

When friends Ken Hope and Ian Nesbitt got together to discuss the man after his death, the question posed between them was, "What did Craig Brown mean to us?" The immediate reply from both was that he was an inspiration; to themselves, and to others within the Air Training Corps where they all met up, and where lifetime friendships were forged. As an N.C.O., and later as an instructor, Craig inspired confidence in others, with the assertion that 'you can do it!' Many, many young people who served as members of the Squadron in their early to mid teens can cite Craig (or Mr) Brown as being someone they looked up to, and who encouraged them to succeed.

One powerful memory that his friends share of Craig is of laughter. A man with an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of jokes, and the dafter the better! A strong man, weakened to the point of collapse through laughter; not once, but many times over the years. Ian carries a memory of travelling somewhere on a train with the cadets when Craig told one of his jokes. Cadet Corporal Ken Hope (aged about 15 at the time) told one of his own jokes in return. Craig responded with another, prompting Corporal Hope to come back with one more; and so it went on, the trading of daft jokes between two people who enjoyed laughing for its own sake, while sharing it with others. The observation that the young Corporal may have had some motivation towards competition with his marginally elder mentor only added to the enjoyment of the experience.

One of the jokes Ken learnt from Craig so many years ago went thus: - A baby polar bear asked his mother if he was a real polar bear. "Of course you are dear," responded the mother polar bear; "You have white fur - you are a real polar bear." Not content with this, the baby polar bear asked his father, "Am I a real polar bear?" His father looked down on his cub and replied, "Of course you are a real polar bear, you have white fur and big claws - you are a real polar bear."

The baby polar bear still was not happy. He asked his uncle, "Am I a real polar bear?" His uncle laughed and said, "Of course you are a real polar bear! You have white fur and big claws, you eat raw meat - you are a real polar bear! If you don't believe me, go and ask your wise old grandmother." So the baby polar bear trotted off and asked his grandmother, "Am I a real polar bear?" His grandmother smiled and said, "Of course you are a real polar bear." The baby polar bear insisted, saying, "But am I a real polar bear?" His grandmother repeated sternly, "You are a real polar bear - but tell me young one, why do you ask?" The baby polar bear said, "Because I'm BLOODY FREEZING!"

It has to be said that Craig could be somewhat intolerant of what he believed to be a lack of effort in others, and in his early days within the cadets, Ian was placed very firmly within this category. When Craig - a pilot instructor with the RAF Gliding School in Northumberland - took Ian for an air experience flight, the prospect was rather scary for the 14-year-old, who was expecting to be thrown around the sky by the fiendish N.C.O. However, Ian's enduring memory of this event was of the back and sides of Craig's head as he scanned the skies back and forth throughout a perfect flight, up to a thousand feet above the rolling Northumberland countryside. A positive memory indeed.

Thankfully - for Ian especially - Craig grew to be able to identify a person's strengths, and as has been noted, encourage them to flourish. Ken was regarded by some as being something of a prodigy of Craig's, and he is the first to acknowledge that this was probably true in some respects. Ken followed Craig into the Parachute Regiment, and then into the Fire Brigade, doing well in the service of both. Craig would be the first to acknowledge that a person's successes are their own, but if he did have some influence on these and other successes, what better epitaph could a man have?

It became something of a ritual for some years for the senior members of the squadron to retire to the local social club after the cadets on Monday and Thursday evenings. It was Craig who invited firstly Ian, and later Ken to join this elite gathering. It is well remembered that Craig was more often than not a leading light in this gathering, as he enjoyed being the life and soul of the party, sharing his anecdotes and ever-present jokes. Craig and Ian became very good friends, though Lord-alone knows why, as they were such different characters. Craig's brash, go-get-em attitude seemed diametrically opposed to Ian's quieter, more thoughtful approach. However, when Craig invited Ian to be his best man when he married Paula in 1979, he could not have felt more honoured. He is unable to recall quite what was contained in his speech that day, but assumes (or rather hopes) that he did not offend anyone.

Craig and Ken's friendship was perhaps more understandable; two like-minded individuals who made similar, if not identical choices, and who shared a mutual respect for one another. It was Ken who noted also that Craig always tried to treat people as equals, respecting other's judgement and opinion, whilst not always agreeing with it. Ken again recorded his admiration for Craig's determination to keep going, maintaining as much of his independence as possible, for as long as possible. He continued to offer good advice and encouragement to the end.

Craig always asked after our own families, our parents, our wives, partners and children. He knew their names and how much they meant to us, and his interest in their progress and welfare was always genuine, and appreciated. When we heard from his sister Penny that Craig had gone to meet his ancestors wearing his new Toon Army shirt, his beloved Beatles watch and clutching his Parachute Regiment beret, we felt that his passing was complete.

His Para beret was one of his most treasured possessions, not only because of his pride at having been a member of this most elite of regiments - in which at one time he was reportedly the youngest corporal in the British Army - but also as his was identical to the beret his father would have worn as a Paratrooper during the Second World War. Being laid alongside his father is undoubtedly where he would wish to rest, as Craig idolised the man who along with his mother, gave him life. Whatever else happened in his life, we know that Craig's parents, as with the rest of his family meant everything to him. He could not be more content in Paradise.

We as his friends, would not wish to portray Craig as something he was not, as everyone who knew him has their own, very real memories of him; but we do hope that we have been able to perpetuate some of the more positive aspects of Craig's character, a man who touched a great many people's lives - some of whom never even knew him, let alone met him - for the better. Let him be remembered for the good times, for they were many; and we would like to record our thanks to Craig's family for the opportunity to share our thoughts of him, as we bid our old friend, Craig Brown a final farewell.

Ian D. Nesbitt
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