

Squadron Leader Anthony Downing, who died on 23 December 2011 following an incident in Afghanistan. He had been seriously wounded when the vehicle he was travelling in was caught in an explosion south of Kabul on Thursday 22 December. He was flown back to the UK where sadly, he died of his wounds at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. His family were with him when he died.

Captain Tom Jennings, Royal Marines, whose death was announced separately by the Ministry of Defence, had been travelling in the same vehicle.

Known as Ant, 34-year-old Squadron Leader Downing was, by trade, an Engineering Officer in the Royal Air Force. He ran the last Nimrod Line Squadron before its disbandment.

His unassuming and modest demeanour belied a hugely professional officer and an extremely determined individual. His work in Afghanistan typified this as he had studied hard at the Defence School of Languages, Beaconsfield, coming top of his language course, and travelled to Tajikistan in his own time to further his studies. However, Ant was no book-worm and found the time to train for, and compete in, a series of Iron Man Triathlons and Ultra Marathons.

This physical and professional drive lent him a rare confidence, the sense of being comfortable in his own skin that made him an utterly charming individual with whom it was so easy to pass the time. This dynamic allowed him to interact effectively with the Afghans and his British colleagues alike.

Ant's generous nature and interest in Afghanistan and her people, led to his intimate involvement in the planning and subsequent conduct of outreach patrols. Tragically, on 22 December whilst on patrol he was mortally wounded when the vehicle he was travelling in was caught in an explosion. There is some solace for his comrades in knowing that Ant died among his friends doing a job he felt so passionate about.

Ant was professionally respected and hugely appreciated for his skills, and built a strong rapport with the Afghan soldiers and their British mentors; his loss is felt greatly among both. He leaves behind his parents, a brother, a girlfriend and a dedicated following of friends, with whom this great loss is shared.

Squadron Leader Downing's family have paid the following tribute:

"Anthony was still a child when he announced that he wished to join the RAF. From a young age it was evident that he was dedicated and self motivated to achieve the goals he would set himself. As a member of the Dover Grammar School Combined Cadet Force he was committed to getting the most out of the organisation and encouraged others to do so too. At the age of 17 he joined the Deal Striders and Velo Club Deal which started a lifelong love of endurance events that culminated in completing ultra marathons and double Ironmans.

He also took to distance events in swimming and cycling and had planned to complete in 2013 the Arch to Arc event despite swimming being his weakest discipline, the event requiring a cross channel dip.

His parents had an easy ride with his upbringing; he was always kind and helpful although quiet and reserved. His brother had someone to look up to as Ant eagerly embraced adulthood. He continued these traits into his working life, keen to listen, help and inspire others to travel and reach for high goals. We treasure the memories and the achievements of his fantastic life and without him our lives have been diminished."

Group Captain Robbie Noel OBE, who was Station Commander of RAF Kinloss at the time Squadron Leader Downing was serving there and knew him personally, said:

"Squadron Leader Ant Downing served as the Officer Commanding, Nimrod Line Squadron from September 2007 to May 2010. An immensely dedicated, talented and passionate engineer, Ant was instrumental in maintaining and sustaining the Nimrod Force under a spotlight of intense engineering and safety scrutiny. As the last Senior Engineering Officer of Nimrod Line Squadron at RAF Kinloss, he led his team in the most honest and courageous fashion earning the highest respect from those under his command. A familiar face to his men and women, he worked closely with his excellent team to deliver a remarkable improvement in aircraft serviceability and availability until the Nimrod MR2 was retired in 2010. Thereafter, Ant worked tirelessly to secure for his people the very best possible future. I was personally guided and heavily influenced by his outstanding, sensitive, and incisive counsel and advice on matters well beyond engineering, which was always delivered with the benefit of others as its prime motivation. Totally committed to the Service, he was invariably seeking to improve himself and demonstrated huge strength of character, initiative and desire in his professional and personal life. A talented student of languages, Ant was also immensely fit and he competed in a number of extraordinarily demanding endurance events. A stalwart of the RAF Kinloss Mountain Rescue Team, his dedication and passion for supporting others were characteristic of a hugely popular, and deeply respected and loved friend and colleague. The very many people who knew him were richer for the experience, and will be all the poorer for his passing."

Lieutenant Colonel Matt Sharp, Officer Commanding, Defence School of Languages, Beaconsfield, said:

"Anthony volunteered to undertake the 15-month Dari language course at the Defence School of Languages in Beaconsfield and immediately stood out as a popular and hard-working student who was one of the top performers on his course. It bears testament to Anthony's character that he was an active volunteer for such a long and demanding language course. Anthony was a talented linguist who was keen to make a difference and he remained extremely focused on making his own, telling contribution in every situation. My thoughts and prayers go out to his family."

