

Tribute to Tony 'Willie' Wilkes

Tony was born on 22nd June 1939 in Manchester, to parents Alice and Arnold Wilkes and he shared a hard but happy childhood with his younger sister Avril, who he affectionately referred to as 'Avee'. He was very protective of his little sister and Tony recalled how he used to walk her to school and they always remained extremely close.

He went to school in Salford, where he excelled in sports and was the captain of all the school teams, (or so he said). But whatever Tony set out to do he was always determined to do it well. Tony was just ten years old when his father took him and Avril on an annual trip to Bellview, Manchester. Tony saw Ian Fraser VC a famous navel diver and a team of divers in a diving tank. It was then he knew exactly what he wanted to do for a career.

So in 1953 Tony joined the Royal Navy. He was a leading boy at HMS Ganges where he qualified as a diver. Tony's first dive at sixteen years of age in Gibraltar was on the Denby Dale a merchant ship. He came back from Gibraltar three years later and was the only one selected for a clearance diving course. He went on to serve a year in Hong Kong and eighteen months in Singapore before rejoining HMS Dingley diving team. Tony worked for eighteen months with the Portsmouth Bomb and Mine Disposal team. He had served at the HMS Vernon and in HMS Fearless. He left the navy in 1970 but not before becoming a chief clearance diver. He spent the next five years on the North Sea oil rigs before going to Trinidad as a chief diver. He returned three years later to work on the oil rigs again where he settled for three to four years. This was followed by a job in Saudi Arabia as a chief diving instructor with the National Diving School. I feel sure that wherever Tony worked he was highly respected by his employers, work colleagues and navy mates alike.

Tony's marriage to June in August 1958 was blessed with the births of their three children Michelle, Susan and Robert and later their grandchildren Bradley, Glenn, Sadie, Danielle, Jack and Louis and great granddaughter Ava. Unfortunately like many couples eventually June and Tony decided to go their separate ways and divorced in 1980, but they remained amicable.

In 1993 Tony was to find love in his life when he met Maureen on the South Parade Pier in Southsea. He was selling bags on the pier for his daughter Susan at the time and always the gentleman he gave up his seat to Maureen.

They got chatting and overtime their friendship developed and in 1995 they set up home together, with the blessing of Tony's children and Maureen's children Sally, Antony and Mary who Tony became extremely fond of. Like all couples Maureen and Tony had their share of ups and downs, but they were devoted to one and other and they worked together as a team. They both derived a great deal of pleasure from travelling and had enjoyed a wonderful Caribbean cruise and holidays in Scotland, Australia, Canada and Tony's favourite place Singapore. Tony had actually visited ninety-three different countries during his lifetime. This couple had

also enjoyed going to Bingo together and a trip to the Crown Bingo Hall in Cosham was a must. I understand Tony was quite lucky with his Bingo numbers. Good times were enjoyed when they went to the B.A.E. Systems Social Club with friends Geoff and Joan once a month when Tony would enjoy a pint of beer or a glass of white wine. They also went to other social events that the club put on and often took a turn on the dance floor; I believe Tony cut quite a dash with his dance moves. In later life Maureen and Tony were very content just to be in each others company and in the comfort of their own home. They have been very fortunate to share fifteen happy years together and our hearts go out to Maureen today.

As dad Tony was firm but fair in the upbringing of his children. He had his rules and they all knew that they had to adhere to them. Usually Tony's voice was enough to let the young Wilkes children know when they had crossed the line and I understand the phrase "wait until your father comes home" was a well known phrase in the Wilkes household. Tony was always there to help, support and encourage Michelle, Susan and Robert in everything that they set out to do in their lives and he taught them by example to have respect for themselves and other people and the importance of honesty and integrity all values that Tony held close to his own heart. Fond memories will surely be the wonderful holidays the young Wilkes family had, six weeks caravanning in Europe, a trip to South America, holidays in Cornwall and Devon and not forgetting the great times they had at Butlin's Holiday camp when good times were always ensured. Then there were the times their dad took them on trips to London to see the sights.

