

Register

Marshal of the RAF Sir Keith Williamson

Combative and fiercely loyal fighter pilot who rose through the ranks of the RAF and played a key role in the Falklands conflict

The Falklands war was widely seen as a victory for the Royal Navy, but as commander-in-chief of the Royal Air Force during the conflict, Sir Keith Williamson felt that his men did not get the credit they deserved.

"At first the navy wanted it all to themselves," he recalled of the conflict, "which was unfortunate." However, Strike Command landed the first blows with the bombing of the runway at Port Stanley airport by Vulcans flying from Ascension Island. It was the RAF's longest operational raid.

"We were showing them that we had the reach to strike Argentina," he said. "The fact that it would have been politically unacceptable had nothing to do with it." The operation led to the withdrawal of Argentine fighter defences from the islands to the mainland.

Harriers later supplemented the Fleet Air Arm but, Williamson recalled: "The navy were very sensitive about us getting into the limelight at all, and one has to accept that in the middle of a war one doesn't want to start raising inter-departmental rivalries. The major lesson from the Falklands war was the same as the lesson from the Korean War: that air power was decisive."

With the Falklands retaken, Williamson, who joined the RAF as an apprentice, became the first of those who had entered by that route to be chief of the air staff. In 1985, after three years as CAS, he was expected to become chief of the defence staff (CDS) after Field Marshal Lord Bramall.

Margaret Thatcher, however, chose that moment to break with "Buggins' turn", under which the three services held the appointment in rotation. The baton was handed to the first sea lord. For many years press and politicians had said the system should be scrapped; it was Williamson's misfortune to be next in line when the government acted. It was suggested in some quarters that he had never looked right for the job. Naturally combative, he had won his spurs as an operational commander, not as a strategic thinker or "Whitehall warrior".

He was fiercely loyal to the RAF and made no secret of his misgivings about



Keith Williamson in Korea in the 1950s, climbing into the cockpit of a Meteor — "a terrible aeroplane," in his words

the centralisation of power within the Ministry of Defence. With an energetic new defence secretary, Michael Heseltine, intent on building up the CDS at the expense of the separate chiefs of staff, Williamson's temperament and left-of-centre views were out of fashion. He was scathing about Heseltine's reorganisation. "It had little to do with defence," he said. "It had much more to do with Mr Michael Heseltine's personal career, and I found that deeply offensive — and I still do."

Keith Alec Williamson was born in Leytonstone, east London, to Percy and Gertrude. His imagination was fired by the dogfights over Essex during the Battle of Britain. "I can't remember a time after the declaration of war when I didn't want to be a pilot in the RAF."

He went to Bancroft's School, Woodford Green, but when his school was bombed he was evacuated to Market Harborough, in Leicestershire, where he attended grammar school. He had

joined the Air Training Corps and, just before his 17th birthday, he enlisted as an RAF apprentice. After qualifying as a radio fitter at Cranwell in Lincolnshire in 1948, he was selected for a flight cadetship, passing out in 1950. "I'm not sure I was ever going to be a good radio fitter," he recalled wryly. He was posted to RAF Fassberg in Germany. "It was a particularly exciting time. We'd just recovered from the Berlin Airlift, the Korean War had started and the RAF was expanding." They were flying five or six sorties a day. "The whole of Germany was our low-flying area."

At one point a Lincoln was shot down on a border patrol, and he and his comrades were ordered to fly around the area, ready to engage. "To a young man, that just heightened the exhilaration."

He next volunteered for service in Korea with the Royal Australian Air Force, for whom he flew a number of sorties in Meteors, which he described as "a terrible aeroplane... I didn't

feel I was hastening the end of the war."

In 1953 he married Patricia Anne Watts, the daughter of a wing commander. They had two sons, Timothy and David, who lead private lives, and twin daughters, Anne and Susie. Susie died in 2015.

Williamson almost left the service, along with many of his colleagues, after

'I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a pilot in the RAF'

the defence white paper of 1957, which ended national service and led to the disbanding of many RAF squadrons. Duncan Sandys, author of the white paper, "did more damage to this country's ability to defend itself than any single person since Napoleon," he said.

Williamson might have departed, but he was offered a flight commander's

post and thereafter rarely looked back. He commanded his first squadron at Leuchars in Fife (1966-68), flying supersonic Lightnings. He was awarded the Air Force Cross in 1968.

In 1978 he was put in charge of RAF Support Command at Brampton, in Cumbria. He sanctioned a TV documentary series about pilot training, *Fighter Pilot*, from which the RAF did not emerge with great credit. Yet as he later put it: "If you look in the mirror and you don't like the image, you don't blame the mirror."

In 1980 he moved to Strike Command, and was in charge of the RAF during the Falklands war. Postwar concerns dominated the first half of his three-year reign as CAS. The hitherto neglected islands suddenly became a defence priority. Williamson took over in autumn 1982 and, after a visit to the islands, improved radar defences. He also insisted on basing Phantoms in the South Atlantic and persuaded his political masters to accept the need for a new airfield at Mount Pleasant.

