

JOHN BELL

I am sorry to tell you that John Bell died weekend 6th December 2020, in a short hospital visit for a minor procedure. He was due out next day. He had a fall next day while in hospital and broke his shoulder, so could not come home then. He died as a result of his very severe COPD, and respiratory failure from it, just a few days later. He was very frail over a long period and on 24-hour oxygen at home for past 5 years. His partner, Mary, had been caring for him for about 10 years at home in London and then in Edinburgh where they moved to get support from John's stepchildren. The plan was to keep John out of hospital and out of care. John's COPD had continued to get worse. John was a real life-force, a strong and independent spirit and very much his own person. He was very funny, creative, a real individual and full of naughtiness in the nicest way. He was a giver not a taker. He did not use his health as an excuse for anything or complain about it or look for pity from anyone. He was very brave and fought through it with great tenacity for years. Mary had a stroke at beginning of year and was hospitalised and John went into care home then. In care home Mary went daily and had to speak to him on phone from car park, because of Covid restrictions. It was heart-breaking for them both. They were inseparable. They hated it. All that they both wanted was to be together at home with family of his stepdaughters and grandchildren around them. The girls and grandchildren were very supportive in his care and keeping him entertained and they loved John.

One bonus for John in the difficulties of the last year was that his birth daughter, Jo, from the time when he was a young RAF man, contacted him. He was so thrilled to discover about her and proud of her. He had tried to race her unsuccessfully years before. Also to hear that he had 3 grown grandchildren. Sadly, because of Covid and the fact that he was in Scotland and she was in Essex, he only got to talk to her on the phone. Plans for her to visit were cancelled, due to Covid again, but he was so looking forward to seeing her. It never happened.

It took months, but Mary managed to make a reasonable recovery from the stroke finally and got John out of the care home and back home again with a little care assistant help at home. John was getting such gentle, person-centred care at home. He was at home with Mary for last 6 weeks, which was the only place he wanted to be.. It was lovely to be together again and be able to hold hands and have a laugh and joke. It was all they both had wanted.

John was born in Staffordshire but left there at 15. He never lived there again. He served for 17 years and went to many places around the world: Cyprus, Aden (as it was), Gan in Maldives, Saudi and Arab states. He always remembered those times and his mates with great affection and, of course, as all of you will do, knew his number off by heart and what to say if interrogated; how many spitfires on your station etc. In any part of UK Mary and John would drive past and he had been to, or could name, RAF stations everywhere. Many of them he had been on detachments to and put-up various radio installations. He told us rhymes of Navy canteen peas that bounced on the floor and 'killed a friend of mine.' He had stories for everywhere. Even as far up as Muckle Flugga in Shetlands. We spent hours hunting for the legendary White Horse in Suffolk villages. We found a lot of them, but not the right one.

When he left the RAF he went back to the Gulf States and Saudi as an independent contractor and helped set up systems for Saudi Air Force. So many RAF words and slang that he used and taught us. It is a different lingo. He did not even remember that his name was John when he left the RAF, as he was known as Dinger for so long. When he reconnected at a Reunion with his good friend, Richie, the name being called out across a crowded room made him swivel immediately. Richie was very loyal and caring to the end and contacted John a couple of times a week and visited John, whatever city we were in. They had known each other for 60 years. John always had an interest in all things military of all sorts and would look at TV programmes about that (causing disputes sometimes) and read books on it. In between he lived in Nottingham and London. He did a few different things and then gravitated to doing a degree in Art, which he had always loved, in Wales and then training as a teacher in London at The Institute for Education in central London. If you asked him if he had a vocation to be a teacher he would always say no, he was in it for the money. But from all Mary picked up from colleagues and the way he spoke about it, he was a very good teacher and really worked hard to engage kids and help to push them through exams etc. John was always positive and enthusiastic in everything he did and managed to get children fired up also and went several extra miles to help them. He had a smattering of Arabic which he used to impressive effect on the kids as a teacher later, teaching in a very multi-cultural school in London. They were amazed that he should speak a bit of their language and know their culture and been to places they had not, but that their parents came from.

John painted and drew all of his life. I may post some of his work later. Mary and John attended some reunions, but due to health that became impossible later on.

Mary, his stepdaughters and grandchildren who were allowed in with him in hospital at the end and caring for him for such a long time before are devastated and broken-hearted to be without him and his humour and free spirit. We will not see his like again.

John was buried in Dingle, Co. Kerry, Ireland on 15th December with all due permissions from Irish Consulate and safety precautions taken. Mary's family came from there and after John retired from teaching, they would drive over and spend 2-3 months there every year staying in the family house, until he could not travel any more. He got to know and loved the place and the people. It was all very difficult to arrange with Covid restrictions and arranging permissions and safe travel etc.