Tony was a father in whom his children could always confide in if necessary and he would never have judged them. I feel sure that Tony was extremely proud of his children and the achievements that they have all made in their lives and also that he was very happy in the knowledge that they have found happiness in their own lives with Billy, Peter and Sheree with whom Tony had shared very good relationships with.

As a grandad Tony loved his grandchildren as he loved his own children unconditionally. They doted on him as much as he doted on them. He always looked forward to visits from the younger members of his family, especially on Boxing Day, when there were always their special treats on offer

This grandad was always a willing playmate and he had loved to tease them and play his jokes on them, like putting a screw through his finger and pulling off his thumb. He loved nothing better than relating stories to them of the deep, the same stories, over and over and over and over again. Tony loved them all and no grandfather could have been prouder of their grandchildren than Tony.

Tony was a very sociable man who made friends easily and was liked by all that met him. He would easily strike up a conversation with anyone. As a friend he was very loyal and if he made a friend of you then it would be for life, like his good friend John Peach whose friendship had spanned many years and whose company Tony had really enjoyed. Then there was Mick Roberts and Tony two other good friends of

Tony's. There are of course too many friends to mention you all by name here today, but I am sure you all know who you are. Once a month, Tony attended a Ganges meeting where he enjoyed meeting up with old navel friends and colleagues. He had been very proud to have been the standard bearer of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla.

When it came to hobbies Tony derived a great deal of pleasure from his garden. Maureen introduced him to gardening and he just took it over. He loved to sit in the garden weather permitting and he liked to sport a nice tan on his legs for when he wore his shorts. He had won the Portsmouth in Bloom competition three times for his front garden. He was a talented man who enjoyed doing wood carving, glass engraving and oil painting. He was a very fit man and was still cycling at seventy years of age and he also enjoyed swimming.

This man was an avid reader and a navy or war book or a book on astronomy would always hold his attention. His television viewing was quite selective, a keen Manchester United supporter, Tony liked to watch his football on television from the comfort of his armchair. His nephew David on the other hand is a staunch Southampton supporter and Tony took him to Wembley to see the cup final between Southampton and Manchester United. Southampton won and David wanted to hang his Southampton scarf out of the car window on the way home. "No you bloody can't", said Uncle Tony, but he did give in and the scarf flew with pride. It has to be said that Tony was a bit of a hoarder, especially when it came to Navy memorabilia. He kept many things he found on the sea bed and everything he kept had a story behind it.

This was a very generous man who would help anyone out if he could and he kindly supported The Poppy Appeal, Doctor Barnardo's and the Lifeboat Association.

Like all of us here today Tony was not without his faults. He was a stubborn man and there were no grey areas with Tony everything was either black or white.

He was also a man, who spoke his mind, but at least you always knew exactly where you stood with him. There were no airs and graces with Tony what you saw with this gentleman was exactly what you got and those who knew and loved him respected this man for his forthrightness and his honesty.

He was blessed with a very good sense of humour; he enjoyed a joke, especially if he was telling it. The humour of Benny Hill, The Two Ronnie's, Tommy Cooper and the antics on Black Adder never failed to bring a smile to his face.

Tony's life was not without incident. In 1988 after a house fire he spent fifty-five weeks in Odd Stock Hospital, where he almost lost both legs. Fortunately he recovered well and managed to get on with his life. Tony continued to enjoy good health until five years ago when he developed heart related problems and his health had been slowly deteriorating since that time. Sadly in December last year he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and sadly treatment was not an option for Tony. With Maureen's love, care and devotion and the help of district nurses, Tony fought a very

brave and courageous fight against this truly wicked disease which sadly he lost on the 28th February in the Rowan's Hospice with his loving family by his side. I trust you will all draw just a little comfort from the fact that Tony is now free from any discomfort and at peace.