

FOREST SCHOOL



November 13th 2011

I am delighted and privileged, but it is with a certain feeling of humility, that I find myself standing here today, after many years, in the Chapel at Forest School as I consider that I am representing those Foresters who left this school in 1939, that most fateful year. Also, of course, we remember at this time those Foresters of a previous generation who fought in the First World War of 1914-1918, so many of whom paid the final sacrifice. There they all are, the names on the wall of the Chapel at Forest, the names of those who died serving their country in both world wars so that you and I are free today – *In Pectore Robur*. It seems only yesterday that, during my eight years at Forest, I used to march into this sacred building twice a day for Matins and Evensong...three times on Sundays!

The Chapel looks and feels just the same now as it has looked and felt to all Foresters over the past 177 years or so and certainly as it did in my day between 1931 and 1939. Truly God is in this place.

In those days Forest was a small school by today's standard, where everyone knew everyone else. That, of course, led to very close and lasting friendships, particularly for those of us who were boarding; friendships that withstood the passing of the years, although there are not that many of us still around.

That last summer term; walks around the cricket field in the evening twilight of a warm summer's day with two close friends, Henry Neil and Christopher Howell-Jones. Henry Neil was destined to chase the Japanese for four years through the jungles of Burma and Malaya whilst Howell-Jones lost his life leading his platoon.

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I recall my last day at Forest School most vividly. The service here in Chapel and the last hymn, "God be with you, till we meet again." Of course, at that time, war clouds were gathering over this land and I remember thinking "Till we meet again? When and where in God's name will that be, if ever?" Handshakes and goodbyes and then the walk out through the main gate, from there on an Old Forester.

For those who left this place in July 1939 there was little time to acclimatise to life outside the cloistered existence of Forest School, because as everyone knows we were all plunged into World War only a few weeks after the end of term, war being declared on September 3rd.

In a matter of months we were scattered all over the world and sadly some of us did not return; Burma and Malaya chasing the Japanese, India, the Middle East and North Africa, constantly recalling and remembering this, our Chapel and that they were old Foresters. I know I did, because within ten and a half months of walking out of the gates of Forest School for the last time, I found myself in the RAF in a front line fighter squadron flying spitfires.

What followed for me was the Battle of Britain, possibly the greatest air battle of our time, memories of which remain so vivid and clear to this day. One had to settle into some sort of a routine. Never to be forgotten..... the transport taking those on dawn readiness round the perimeter track to the squadron dispersal and to the hut where we waited for the call to scramble. I even recall little things, dew on my flying boots as I carried my parachute to my waiting Spitfire in the tranquillity of the peace of the pre-dawn and the beginning of a new day. Looking up at a clear sky and thinking, "it's going to be a lovely day again, Oh God another dawn". The chug chug of the petrol bowsers, refuelling the Spitfires. The clink of the spanner and muffled talk as the ground crews prepared their charges for the testing hours to come. Resignation, total resignation. For me, in that peaceful moment, was when memories of Forest School and this Chapel made themselves felt to the fore, with the offering up of a little prayer. "It's going to be another busy day, Oh Lord, and if I forget You, don't You forget me. Just give me this day please, please give me this day."

An early take off and from 25,000 feet you would see the sunrise and, for those who returned to an earth still shrouded in pre-dawn twilight, suppressing thoughts of friends still not returned and unaccounted for, you would see the sun rise again for the second time. We had lived to see two dawns and between those dawns enough incident to last a lifetime.

A few years ago I visited Duxford again, an old Battle of Britain airfield from which I had flown. This time it was as a guest of the Flying Legends at their Open Air Day. During the course of their display twelve Spitfires took off in pairs, with

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that never- to- be-forgotten sound of Rolls Royce engines under maximum power. I am not normally, and I don't consider myself to be, a very emotional person but watching those Spitfires getting airborne, a lump came into my throat and I had to fight for self control. You see, their cockpits were full of ghosts. They knew the odds. They were typical young men of their generation and, indeed I suspect, of all generations, today's generation.

The present generation of Foresters, your generation, is just the same as we were in 1940. You may live in a different world to ours of those days, have a different way of life and a different outlook, dress differently and have different rites and rituals but if and when at some point in the future the cards are face up on the table, the chips are down when no quarter is asked or given and there is a National crisis together with a true belief in justice of your cause, you will respond as we did back in 1940, you will respond. You are just the same, you are Foresters and I, as a very Old Forester, salute you.....*In Pectore Robur.*



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