BRIAN LEONARD COAK

The Early Years

Like his father before him Brian was born in Penzance, Cornwall, and Brian’s earliest memories were of the Germans bombing Penzance in WWII. In one particular bombing raid his father was almost killed when working on a ship in dock and a near miss lifted the ship out of the water.

His years in Penzance after the war, Brian described as the happiest years of his life. He taught himself to swim at the age of 7 years, became a member of the junior water polo team by age 8 and at 12 years became captain of the team. Jubilee Pool in Penzance became his second home.

By the age of 16 years, his life was centred on sailing in the summer and playing ruby in the winter. Showing the initiative that marked him out as a leader in later life, Brian asked Lord St Levan if he could use his Lordships Redwing sailboat, and in this boat he explored the many smugglers coves in the area.

From 1949 to 1957 Brian attended the Penzance Grammar School and it was during these years his rugby playing really developed and he was to become captain of the Cornwall Grammar XV. Anyone who knew Brian knew he possessed boundless energy and as if he was not already fully occupied with his studies and sporting activities he did volunteer work assisting the local vet.

Military Service

In 1957, like all 18-year-old young men at the time, Brian was called-up to do his two years National Military Service. He was drafted into the Army and commenced his recruit training at the Grenadier Guards Depot. Very quickly assessed as a potential officer he completed officer training and became a 2/Lt in the Devon and Cornwall Light Infantry. Not wanting to spend his service in a stuffy officers mess in England Brian volunteered to serve overseas and he was sent on secondment to Nigeria.

In Nigeria Brian joined the 1st Battalion of the Queen’s Own Nigerian Regiment and as second in command of A Company he was part of the West African Frontier Force. In the absence of the captain Brian became the acting company commander, no small task for a young National Service officer when the company comprised 150 Hausa Muslims.

It was during his service in Nigeria that Brian became an expert marksman and horseman. Brian was later to comment that although he never saw active service he learnt to be a good soldier and how to command men.

Hong Kong Police

Brian was asked to become a regular officer and stayed on in Nigeria but foreseeing independence was near and this would bring with it inter tribal and religious problems when the British departed, he decided to leave the army on the completion of his National Service. In light of what was later to happen in Nigeria Brian’s decision was the right one but on his return to England he made a decision he said he was to regret. He was offered a scholarship to study at university but turned the offer down to go to live and work in another British colony – Hong Kong.

Brian was accepted as a Sub-Inspector in the Hong Kong Police and arrived in Hong Kong in January 1962. After completing training at the Police Training School in Wong Chuk Hang Brian served in Shau Kei Wan, Wanchai, Pat Heung, Narcotics Bureau and Central Magistracy. In all divisions and postings he served with distinction, never afraid to ‘kick ass’ (to use his own words).

During his years with the police Brian used to drive a small Austin Healy Sprite and in this car he was lucky to avoid serious injury. Being a man with a strong sense of duty he drove from Shau Kwei Wan to Wanchai at the height of Typhoon Wanda, one of the biggest typhoons Hong Kong ever experienced. The second occasion was driving down Route Twisk, skidding on a patch of oil and crashing down an embankment, the car summersaulting three times before coming to a stop. Neither Brian nor his passenger was hurt. Brian knew no fear!

In 1967 Brian was a Police prosecutor in Central magistracy and after his daytime duties there he studied 12 law subjects and obtained an LLB degree.

Career as an Administrative Officer

Brian’s 27 years as an Administrative Officer with the Government was so event filled it could easily be the subject of a book, indeed such was Brian’s drive, energy and can-do approach that any other part of his life could just as easily be written-up and make an interesting book.

New Administrative Officers were always sent out to the New Territories to serve as Assistant District Officers and Brian became ADO/Tuen Mun. Other qualities in addition to drive and energy that Brian possessed were a strong sense of justice, of doing the right thing, and an incident that occurred at Tuen Mun illustrates this. Burial sites that had good fung shui were difficult to find but people with money and influence managed to find ways to get round the rules and bury their deceased relatives illegally. Brian enforced the law and ordered these illegal graves to be dug-up, the only District Officer in the NT to do so.

Compassion for the less fortunate was another quality that Brian showed time and again throughout his life. Later in his career as District Officer Kwai Chung and Tsing Yi he helped a 99-year-old woman facing eviction from her wooden hut into an aged care home he has set up (see below). The old lady went on to be well looked after and lived another two years.

It was also whilst being District Officer Kwai Chung that Brian displayed that drive and leadership that were evident throughout his career with Government. A strike by container lorry drivers had brought the Kwai Chung Container Terminal to a standstill and with ships being unable to unload the situation was serious. Brian led from the front going backwards and forwards between the left wing and right wing unions and the management and in two days brought the strike to an end.

In a later posting Brian was Assistant Director Ops in Transport Department and was responsible for supervising 1500 staff. However, it was as Assistant Director Squatter Control in Housing Department that Brian faced his greatest challenge.

To build what is now the MTR Depot in Kowloon a large squatter area had to be cleared and although there was police back-up it fell on Brian’s staff to do the dirty work and do the actual clearance. Triads controlled squatter areas and in this case both the Big Circle Gang and the Sun Yee On were involved.

The Sun Yee On had set-up their ‘headquarters’ near the centre of the squatter area and Brian, using a bulldozer he had hired, smashed his way through and demolishing it. Brian himself tore-down the Sun Yee On flag that had been flying from the ‘headquarters’. As soon as the flag came down resistance ceased and the clearance went ahead.

