**Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project**

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Start of Transcription

00:00:00 Leonard Cheshire: President, Alan, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen. Well I hardly know how to thank you for the great warmth of the welcome that you’ve given me, nor to say how happy and privileged I feel to be here at Maguire Base, with all the memories that that brings back for me of days when I served, as part of my wartime career, with the United States Air Force. And I can only thank the British Officers’ Cub, Mr President, with all my heart for so kindly inviting me to be your guest tonight. I really have enjoyed it, it’s such a happy evening, the only thing that spoils it for me is I have now got to give a little talk for a little while. It didn’t get everything quite right… [audience laughter] But I’m not going to get into a dispute. But anyway, thank you very much for the warm things that you’ve said.

00:01:18 In thinking about what I would say tonight, I felt, ‘Well, we are a service in the British sense of the word, gathering, and so perhaps, if you’d allow me, I would give what I can only call a personal reflection upon war, looking back at it from this vantage point, but with the objective of seeing how what we did and what we learnt and what others who’ve had to fight other wars since have learnt and done, relates to the needs of today. And that I would like to do as best I can, by way of a personal story, a personal reflection.

00:02:16 But perhaps before I embark upon that I could just touch upon one thing that Alan said, and that was my promotion. You said that I was promoted at an early age to the rank of group captain, colonel. Well, I was, that’s true. I think I became a group captain in three and a half years after having joined the RAF. You may think that’s fairly rapid promotion [audience laughter], but for one thing, Air Force promotion in the war was a little haphazard, and depended largely upon whether you were fortunate or blessed enough to survive, but it operated in a different way from promotion in the peacetime Air Force, which I’d like to explain to you, as I’m sure you’re interested, by telling you one man’s experience. You will realise that some people in the wartime Air Force were really keen on promotion and others didn’t really bother. There was a certain flying officer who could think of nothing but promotion, he just wanted to get promoted. And it so happened that he was posted to Gibraltar, given a Hurricane – that’s a fighter plane – and entrusted with the aerial defence of that rock of the British Empire, Gibraltar. After he’d been there for a little while, he discovered that there was a system of warning signals in operation which went by 3 stages. On the first siren, you leapt out of bed and got into your clothes and sat on the edge of your bed, at the second siren you ran out to flights, jumped into your Hurricane, having got your flying suit on, and waited. And only on the third siren did you take off. And he found out by observation that sirens 1 and 2 frequently went off, but siren 3 never went off. So being a man of initiative, he succeeded in training one of the Gibraltar Rock monkeys [audience laughter] to perform operations 1 and 2 [audience laughter] while he staid happily and warmly in bed. But one night, unfortunately, siren 3 went off. He leapt out of bed, he wasted no time in getting up to flights, but only to discover the Hurricane trundling down the runway, taking off. So thus ended all his hopes of promotion. [audience laughter]. But to make it worse, the monkey landed the Hurricane [audience laughter] and ended up the war a group captain.

 00:05:55 [audience laughter and applause to] 00:06:17

00:06:17 So if I may go back to my early days in the RAF, and try to think what it was that imprinted itself most in my mind, I think the first thing, of course, is discipline – as a young man you learn discipline, and as a young man you don’t always understand the need and the benefit of discipline – you then learned the importance of being professional, of totally mastering whatever your particular profession or trade may be. I can remember arriving at my first operational station, you operated first as second pilot, second Dickie it was called, and you had a captain who took charge of the aircraft until you’d done enough trips to go on your own. My captain was a New Zealander whose name was Long, and he was 6 ft 2, so we called him Lofty. And he was the best of the peacetime RAF pilots. If ever he saw me sitting down having a cup of coffee or playing a game of cards, he’d pull me up by the scruff of the neck and say, ‘Up to flights, Cheese!’ – he always called me Cheese – and he would make me for instance sit in my cockpit for 20 minutes blindfold, until I could – I knew where everything was. He just made me learn completely that aircraft.

00:08:17 Of course I admit that luck comes into it, sometimes. I remember at flying training school, when we were flying Ansons, one of the things the instructor made you do was instrument flying, and to do this he pulled down what was then called the hood, he just pulled a screen down that blanked out the windscreen and you saw nothing. He could, but you didn’t. And one of the nice little things he’d ask you to do was to … he’d say, ‘I’m going to give you some courses and some times to fly, and you’re to fly them, and at the end of 20 minutes I’m going to pull up the hood, I give you 20 seconds and you tell me where we are.’ Very nice of him. On this particular occasion, we did our dog-legs and so on, he pulled up the hood, I picked up the map to have a look at it, and as I did so I squinted out on the starboard side and just in time to see my favourite pub, The Half Moon, appearing under the wing. [audience laughter]. So I said ‘We are 3 miles North-Northwest of the village of Kington Langley, sir’. The first time I’ve ever known an instructor lost for words for a moment… [audience laughter] and the only time I got an above average instrument rating. [audience laughter]

00:09:57 But I think that everybody in this room will agree that no matter what walk of life we may find ourselves in, if we want to be successful, then we have to give our whole mind and our whole heart to our job. In flying terms, operationally speaking, I would say that a pilot needs to be so familiar with his aircraft and with the art of flying that no part of his mind is on the business of flying, only on achieving the mission on which he’s sent. When I finally came to the Dam Busters and when we were doing low-level flying by night – and it was low-level, it was… below tree level, for special marking purposes, either under moonlight or under the light of flares, we practised every single day. And if we had 48 hours off and on the next day there was an operation, we would go up for 2 hours just to make up for the 2 days that we’d not been flying. I think that those 2 days just made a subtle difference. I am trying to say that the RAF, which is to say all the armed forces, is the teacher par excellence, in my humble opinion, of the necessity of being professional. As somebody said in a different context, ‘Everything that you can polish, polish. What you can’t polish, perhaps you’ll get away with.’ And obviously survival in war is mainly a matter of chance, or as I’d rather put it, in the hands of Providence. And if we survive, then we have a great deal for which to thank God.

