

CHRIS CLARKE – 22 May 1946 to 30 April 2003

(Tribute at Chris's funeral at Gloucester on 9th May 2003)

Chris was a giant of a man in all senses. He reminds one of a Viking - strong, purposeful and powerful. But despite his occasional gruff exterior, underneath was a thoughtful person who had a soft side to him, reflected in his approach to many aspects of life.

His interests were broad. Rooted in a strong family environment, he found time for involvement in rugby, motor sport, gliding, sailing and skiing, and probably many other pursuits.

As with many of us, his patience could be tested by daily pressures. On one at the gliding club, his glider canopy was blown open and broke – an expensive event, which Chris never liked. He loaded the canopy carefully into his estate car and slammed the tailgate down – rather too hard - only to smash the back window of the car. We all waited for the further fireworks, but then his calm nature took over and he just shrugged his huge shoulders as if to say, “there's not much more that can go wrong today”. None of us wanted to ask him what the bill was for both breakages!

On another occasion two young and, dare I say, attractive ladies were at the airfield, and when they saw Chris land his glider they went over to him to help him back to the launch point. As they approached, the canopy opened, and a great plume of smoke emerged from the cockpit. This was not a cigar that Chris had lit. Unbeknown to them, Chris's instrument panel had developed a wiring problem during the flight and starting burning! Needless to say, the young ladies' reception was somewhat unusual as the stream of unrepeatable words flowed forth.

For many of us, we got to know Chris initially as a member of the Cotswold Gliding Club, which he joined in May 1978. He was one of the core members, soon elected to the committee to take on the role of “Tech Member Ground” as it was known, or in modern management parlance “Executive Director, Non Airborne Equipment”.

In this he excelled. Not just for his engineering and technical knowledge, but for the fact that he simply got on with the job. His approach revealed his main characteristics – reliable, dependable and resourceful. If it needed fixing, Chris would do it. Without fuss – or at least not too much! He would cajole others to do their bit, and complain bitterly about careless members who screwed up the equipment. But that was Chris. He kept the club going for many years through his dedication to the many tasks that landed on his doorstep. We are forever grateful for his massive and lasting contribution in establishing the club, and from which many thousands of people have benefited.

He went on to become Chairman – and a very successful Chairman – of the Club. He had the vision to see where we needed to go, and the drive to carry out a plan. A born leader. And also no mean glider pilot, who did not count himself as one of the pundits but who nevertheless could out-fly many other pilots on difficult days.

His interests did not just reside in flying. Four years ago he bought a yacht that he kept at Falmouth. He was a very competent yacht master. But in the earlier days, he didn't always get it right.

I remember one occasion in the 1980s, when a group of us hired a large yacht for a weekend on the Solent. Chris was at the helm under the guidance of the skipper, Reg Gardner, another gliding man. We were approaching the rocks just east of the Needles, and about to tack to the north. Chris got it slightly wrong, whereupon the skipper issued rapid instructions to Chris, who calmly but surely entered another tack. A mark of a competent sailor – no panic, he stuck with the task and led us away from potential difficulty. As we sailed back into the open water I watched the rocks slip by on the port side and heard Chris give a big sigh of relief. Actually, I recall it was more than just a sigh!

As a regular skier, who enjoyed skiing immensely, amongst his friends on these trips he was often the last man down the piste. Chris did not ski around moguls – he went over them or through them. Recognisable as the vision of the abominable snowman, arms out, legs in the “open position”, his large frame inflated by the big jacket, carving his way to the bottom in his inimitable style, which became known to all as “the Cotswold Style” of skiing.

When the skiing – and drinking - were over for the day, the competition for those sharing a room with him was to see who could get off to sleep first, because if you didn’t beat Chris to that then you had to suffer the snoring all night long. And it was loud!

Chris ran a successful family business. Whilst I was not involved in his business life, other than as an occasional satisfied customer, I gained the impression he was very well organised, knew everything about the business and was well on top of the financial aspects. What I do know from conversations with him over the last year or so was that he was immensely proud of Russell and how Russell had taken to running the business so successfully. Chris was very happy he would be leaving the business in a very safe pair of hands.

Sandra has asked me to thank you all for the unfailing support and comradeship you have given Chris during his illness: the visits, phone calls and even the shared frustrations in watching rugby matches on television meant a great deal to him.

Chris was to us the greatest of friends. His was the friendship that lasts - solid and true. Always there, never imposing, but there to help when needed. He never wanted thanks for anything, but quietly accepted thanks when offered. A rock that didn’t move, and that resisted any attempts to dislodge it.

And so, dear friend, we say farewell. Your stature amongst us all will be a lasting memory of what a real strong family man and true friend you have been.

I should like to complete my tribute with the poem that has become well known in the last few years, and the unofficial farewell for glider pilots who have launched on their last flight. It was written by a 19-year-old Spitfire pilot in the early part of World War Two, John Gillespie Magee. Whilst this is a non-religious service, I hope you won’t mind the reference at the end.

It is called -

High Flight

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of;
Wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence.
Hovering there I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air;
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark nor eagle flew;
And while, with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Chris, may your spirit soar with the eagles and always remind us of what a truly remarkable husband, father, brother and magnificent friend you have been.

David Roberts
Friend