Leonard Cheshire Project Resonate

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00:00:00 Leonard Cheshire: November 24th, RAF Reserves Club.

00:00:05 LC: Mr President, Mr Chairman, my Lord and gentlemen. Well I’d like to explain first and foremost why I am standing up at the moment. I received a very warm invitation from your secretary, Harold Roome, to attend the dinner, which I accepted which pleasure, having been out of the country the last 3 years, I think. 4 weeks later I got another letter saying, ‘Would I please propose the toast to the Club’. I obviously couldn’t then say that I was not in the country. [audience laughter] I rang Harold the night before last to get a little brief on this evening, and as I was talking to him, a bell began to ring in my mind, thinking that I’d given this talk before. And knowing that my repertoire’s a little limited, I said, ‘Harold, I’ve done this before!’ ‘No you haven’t,’ he said; he said ‘It wouldn’t be right to ask one person to do it twice, and anyway it’s against Club policy.’ I said, ‘But, Harold, I think I can remember the occasion –’ I began to describe it. He said, ‘Oh yes, yes, yes, now I come to think of it that’s quite right. You gave a wonderful talk, in fact we’re still all talking about what you said…’ [audience laughter]

00:01:39 Well I think to be able to talk yourself out of a situation like that indicates why Harold got the job of secretary to the Club [audience laughter], and why the Club has been so successful. You know probably that the Club started in conjunction with the Naval Club. It then tried a little time of independence on its own, which eventually came to a halt, and reverted back to joining the Naval Club. I’d like to point out there’s no moral to be drawn from that [audience laughter], it’s a once-only event, but had it not been for the Naval Club we would not be here tonight, and I think we should express our deep appreciation to the Club – the Naval Club – and all its members, for their hospitality and everything they’ve done for the Reserves Club.

00:02:44 Voices from audience: Hear, hear! [applause]

00:02:52 LC: And finally, while I’m on the subject of the past and the Club, I’d also like to say that sitting at this table is Sir John Baker, who some years ago gave the talk that I am giving now. And in it, he recounted a little episode during the fighting of the First World War. And as I think that it typifies something of the sense of duty and sense of discipline of the Air Force, I’d like to repeat it, insofar as I remember it, and with my own omissions and perhaps additions.

00:03:39 A young pilot set off on a flight deep into enemy country, in his single-seater plane, but before he was able to accomplish the mission, something happened to him that’s almost unique to a pilot – an RAF pilot – on active duty. He got lost [audience laughter]. And having attempted to find a landmark without success, he decided the only hope was to turn his nose westwards and keep flying. Which he did, until the engines stopped through lack of petrol. He continued gliding, hoping that he would just make it over the German lines. Nothing fired at him, and so, when eventually he came down in a convenient shell hole, he feared the worst. He put his head over the top of the shell hole and saw a vehicle approaching him from the west. When he got closer, he saw it was a British Army vehicle. He stood up and stopped it, and said ‘Lieutenant…’ And the man said, ‘I’m not a lieutenant, I’m a general!’ ‘Good God,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know I was that far back behind the lines!’

00:05:09 [raucous audience laughter and applause to 00:05:23]

00:05:23 LC: Well… I thank you Sir John, but I’d like to ask – it wasn’t you, was it, Sir John? [audience laughter]

00:05:38 Well my task tonight is to propose a toast of the RAF Reserves Club. And in doing that I would like to associate also all those clubs, institutions and ceremonies, whatever they might be, that have as their origin in one way or another, either the First World War or the Second World War, and are trying in different ways to perpetuate – as this club sets out in its articles – to perpetuate the spirit of friendship and cooperation that we knew in the War. Because whatever the institution or the organisation, our objective is the same, though our ways are different. And obviously, when we come to think about one of those 2 World Wars, each of us has different memories, we see it in a different light. But I think that we would all agree that in that World War we knew what it was, as a nation, to have a common objective, to know what we were doing, to know that we had to do it, that there could be no question of failure, and then finally, in the face of difficulty, to achieve it. We learned what it was to be united, by virtue of a common danger and threat, and also a common challenge. And on a personal level, I think that we also know what it was to be a member of one of the Armed Forces in wartime. The friendships we formed, the examples that we were shown, the courage that we saw, I think also the tradition – suddenly to realise that one is part of a tradition that goes right back into the past, and to feel the strength that that gives one. I think that most of us who came from the outside world into one of the Armed Forces know that service in that force made us, so to speak, a man, it gave us a maturity.

00:08:30 But that’s not the only lesson from the war. Another one is our failure in the years before the war, to take the action we should’ve taken to stop Hitler. Because it’s perfectly clear that, had we really known what we were doing, had we really been able – willing – to face the threat, we could’ve stopped him, because he, as his generals told him, was talking from a position of weakness, we were in the position of strength. But we did not want to face the reality of a man who meant war. And because we didn’t, we opened the door to him, we entitled him in a way to think that we wouldn’t go to war. And I wonder whether today we have entirely learnt that lesson. Because given the world as it is today, given human nature as it is, it’s naïve to think that there will never be violent confrontation. We need to remember that, whilst working for peace, we must be on our guard, we must be committed as a nation – not only positively to working for peace – but committed to standing up if there really is a threat.

00:10:12 It’s easy to talk about not wanting war, and that argument is liable to prevail. And I think that those who’ve been through a war have something to contribute to that argument, only – we must do it in a way that is understanding of the new generation. I have listened to a number of debates about pacifism, I find that they are all conducted in a vacuum – that’s to say, abstracted from the concrete situation with which we are faced, or were faced. I’ve seen people arguing against it, but doing it in a militaristic point of view. Not declaring themselves as wanting peace, only realising that there comes a time when, sadly, we may be forced to resist aggression by force. The institutions which we represent – whether it be Armistice Day, or squadron reunions or whatever they may be – are not always understood by the present generation, because, I think, a dimension is lacking to them. I think that we should modernise, become more contemporary. But our Club, and this Club in particular, should continue opening its doors to the present generation, so that the spirit that it’s been our privilege to share in and to carry on will continue, not just stop when those who fought in the War are no longer here, but continue. And that cannot be unless every institution and every club becomes contemporary, introduces a new dimension, so that it belongs as much to today as it did to the past. ‘Cause after all what we are today is what we were in the past. We have the privilege of benefitting from what other generations, right back into the beginnings of time, have achieved, have worked for, and we have a job to pass it on. I think for instance that Remembrance Day should be given a contemporary form. I think we should bring back that two-minute silence, to make it meaningful…

00:13:05 Voices in the audience: Hear, hear! [audience applause]

00:13:11 LC: …so that we as a nation can stand up as it were and declare that we are committed to the cause for which so many died and whose memory we honour tonight. And so I count it a great privilege to be standing for this moment to propose the toast of the RAF Reserves Club – not only the Club itself, but all those other institutions and ceremonies of all the services that are perpetuating and bringing to the modern generation – enabling them to transform it in their own way – the spirit of service that was shown by our nation and our allies during that last World War. And so, on behalf of you all, I propose the toast – ‘the RAF Reserves Club’.

00:14:12 Man: The RAF Reserves Club!

00:14:14 [clinking noises and indistinct audience murmur to] 00:14:20.

00:14:13 *Speech ends*

00:14:22 *End of recording*

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