

## **Eulogy** by Colin Greenwell.

Whilst everyone present knows that Nick was unlucky enough to contract Motor Neuron Disease which has tragically shortened his life, that is only the end of his story – generally speaking for most of his time, Nick Palmer was blessed – he had a stable childhood and upbringing, supportive parents, a loving wife, two great children and a very successful career.

Jackie (The Reverend Sethton) has outlined Nick's path through life, but I would like to share with you some personal recollections of my friend. It was in Nov 1980 during his very first ABP training assignment in Fleetwood that Anne and I met Nick and Julie. I had just been appointed Port Engineer there and we required temporary accommodation. Nick had been in post a couple of months and, being a helpful soul, managed to arrange for us to rent a flat in the same building as them. For us it was a great result - a chance to move our family to Fleetwood quickly – and built in babysitters to boot. It was the start of a friendship that I am pleased to say has lasted 35 years.

In our time, to progress within the Company management ranks you had to be prepared to move location – not always easy with a young family. However one thing is clear, Nick made the right choice of employer – he never worked for anyone else, his career provided an amazing variety of experiences and he rose from management trainee right through the ranks to finally become Port Director, Grimsby and Immingham – one of the most senior and important jobs within the company.

The itinerant nature of our respective careers often found us living on opposite sides of the country, but somehow we always seemed to be able to get together either through company activities or by weekend visits. We climbed Scafell Pike and had get togethers in Stratford where we played golf and took in a bit of culture at the Shakespeare theatre. On one occasion Nick and I were so culturally impressed by the play that we both fell asleep – but at least he dozed off before me. Midsummer Nights Dream was much more to our liking!!! Anne and I used to hold Burn's night parties and on one memorable occasion I discovered Nick could sing when he and Julie entertained the assembled crowd with a spontaneous duet of "If you ever go across the sea to Ireland".

As he progressed in his career Nick typically had to deal more and more with managerial aspects of his work, industrial relations, contracts with customers, future planning etc but he was never happier than when he was involved in hands-on activities on the dockside. One such example was in King's Lynn where he was Assistant Manager. After the abolition of the Dock Labour scheme, there was a period of intense re-organisation in the workforce and for a period the port was very short of manual staff. Anxious that they should continue to provide top class customer service, Nick donned a pair of overalls over his suit and helped the staff shovel fishmeal from the corners of the ships hold. All went well with the discharge but fishmeal has a particularly invasive smell and when he arrived home Julie would not allow him into the house until he had removed his clothes – the suit I believe went in the bin.

Another example was when he was with Red Funnel and he arranged for an inspection of the buoyancy tank situated beneath the ship to shore ramp. This tank was only designed to support the weight of the unladen ramp - which had to be connected to the ship before it could support the weight of a vehicle. It being in Nick's nature to see things for himself, he and 3 others climbed down the vertical access ladder to inspect the tank. Unfortunately the contractor who had arranged to meet them arrived late and drove right up onto the ramp - which immediately started to sink!! The panic below as the water topped Nick's wellingtons with 4 people simultaneously trying to use one escape ladder was perhaps not the most edifying spectacle.

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During our careers Nick and I worked together on a couple of projects. The first was when he was my Client during his Red Funnel days. I was then the Port Engineer Southampton and was tasked with handling the contract for the replacement of Red Funnel's vehicle ramp on the Isle of Wight. We were severely constrained by the ferry timetable of up to 18 sailings a day which had to be preserved throughout the construction period. When we were ready for the final installation Red Funnel allowed the contractor a weekend possession to make the changeover. We used the port's floating crane to do the lifting. Nick and I virtually camped at the terminal all weekend - at the end of which neither of us had any fingernails left, but to much acclaim the first ferry arrived on schedule on the Monday morning. The second occasion was when as Director Short Sea Ports he was my boss and we had to negotiate a new 15 year agreement with Brittany Ferries in Plymouth - a delicate negotiation especially as they required us to spend several millions on upgraded facilities for their new ferry. That too had a successful result. Working with Nick was not work – it was fun.

He was the ultimate enthusiast. On a weekend visit, Nick took me for a “busman's holiday” round the newly extended Immingham Bulk Terminal. Bearing in mind the size of the port and the numbers of staff I was amazed that he could introduce me to every one of the shift workers we met. And the passion with which he described the machinery would make you think he had assembled it all with his own hands. But that was Nick. In his position, he had to deal with people from all sorts of background – from dock workers to board directors, to customers and politicians – yes even royalty - and he was at ease with people at all levels. The words of Kipling's “IF” spring to mind

*“If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
' Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch”*

I know of no-one who ever had a bad word for him and never really saw him lose his temper. Apart perhaps from one incident when we were at a caravan park. Nick was in his wheelchair and patiently waited outside the disabled loo. After 15 mins a seemingly perfectly fit woman emerged and when he questioned her, she replied that she simply preferred to use the disabled loo as it had more space and privacy. I can assure you she will think twice before making the same selfish mistake again.

Nick also loved sport and he and I played many games of squash over the years, particularly when we were both based in Southampton. I had been a regular club player and initially he found it difficult to chalk up a victory, but he had a very competitive nature and towards the end of our playing days he at least began to believe he was my equal. We enjoyed competing at anything. Even after he became wheelchair bound, at a weekend away we had a thoroughly enjoyable and spirited croquet challenge. I'm sure if we had ever played tiddlywinks that too would have been an intense competition.

Unfortunately MND had a dramatic effect on Nick's later years. The commencement was slow with Nick first complaining about struggling with his leg after we had been playing golf. When the cause was eventually diagnosed he was advised he would be unlikely to survive beyond 3 years. That was almost a decade ago.