He argued the case for the new European fighter aircraft and led the RAF challenge to Heseltine's centralisation of policymaking. A number of his contemporaries felt he fought this dogfight too ferociously for the good of the service, as well for his own. In misjudging the strength of the tide against him, Williamson exposed the flaw which, in the opinion of his critics, made him unsuitable for the last great honour that was supposed to be awaiting him.

He retired to the country in 1985, to play golf, sail and watch rugby, on which he was eloquent and informed.

If there is a single message to be taken from his career, it is that we neglect our air capability at our peril. "Command of the air prevents defeat," Williamson said, "as in every war since aeroplanes first appeared over the battlefields of Flanders. I believe that, bang for buck, you get far more value for money investing in the air."

Sir Keith Williamson, GCB, AFC, Marshal of the RAF, was born on February 25, 1928. He died of undisclosed causes on May 2, 2018, aged 90

Liz Chase

Effervescent Zimbabwean hockey player who helped to win the fledgling nation's first gold medal at the Moscow Games in 1980

In what was surely one of the most bizarre starts to an Olympic campaign, the Zimbabwe women's hockey team set off from Harare for the 1980 Moscow Games in an aircraft used to transport meat. They had to cope with the overpowering stench, strapped in like paratroopers down either side, their luggage piled up in the middle.

Robert Mugabe had led the newly independent country, formerly known as Rhodesia, for three months when the International Olympic Committee extended its invitation. Women's hockey was making its Olympic debut and there had been plans for a six-team tournament, but five pulled out after the US-led western boycott protesting against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.

With only the hosts left, the organisers cast around for replacements. The Zimbabweans received their invitation 35 days before the opening ceremony and officials scrambled to select a squad. Their captain, Ann Grant, admitted that they were like a bunch of excited children when they first saw the Olympic stadium. "We had never seen an artificial pitch and didn't have the right shoes to play on it because we'd only ever played on sunbaked grass



Liz Chase with her gold medal in 1980

pitches in Zimbabwe," she recalled. "We had to rush out and buy them."

The happy-go-lucky group attracted the attention of many athletes in the Olympic Village. Britain's impending medal-winners Daley Thompson, Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett were among the athletes who spent time

with them and followed their progress during the Games.

"Suddenly people wanted to know all about Zimbabwe," said Chase. "We went to a party at the Kremlin and had such fun socialising with loads of famous athletes. Everyone wanted a part of us — we were all just so proud."

A skilful and versatile forward with a natural goalscoring ability, Chase was a cornerstone of the side as they progressed through the round-robin event. Despite struggling with a knee injury, she provided the pass for Pat McKillop to seal Zimbabwe's 4-1 victory over Austria, which secured the gold medal.

Never one to opt for extra training sessions, Chase could be temperamental when things did not go her way on the pitch, but her vivacious personality and sense of fun and enthusiasm made her popular among her peers.

There was one hitch at the medal ceremony, Sarah English, the team's goalkeeper, recalled. "Zimbabwe didn't even have its own national anthem," she said. "They played the Olympic anthem, that's all. But there was the Zimbabwe flag and we were all so proud."

Back home the team's unlikely victory had captivated the nation: they

were heralded as "the Golden Girls", and Mugabe's wife, Sally, promised each squad member an ox.

At a ceremony to mark their triumph the said animals failed to materialise and the players were left bemused as Mrs Mugabe presented them with a small polystyrene-wrapped packet of meat each. "It was actually hilarious," Chase recalled.

Elizabeth Muriel Chase was born in the city of Mutare (formerly Umtali), the elder of two daughters born to Ken, who worked in customs and excise, and Daphne (née Lowth), a housewife.

As a young girl Liz moved with her parents to Bulawayo before they returned to Harare, where she attended Girls High School. She was a school prefect and games captain, and she excelled at hockey, representing the national schools team.

As a student at Johannesburg College of Education (JCE), Chase represented South Africa at under-21 level and Southern Transvaal. After graduating with a teaching diploma she returned to Harare. Posts at Oriel Girls High School and Mount Pleasant High School followed. From 1976 to 1977 she played six times for South Africa.

Three years after winning the gold

medal Chase accepted a position at JCE as a lecturer in physical education. Always eager to maintain links with the sport, she took on several roles, including coaching the South African schools team. She also served on provincial and national selection panels and became a sports administrator at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2000 until her retirement in 2015. She is survived by her partner of 28 years, Clare Digby, former president of the South African Hockey Association.

Her lasting legacy is the long-awaited synthetic turf hockey pitch at Wits, which was officially opened in 2014. Her effervescence made her the driving force behind the £750,000 project as she co-ordinated the fundraising effort.

Chase loved cooking, especially on the barbecue, and friends told the story of an incident in the bush near Kruger National Park. Noticing two hyenas in the darkness 20 yards from the fire pit, the guests quickly scampered to the house for safety, apart from Chase, who was unfazed and ignored the predators as she calmly carried on cooking.

Liz Chase, Olympic gold hockey medal-winner, was born on April 26, 1950. She died of cancer on May 9, 2018, aged 68