**Audio Transcription**

**Rewind - Leonard Cheshire Disability, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund**

**Title:** Leonard Cheshire Eastwood Rotary Speech - 1955

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**Location:** Eastwood Rotary Club, Leicestershire

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**Start of transcription**

[Applause]

00:10 **[Sydney Brown]:** Gentlemen, we are honoured this evening with the presence of one whose gallantry, skill, bravery and devotion to duty has earned the nation's deep gratitude and appreciation, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire.

[Applause]

00:39 He is the recipient of the VC. Was awarded the Distinguished Service Order three times, and holder of the Distinguished Flying Cross. His distinguished career in the Royal Air Force captured the imagination. He joined 102 Squadron in 1940, was Wing Commander, commanding the 76 Squadron in 1942, was in command of the RAF station Marston Moor 1943, and became the leader of the immortal 617 Squadron, and instituted a new technique in marking the target. He piloted 100 bombing raids, and was the official British observer at the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki in 1945. Those of us who have read his book 'Bomber Pilot'; 'Cheshire VC' by Russell Braddon; and Paul Brick Hill's 'The Dambusters' will know of his courage, loyalty and affection. We feel that tonight we have no stranger in our midst, but one who through the medium of the written word we know, respect and admire.

[Crowd murmuring]

02:24 He has now devoted his life to the relief of those who suffer. Putting service above self, and spoiling himself not in the effort. He brought a sick man to an empty house and personally nursed him. Later came a bedridden old lady, followed by others, thus there came into being his first home for those who were sick and in need of help. There are now seven of these homes including Staunton Harold Hall, to which some of us went last Saturday and mingled with a crowd of some 7000 all of whom came to help this latest venture of faith and hope. These homes are non-sectarian, the qualifi-, qualification for those who enter is not a religious one, it is that they are sick and in need of help. Group Captain Cheshire is the inspiration and driving force behind this.

03:50 We salute him as a gallant and brave gentlemen and pray that his work for suffering humanity may be abundantly blessed and that he himself will be given health and strength to carry on his great work. We are delighted to have him with us this evening and appreciate immensely the honour he has conferred upon us. He is a terrifically busy man and it has not been easy for him to arrange this visit. We thank you sincerely for coming and we look forward to hearing his address. May I ask you to honour him by drinking to his health and success to the cause which he has so much at heart. Gentlemen, the toast is 'Group Captain Leonard Cheshire!'.

04:55 [Crowd toasts]

05:07 [Applause]

05:09 **[Man]:**  ...president, distinguished visitors [unclear] and guests, pray silence for Group Captain Leonard Cheshire.

05:19 [Applause]

05:34 **[Leonard Cheshire]:** Mr President, and gentlemen, well I do thank you for so much kindness and such warm friendly hospitality. From the moment I walked inside this room, this building, I was made to feel completely and absolutely at home and as your president has said, only the other way around, I haven't for a moment felt a stranger. I've felt completely, absolutely at home. In fact, even one of your members, Mr Jackson came to fetch me from a very long way away and he made me feel at home too. And I'm sure there's no finer expression of kindness than being made to feel at home and put at your ease. So I do thank you, with all my heart.

06:24 Your president introduced me very generously indeed, and from, what he said about the war, I couldn't let the occasion go without saying just one thing, that of course, we all know well that survival in the war largely a matter of some people might say chance, other people perhaps the providence of God. And it was my good fortune that I survived when many others didn't. And having heard what he had to say, I must pay my tribute to those who didn't.

07:03 [Crowd murmurs in agreement]

07:05 **[Leonard Cheshire]:** Well I've been very kindly invited to say a few words, about what we're doing at Staunton Harold and why and so forth. Well it's going to be entirely impromptu and I don't quite know how it will come out but I hope it will be alright. And I won't keep you too long either, at least I won't mean to.

07:29 It all started about seven and half years ago, at a time in my life when I really didn't know what I was going to do, I suppose that happened to many of us after the war. I studied law at Oxford, and I, I did get my degree, but the war broke out and I left the law and became a pilot. And when the war ended I left the air force and had no trade. I had a lot of big ideas, I suppose like most of us did and most of them weren't very practical. In the end, rather impossibly, I set about a sort of a scheme for trying to help resettle ex-servicemen. If you remember about eight, nine years when the war was over we used to feel the, that there was something missing. Whereas in the war we'd all stuck together and we had something to do, once the war was over we were rather individuals each going our own course. And several of us thought we ought to do something about it. So we started a scheme. It was very well-meaning and equally impractical, impractical I mean. And a year and a half alter it collapsed, leaving me with a very large house and an estate and about £18,000 worth of debt [laughter].

