Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project

File Title: AV-S 221 Side 1 RAF Marham. GLC proposing Squadron Association toast to present Squadron members on 40th anniversary of Dams Raids. May 1983.

Recorded: 05/1983

Preservation copy:

Duration: 00:15:13

Transcription Date: 20/07/2020

Archive Number: AV-S:221/1

Start of Transcription

00:00:01 Host: Make silence for Leonard Cheshire.

00:00:06 Host: Do you want to give them a rank?

00:00:07 [Audience Laughter]

00:00:08 Host: Because he knows no [unclear 00:09 – 00:12]

00:00:13 Host: Leonard Cheshire!

[applause]

00:00:24 LC: Mr President, gentlemen. I assure you that it’s a very happy task that has been given to me of proposing on behalf of the squadron association – 617 Association – the toast to the present squadron. Tonight, is the anniversary of that first attack on the dams 40 years ago. Of the 133 crews that took part, only 34 are still alive. And of those, 21 are here tonight as your guests. The rest of us joined the squadron after that memorable occasion, and I think that we inherited something of their spirit and their tradition, even if we were a little overawed by what it was, we’d come to join. And I would like to introduce to you our present party of 80 or so who are your guests. You will see that we’re a fairly motley crowd – what your private thoughts are I don’t know. [audience laughter]

00:01:52: I would like to assure Ken Brown that if we limeys met you with what you thought was some rough language, that’s nothing compared to the home truths that we Poms were told by you Australians. [audience laughter and applause]

00:02:18: Well we’ve come here tonight, many from the other side of the world, travelling thousands of miles at their own expense. Yet we were only on the squadron together for quite a short time. Most of us not for more than a year. We’d come from different backgrounds. When we left the squadron and the war was over, we dispersed to different countries to build new lives, to make new friends, many of us to raise a family. And yet, we still meet together. And I think that in meeting together we like to look upon ourselves as a family, members of a family. Moreover – a family that is bigger than just we ourselves, the –

00:03:24 Audience member: [inaudible]

00:03:26 LC: How many – a hundred and...? Whatever it is – comprise. And I think one has to ask oneself ‘What is it that makes us come together to be here with you in your mess tonight after all those years and despite not seeing each other very often. Well obviously,, any intense experience that is shared in common creates a bond, particularly if that experience is in the face of a threat to one’s safety and involves danger. Every experience, even though it’s a momentary one, influences and moulds the rest of our lives to some extent. But that isn’t in my mind enough to explain our coming together, our feeling as if we were a family. I think that the real reason for it is that when we joined the Royal Air Force, we inherited a tradition, and when we were finally posted to 617, we inherited a particular form of that tradition.

00:05:00: I’ve often pondered about tradition and wondered ‘What exactly is it?’. I have a very vivid memory of reporting for duty in June 1940 to my first operational squadron. The Air Force was very generous then and allowed you to choose whilst at flying training school what operation command you wanted. They gave you three choices. None of mine were bomber command, because that’s the last thing I wanted [audience laughter]. Different now, isn’t it? [audience laughter] And I arrived at the station feeling very anxious. I didn’t know how I was going to make out. But when I arrived there, suddenly everything was different. Everyone was normal, you felt [audience laughter] ... I wasn’t looking at you, Ross. You felt somehow carried along by something greater than yourself. As you know, after World War One, when the Royal Air Force became the Royal Air Force, it had the choice of sharing some of the facilities and training of the Army and Navy, but decided that it was in its best interests to be entirely on its own, so as to build up its own traditions. And I think the fact that it did that was the major fundamental factor in the winning of the Battle of Britain. Because the Royal Air Force, as distinct from the Luftwaffe, which was mainly in a support role to the Army, enjoyed an independent existence. And so, the RAF has built up its own, unique tradition, of which all of us in this room are proud sharers.

00:07:12: But tradition is something living, active. It isn’t something in the past that you enjoy and remember, once you’ve shared in it, it is a part of you. And as each new recruit comes into the Air Force or the squadron, he and his squadron add something to that tradition, and we tonight, the members of the 617 Association feel that we are part of the tradition which you have now built up and developed during your term of service. I think that it’s the fact of our common tradition that holds us together as a squadron association.

00:08:11: When I look at our short term of service and wonder whether there is anything I can mention of that that has any relevance today, I think first of something that we were – was borne home to us this afternoon when we watched your flying display, and when we went into your aircraft and met you air crew, it reminded me of the basic need for professionalism. I don’t believe that in any area of life there is any substitute for total commitment to your job and hard work. I know that we found in the squadron doing low flying that you couldn’t afford to leave it for two days and then go on to an op. If you’d had a weekend off, then you needed to go out that morning and do an hour’s low flying, to get your hand back in. I think you would agree that what is needed is that when you go into an op no part of your mind is on the business of flying, so that all your mind is free for what you have to do.

00:09:36: Then secondly, I think it’s necessary always to ask ourselves ‘Are we doing it in the right way? Is there a better way in which we can achieve our objective?’ I think that the wartime squadron did have a gift of thinking new and improvising. I suspect borne out of an innate resistance to obeying any command that came from higher up unless it was unavoidable.

00:10:15 [audience laugh and bang tables appreciatively to] 00:10:26

00:10:26 LC: And we who’ve looked at you today and been allowed to share a part of your life and your work, I wonder what it is that we think, what our memories will be when we move away sadly after this happy evening. There are two thoughts in my mind, two ways in which your task is different from ours. The first is that in our case we were fighting a war with the objectives of which the entire country – in fact the entire Commonwealth, the entire free world – totally agreed. We knew that everybody was behind us. We knew that what we were doing depended upon everybody’s cooperation, participation in the country. But today, as in the 30s, the right to defend oneself is being questioned, and it can’t be quite so simple doing something when you wonder whether everybody is behind you. I think that in addition to becoming as you have masters of your profession, you need also to master the arguments against disarmament, so that when you meet people who hold a different view, you can meet them in reasoned argument and win the case.

00:12:12: Then I think it’s clear that now we are in the nuclear age, that the nuclear weapon has fundamentally changed the nature of war. In my own firm opinion, the nuclear weapon makes any form of war between nuclear powers rationally impossible, by making the cost of using it higher than any possible gain to the user. So in my own opinion, the likelihood of war between nuclear powers, so long as the deterrent is kept up to date and credible, is very small indeed if not nil. [audience assent and applause]

00:13:19: But the paradox is that in order to make any form of war – not just nuclear war – rationally impossible you have to make it quite clear that you’re willing to use it if need be. You need to make not only the enemy afraid of the fact that you may use it, but I think also your own people, the public. That is the paradox. And to come up as we did today and to feel your commitment, and to feel something of your skill and professionalism was very moving to all of us.

00:14:05 I would like to assure you that having participated as we have in part of your day, we feel that our involvement in the squadron 40 years ago was even more meaningful, because we see what the squadron is today, and we see the standard that it maintains, and we see that it is determined to carry out its own objectives. I think what set 617 apart from other squadrons is not that its crews were better – though perhaps we may like to think we were [scattered audience laughter] – we were specialists, we were picked out and given a special task and trained in that special role. And although the specifics of that role altered – [recording cuts off]

00:15:13: *Speech ends*

00:15:13: *End of recording*

End of Transcription