00:12:23 The next thing that the Air Force taught me is how we all depend one upon another. It’s easy to think that there are individuals who achieve things on their own. But I don’t think that’s strictly true. They may appear to, but they know very well in their hearts that they have, as it were, been carried on other men’s shoulders, that they can achieve no more than what the team to which they belong achieves. And the team is not just your own aircrew, not just your own groundcrew that looks after your own aircraft as happened in World War 2, it reaches right back to the hangar, to the cookhouse, to everybody on the station. Everybody who is keeping the station running efficiently and well. And I think they need to know it, they need to know that their role is just as important as that of the pilot who is at the spearhead of the particular operation. I believe it goes even further than that, certainly in a total war like World War 2, where it’s not the armed forces that fight, it’s the whole nation. And we owe a debt that we can never identify to those who built our equipment, to those who in any way whatsoever keep the nation going. It teaches us that we’re all members of one human family, that the unity that unites us is not a haphazard, constructed unity, for instance like the flowers arranged in a bowl, it’s an organic unity, like that of a flower itself, or a tree. And that is a lesson that I have found repeated all through life, and something that I think we need to remember. Whatever happens, whether good or bad to any part of the human family, affects us.

00:15:00 Then I think war also taught us what men and women can do when they are united in intention, when they have a common goal, when they know what that goal is, and when they know that it has just got to be achieved, that if it isn’t, then we all go under. I think that World War 2 taught us that almost more than anything, that nothing is impossible, provided it’s good, if you have the commitment of will, if you have the unity, the resolve and of course the professionalism and the capability. But you can’t talk about World War 2 without saying something else of a very different nature.

00:16:04 World War 2, as you may know, cost all in all, in the 6 years that it lasted, 55 000 000 lives. The tragedy of that war to me is, above everything else, the fact that, honestly speaking, if Britain and France had had the political resolution, that war need never have been fought. Hitler would never have risen to the position of power he did if we had stood firm and said, ‘No.’ But we didn’t. We tried appeasement. Now, I don’t wish to say anything political, but I am convinced in my mind that the cause of peace is better served by being militarily strong than it is by being militarily weak. [audience applause]

00:17:19 But that immediately raises a difficult issue. There are many young people and many others who in all honesty and sincerity think that the way to avoid war is not to be militarily strong. Now, my personal view is that we, who have either served in the armed forces or who are serving in them now – assuming that you hold the same view as I’ve just expressed – need to be equipped to meet those who hold the appeasement or the pacifist view, to meet them in reasoned argument and to be able to put the other side of the case. I find that this doesn’t happen. I find that very often when that debate takes place that the person who believes that being strong is the way of averting war will appear to be on the side of war to the third party listening, whereas the unilateralist or the … whoever he may be, appears to be on the side of peace. It is very important in my opinion that the moment any discussion like this starts we make it clear that we are men of peace, that peace is what we want, that if we believe in armament it’s because that is the way to deter a possible aggressor. We have to respect his sincerity, we have to argue in a reasoned way, but that means understanding the arguments, we have to give time to study that issue, or else we won’t hold up to him in a reasoned debate.

00:19:31 But that is only one side of the question. In a way, the negative side of the question. If we want peace, we have to work for it with all our hearts and with all our strength in a very positive way. In order to do that, I think the first thing we need to do is to ask ourselves, ‘What is peace?’ We talk about peace, people sing about peace, demonstrate about it, but how often do we sit back and think, ‘What is it?’ Peace is not the absence of war, or of armed confrontation, neither is living under an oppressive and dictatorial regime living in peace, even though there’s no war. Peace presupposes justice and freedom. So that if you want to work for peace, as we all do, what we have to do is work for justice, work for freedom. We have to work to do away with injustice wherever we find it, whether in our own society or further afield. And I think very specially today when the World Summit on World Poverty is being held, and because so much of my life is led in the developing world, in my work for disabled people, where I see the totally poor, I see that gap between the poor parts of the world and the better off parts of the world as the greatest threat to our future security.

00:21:38 I think that unless we make it clear that we really mean with all our hearts to do something about it – and in saying that I don’t deny the complexity of the problem, it’s a very complex, difficult problem, it’s so difficult and so global that we tend to say, ‘There’s nothing I can do about it.’ We should never say that. Rather than look at the problem and be overwhelmed by its magnitude, we should look at ourselves and say, ‘What can I do?’ Well, there are many things that I can do, they’re very little, but they’re all something. And I think that that needs to be our attitude. If this problem is to be solved, we need a national commitment. We need to make up our minds that we are going to do something about it. If not, then those nations that live in poverty will inevitably turn to some way of…helping themselves other than political. And there are many people wanting to make use of this situation for political ends. I feel that we owe it to all those who never survived the war, who laid down their lives at so young an age, to try and work to the best of our ability, to see that the world we hand on to those who come after us is a more liveable world, a world in which there is less injustice. So I see the road to peace in two directions: 1, by being militarily strong and saying, ‘We will not ever again allow an aggressor to march’ and secondly, working in whatever way we each think best to make life more liveable for those whose lives are led in great poverty. I would like to thank you, Mr President for your very great kindness and the honour you’ve done me. Thank you. [audience applause]

00:24:16: *Speech ends*

00:24:33: *End of recording*

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