The Sun Yee On had not only lost income from the area they had controlled but they had also lost face and they went after Brian. By keeping a cool head he managed to avoid an attack by several armed Sun Yee On members, as he was leaving his office and after this he always had one of his most burly staff armed with an iron bar accompany him whenever he left the office, whilst he himself carried a large wooden pick handle.

Freemason

Brian was a Freemason for 50 years and as was his nature he involved himself in masonic activities with the same energy he did in all other aspects of his life. He founded five lodges and at one time was a member of no less than 27 lodges, and even as his health failed he still managed to be a member of 7 lodges.

A commendable activity of the Freemasons is to raise money for charity and it was to this activity that Brian was to devote much time and energy. Over the years he helped raise millions of dollars for the disadvantaged and those in need of help. Examples are funding the tuition of a young musician, Colleen Lee Ka-ling who went on to become an international renowned concert pianist and providing much needed money to aged care homes.

Two of Brian’s closest friends were Bob Murby and Garth Richardson who were Freemasons and it was unfortunate that both died of cancer in their early 60’s.

Charity Work

When he worked in Housing Department Brian set up Temporary Housing areas for families who had been homeless by the demolition of squatter areas. In 1980 Brian was approached by a Hong Kong resident, Aileen Bridgewater, for help in providing shelter for aged people she was trying to find housing for. Brian found space in one of his Temporary Housing areas for these aged people and thus began what eventually would become a charitable organisation called Helping Hand.

Helping Hand eventually built three homes at Lok Fu, Tai Wo Hau and in Sai Kung and by 2008 these homes housed 700 old people. Brian was a founder of Helping Hand and served on the Executive Board for 32 years. Even though his health was failing, in 2013 Brian and fellow Freemasons raised $1.4 million for essential renovation work to be done on the three Helping Hand homes.

Other Community Work

Despite charity work commitments elsewhere, Brian still found time to be Chairman of the Incorporated Owners Committee for Broadview Terrace in Cloud View Road where he lived. These committees are much in the news right now for the corruption involved in building renovation work. In the 8 years Brian was Chairman of his committee he prepared agendas, notices and minutes himself, kept a tight control on tendering and, to use his own words, he ran a tight ship.

Family

Before he came to Hong Kong Brian was engaged to a Cornish girl but the relationship came to a mutual end soon after Brian arrived in Hong Kong. Brian had an eye for the ladies and had a natural charm, which won him friends. However, when Brian met Dora he met the love of his life and he said that marrying the ‘Queen of Queen Mary’ was the best thing that every happened to him. Brian and Dora where married in September 1965 and celebrated their 50 years Golden Wedding Anniversary last year.

Brian and Dora have two sons, Perran and Symon. Perran became a champion swimmer winning 500 swimming medals whilst Symon played tennis to championship level. Brian gave every encouragement and devoted much of his time to help his sons with their sporting activities resulting in parental bonding and mutual respect between father and sons.

From about 2008 Brian began to have worsening health problems and he made a decision to cutback on many of his activities. A lover of cars from his youth Brian sold his last car in 2011 after 50 years of motoring. His special licence plate, AE 35, he had auctioned and he donated the money to charity.

Brian hated shopping but liked eating and two of his favourite Chinese foods being yau jar kwai and chung yau beng, that were usually eaten in the Shanghai Restaurant in Central. He also liked his afternoon tea, which was Lung Tseng Chinese tea and cakes from the Mandarin Cake Shop bought for him by Dora. In recent years Brian and Dora liked to go to Stanley and have lunch there.

To lunch with Dora at the Shanghai Restaurant in Central and in Stanley, tea at the Shangri-La Hotel in Pacific Place there must be added another favourite of Brian’s and that was the Peninsular Hotel in Shanghai. Brian went to Shanghai five times and a few days of luxury in the Peninsular made up for being unable to join other retirees on world cruises and trips to Europe.

Health

Brian was physically strong and also very fit due to a lifetime involvement in sport. He was never a big drinker but he did like his food and this had caused him to constantly be aware of being overweight. His first real health problem was a detached retina in his right eye and the later glaucoma, which developed, in the same eye.

To help control his weight Brian took daily walks on the trails near where he lived and at one time was walking 65 Km a week. As these walks included going up and down 300 steps, it was not surprising that his knees gave way and he had to reduce his walking to 15 km a week.

Pneumonia and bacterial infections resulted in Brian being hospitalised and the discovery that he had a seriously impaired left ventricular. The hospitalisation and resulting tests had to be done urgently and Brian expressed his gratitude to Dora for being magnificent in arranging everything and being so supportive.

Cornwall

It was only half in jest that Brian used to say that when asked if he was English he would reply Cornish. He once wrote under

Nationality on a on a census form ‘Cornish Celtic Minority’. Brian was the ultimate patriotic Cornish man and he was proud to be a Cornishman who was hard and stubborn. Brian was Poldark before anyone had heard of the popular fictional character.

Final Words

Brian was a natural leader, a doer, a decision maker, and a man with vision. He was honest, hard working and compassionate but these qualities often put him at odds with those he was working for. He never reached his potential because of this, so promotion and honours he so richly deserved never came his way. He truly did things his way and in so doing earned the respect of all who really knew him. And the many, many people he helped along the way.

Brian would like nothing better than a few words in Cornish to be said at a service dedicated to him. ‘Keskerdh Kernow’ means ‘Cornwall Marches On’. Just as Brian Leonard Coak will forever march on in the memory of his much loved family and friends.

Written by Paul Dickinson,

Perth, Western Australia 4 October 2016

Note: For a more detailed reading of Brian’s life, visit his website at Kernowkid.com

HoweverH