

Major Reg Elson

I have had the great good fortune to know Reg Elson for more than 30 years, from the time when he came as a supply teacher into the History department of The Highfield School, Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire. He was instantly popular with both staff and students and as Head of the department I was immediately impressed by both his outstanding professionalism and his great sense of humour and fun. This began an association with The Highfield School that lasted for over 20 years, mainly in the form of accompanying us as the resident World War II Veteran and Military Expert on our annual field study visits to the 'D Day' landing beaches in Normandy with our year 11 students, though he also came on visits to the World War I battle fields with year 9 and a sixth form trip to Austria and Hungary.

On these visits not only was Reg excellent company and a full member of the teaching team but he also provided a fount of knowledge delivered in such a gracious and welcoming way that he truly inspired the students every year. They hung on his every word and essentially adored him and I know that he has kept in touch with one or two of them. My own son, who attended The Highfield School and went to Normandy on one of the visits, has said that Reg's enthusiasm was one of the factors which led him to read History at University.

Memories of these visits are many. Reg always brought a wreath from the British Legion for our students to lay at Ranville cemetery near Pegasus Bridge. The students always responded superbly to these occasions and Reg, dressed in his blazer, regimental tie and beret and medals, seemed to be able to add unexpected additional touches. On one occasion a Spitfire flew over just after the wreath had been laid and on another a group of trainee officers on a visit to the area provided a guard of honour for Reg and the students as they approached the Cross of Remembrance. We were frequently joined by other veterans who wanted to chat with Reg and by members of the public who were enthralled by his knowledge and stories. He even formed a friendship with Madame Arlette Gondre, owner of the Pegasus Bridge Café, who would then invite our students into her small establishment and recall her

memories of the night of the 6th June 1944 whilst giving Reg and me a free cup of coffee and pastry!

Reg always set high standards for himself and others as he demonstrated very clearly to the staff of an Irish school, who were sharing the hotel with us one year, but who were doing little to control their students. That changed after a few words from Reg! Another memory is of Reg getting the largest student in the group to give a piggy back to the smallest one over the sand dunes at Omaha Beach, to give an impression of what it was like for the soldiers landing with all their equipment. The hefty rugby player collapsed after about 6 paces - and Reg had made his point.

The visits to Normandy also allowed Reg to display his fantastic acting skills! His feigning of a twisted ankle which got him a bag of ice from the hostel we were staying in was worthy of an Oscar and earned the thanks and respect of the staff, as the ice found its way into our gin and tonic!

Reg continued to accompany the School on our Normandy visits even after he moved to Birchington, catching a taxi to meet us at Dover for the ferry. He and Ann also provided a marvellous display for our History Department at the School Open Days, when a classroom and landing was given over to the D Day visits.

It is hardly surprising that the school showed its gratitude to Reg by naming their Award for Extracurricular Contribution –

“The Major Elson Award”.

Reg was generous with his time. He and Ann always made us very welcome on the occasions when we were able to pop in and see them. He had a genuine interest in people, a fact which was appreciated by our students. He gave my other son a pair of his army boots to add to his military memorabilia collection. “You can’t do that”, Ann gently chided, “there’s still mud on them!” “No Ann”, Reg replied, “that’s battlefield mud and people would pay good money for that!”

It has been a genuine pleasure, honour and privilege to know and work with Reg, the “Major”, as staff and students knew him. He was a special man – a true gentle man in all senses of the word.

Chris Lewis