

ADDRESS FOR BILL SMYLY'S FUNERAL

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.
(Psalm 130.5)

It is an honour for me to stand here and speak of Bill, of his life and loves, and of his faith. When, on perhaps my last meeting with him, when he was virtually immobile in his bed, I impressed upon him how highly he was thought of by his friends and family, and how I too held him in high esteem. As I thought he might, he characteristically shrugged it off with a gently baffled expression. But it's true.

Bill, whom it has been my pleasure to have known for the last five years, was a man of remarkable depth, stability, graciousness and wit. His kindness and generosity of speech was known, I'm sure, by all of us. And his sparkle was something many of us secretly would wish to emulate.

Born in Peking, China, on 5th July 1922, Bill's parents were both Irish Missionary doctors. His very start in life was therefore rather extraordinary. Educated at Wrekin College, in Shropshire, Bill was recruited into the army straight from school in 1937 and was commissioned in 1939: one of the army's youngest officers.

His wartime career cannot be done justice in the time available to us today. Bill was interviewed for publications and television many times over and he recounted these days with vivid clarity - and we are fortunate to have his first-hand records.

He served, bravely and brilliantly (and was mentioned in despatches) in the 77th infantry brigade - a task force assembled for *Operation Longcloth* in Burma in 1943. This formation was also known as the Chindits - Chindit being a version of the Burmese word for these stone lions which guard many Buddhist temples. Under the (rather unconventional) leadership of Brigadier Wingate, this specially-trained force of British, Gurkhas and Burmese were formed into long range penetration groups to trek deep into Japanese-occupied Burma. Their objective was to cut Japanese supply lines and disrupt communications but to do this they had to march through seemingly endless jungle terrain, through intense heat and torrential rain, and persevere despite repeated bouts of malaria and dysentery. With minimal air support available, serious injuries among the men often spelt death, for once in the jungle there was no easy way out. Casualties were expected to be high, and indeed they were.

Having achieved their objective, exhausted and starving, the Chindits were formed into dispersal units of around three dozen with instructions to choose their own route back to the allied lines. Bill, suffering from Beriberi (affecting his eyesight and mobility) got separated from his detachment, but carried on alone. His family had been told that he had died in the jungle, but in fact, for three months he had been trekking hundreds of miles from village to village, receiving food and shelter from local tribesmen. When news came that he was safe - the final Chindit to make it out alive - the British in India sent him a consignment of bully beef as a welcoming gift. Bill was possibly the last person who participated in both the Wingate campaigns.

After the war, and on his return to England, Bill went up to Cambridge where he read History and English at Clare College. He embarked on a career in journalism, first with the Derby Evening Telegraph, and then the Daily Mail, and then the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong. He was asked to chronicle his journey to Hong Kong and so submitted an episodic journal by way of weekly articles describing how - in a Standard 8! - he made his way across France, Switzerland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan to India. What a trip!

From journalism, Bill was invited to become a housemaster at the Hong Kong Diocesan Boys' School. Still remembered to this day (the school has sent one of today's floral tributes), former pupils kept in touch with Bill throughout the years. One posted online that Bill was his English teacher and took this class of 13 year olds into the music room to play them the song, "Thanks for the memory." Then he had them all use their imaginations to compose a story of explaining what led to the singing of that song. It certainly was an interesting and memorable exercise.

It was one year at the Music Festival Prize Winners' Concert - held jointly with the Hong Kong Diocesan Girls' School that Bill and Diana first met. They were married in St Andrew's Church Hong Kong and it was whilst still in this city that their daughter, Eleanor, was born. It was the late 1960s.

Bill had become a teacher at the Chinese University but the family returned to the UK at this time so that Bill could enrol for a Post Graduate MA degree in Linguistics and Language Teaching at the University of Leeds.

Overseas posts with the British Council then followed in Thailand and in Saudi Arabia. Diana and Bill enjoyed the social life of the embassy and school in Saudi. Bill even found a room in Saudi embassy and - with the help of the Ambassador's wife who could play the piano - illegally set up their own little church there.

The family came to Bedford when Eleanor commenced her studies at the High School. Bill became Education Officer at HM Prison Bedford for a while, and - when Eleanor went off to University - he took a British Council post in China. His career has been both varied and distinguished.

In retirement, Bill and Diana shared much in their joint appreciation of music, art and drama. He was keenly supportive of the new organ here at St Andrew's and of the artistic life of this place. Their flat in London also better enabled them to enjoy so much of what the capital had to offer. With typical pragmatism, when Bill's hearing worsened and he was unable to catch the dialogue at the theatre, he switched to attending the ballet! And was thrilled to attend live streamed performances at his local cinema.

Bill's journalistic skills were put to use later in life when he became the editor of the journal of *The Servants of Christ the King*. The Servants of Christ the King meet in small groups to study, pray and listen for the will of God in their lives and for the world. This attentive 'Waiting on God' describes Bill's spirituality succinctly. He was well-versed in Holy Scripture.

He said that having been obliged to learn many psalms by heart as a schoolboy - a psalm a week - they were to him a particular strength and comfort when out alone in the Burmese jungle. They sustained him. Whenever he read from the lectern here in church one could hear a pin drop for every word was carefully and prayerfully weighed and placed into position.

His wartime experiences (and that of others) led Bill persuasively to argue for peace and reconciliation with the Japanese. Quoted in Tony Redding's book, *War in the Wilderness* he said, "If I met a Japanese veteran of Burma today, I think I would have feelings of comradeship. People get killed. Sometimes you kill, especially if it is "him or me". But now one would really like to meet up with people who shared very much the same problems and conditions. Perhaps that is what chivalry is about."

Accordingly, Bill was an active member of the Burma Campaign Society seeking Anglo-Japan reconciliation. Akiko Macdonald, is the Chairperson of the Society. The daughter of a Japanese Imperial Army's Lieutenant, Bill, she said, latterly considered her father as his brother. She said of him, "I owe him so much for understanding of my way of thinking." His desire for peace and friendship is also appreciatively acknowledged by The Embassy of Japan in London. The Buddhist temple in London will also hold prayer to memorialise Bill's life and work. Bill so desired reconciliation with Japan - and this desire for forgiveness was fundamental to his faith and theology. Even in wartime, he said, God's love is there.

Diana and Bill celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary last year - Eleanor had booked them in to stay and an old royal hunting lodge in Devon which they loved.

He will be remembered here at St Andrew's for his willingness to little jobs behind the scenes - mending hymn books; painting ceilings at the vicarage; producing a hip flask of whiskey to improve the post-service coffee experience; getting down on the floor to fix all those brass pins that hold the kneelers in the pews in front of you. Bill did all those. The congregation at his other church - St Bartholomew the Great in London - and all of us will miss his wit and wisdom, his appreciative encouragement, his kindly generosity and his warm smile.

The last time that Bill read here in church was on the morning of Christmas Day - six months ago to the day. As well as a lifelong love of the Psalms, Bill was greatly fond of the prophet Isaiah and it was Isaiah that he read from that morning - a passage foretelling of peace after war, of new beginnings and fresh hope - indeed, of reconciliation.

So I'd like the last word in this address to go to Bill himself, a servant of Christ the King, and we'll hear a recording of that reading in just a moment. But first, this week's collect from the Book of Common Prayer - words which Bill would have known well and that mirror his attitude to life. Let us pray.

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal: Grant this, O Heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord. Amen.

Rev James Reveley