Squadron Leader (Retired) John Nelson MBE, said:

"I worked closely with Ant over a period of 2 years during which the Nimrod Force came under intense safety scrutiny. During this time Ant bore a heavy responsibility but was always approachable and always a source of good sense. I was constantly impressed by his ability to get to the core of a problem, come up with a solution, and do it with patience and understanding. He was great fun to have as a mate and I am deeply saddened that I will never again have the pleasure of his company"

Warrant Officer Chris Miles MBE, said:

"As his Warrant Officer I had the honour and privilege to serve under the truly exceptional and inspirational leadership of Squadron Leader Ant Downing throughout his tour of duty as the Senior Engineering Officer on the Nimrod Line Squadron at RAF Kinloss. Both as an Aeronautical Engineer and as an Officer Commanding he was, at all times and without exception, the consummate professional. As one of those rare individuals who genuinely always put the interests of others above himself he held the deserved respect and admiration of all those who had the good fortune to work alongside him. Under the most challenging of circumstances it was his personal incisive and well balanced engineering judgement that ensured the continued delivery of safe and effective operations within the Nimrod force until the aircraft was retired from active service in March 2010. During his speech at the formal dinner to mark this historic event he modestly demonstrated his gifted personal qualities through his ability to recount, from memory, the individual names of the nearly two hundred and fifty personnel who were serving under him on the Squadron at that time.

Outside of work he was an outstanding athlete, a passionate mountaineer and an adventurous traveller whose sheer energy and enthusiasm for life knew no bounds. Through this tragedy we have lost one of the most gifted and personable individuals I have ever had the privilege to know. In every sense of the word he was a true comrade, one of 'the very best' who will be sadly and fondly missed but never, ever forgotten."

Squadron Leader Paul Lipscomb, Officer Commanding, Mountain Rescue Service at RAF Kinloss, said:

"Ant's unbeatable enthusiasm inspired others to 'climb well above their grade' and succeed in all tasks; or at least, in the face of failure, to earn the bragging rights to an epic hill day. He is one of the best examples of the courage and commitment that has typified RAF Mountain Rescue Team members for nearly 70 years. He was also a good friend, who I had hoped would succeed me as the Commanding Officer and his infectious sense of adventure would have strengthened and enriched it for all. I have been lucky enough to know Ant Downing for over 10 years, first as an engineer and then more true to his spirit as a Mountaineer, and in the same way as if he had died in an avalanche or a fall helping

others in the mountains, then I can draw some comfort in knowing that he died doing something that he enjoyed and chose to do, what's more he will have made a positive difference to all those he worked with."

Sergeant Ed Jones, Deputy Team Leader, Mountain Rescue Service at RAF Kinloss, said:

"Ant quickly showed himself to be an exemplary Team Member who inspired all with his great fitness and endurance. Mountain Rescue work is by its nature demanding but not for Ant who would often (even after a challenging weekend) cycle from a remote 'Bothy' back to Kinloss just for extra training. Once when recovering from an injury that kept him off the mountains he cycled 220 km so as not to lose any fitness! Often the training was for a competition in which he regularly took part. These including several Iron Man's along with a 24 hr endurance event in which he helped raise £6,000 for Breast Cancer UK. For many these events would be enough in themselves but for Ant they were just another adventure for he was a true adventurer at heart. He had travelled extensively round the world and we had many a long conversation about places we had been and wished to go. Ant completed many of his trips alone showing great self reliance, determination and trust in his fellow man. On one epic journey he cycled across America despite having to put up with searing heat and swerving juggernauts. Perhaps Ant's greatest strength was his humility, before joining the RAF he was a volunteer for the Samaritans often helping others in their darkest hours. He was rarely interested in rank or status being more concerned with the person and often encouraged others to achieve things they previously thought impossible.

Ant you were a truly great friend. You are gone now but I will never forget our adventures in the mountains. Goodnight, God bless."

Corporal Dave Gleave, Party Leader, Mountain Rescue Service at RAF Kinloss, said:

"Ant was a friend, leader and above all a gentleman. He possessed the ability to inspire and the confidence to make anything seem possible, his only obvious weakness was a total dependency on tea. Knowing Ant was just to be part of the adventure that was his life. Most chapters of which seem to start with, "I've got an idea" and end mildly hypothermic clutching a brew! He died living part of that adventure."