

Air Chief Marshal Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman GCB KBE DFC AFC



One of many trophies that exist within RAFSAA is the IVELAW-CHAPMAN Challenge Cup, this was presented By Air Chief Marshall Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman GCG KBE DFC AFC in 1957 to RAFSAA as The Individual Sub-Machine Gun Championship Challenge Cup. Sir Ronald retired from the Air Force in 1953 but was RAFSAA President from 1953-1957 and remained a great supporter of marksmanship and skill at arms.

In 1991 the Sub-Machine Gun (SMG) was withdrawn from Service and the Cup was reallocated to the Fighting in Built Up Areas (FIBUA), later renamed Close Quarter Battle (CQB) match which is still competed for today and recorded on the winners' boards in the clubhouse.

Born in January 1899 in Georgetown, British Guiana, his father was a merchant adventurer of Franco-Jewish extraction – his maternal grandmother being a French Creole. At the age of four he was brought to England, and at seven he was sent to the Junior School of Cheltenham College. By his own admission he never showed any real promise as a scholar and failed to reach the Upper Sixth Classical.



IVELAW-CHAPMAN Challenge Cup

While still at school and aged 17, he enlisted in Kitchener's Army, which committed him to join on his 18th birthday. He duly left Cheltenham on the morning of his birthday and enlisted into the Royal Flying Corps that same afternoon as a 3rd Class Air Mechanic. Soon after, he became an officer cadet and on completion of his training and the award of his wings, he was posted in February 1918 to No. 10 Squadron having just turned 19.

Flying the Bristol Fighter, his task was artillery observation. He survived unscathed the last nine months of the war as a combat pilot, flying more than 500 operational hours and receiving a well-earned Distinguished Flying Cross.

Granted a regular commission in the newly formed Royal Air Force, in 1919 he was posted to No. 97 Squadron stationed in India, where he remained until 1922. His exploits in India gained him the India General Service Medal with three clasps. Returning home, his next appointment was as a test pilot with the Aircraft and Experimental Establishment at Martlesham Heath. During his five years at Martlesham he flew no fewer than 78 different types of aircraft.

In 1928 he volunteered for overseas service and was posted to No. 70 Squadron in Iraq. Now flying the Vickers Victoria troop carriers, he was based at Hinaidi in Baghdad, from where his flights took him throughout the Middle East and included piloting King Feisal on a general tour of desert posts. In 1929 No. 70 was summoned from Baghdad to Risalpur in the North-West Frontier Province to undertake the Kabul air evacuation of the British Legation, who were beleaguered during the violent Civil War. The flight from Baghdad to Risalpur was an epic adventure but was nothing compared to the challenge he faced flying over the mountains of the Hindu Kush to Kabul. As the peaks rose to 10,000 feet, he was forced to push the Vickers Victoria to its uppermost limits.

On his second flight into Kabul, he suffered dual engine failure at 12,000 feet, before making a successful forced landing on a 60-yards-long plateau high in the mountains. Both he and his co-pilot were at once surrounded by heavily armed and warlike Afghan tribesmen. Remaining for three weeks in hostile territory, he was eventually rescued by air and flown to Peshawar. His exploits in Afghanistan earned him the award of the Air Force Cross.

His career followed a more conventional pattern in the ten years leading up to World War Two. He married in 1930 and attended the RAF Staff College. He then became a member of the directing staff there, with a spell on intelligence staff work at the Air Ministry. At the commencement of the war, he was on the staff of HQ Bomber Command based at High Wycombe.

In June 1940 he was appointed Station Commander, No. 4 Group Bomber Command at Linton-on-Ouse, equipped with the Whitley bomber, where one of his junior officers was Leonard Cheshire. He was tasked with flying bombing raids over Germany and Italy. There then followed in June 1941 a posting to the Air Ministry for highly secret work planning for D-Day; he held the designation of Director of Plans and then Director of Policy through to February 1944.

