

Flight Sergeant Pilot (112th Squadron RAFVR) GEORGE RAE, 1922-1942:
Ave frater atque vale!

“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them”. (Laurence Binyon: 1914)

The 2011 edition of “The Petriburgian” contained an article concerning the Second World War. In it was mention of George Rae, whose tragic and untimely death in the autumn of 1942 caused widespread sorrow throughout the School. (Rae was not, incidentally, the first war-time casualty). His name is perpetuated by the George Rae Memorial Prize, which is awarded annually at Speech Day. This year marks the 70th anniversary of his death, and now that the number of Old Petriburgians who remember him has diminished to a mere handful, this is perhaps a fitting moment to recall George Rae and all that he achieved during his cruelly short span on earth. His sad story clearly demonstrates the utter futility of war.

George was born on 3rd June 1922, the only child of George and Sophie Rae. Mr Rae was an inspector in the Post Office engineering department. The young George gained a Warwickshire County minor scholarship in 1932 when he entered Leamington College. Upon the transfer of his father to Peterborough in 1934, George commenced his studies at The King’s School in the Spring term of 1935. He was awarded a “Special Place” by the Soke of Peterborough education authority with total remission of fees. He was a quiet, reserved boy with a shock of auburn hair. Rae was one of those fortunate individuals who excelled at academic work and also shone on the sports field. From quite early on, this serious-minded and highly intelligent boy displayed his aptitude for science. He had no difficulty in passing the Oxford School Certificate in 1937, and the Oxford Higher in 1939 (in which he gained Distinctions for Maths, Physics and Chemistry). He was an outstanding sportsman and obtained his colours for cricket, hockey and rugby. He captained the 1st XI Cricket team, was a highly popular Captain of St. Chad’s House and became Head Boy in 1940. In his last year at School, George won a Hulme Exhibition to Brasenose College, Oxford to read Natural Science. (The Headmaster, Reg Hornsby, had been a scholar at Brasenose and would undoubtedly have influenced Rae in his choice of college).

War was declared on 3 September 1939. The younger members of staff and many Old Boys who had scarcely left the School joined the colours. Instead

of going up to Oxford for the Michaelmas term, George elected to join the services immediately on leaving School and enlisted in The Royal Air Force on August 28 1940. He received his training in England, gaining his wings as a fighter pilot in October 1941. At his E.F.T.S. he set up a 'record' by going solo after 6.05 hours dual, but he wrote: "I understand that this has now gone the way of most other records!" Whilst he was being trained, Rae flew over Oxford in his Hurricane: "I picked out Oxford quite easily", he wrote, "and ...look forward to the time when I can take my place in the College – may it be soon!" When on leave during this period, he enjoyed spending some time at his old School and was never happier than when experimenting in the laboratory under the watchful eye of W. F. F. Shearcroft, the Science teacher and war-time Acting Headmaster.

George volunteered for service in the Middle East and went abroad in March 1942. His squadron was based at Amriya, operating in the fighter bomber role, flying support missions to the ground troops to and during the Battle of El Alamein. On Friday 2 October he was out on a practice flight from his base in Egypt, and his plane – a Curtis Kittyhawk 1 fighter aircraft AL 192 – had only been in the air for ten minutes when it inexplicably burst into flames. Rae endeavoured to land the burning aircraft but was unable to do so, and was killed on the impact of landing. He was but twenty years old. His commanding officer, Squadron Leader Billy Drake, DSO, DFC and bar (one of the most illustrious RAF fighter pilots of World War II), paid tribute to Rae's keenness, and his popularity with the ground and flying personnel. The young airman's remains were buried in the El Alamein War Cemetery in Egypt. In his obituary for George Rae in "The Petriburgian", Roland Jermy wrote: "He had great qualities which, except to his friends, seemed hidden behind his shyness and reserve. He had begun to lose this reserve in his contacts with RAF life.....He said typically, on hearing that he might be sent to the Middle East, 'I'm going to learn all I can' ". George's obituary in the Brasenose College annual report for 1942 expressed deep regret at his death: "...we remembered the impression that he created when he came up for his scholarship interview and we had been confidently expecting that he would bring credit to the College of which he was a member".

The entire School community was horrified when the news of George Rae's tragic death was announced by a visibly moved Mr. Shearcroft at morning assembly in Big School. Rae was still known and remembered by many of the boys, let alone by his old masters, and his passing at one and the same time saddened and inspired. It seemed quite inconceivable that this young man of brilliant promise, who only a few terms previously had been Head of School, had lost his life as the result of a freak accident. His death in the

gallant service of his country cut short what would undoubtedly have been a distinguished scientific career.

Mr and Mrs Rae, who were devastated by the tragedy, resolved to do something to honour their son's memory in order to provide some tangible reminder of his sacrifice. They accordingly endowed a prize for Physics in his name, and the first "George Rae Memorial Prize" was awarded at Speech Day in 1944. Five years later, an oak board listing the names of all Old Petriburgians who gave their lives in the Second World War was placed in Big School (now the Library). On 23 October 1950, a stone tablet recording the names of those who did not return was unveiled in St. Sprite's Chapel at the west end of the Cathedral. The Headmaster formally handed over the memorial to the Dean and Chapter for their safekeeping, The Bishop of Peterborough dedicated the plaque and the Cathedral choir sang, "Blessed are those that die in the Lord" by Sir John Goss. Nearly two hundred people were present at the service. Quietly and reverently, many of them in turn visited the tiny chapel to inspect the memorial and to shed silent tears for their loved ones. At the conclusion of the poignant ceremony, Dean Noel Christopherson said of those whose names were recorded on the plaque: "May they never be forgotten".

Tim Hurst-Brown.

"Those whom the gods love die young" (Greek proverb)

I am deeply grateful to my old friend Dr Jim Deboo, an exact contemporary of Rae's, for sharing his vivid memories of George with me. I am also indebted to Commander John Willis for putting me in touch with Old Petriburgians Mr Ian Braddock and Mr Bob Steward, both of whom have shared their recollections of far-off schooldays. I am similarly grateful to old chorister Dr John Martin, sometime Vice-Master and now Emeritus Fellow of St. Catherine's College, Oxford, who has supplied me with some extremely interesting information. I would also like to express my gratitude to Old Petriburgians Mr Geoff Blake (former chorister) and Mr Barry Proctor for their help and advice. My thanks are likewise due to Miss Georgina Edwards, Archives Assistant at Brasenose College, Oxford, who has passed on much valuable data. I wish to express my appreciation to Mrs Judith Bunten, Archivist of The King's School, who has been exceedingly helpful, as has Mr Richard Hillier, Local Studies curator at Peterborough Library. Finally, I am obliged to Mr Trevor Elliott and Mr Bruce Jarvie for their interest and assistance.