

WLCOW “TALKING HEADS” – SIMON HOLT WITH IVOR CHESTNUTT THURSDAY 17TH
JUNE 2021



The 10th in our series of Talking Heads was held on 17 June 2021 with Court Assistant, Squadron Leader Simon Holt MBE MA MB BChir FRCS, Consultant Surgeon and Chairman of the Charitable Events committee, being interviewed by Liveryman Professor Ivor Chestnut, PhD

Simon started by apologising for his complete lack of “Woke” credentials admitting that he was white, heterosexual, male, a baby-boomer, ex-colonial, educated at a public school and elite university, ex-military, a highly qualified high earner and, as an ultimate condemnation, he had never claimed any sort of benefits any time in his life.

He started by confessing that he was born in Blantyre, Malawi or Nyasaland as it was then. To emphasize his colonial past Simon noted Blantyre was named by David Livingstone after his birthplace, Blantyre, Lanarkshire. However, he soon moved to Zomba, the administrative capital of Nyasaland and at the foot of the 6,000 ft Zomba Mountain which provided a cool retreat from the heat of the plains.

Simon reflected on his near idyllic upbringing with camping holidays by Lake Nyasa but highlighted some of the hazards and inconveniences of living in Africa such as the mosquitos, poisonous snakes and dreaded hyenas. He admitted that they had 3 house servants and that he was unaware of what a cupboard was for until he visited his grandmother’s house in Croydon.

At the age of 10 he was sent back to boarding school in Sussex as there was no secondary schooling available in Malawi. He described the total contrast of a traditional prep school education, complete with frozen sinks, beatings for not learning your Latin vocab and a diet supplemented by chestnuts scavenged from the school grounds. At the age of 13, he scraped a pass into Ardingly College in Haywards Heath and eventually succeeded, against expectation particularly of his Latin master, to pass all 12 of his O-levels. His education took a significant turn for the better once he started to do A-levels in the subjects he enjoyed and he succeeded in gaining a place at King’s College, Cambridge to study medicine.

Simon admitted that his inspiration for becoming a military surgeon was not a wish to serve humanity as stated in his entrance interview but “MASH” and in particular Hawkeye Pierce. At Cambridge he embraced the many social activities available and became captain of the college rowing team. He won a senior scholarship in medicine and went on to do the clinical part of his medical training in University College Hospital, London returning to Cambridge to graduate with a distinction in surgery.

Having joined the RAF his first posting was as a General Practitioner at RAF Benson, Oxfordshire and then as a Senior House Officer in surgery at Nocton Hall Hospital in Lincolnshire followed by a posting to Wegberg in Germany as a registrar. He some of the perks of being in the RAF such as being offered a free holiday skiing (but with the catch that you were expected to climb up the hills first before skiing down). He completed his surgical training and took up the post of Consultant Surgeon on the Cade Oncology Unit at RAF Hospital Halton before leaving the RAF after 16 years' service to move to Llanelli as a Consultant General Surgeon in 1990.

He described the difficult loss of his wife Kim to cancer and how this led to his decision to specialize in breast cancer and how, in turn, this inspired the development of a new Peony Breast Cancer Centre at the Prince Philip Hospital and to the establishment a very successful research team specializing in gene expression analysis, intra-operative node analysis and three-dimensional mammography. Much of this success was as result of the extraordinary generosity of the people of Dyfed giving money to the Breast Centre Charity. He met his second wife, Xixi, in Hong Kong and now has two more children keeping him busy.

Simon finished by describing his experiences with glass bridges in China and the scariest speaking engagements he had endured.

