

LIEUTENANT COLONEL HAROLD JOHN TAPLIN HIS LIFE

To his family, friends and work colleagues, he was known as 'Taps'. He was born in London in 1891 and died in Malta in 1969. He was buried in St John's churchyard, Valletta. He married Kate Agnes in c. 1930. Her maiden name is unknown at present, but her father was Mayor of Stoke Newington. Kate was born in 1895 and died in Thanet in 1981.

As a youngster of 15, 'Taps' made his first model aeroplane. Three years later he made a large wooden propeller, which the family kept for many years. Between 1912 and 1916, he worked at Empress Aviation in Manchester as an automobile and aero-engineer. Because of this occupation, he was not free to join up during the First World War until the worst days of 1916, when he joined the RFC in August of that year. He learnt to fly on the Farman Longhorn, at that time the Royal Flying Corp's standard trainer. He graduated to Avros and ultimately to the B. E. series of 2-seaters. These were known during WW 1 as 'Fokker Fodder', because they were so un-combat-worthy, that many of the crew lost their lives unnecessarily, through lack of adequate protection. (Fokkers were one of the commonest types of German planes in that war.)

'Taps' was sent over to France in December 1916, but saw very little flying service. Because of his engineering skills, his talents were required to repair the planes as fast as he and his team could. He was designated an 'engineering specialist', and was given the rank of Engine Officer, 3rd Class, in the London Gazette of May 1917. During 1918, he was promoted to Captain and was demobbed in April 1918.

His home address at the time he enlisted was given as his father's address – 16 Lordship Park, Stoke Newington, London. By 1918 his home address was given as Hove in Sussex and later on he moved up into the Midlands. Sometime after the war he married Kate (probably in the late 1920s or very early 1930s).

Their first son, John, was born at Wembley in London in 1932, when 'Taps' was 41. Four years later Michael was born, also at Wembley. 'Taps' later worked for A. V. Roe in the Birmingham area. During the Second World War he was called up to serve in the Local Defence Volunteers (later renamed the Home Guard), but also worked with a group of RAF engineers on automatic pilot controls. The War Office was not particularly interested, so the idea eventually went over to America, where it was patented and used. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel by the end of the war and kept this rank in civvy street, as so many ex-army personnel did. During 1945 he made his first radio-controlled aeroplane, which was the start of an all-consuming hobby to the end of his life.

The family came down to Birchington for a holiday in 1945, looking for somewhere for 'Taps' to start up a factory. While he was in the village he met Harry Ward, a local estate agent. A member of his family suggested that it was quite possible that 'Taps' already knew Ward before he arrived. Harry told him that the old Primitive Methodist Chapel in Albion Road was available and 'Taps' immediately decided to buy it. He moved down to Birchington by 1946, starting up his factory by the end of the year, and rented a spacious house in Minnis Bay called Shrublands (23 St Mildred's Avenue). The property at that time had a large garden behind the house that ran right back to Reculver Avenue behind it, as well as extensive space on either side.

Once they were settled in John and Michael went to two local schools. John went to Wellington House in Westgate and Michael joined him there for a while, until he went to the King's School in Canterbury as a day boy from 1950-1952.

Their home at Minnis Bay proved to be an ideal site to try out Taps' radio-controlled aircraft and kites. He even experimented with aerial photography from these kites. He converted two of the rooms in the house into workrooms for his model making. On June 6th 1948 John established a British Class II Control Line Speed Record with one of the family's model planes. He flew the model at 89.95 mph. The record was verified by officials from the S.M.A.E., who were present at the event.

In 1954 'Taps', together with his sons and a number of supporters, flew a model aircraft across the Channel, starting out from St Margaret's Bay. This was an amazing achievement, given the stage at which technology stood at that point. A more recent crossing, in 1990, from France to England, claimed it was a 'historic event' – but with all the modern state-of-the-art equipment now available, it was far easier than that first 1954 feat. For some years 'Taps' was chairman of the Thanet Model Aeroplane Club.

By 1949 he had ventured into the world of radio-controlled model boat making. Together with John and Michael, and eventually their wives as well, they became very successful in making, racing and finally manufacturing the engines for these boats. From the 1950s until the mid 1960s, the Taplin family dominated the radio-controlled model boat scene, both in Britain and across Europe. They travelled widely to France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, as well as all over the British Isles. They were even filmed at least twice by Pathé Newsreel at events around Britain.

The 'Taplin Twin' engine, which began with 'Taps' and was later further refined by John, became a best-seller in the model boat world. It was first marketed commercially in January 1959 and by the end of that year it had become the most popular model. As David Wiggins stated in an article in the magazine 'Radio Control Boat Modeller', "It became the bench-mark of quality, reliability and power by which other engines were soon being judged." By this time 'Taps' was 68.

When he began, 'Taps' was manufacturing the engines in the Birchington Engineering works, but once the second firm of Dinton Engineering was set up in Margate in 1963, the engines were all made there. During this period the family used to go regularly to the Poole Regatta for the radio-controlled boat competitions, where 'Taps' sponsored a number of different events with cups to be won. All three men belonged to the International Radio Controlled Model Society for many years.

During the period when they were competing, one problem kept recurring. When two models were near to each other, it was always difficult to prevent the frequencies on the control units from interfering with each other. He and John did a lot of work on the patch-boards being made in his factory at Margate to try and master the difficulty. In the end, 'Taps' overcame the problem and even demonstrated the success of his patch-boards by controlling two boats simultaneously.

You would have thought that with his hobby and his business, 'Taps' would have had little time to spare. However, he still found time to become very involved with village activities. On one occasion, in about 1953, he organised a huge Guy Fawkes event. It began in the Square with a trial of the Guy, with Monty Crick acting as the judge. Then four men, one of which was Timber

Wood, carried the Guy in the midst of a huge procession, down Albion Road to Epple Bay. Once there, food and drink was available, while a gigantic bonfire and fireworks display took place. All this was funded, as far as can be recalled, by 'Taps' himself.

One local resident, Nora Barrows, recalled that after the Dip at Minnis Bay was flooded in the devastating floods of 1953, The Taplin family were constantly down there whenever the weather was fine enough, to sail their model boats on the large expanse of sheltered water.

Another of his big passions was the Annual Carnival. He was always a willing helper and made sure his own firm had a magnificent float. He was one of the leading lights who suggested that any spare revenue generated by the Carnival should be put towards another pet idea of his – a new Village Centre. There had been two previous ones, the first in a converted building behind the north side of the Square, first used for this in 1878, and the second one was purpose-built hall in Station Road, opened in 1902. He didn't live long enough to see his dream come true, but at least he knew it was gradually becoming a reality and was not just a dream when he died in 1969. The first Quexpo was held in 1970, with the sole aim of raising funds for the next Village Centre, so plans were already well under way before he died.

Among the memories that emerged when the name of 'Taps' was mentioned recently was that he had been involved with Malcolm Campbell and his Bluebird racing project. We have been unable to confirm this, in spite of extensive enquiries, so it would be wise to treat this memory with some caution.

After his death in Malta during one of his frequent visits there in 1969, a memorial service was held for him in All Saints Church, Birchington, with the Vicar, the Rev Frank Fordham presiding. The church was packed with family, friends, employees, villagers and representatives from the model craft world. How fitting that this larger-than-life man should now be commemorated in the naming of a new block of apartments erected in Albion Road on the site of his old works! And in a way, it is also a tribute to his two sons, who shared so much of his working life and his many interests and concerns.



'Taps' and Kate on the settee, with Michael (R.) and John in the sitting room at 'Shrublands' - 1947