

Terry O'Connor

4.10.1922 – 29.5.2011

The Tribute paid at Terry's funeral on 6 June 2011 by Mary Kidd

Today we remember and give thanks for the life of Terry O'Connor. For many of us here we knew him as a bass singer in the Dunfermline Gilbert and Sullivan Society, as the Rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof* – indeed, as a real gentleman (but not of Japan!). However, I wonder how many of us knew these facts about him:

He had a long service and good conduct medal from the Royal Signals – no wonder, because he started as a boy soldier at the age of 14 and was a Lt. Col. when he retired in 1977.

He met his future wife, Win, when she was 8 and he was 10. He was married to her for over 60 years.

He joined his first musical group in 1955, and has been a keen member of Gilbert and Sullivan Societies in numerous locations since 1971.

He was a life-long Norwich City fan – and they earned promotion this season.

Terry also spoke fluent Malay, having studied it when serving in Kuala Lumpur. Because of this he used it whenever mounting the guard, and every seconded officer was forced to learn it too, to be able to follow his example!

What a complex character he was. His voice was sufficient to freeze poor squaddies on a parade ground, and yet gentle enough to read 'John Mouse' stories to his grandchildren, Kirsty and Alasdair. He was a man of many parts, soldier, husband, father, granddad, an extremely efficient retired army officer, singer, reader in church, and he read very well, and a keen gardener (although it has to be recognised that in that role he was very much under Win's orders!) He was an avid reader of The Daily Telegraph, and often completed the cryptic crossword! Only a few of us here have been privileged to know Terry O in all those capacities; Derek, his brother-in-law, was best man at their wedding, and no doubt he has quite a few tales of his own to tell. (Catch him later when his wife is not listening!).

Terry was born in Sudbury, in Suffolk, 88 years ago. From the start he wanted to be in the army like many of his family. At the age of only 14 he left home to sign on as a boy soldier on 30 June, 1937 and from then on until he retired his life was one of service. He was too young for active service at the start of the war but as a trained radio operator he was involved in sending false signal traffic from the Aberdeen area to keep the Nazis guessing about Britain's invasion plans. Terry's memories of the early war years were more about dances and Land Army girls than guns and fighting!

Eventually the MoD worked out his age and sent him to the Far East – but the Japanese heard he was coming and surrendered just as he arrived in Singapore! That didn't mean he had it easy, because he was sent to India and Burma. Even though conditions there were rough, he really enjoyed the experience. After that he was re-united with Win, his childhood sweetheart and they were married in 1948.

Terry was stationed in Catterick and Germany before coming back to march at Queen Elizabeth's Coronation. As you can imagine he polished his buttons, belt and boots until they shone – before stepping out into the torrential rain. Terry often recalled marching miles through London that day, but worse than the blisters was the weight of his sodden uniform as the regiment squelched back to barracks. But he was always meticulous in his appearance, and before going to bed that night he did his best to restore his uniform ready for inspection next day!

Perhaps it was some consolation that he was then posted to Malta, although he always had very skinny legs and they didn't show to advantage in shorts!

Throughout the 50s and 60s he moved up through the ranks – a stickler for giving and following orders. His son Graham was his greatest admirer and once when Terry was shouting commands at a 1,000 men on parade a little voice carried across the parade ground, "Didn't Daddy do well!"

Knowing Terry's sense of humour, as we all do, it was just as well the moustache could conceal the quivering lip!

Although I'm not sure Terry would want this brought up again, his grandchildren wanted me to tell you of an incident of vandalism and lack of sobriety on Terry's part, while serving in Northern Ireland. They were amused and delighted to hear that on more than one occasion, Terry was known to consume more Guinness and gin than was good for him! These 'men only' nights in the mess often resulted in dangerous stunts, and one night he pushed over a grandfather clock, sat in it, and 'canoeed' down a flight of stairs! Others joined in and the next morning it wasn't just his head that was sore from the bumpy ride! His bank balance was severely bruised as he paid for his 'high spirits'! On one occasion his service dress jacket was also torn from collar to waist – would love to have been 'a fly on the wall' when he got home that night!

Having got his commission in 1962 he and Win enjoyed postings in Northern Ireland, Malaysia, Germany and the MoD in London. Then he was then sent back to Catterick. Win reminded him he had promised they wouldn't have to face North Yorkshire again. Terry's quick humour was to point out he would buy her a fur coat and thick lined boots if she would agree to go. With a straight face he then warned her that she'd then be all set for a Catterick summer but she'd have to decide her own winter wardrobe!

Yet leaving Catterick for even further north, to Fife, was an easier move! Both Terry and Win adored their family and when Graham, Morag, Kirsty and Ali decided to make their home in Limekilns, they packed up their home for one last move to Charlestown, to be near them. One October day, soon after their arrival they attended the Annual Hobbies' Exhibition in the Glen Pavilion to see his grandchildren dancing in the Scottish Dancing Club, but his toes were tapping to a different tune. He happened to meet Bob Headden who invited him to come and join us, the Dunfermline Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Actually, it was much to his grandchildren's relief because the thought of those legs in a kilt gave them sleepless nights! Much better to see him as a Pirate, a Gentleman of Japan, a common sailor, or, better still, as a Yeoman of the Guard! He wore his uniform with pride and his pike drill was second to none!

A fellow member of that elite Bass section of the Society has asked me to convey his personal tribute. That recommendation from the late Bob Headden was more than enough to allow Terry to achieve the honour of belonging to their number! That introduction spoke of his long service to G&S in other parts of the United Kingdom, and it soon became apparent that Terry could claim his place with them on his own merits. His musicianship, his stagecraft and his open and friendly character soon won him status as a valuable and valued member. He made especial friends with John Headden and as both men grew ever-so-slightly less nimble their partnership flourished in an indulgent Director's choice of character roles.

To recall one example, Terry won many plaudits for a brilliant performance from a wheelchair in *La Vie Parisienne*, as he was pushed around the stage by an attractive nurse!

Terry was a quiet man not given to thrusting himself into the limelight (though he knew exactly what that term meant!). He was a good listener as well as good story-teller and his friendship was enjoyed and valued by many of us over the years.

His passing is a genuine and deep loss to the Society.

In 2008 Terry and Win celebrated their Diamond Wedding Anniversary.

Their favourite photograph on that special occasion is on the back of your Order of Service. Eight months after that Win was taken from him after a stroke. The stiff-upper-lip was still there – and the determination to carry on – but the family recognised the light in him had dimmed. He continued to read in church, and I know he read very well, and to sing at our rehearsals but increasing health problems caused him to withdraw from those activities.

Terry was a special man, a Christian disciple, a gentleman, 'one of the old school'! He upheld traditions of times past and yet we all knew his sense of humour and reliability – 'the very model of a modern Colonel!' He wore his medals with great pride on Armistice Day; the Burma Star, the Defence Medal, the Coronation Medal, the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal and the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal, and yet his life of retirement in Fife was interrupted only by the annual reunion of the Quartermasters – all friends from boy service days way back in the 1930s. Sadly each year saw fewer and fewer of them able to attend and last year it was clear they had reached the final gathering.

But we who knew and loved him today mourn his passing, but we also give thanks to God for his life and for what he meant to each one of us. We will remember him!

Mary Kidd