

Speech from Barry Powell, MVA President 2020

Mr. Patron, Mr. Chairman, Honoured Guest, Fellow Veterans

I am sure you've noticed that the 2020 Reunion is being delivered more in keeping with the delivery of most Marconi projects – 17 months late.

However, the Team have played a blinder and reduced the delay for the 2021 Reunion to only 5 months.

Furthermore, they assure me that they are on target to reduce the delay to only 3 months for the 2022 Reunion and have high hopes that the 2023 Reunion will be delivered on time.

I felt very honoured when I was invited to be your President for 2020 but more than a little surprised considering how I came to join the Marconi organisation.

My Marconi journey started in the summer of 1968. I was serving customers in my Father's butchers' shop when my Mother, phoned to say that my A level results had arrived.

It was a disaster!

Instead of the 3, A or B grades predicted I had one grade E and had failed the other two completely. I couldn't take up my place on an HND Applied Physics course at the Mid Essex Tech.

A few days later, I was in Chelmsford trying to sort out the mess. They had a solution. I could do the first year of a 3-year ONC/HNC Electrical Engineering course, concentrate on the Physics module and then transfer to my chosen course a year later.

But there was a catch! (isn't there always?) The course was run exclusively for Marconi's and I would have to con them into (sorry, apply for) an apprenticeship.

Having succeeded in securing an apprenticeship, I found that I was enjoying the subject and the placements in the different departments.

I decided to stay with Marconi's and complete the course to HNC level.

The rest is history.

My first apprentice placement was in December 1968, with Computer Systems Division at Kensal House. My initial impression was that computers were boxes the size of a wardrobe whose sole function was to spew out streams of paper tape which, when held up to the light, read "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" all to the accompaniment of Christmas Carols and multicoloured twinkling lights.

Little did I realise what part computers were to play in my career.

On gaining my HNC, I joined Radar Field Services and was posted to some very exotic places (Baddow, Writtle Road, Rivenhall etc.).

A lucrative side-line at Rivenhall was to buy peas from the processing plant on the other side of the airfield, take them back to my father's shop, blanch, pack and freeze them, and then sell them to customers. Birds Eye eat your heart out.

It was while I was working at Rivenhall that I met Christine (forever to be known as "The Secretary's Secretary").

No Marconi connection - it was at a family party in 1972.

A few weeks after we started going out, the inevitable happened..... I was posted overseas.

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It was Abu Dhabi (where??). The contract was to last for 3 years in 5-6 month chunks.

Chris didn't talk to me for a week.

At the time, this was 1973, Abu Dhabi was just waking up to the fact that it was rich. There were very few of the skyscraper buildings that are common now. There was a supermarket, a sort of department store and the souq for shopping. The rule of parking was "if you can get the Land Rover there, you can park there"

One of the shops in the souq sold lengths of material elaborately decorated with sequins. I decided to take one of these home for Chris' Sister to turn into a dress for her. I was in the middle of choosing it when the mullahs started to call the faithful for prayer. Within minutes, I was sitting in an empty shop with a cup of coffee while the staff were outside the door praying. Prayers over, they returned, rolled up the prayer mats, cleared the now empty coffee cup and carried on as if nothing had happened.

I later obtained another piece of material which became part of Chris' wedding dress.

We had a boat that we would keep at the Mess and tow it to the Sea Wing Base to put it in the water. On one such occasion, I was driving when we were carved up by a taxi. In a momentary lapse, I laid on the horn. Next minute we were being pulled over, with the taxi, by the police. After a few harsh words, the taxi was sent on its way. We were asked where we were going and told to follow the Police car.... Through the centre of town, at twice the speed limit led by this Black & White Police car on full blues and twos.

During my stay there, team members gradually went on leave and we had replacements fly in.

On one occasion, I was collecting a new member from the airport. The plane landed, all the passengers came through arrivals – except the one I was meeting.

Then I was approached by one of the guards.

"Marconi ?" "Yes ?" "Come with me".

