

Dennis Bray

Dennis was born in Brondesbury, London on 1st October 1923. He lived there with his parents, Frank and Lizzie Bray, and much loved younger brother and sister – Hedley and Myrtle – until they all moved to Maidenhead when he was 13.

At the age of 5, Dennis started at Sunday School, where he was given a small text to learn – one that he always remembered - ‘God Loveth a cheerful giver’ (2 Corinthians 9 v 7). This was something that he certainly took to heart – he always gave generously and cheerfully to others throughout his life.

That Sunday School was the start of his lifelong association with the Church. He became a Christian when he was just 9 years old and kept a strong faith for all his life.

Dennis attended Maidenhead County Boys’ School and left just after WW2 had started – to take up an apprenticeship in the Post Office Engineers Department, where he learned to install switchboards, teleprinters and Air Raid Alarms. Then at 18, he volunteered to join the RAF and was accepted to be trained as a pilot, thereby starting another lifelong love - flying. After training in the UK and abroad, Dennis was posted to join the 225 Squadron in Naples. From there he travelled around the World, carrying out Air Reconnaissance missions – a source of many stories later!

Dennis was demobbed in 1947. He qualified for a full-time Government business course and joined the Pirelli General Company in Eastleigh. There, after 2 years of training, he became an engineer with Outside Contracts work and so enjoyed this work that he continued there for 37 years, finally retiring after becoming Assistant to the Managing Director.

In 1952, Dennis married his beloved Ann and after the birth of their daughter Gillian, they settled down in a brand new house in West End – which was to be their home for the rest of their lives. Their life was busy, filled with work, church and family events. Gillian went away to university in Nottingham and then stayed on in the area to work as a teacher, so Dennis and Ann would regularly visit and enjoy short breaks in the Peak District. Dennis continued to follow Gillian’s career with great interest and was particularly proud when she became a Professor in 2011.

After Dennis had retired he remained very active, often commenting that he wondered how he had found the time to go to work before!

He was one of the founder members of the Spitfire Society and retained strong links with his 225 Squadron friends. He was a very active member of his Church in West End, providing support to the community in many ways, despite his advancing years. More recently, the Southampton Spitfires Rugby Club asked Dennis to present their annual Junior Awards. He was delighted to do this, especially when they dedicated a special award in his name – a wonderful tribute that will continue for years to come, in his memory.

Dennis always retained his sense of adventure, enjoying travel and was particularly thrilled to be given a Hot Air Balloon ride for his 70th birthday by Gillian – something that he had always wanted to do. Definitely not for him, a slowing-down type of retirement!

Dennis was always about family. He enjoyed everyone's successes and was supportive when things didn't go so well. When he was younger, he loved attending the 'Cousins Parties'. He also loved the annual Christmas family get-togethers in Maidenhead each year, originally organised in the homes of Myrtle and Noel and June and Hedley, and later by his niece Heather and her husband Martin. He especially enjoyed family weddings and then spending time with the youngest members as all the families grew.

In 1989 Dennis was so happy when Gillian married Raph – a son-in-law who he loved and admired, and whose company he greatly enjoyed. Through Raph he gained another extended family – the Richards – and he particularly enjoyed spending time with them at family events over the following years.

When Ruebyn was born in 1993, he was delighted to become a Grandad. In the early days, he would spend hours playing with Ruebyn when he visited – making Duplo models and building bridges, telling him stories and taking him out on trips. Later, he always took a keen interest in Ruebyn's career as a full-time elite athlete with the Great Britain Taekwondo team, greatly enjoying his many successes and world travels – always wanting to receive 'real-time' text updates from Gillian and Raph from the competitions. He was so very proud of Ruebyn and loved him dearly, always keeping a photo of him at his bedside.

After Ann died in 1998, despite his devastating loss, Dennis was determined to stay independent. Although Gillian and Raph invited him to come and join them in Nottingham, he wanted to stay in West End – he was happy in his home and local community, where he had so many friends and interests.

He especially enjoyed travelling to Nottingham to stay with Gillian, Raph and Ruebyn every Christmas, where they were joined by Linda and Tanya and their families – always a lively family time, that he took part in joyfully. He also enjoyed meeting Gillian regularly in London at the RAF Club – a chance to bump into old friends and for the two of them to just spend the whole day together, enjoying each others' company.

Dennis' 90th Birthday was a great event. Gillian spent the day with him and they started his day in style with Champagne! This was followed by a birthday lunch with close friends, where he was in fine form. A few days later, Dennis travelled to Maidenhead for the family birthday party, hosted by Heather and Martin. There he was given a collection of family photos and memories of his 90 years – a lovely trip down memory lane that everyone shared. Later in the month, a birthday tea was held by church and other local friends in the village. He talked about these celebrations for a long time afterwards, deeply touched by everyone's love and kindness.

Dennis retained his independent lifestyle until the end. Much of this was thanks to Heather Hunt and her son Adrian, who helped him with the house and garden – tasks that became too much for him as he became older. Over the years Heather and Adrian became important friends to him, friends whose company he enjoyed and especially valued.

The other person that was an important part of Dennis' life was Neta Talbot. Neta and her husband Pat had been good friends of Dennis and Ann for many years and after Ann and Pat died, their friendship grew. Neta was very special to Dennis. He really enjoyed their regular outings and their mutual care for each other was a great source of comfort and support for him.

Dennis' death was a surprise, despite his advanced years. One had the feeling that he could make it to at least a 100! But, he always said that he'd had a great life and was ready to 'go' whenever that happened. He was loved by many people. As friends have described him, he was "a real old fashioned gent" and "a true hero – decent to all, courageous and modest".

He will be greatly missed, but there is so much to be celebrated about his life and we give thanks for it.