08:52 I was settling down in this house, trying to pay them off by selling everything I could, that I could lay my hands on. I mean that belonged to me! [laughter]. The air force did teach us to scrounge a bit, but anyway! [laughter]. And I, again, had many big ideas what I was going to do, when suddenly there was telephone call, and it was a matron from the local hospital to tell me that one of the men who had been in the scheme, an ex-LAC, in his 70s, was there dying of cancer. There was nothing more they could do, and they needed his bed for somebody they could treat. I was the only person they could find who had anything to do with him, so would I please get him somewhere else to go. Well, having been used to pulling strings in the air force, I said 'Yes, I could'. But unfortunately I didn't succeed. I got on to the local health officer amongst other people and he told me to reapply in six months. Well as the hospital said he wouldn't live for more than three months there didn't seem much point. Meanwhile, Arthur, as I then knew him, was obviously getting very sad and despondent at realising that he was in the way and nobody wanted him.

10:16 And living in the, I call it an empty house, but it wasn't quite, there were still a man and his wife living in one wing waiting for somewhere else to go. And the wife very kindly said that, if I would provide a room in the house, she would nurse Arthur. So I was frightfully pleased and I ran off to the hospital, told Arthur about this, and he was absolutely delighted. When I came back and the woman's husband met me and she said well, she was very sorry, he was very sorry, but this was more than his wife could take on, because it would mean a permanent responsibility and that he couldn't let her do it. Well, obviously, I couldn't go back to Arthur and tell him that it was off, and without thinking what I was doing, I did the only thing you could do and I said well alright, well if you won't, I will. left it at that. well in the morning, I woke up and I thought 'I don't know anything about nursing' I had never nursed anybody. So I got on to one of the nurses at the hospital and asked her if she would show me how to make a bed and do all the rest and whatever I'd have to do. She gave me a course [laughter] Well, then everything we did was by numbers. We made a bed by numbers [laughter] when it was over she said, 'Now you turn to the patient and say 'Do you feel comfortable?'' and I said, what happens if he says no?! [laughter]. So I did my apprenticeship, as a nurse for those couple of days, and on the third day I went along in the car and fetched Arthur and brought him home.

11:51 Well you can imagine the nursing he was getting was pretty rough, and I'd even had to borrow a.. I'd sold all the beds [laughter] had to borrow those. I put him in bed and got him some tea, and went out, and when I came back he was sitting up in bed and he had a big tube of kolynos and he was squeezing it into his mouth. I thought good heavens, he's gone mad! [laughter]. He looked at me and said, this is the only thing that cures my indigestion! [laughter].

12:33 Well that put me a little bit at my ease, and so we staggered along. Every now and then people would turn up at the house to see what was happening. And as best I could I had press-ganged them into giving me a hand. One of the first ones was an ex-paratrooper called Bill. He was a tough fella, who said he'd like to help so I said well would you please get Arthur his tea. So he said yes he would and he found out that Arthur liked toast overdone, and Bill went down to the kitchen [laughter], he was there about half an hour. And he came up with a piece of toast that was absolutely black. He gave this to Arthur, and of course Arthur threw it out with disgust [laughter] and Bill came out looking most despondent. He said, 'well he said he liked it overdone' [laughter] and so along these lines the house proceeded. Nonetheless, Arthur suddenly became very happy. Because, I think, he realised that  he was somewhere where he was wanted, even though he was getting the worst of the deal.

13:44 And I began to think that there must be others in a similar situation, that is to say who were dying and had no-one to take them in. And thought that if there were I would like to take them and use the house for that purpose, instead of getting rid of it. I also decided I wouldn't go and look for them, I would leave it, and if they came I would take them, and if they didn't I wouldn't. And about two or three days later there was another telephone call, and this was the porter at the block of flats in which my aunt lived. Now my aunt, or this particular one, had very strong views on what I was doing, because she thought it was a disgrace. And, she was voicing her views in no uncertain terms. One of the people she voiced these views to was the hall porter and he happened to have a grandmother-in-law who was stuck with nobody to look after her, and I suppose whilst he was agreeing with my aunt, saying 'so and so and so' at the back of his mind he was saying 'well, I think I'll ring Cheshire up' [laughter]. Well, he did ring up and asked me if I'd take the old lady and I did. She arrived the following day. Once again I had to borrow some sheets and some blankets and we started off the same old game.