Eager to return to operational involvement, in February 1944 he was appointed as a Base Commander at Elsham Wolds, with three stations under his command equipped with Lancasters and Stirling bombers. Detecting there was a certain amount of ill feeling among his aircrews that sorties into France did not count as a full tally of operations, he sought approval to fly as a second pilot on a raid over occupied France to restore morale and this was granted. Taking off on the night of 6 May 1944 in a Lancaster, their target was the German ammunition dump at Aubigne Racan, north of Le Mans. Unfortunately, the flight ended in disaster when the aircraft was shot down with only two of the crew surviving: Ivelaw-Chapman and the Flight Sergeant wireless operator/bomb aimer. Because Ivelaw-Chapman, was one of the only people to know extensive details such as the date and target of the planned D-Day invasion, Churchill gave secret orders to the French Resistance to keep him safe at all costs and get him back to the UK if possible, but said that if there was any chance of him falling into German hands he was to be killed.

On the run from the Germans for 5-weeks with the aid of the French Resistance, he evaded capture until 8 June, where he was hiding in a farmhouse guarded by a French minder. His whereabouts were betrayed, and the minder killed in the subsequent shootout where he was captured. The air chief, unaware of the order to silence him, was taken to the Gestapo HQ at Chambray where he remained under intense interrogation until 15 June. During this time, he was suffering from a severely dislocated shoulder, due to him failing to secure his parachute correctly when leaving his plane. Secret documents from the National Archive have since revealed that he was able to keep the vital D-Day plot details under wraps by convincing his Nazi interrogators that he was merely a regular airman.

He was finally released to a POW camp and his damaged shoulder at last received treatment. Liberated by the American forces from a camp near Nuremberg on 16 April 1945, he persuaded a US Colonel to fly him out by DC3 via Paris to England. On 19 April he completed the obligatory MI9 debriefing form (WO 208/3336/2), which details his capture and subsequent treatment as a POW.



Air Chief Marshal Sir Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman in the cockpit

Postwar he was promoted to Air Vice-Marshal and in August 1945 given command of No. 38 Group at Marks Hall in Essex. Later he became RAF Member, Defence Research Policy Staff and in 1947 he was appointed to the Directing Staff, Imperial Defence College. During 1950–51 he was seconded with the rank of Air Marshal as Commander-in-Chief, Indian Air Force, based in Delhi. During this time, he had sole use of a Spitfire Mark XXI and made 58 trips away from Delhi visiting air force units throughout India.

Returning home to England in December 1951, he was suffering from an obscure tropical disease which necessitated a spell in the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases in London. His final appointments were on the Air Council, firstly as Deputy Chief of the Air Staff and then as Vice-Chief of the Air Staff.

Retiring from the Royal Air Force as Air Chief Marshal in September 1957, he worked closely with the Royal Air Force Escaping Society - a service sponsored charity devoted to the needs of those who risked their lives to assist Allied evaders on the escape routes, latterly becoming Vice President. He died of abdominal cancer on 28th April 1978.

Citation for the award the of the Distinguished Flying Cross

“Lieut. (A./Capt.) Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman. (FRANCE) (London Gazette – 3 December 1918)

This officer has rendered most valuable service in co-operation with our artillery. In these operations he displays marked skill and devotion to duty, his keenness of observation being excellent. On more than one occasion he has carried out several successful shoots in one flight.”

Citation for the award of the Air Force Cross IVELAW-CHAPMAN, Ronald, F/L, DFC

"In recognition of distinguished services rendered during the recent evacuation from Kabul".

Based on the following submission: "This officer made a forced landing in Afghan territory owing to engine trouble. He landed the Victoria by exercising judgement and skill in exceptionally difficult circumstances with the smallest amount of damage to the machine and passengers. He subsequently worked his way back to Jalalabad. Here he made arrangements which ultimately rendered the evacuation of himself and passengers possible by air. He also made two successful evacuation trips."