I have the utmost admiration with the way he, and Julie, coped. He was given some early counselling which confirmed the conclusion that I am sure they would have come to anyway - time was going to be short and to make the most of every day. And, if you want to do something, find a way and do it. They had always enjoyed travelling to faraway places for holidays and when flying

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became too difficult they took up cruising. They also bought a campervan to explore Britain. Nick, determined to continue a normal life as long as possible, had the van fitted with hand controls and off they went. At one point we met them in Oban and Nick and I spent a week on board the Lord Nelson, a 3-masted square rig sailing ship that can accommodate a few wheelchair passengers. We sailed to Ullapool and back with a stopover in Barra in the Outer Hebrides. Everyone on board was given the opportunity to climb the rigging and visit the crow's nest – those in wheelchairs being hoisted in their chairs. Nick was having none of that and climbed the rigging using only his arms. The only assistance came from a crew member who placed his feet into the rope ladder as he went. A huge cheer went up when his obvious effort paid dividends, but I am afraid the whole experience brought home to Nick that he had to accept he really was now disabled and that put a damper on his memory of what was otherwise a great experience.

The time came when Nick could no longer get in and out of an ordinary car and the search was on for a suitable vehicle. By a quirk of fate one of the country's biggest dealers in such vehicles is based about 5 miles away from us in Devon, so I was dispatched to review the possibilities. There was row upon row of car sized vans in which the poor wheelchair occupant gets stuffed in the back often without a view, but there was one larger van in the workshop with a powered side ramp just in the process of being prepared. There was no contest, Nick chose that one and had it modified so that he could lock his wheelchair directly into either the front seat passenger's or indeed the driver's positions. As it turned out, it was only a matter of a few weeks later that Nick himself decided he couldn't drive any more. Nevertheless with Julie at the helm the van went on to give excellent service and made a real difference to their ability to get out and about throughout the remainder of his time. He did have a bit of a habit of giving what he thought was helpful advice from the passenger seat. Somehow Julie never really appreciated that assistance.

Throughout his illness Nick adapted to his circumstances and involved himself in activities.

He took up painting – something he had done at school and a talent I never knew he had. He joined a painting class and soon began to turn out some very respectable pieces. The picture of a highland cow which he painted for my wife now takes pride of place in our study.

He took to writing his memoirs using speech recognition technology. These contain a fairly detailed history of all the ports he worked in and an interesting review of his life in the docks. I'm sure a number of people here have spent some time searching for suitable photographs to include within his text. He also published a couple of informative, pragmatic and poignant articles on living with MND. (*These are published on the website platform 505*). In his writings, Nick told the story of how as boys he and Tim had an old Austin A35 in the field behind their house and how they drove around playing tanks – the windows being covered over and the driver having to obey instructions from the "Commander on the roof".

He took up sailing at the Woolverstone Sailing Club that has dinghies adapted for disabled use. For a period he went regularly to the sailing club, at one time being partnered by a blind lady – she did the practical stuff, he was once again the "commander on the roof"!!! On one occasion I went out in the boat with him. By the time we got to the far end of the lake the wind was strengthening and the dinghy heeled as we made the turn for home. Nick never lost his sense of humour. After a short while he grinned at me and asked if I'd lean over and lift his arm back into the boat.

To preserve his independence he acquired a mobility scooter capable of coping with unpaved footpaths. For several years he was able to take his dog Monty for walks unaccompanied – only falling off occasionally. For such events he carried a mobile phone round his neck so that he

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could call Thunderbirds to come to the rescue (Julie apparently playing the part of Virgil). His walks may or may not have been the catalyst but before long he was on the local council and was producing a plan of rights of way suitable for disabled use. He carried on to become chairman of the council for some time, getting involved in consultations over subjects such as the future siting of electricity pylons etc.

We went on a canal barging holiday and Nick enjoyed that particularly as he could sit on the stern and steer the boat - and there was no evidence of his disability. Often however he got so involved in conversations with other bargees while we were setting the locks, we would then be ready and he was still sat there talking!!

Nick was a keen Norwich City supporter – I suppose someone has to be – and whenever possible he would attend their home games. He described the welcome and the facilities for the disabled there as excellent. Earlier this year whilst he was seriously ill in hospital, Norwich qualified for the Championship play off against Middlesbrough at Wembley. The club sent him complimentary tickets. Nick made it to the match and Norwich won 2-0. It meant a lot so a big tick in the box for Norwich City.

Nick had tenacity and a sense of fairness. Last year six of us went to Duxford only to discover the American aircraft hangar – a major exhibition feature - was closed for a private function. It was Nick that took it upon himself to negotiate a suitable concession from the duty manager. I always knew he was an aircraft enthusiast but was amazed that he seemed to be able to identify almost every aeroplane we came across.

During his illness he was helped by a number of people, from neighbours to doctors and carers, to colleagues, friends and family. It would be unfair to single out any one individual – you know who you are and what help you gave, but on Nick and Julie's behalf thank you all. He bore it all with dignity and incredible resilience. It is a testament to Nick and his personality that SITRAN or to be more precise "the Sheffield Institute of Translational Neuroscience" - who have supported him throughout, are proposing to name a new laboratory after him.

I have spoken at length about Nick's career and our joint exploits but above all else Nick was a family man. A devoted son, a dedicated husband and a very proud father. I think we were advised at every stage of Mark's flying and army career and of Megan's progress to the very top of the piano grades as well as her more recent sailing achievements and career moves. I know he was delighted to make it to Mark's wedding and to know Megan was engaged and settled.

These days the word gentleman is used easily and in many contexts, but in my opinion it is the best word to describe my friend Nick – a true gentleman. Thank you.