

Tribute to Captain John Stewart OBE

By Hugh Stewart

John Stephen Stewart was born on 14th July 1922 into a poor, but honest farming family, eldest son of the three children of William and Phyllis Stewart. The farm and life outdoors in Weston Underwood was a magical, if sometimes hazardous, place for adventures with horses, dogs and various farm animals as well as with men whom he would later manage.

From Olney Convent School via Bedford and Winchester House School, Brackley, he took up a full scholarship to Clifton College in Bristol aged 14. Even from an early age he felt a strong drive and pressure to achieve. While at Clifton, he joined the OTC where he was placed in charge of a section which was charged, on one occasion, with ambushing the General's car when he came for an inspection. The GOC Southern Command's car was duly stopped by camouflaged youths enthusiastically firing blank ammunition. Major General Bernard Montgomery alighted and asked who was in charge, complimenting John and winning him promotion to Lance Corporal!

Having commenced medical training at the London Hospital Medical School, he applied to join the Fleet Air Arm, having learned to fly in the OTC at Clifton. However, there were no vacancies and no planes to train on. A chance meeting resulted in a short interview with the Commandant General, Royal Marines and a temporary commission in the Royal Marines. Thus was determined the next 17 years of his life! After passing out second on his training course at Thurlestone, he came top of a Small Arms course and was posted to Lympstone Training camp. During this time he managed to fly operational patrols on Sunderland flying boats of the Royal Australian Air Force out of Plymouth.

While on leave, he met some American pilots staying at Weston Underwood and was invited to meet the CO of a B17 Flying Fortress group near Bedford, who suggested he might like to go for a short flight. Equipped with parachute, flak jacket and helmet he climbed aboard what he thought would be a short training flight. After crossing the coast and then land, the plane was suddenly under fire. On returning to base he learned, to the amusement of his hosts, that he had unwittingly take part in a daylight raid on Rouen!

Joining the RM Commandos, he took part in the raid on Dieppe alongside Canadian forces in August 1942, albeit on an informal basis, getting slightly injured and evacuated to Newhaven. He subsequently joined 41 Commando and moved to Troon to prepare for Sicily landings. On 10th July 1943, he was in charge of A Troop and was first ashore before the main landing to take out a gun battery that threatened the Canadian Division's landing beach at Punto Castelazzo. The LCAs grounded 200 yards from shore and the troops had to wade ashore in chest deep water losing much heavy equipment and finding their only effective arms were some grenades and a pistol. The troop captured 200 prisoners and spiked the guns an hour before the main landing.

He then moved to Palermo to work with US troops prior to the Salerno landings on 3rd September. During the landings he was shot through the right arm and blown up by a 6" mortar bomb which took the pack off his back before embedding itself deep in the ground and exploding, leaving 32 pieces of shrapnel in his body. He was captured shortly afterwards and treated well before escaping during the night. After three hours he returned to his Troop's position, where he was shot by friendly fire. He was quickly brought into friendly lines having told a story about the Sgt Major's love life at Troon. He was transferred to the dressing station and down to Salerno main beach, with a German doctor who had lost a leg, before embarking on a hospital ship. The ship was sunk by a German bomber but he and the Doctor managed to float clear together before being picked up by a US destroyer half an hour later and taken to Sousse in North Africa.

Later he returned to his unit and volunteered to join parachute drops of arms into Yugoslavia coming out each time by mule and motor torpedo boat. After returning to UK with his unit he moved to OC Platoon Weapons at Browdown Small Arms School, where set up an Advanced Handling Wing based at Gibraltar Camp near Towyn carrying out live ammunition training around North Wales. Gibraltar Camp closed in 1947 and he moved to Chatham and then Eastney Barracks, as Adjutant. He was later posted to HMS Implacable for three happy and adventurous years as Squadron Royal Marines Officer. The tales are too many to tell but life seemed far from warlike with adventures in his souped up Rolls Royce hearse, bought for £80 and sold for £90; the competition to grow moustaches with the winner being the first moustache to touch the owners' eyelashes; many sorties into foreign places with Admirals and alcohol.

During his time on Implacable, John met 3rd Officer WRNS, Eileen Lahiff at a dinner in Stirling. After a rather geographically challenging courtship, they were married in Brompton Oratory on 15th July 1954. Following the honeymoon in Copenhagen, and some time in England, John returned to 45 Commando in Malta alone, as they had learned that Eileen was pregnant. Some months later, John was directed, at Lord Mountbatten's request, to clear a fort in Libya of some French Legionnaires. The plan to achieve this involved several cases of whisky. Once the legionnaires had been literally drunk under the table, they were relocated to another fort while their original base was destroyed. Shortly afterwards, John learned of the birth of his first born. Each of the remaining three cases of whisky were parlayed for six cases of champagne. The baby's head, mine, was well and truly wetted in the Libyan desert!

During activity in Cyprus to suppress the EOKA revolt, John was injured by a bomb thrown into the car in which he was a passenger in Nicosia. As a result his hearing was badly damaged and he was subsequently invalided from the Corps in 1957.

Throughout the remainder of his life, he retained huge pride, interest and affection for the Corps and seemed to spend much of his latter years dressed in Royal Marines tee shirts and sweat shirts. The influence of the Marines' discipline and high standards significantly impacted both his way of working and living. Detailed advanced planning was a hall mark of his life from organising Nuffield Scholars around the UK and Europe to Wine and food Society functions

planned to the last crumb and family meals commencing on the dot of 1 o'clock and 7 o'clock. Errant scholars, as Stephen Fell may shortly describe, and family alike were treated to robust explanations of their personal frailties and rejoinders that they must do better. He leaves a legacy of standards for others to follow, founded largely from his family upbringing and from the Royal Marines, of hard work, commitment and determination to achieve potential.