

THE DOWAGER LADY MIDDLETON

Janet Denyse

1st May 2015

There's a corner of France that is forever Janet.

There lies her brother Jim who gave his life to save a village.

It was her annual pilgrimage.

A journey that tells its own story about the influences that sculpted the contours of her life.

The Military. The Continent of Europe. The Family. The Grand Social Gathering.

To her dying day she was forever proud to have been born into a distinguished military family. "Janet Denyse, daughter of General Sir James and Lady Marshall- Cornwall..." she dictated her own obituary notice!

Proud too of her brother, a young officer in the Grenadier Guards, who risked and gave his life saving the village of Cahagnes in Normandy. So revered and adored by the villagers that his grave is set apart in honour of all that he did for the liberation of France. Taking over the baton from her father, Janet carried forward the annual remembrance of his sacrifice.

The Continent of Europe was familiar to Janet. Not just France and Switzerland where her sister Peggy died at the age of 13, but Germany where her father served as the military attaché at the British Embassy in Berlin. She knew first-hand the culture that spawned the Nazi tyranny, from which she herself escaped when airlifted from Paris just ahead of Hitler's invasion of France.

And, only Janet could have done it by courtesy of the aircraft assigned to Winston Churchill!

All of this gave her understanding of the evil that claimed her brother's life; an understanding that was deepened by the work she did for the Intelligence Service.

Nurtured in the world of the great Embassies of Berlin and Cairo Janet acquired a talent for the Grand Social Gathering. She loved parties, the fancier the dress the better! She was elegant, charming, witty, fun and generous. But when it came to sharing her well-formed opinions she would happily abandon the skills of the diplomat!

Little wonder that Michael fell in love with her! On their engagement he wrote to her mother Lady Marshall-Cornwall, "I have never been so sure about anything in my life as I am about my very sincere love for her – and I am sure that it is no ephemeral affection but the foundation for a happy marriage is a very secure one."

And so it proved. Through their marriage Janet found her vocation in life. The Lady Middleton. The Chatelaine of Birdsall. Home for Mick, Hugh and Richard, for children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Every family milestone celebrated by a great social occasion in the Big House and in the garden peopled by peacocks and crowned by Michael's beloved Rhododendrons. Janet in her element! Not just to the manor born. To the manor predestined! You can almost see the destiny in the bold strokes of the many paintings she did of the House.

Her love of life found perfect expression in the motto to be found embroidered on a small cushion, "Veni, Vidi, VISA" – I came, I saw and I shopped! Beautiful clothes and jewellery were her passion. And travel – America, cruising the Mediterranean and the rivers of Europe.

But losing her sister in her teens and her brother in his twenties, and having lived through the struggle with an evil tyranny it seems that for Janet life was for living and truth was for telling however unsettling that might be at times.

In all of Michael's work in the House of Lords, with the Country Landowners Association, as Patron of Parishes she was the perfect Consort and in her own right served on the bench as a magistrate and as a Councillor.

Her independence of spirit and mind came to the fore when she took the initiative and formed the Association that would challenge the Lloyds Underwriters after their disastrous losses. They were neither the first nor the last to witness her indomitable spirit which fought illness and even death with equal vigour.

When on Saturday we received her body into the church Mick went down to the Crypt to check that all was in order. As he unlocked the door it disintegrated before us – you couldn't help feeling the indomitable spirit of Janet still at work!

Yet that shattered door tells an Easter truth, captured by the poet John Donne, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and Death shall be no more....".

But let us return to that corner of France which is forever Janet.

The Other Birdsall, if you like.

Janet did not talk easily about faith or the mysteries of religion. But today let us think not of what she said but what she did – a much more reliable guide to our beliefs.

Year by year she made that pilgrimage, faithfully and devoutly.

Yes, she loved France.

Yes, she loved the Military.

Yes, she loved the Parties.

And yes, she loved her brother and her whole family.

But year on year she chose to feed her soul with the memory of his sacrifice.

The sacrifice that saved a people out of duty and of honour.

And of whom does that sacrifice remind us but the One who told us that greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends.

Janet fed on this sacrifice with proper pride and thanksgiving.

A sacrifice that expresses the Eternal Love that sent Christ into the world that we might have everlasting life.

Such love as this holds together the whole of Creation.

Such love as this holds us in our grief and thanksgiving for a life well lived.

Into such Everlasting Love as this do we now commit Janet for all eternity.

Amen.

The Rt Revd James Jones