Our new arrival had been stopped for bringing a pistol into the country. Luckily, this was not a major problem but he had to report to police headquarters the next day. Turning up, the next morning, we were shown in to see a Police Captain who spent half an hour instructing us on the etiquette of being served coffee and enquiring about how I was enjoying my stay and had I seen this? or that? And then five minutes explaining that our new arrival could not have his pistol in case he shot any local wildlife but, given 24 hours notice, it would be waiting for him when he left.

Before I left, I thought it would be nice to take home a guide book. I looked in vain so decided to go to the Ministry of Tourism and enquire. I was asked to wait and then shown into an office where I was served coffee.

The office was that of the Minister himself – A member of the royal family as many ministers were.

After the customary 30 minutes of conversation with the Minister, I got my guide book.

It wasn't all fun though. One morning we were greeted by armed guards who escorted us wherever we went – I think Israel and Egypt were having a pop at each other. Thankfully, it only lasted for a day or two.

Even on the flight home, there was a change of plane in Beirut. Landing there, the plane had to slalom round the bomb craters on the runway.

I renewed my acquaintance with computers when I moved to STC in 1983. In a corner of the office there was something that looked like one of the early television sets with a typewriter keyboard stuck on the front.

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It was a terminal of the main-frame computer used to input equipment details for costing projects. Pricing was still done using pencil and paper with even the slightest change taking an hour or so to make and check. Before I closed it down, one evening, I looked at some of the other functions. One was multiplan – a rather crude and basic spreadsheet. It could add, subtract, multiply and divide – that's all.

Over the next few days, I constructed a spreadsheet that replicated our pencil & paper sheet. It did the job – but changes took only a few minutes. It was gradually picked up by the rest of the office and saved a lot of time.

In 1988 I had a relapse and returned to the asylum

.... as Proposals Manager for Computer Systems Division. Full Circle in 20 years.

I completed 25 years of Marconi service in 1998 and attended my first reunion in 1999.

I was invited to join the Management Committee shortly after that and became Secretary in 2005

In 2008, shortly before I retired, I completed 35 years service. We were now part of the Italian Finmeccanica group and I was invited to Florence to receive my award at a ceremony covering the entire group. Chris was invited too so it made for a memorable trip.

Being Secretary of the Marconi Veterans' Association had its moments.

Like one February when we had a particularly bad fall of snow the day before we were to meet to put the Newsletter etc. into envelopes for mailing. Our lounge was, as usual for the time, stacked out with boxes of print and envelopes and I was not relishing the journey from Canvey to The Marconi Club. Chris & I decided to sort it ourselves – just the two of us – all 1200 copies! Every flat surface was pressed into service – even the ironing board!

At this point, I must pay tribute to Christine who's support to me during my stint as Secretary has really justified her nickname of "The Secretary's Secretary"

I would, also, like to thank you, and all the Veterans unable to be here today, for making my time as Secretary as easy and enjoyable as it was.

Throughout my time with Marconi's, one of the most common complaints was that the Company couldn't organise its way out of a paper bag – or words to that effect. So, I'll leave you with this thought.

In later years, I often had to go down to Christchurch for project meetings. They were usually early in the morning so I used to travel down the afternoon before. On one occasion, an evening visit to the Ringwood Brewery had been arranged and I was invited. About an hour before I was intending to leave, a tender vet was called for 5 pm. The project meeting would have to be put back to the afternoon so I could travel down in the morning.

So, far from not being able to organise the proverbial beer-up in a brewery, Marconi's could DIS-organise an already organised Beer-up in a brewery.

Thank you

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Our Honoured Guest, today, hails from Colorado Springs in The United States.

When we received his biography, listing his many achievements, we decided that the best course was for us to make it available for you to peruse before and during the luncheon and select just a few points for my introduction.

In the late 1950s he worked at the NASA launch site at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

In 1962, he relocated to the UK becoming a Research Engineer for Standard Telephone Cables and, later, a lecturer at the Mid-Essex Technical College.

In the 1970s he was influential in the development of the mobile phone system that so many of us rely on, today.

Between 1969 and 1971, he was the lecturer for the Radio and Data Transmission module of my HNC course, where his lectures often included anecdotes that were both entertaining and educational.

Please welcome Professor Lewis Schnurr.