

DOUGLAS WHITE

Everyone here has memories of Douglas White and most of us also remember Elizabeth, who died just three years ago. Douglas and Liz were married for 55 years in what was a working team, as well as a deeply loving partnership. Val and I knew them for more than 50 of those years.

That is really the only excuse I have for writing about Douglas today. We probably all knew slightly different aspects of the man, depending on our own interests. He was an automobile engineer, a clock collector, a photographer, a wind and watermill expert and an enthusiastic collector of historical recordings of music hall artistes. It was this last aspect that led to our meeting, when I answered his advertisement in Exchange and Mart. He was looking for records of variety stars of the Edwardian era. I hadn't much to offer, but up to that moment I'd always thought that I was the only idiot collecting such stuff.

The Whites were utterly different from the Earls, politically, socially, and in life style - for goodness sake, we didn't even have a car (we still haven't) but we did have a glorious day, riding to Brighton on his steam waggon! Our family life, too, was quite different. We had two small children and they were clearly very

happy to be childless. But despite all this we became the warmest of friends. The secret of the relationship was that we both knew there were subjects that were not discussable, so we kept off them and never had to disagree. They were lovely people and we miss them so much.

For a man of so many enthusiasms, with a great sense of humour, Douglas was oddly silent about his career before he met Liz. You had to be pretty close to him before you discovered that he had been a fighter pilot in the last war. He flew Spitfires in the early years (a beautiful aeroplane to handle, he said), then he went on to train other pilots before returning to battle action in Typhoons. I was a schoolboy at the time of the allied invasion of Europe and in the summer of 1944 I was doing holiday work on a farm in Kent. I used to watch flight after flight of Typhoons with black and white stripes on their wings, roaring over at low level, on their way to France. Perhaps I saw Douglas's plane without knowing it.

'Everyone' he said, 'Is deeply afraid, going into action. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying'.

A really curious fact about Douglas is that when he climbed out of his last combat plane, he never flew again, either as a pilot or as a passenger.

At this point I have to return to Douglas's collection of early music hall records. This collection, by the way, is so rare and important that it is going to be deposited in a national music collection.

He made me promise that I would play one song and one only at his funeral. He treasured it as one of the most wonderful performances in his entire collection. It was recorded 101 years ago by a great American musical comedy writer and artist, George M Cohan, known as 'The Yankee Doodle Dandy'.

It is unique in Cohan's generally lively output. It is written in the character of a thoroughly depressed young man, for whom everything has gone wrong. He sits on his suitcase in a deserted railroad station at dead of night and wonders whether his life has any point at all. Douglas said it was spine-chilling, and yet wonderfully true and, for that reason, it was sort of joyful.

You may not agree, but you won't deny Douglas his very last Desert Island Disc. The voice you are about to hear was recorded more than 100 years ago. And if you listen very carefully you may even hear Douglas laughing....

PLAY SONG 'Life's a Very funny Proposition'