15:07 Behind her came a Londoner who was suffering from TB and one of the voluntary helpers said well we can't take TB in here. I said well why not? She said, well it's infectious. I said, well I didn't know that. And she said, well I'm never going to come here again if you, if you're going to take that. She said it's not that I'm frightened for myself but I'll take it back and give it to the children. So I thought, well, this was a mistake, but once again I'd set to do so I couldn't stop it. So, once again I had to send for the nurse and get my instruction on what to do about isolating TBs and all the rest of it. And, a few days later up turned Alf. He was very ill and he told me he was having haemorrhages every now and then. I had to help him up the stairs, and about 10 o'clock that night he came into my room looking a bit sort of lost, and he said 'where's the staff?' So I said, well there isn't any Alf, just the three of us. That's himself, and the old lady and somebody else and myself. He looked a bit perplexed and he went out. The following morning about 10 o'clock I went down to the lounge and I found Alf in there breaking up firewood. I said 'what's the game Alf?' He said, well I wanted to help. I said, well you don't go breaking up firewood in the lounge; take it out into the garden. Well he looked most put out. But anyway, he said 'I only wanted to help' and I thought, well if he wants to help I'll let him.

16:50 So, from then onwards I realised not having any staff at all that the only hope was to get the patients to help. And as they came in all of them did. Those that were in bed did the sewing or some of them took, peeled the vegetables, and the vegetables were brought up to them. Another trimmed the lamps because we didn't have any electricity, we only had oil lamps, and so on. And I suddenly realised that a lot of them were getting a little bit better.  In other words, having something to do to occupy their minds made them better. For the first time they felt that there was something that needed doing and that depended on them. And, from then onwards that is what we did, we had a minimum of staff, because of course we didn't have many helpers and we didn't have any money to pay them, and all the patients took a part in helping out. Well in due course of course I had to get the house organised and I had to get a committee who knew how to run a house, a home. And bit by bit the home did get itself on a proper footing, and the various ups and downs and disorganisations and so on, burnt toast and all the rest of it, disappeared.

18:15 Having that committee freed me, so that I was able to get away a bit more and so we started another house under similar circumstances down in Cornwall. Once again, we didn't go out of our way to start the house on our own, we just waiting until the opportunity came. In this case, an ex-naval man, a frog-man, who had epileptic fits and was moving from one boarding house to another and had just been turned out and nobody would take him in. So we took him and that started the next house.

18:54 From that second house of course we went on and we had a third, and then I went ill myself and had two and a half years in the sanatorium, with TB. And that taught me to get other people to do the job, because I couldn't in bed. And so during that time we had a fourth house and a fifth just about starting up. By now, we had got ourselves more or less into a pattern, which was roughly speaking as follows. That each house was taking in, rather like the first Arthur Dykes, the chronically sick who had nowhere else to go. That weren't like Arthur, dying, most of them were different ages, who were incapacitated whether through paralysis or old age or any other cause and needed a home to live in for the rest of their days. Now the Health Service, as you know, is designed to give treatment and does give treatment to all those who are sick. But it isn't, as yet, designed to provide homes where those who don't need treatment anymore can live. Because a hospital being designed for treatment, must be run on a sort of definite routine, but a home like ours where people don't need treatment but merely need attention can be run on different lines. In other words like a family.

20:30 And what we were trying to do was to take the place of the families of these sick people who for one reason and another couldn't be in their own homes. In other words to get a home that was really home. In order to do that it had to belong to the locality, and so each home was organised and kept going by the local people. We never had any money and so we had to start off with a building which was unusable, because you could get it for nothing. And then do it up ourselves. Well in the same way that one or two people start off life, I mean two married people start off life, they haven't much money and they have to build their own home, which means that once they've got it, they feel it's really theirs, so with us. But having an old house which we've all helped to put right means that we feel the house belongs to us. That is to say, belongs to all those who helped it get going. And consequently when a patient comes in he feels that it belongs to the neighbourhood.

21:42 I would like to say just as my conclusion, this. As I told you, when I first received this old man, I was in rather a bad state. I had all these £18,000 of debt, I didn't know what to do with my life and I had various other little problems that needed sorting out. The moment Arthur came I had no alternative but to concentrate my attention on him. And in doing so, without realising how it happened all the debts melted away, they were all paid off, and I still don't how. I did get my, sort of, well i knew what I wanted to do from then on, and in due course all the other little problems solved themselves.

22:26 I found just the same thing when the patients came in. That having to do something which needed doing and which they saw there was no one else to do, gave them a new purpose in life, gave them back their self-respect, because you can lose it when you're just lying on your back unable to do anything and seemed to give a whole new direction to their lives. And so it did with many of the helpers, both part-time and full-time who came our way.

22:54 When India came along, I couldn't help thinking that what happens in the life of an individual might well happen on a much larger scale, because today after all, the one thing we hope for humanly-speaking is world peace and although we do have freedom from war we can't quite say that we have world peace. And world peace is now purely a question as I see it between east and west. There are no other major divisions, and in the east there is a tremendous amount of suffering, as we know, in fact suffering on a scale that we here can hardly imagine. And if that work that's being done here by so many ordinary people, helping the sick and getting these homes going, has spread to India and started homes there, who can tell that it might not have any way, a very small contribution towards world peace.

24:05 [Applause]

**End of transcription**