

Garth Lawrence

Read at Garth Lawrence's Service of Thanksgiving

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I first met Garth in the early 70's when I joined Esso Engineering. Garth joined a few years earlier. After our early training assignments to the United States we each embarked on an engineering career. In the early years we both learned our trade working on various projects together, getting to know each other. However, it was during my assignment to the Fawley Refinery, near Southampton, in 1981 that I got to know Garth very well. He was there on a Reliability Study, away from his family. We enjoyed games of squash and spent evenings sorting out the problems of the world, particularly within the England rugby and cricket teams.

In 1983 he and I found ourselves as Section Heads of two of the Technical Sections within Esso Engineering. That was the start of three very good years working together. Garth was a natural manager, I was a reluctant one. However, it was working with Garth that I learned his true character. As you can imagine, in the corporate world, there are always those that try to get ahead at other peoples expense. Garth was anything but that. As part of our job, we had to make presentations to senior management, giving our plans, objectives, targets, manpower requirements etc. Garth was in his element. I was not. However, he was always happy to share all his work with me with the suggestion that I might like to prepare similar plans for my section, as that is what is expected. I did and I got by. He did however, one Christmas, suggest that I might ask for a calendar as a present. He thought it would be a useful aid, and one that I obviously didn't possess. Apart from the work, we enjoyed many extra-curricular activities together. In the annual football match between the technical and process divisions, he like the rest of us ex-rugby players, joined in with great enthusiasm but not much skill. We both played in the Esso cricket team, Garth as wicket keeper, and joined the annual office pilgrimage to either Lords or The Oval to watch England being beaten.

One very memorable event was a long week-end fell-walking with Garth and two other friends. I had dusted off a pair of boots not worn for 20 years, and after the first day, I was crippled with blisters with no hope of walking on day two. Most people take spare laces, but Garth had spare boots. I borrowed them and I did continue with my size 8 feet in his size 13 boots. A comical, personal memory maybe, but another example of not only his planning skills but his undoubted generosity.

Lunchtimes were spent with trips to Greggs in the High Street, a Cornish pasty and in his case, a Bounty Bar. He said he was always trying to re-create the 'TV ad' atmosphere of basking on that tropical island instead of looking out the window at New Malden Railway Station

In 1986 Garth and Valerie returned once again to the United States where his management career really took off. He moved into the Computing/IT world slowly moving up the management ranks. On returning from the US in about 1988, Garth coordinated the office move from New Malden to Leatherhead. A thankless task as nobody wanted to move anyway, and we knew all his promises of luxury new accommodation would never materialize. However, we all showed some sympathy and made the job as easy as possible.

After that, Garth entered the executive management sphere. He was posted to Fawley Refinery as Projects Manager overseeing projects valued at tens of millions of pounds, and then became Technical Manager.

Garth returned to Esso Engineering as one of the two senior managers, a position that no other Briton had ever achieved. For all of us, it was a great comfort to know that the manager had actually done all of the jobs that we were expected to do, including the extensive travel.

In 2003, Garth retired. His secretary had compiled a very thick binder of messages of good wishes from all over the world. The many people with whom he had interacted, took the time to reminisce and offer

their best wishes to both he and Valerie. For 30 years we'd heard of his claims to be a good tenor, so as a last gesture, we thought we would put him to the test. We composed some new words to the Gilbert and Sullivan HMS Pinafore song, "When I was a lad, I served my term...." etc. The alternative words reflected his rise from Humble Engineer to the Senior Executive Manager that he was. He sang the lead and a few of us the chorus. He did pass the test.

I retired a year later but very much kept in contact. Our annual trip to The Oval continued. With our wives we spent many days wandering along the south coast paths, again sorting out the problems of the world across a pub lunch.

I spoke to Garth a few weeks ago to arrange a date to visit him and Valerie. Because of some health problems in our own family I let him persuade me to delay the trip a couple of weeks. "Your place is with Anne" he said; a typically selfless gesture.

I collected many tributes. All talk of him being a gentleman who was totally reliable, with a calm approach to all problems, plus a great, dry sense of humour.

A note from his Secretary: "We were having cakes one day and Sally, another secretary, had baked a beautiful sponge cake. Garth quietly ate most of it and afterwards with a very straight face he said 'that was probably one of the nicest sponge cakes I've tasted but it was a bit on the dry side'. A few choice words from Sally and laughter followed."

A note from a Refinery Engineer: "For me, Garth was a superb manager of people. He was always positive, easy to approach and a great motivator. He treated others with dignity and professionalism, and supplemented this with a delightful dry sense of humour. I remember, when he was my Technical Manager he saw me with a colleague over from the US whom he'd met some 20 years earlier, walking along the seafront in Lymington. I didn't expect Garth to remember him, but with that sense of humour he said 'Ah, Mr White, good to see you after such a long time; however, I do hope you're here on holiday and not on my budget!'"

And a note from the Manager who replaced him when he retired: "Garth was one of the best bosses with whom I had the pleasure of working, over my 35 years in Esso. He was a true Gentleman and was a hard act to follow, but Garth helped guide me and was a great mentor and friend."

Finally, I received an e-mail from an ExxonMobil(Esso) Vice President in America asking for Valerie's address. He added that the number of requests he'd had for the information, serves as a great tribute to Garth, and demonstrates how well-loved he was.

There's very little I can add to that, except to say that to me he was simply a very good friend, and for that I shall always be thankful.