

# How our true love triumphed over RAF wedding ban

A couple who broke a Royal Air Force ban to marry in Madagascar in the 1960s this week return there for the first time after 42 years. ANDREW MCGILL heard a tale of romance on a foreign posting from David and Christiane McCandless, now living in St Ives.

LITTLE did David McCandless know but the French he learned as a schoolboy would land him a dance with the most beautiful girl in the room at the regular Saturday night dance in Majunga, Madagascar, in 1966.

Then a 21-year-old RAF serviceman, David was asked by a friend to use his basic French to ask the pretty girl for a dance.

"I thought: No way, Jose – I'm asking her for myself," David said at home in St Ives on Monday.

David said he had to get permission from the mother of his bride-to-be Christiane to dance with her. He said: "I could only slow-dance with her at first because none of the British servicemen knew the moves."

A whirlwind romance followed but, when it came to marrying, the RAF hierarchy refused to grant permission and sent David from Madagascar to Aden in Yemen ... leaving him heartbroken.

However, despite David and Christiane, vowing to ignore the RAF and marry anyway, a senior officer made the marriage possible by arranging a 2,000-mile flight for David back from the Yemen to Madagascar to reunite the couple.

Brought up in Grimsby, David, following in his father's footsteps, had joined the RAF in 1961. After three

years' training at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire, the newly-qualified junior technician was posted overseas.

Brief spells in Northern Ireland, Singapore and Indonesia followed before David was posted to Aden in January 1966.

David, whose role involved maintain-

ing aircraft engines, said: "It was so hot during the day. You had to remember not to put your tools on the sand because they would get so hot they would burn your skin off."

"Some of the men went doolally through heat exhaustion – one guy even smashed up a room due to the heat."

David, 63, told *The Hunts Post* that Aden had been a tough posting in a country with increasing levels of terrorist activity.

On one occasion the young engine fitter found himself acting as a bizarre goalkeeper, using a tractor to stop empty oil drums from hitting a Shackleton aircraft during a sandstorm.

In March 1966, David was sent to the former French colony of Madagascar as part of a top-secret mission. Britain was preparing to impose sanctions on the newly-independent country of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in southern Africa.

About 50 RAF men were posted to Majunga, on the north-west coast of the island, to assist with the interception of oil supplies to the country and tobacco exports from the state.

After some initial mistrust with the French locals, David used his basic GCE-level language to communicate.

His skills came in useful at the weekly evening dances, where the RAF men mingled with the French girls whose families had remained in the country after its declaration of independence in 1960.

After three Saturdays of dancing, David visited Christiane at home,

where she and her friends taught the RAF men to dance. "I had fallen for her," said David.

After having his application to get married turned down by the RAF, David was threatened with discharge from the service if he "persisted with this folly".

In July 1966, the RAF shipped David back to Aden, separating the couple. The rest of his unit followed in August after an increase in terrorism.

However, after an attempt to get on an "indulgence flight" to Majunga for his wedding to Christiane was blocked at

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the last minute, an RAF officer came to the rescue. David said: "Flight-Lieutenant Nicholls came to me and said: 'Dave, you shall go the ball – I'll think of something.'"

The officer sanctioned a 2,050-mile "training flight" from Aden to Majunga, enabling David to arrive two days before his wedding, which was set for October 1.



**WEDDING DAY:** Above, David and Christiane at their reception in Majunga.

**RETURN VISIT:** Left, David and Christiane are preparing to return to Majunga.

David said: "I will never forget his generosity. He put his career on the line for me. His boss had said no to the marriage – goodness knows at what cost to the taxpayer!"

The wedding was the first of a British serviceman in the country since 1942.

Although David had to leave his bride shortly afterwards to return to Aden, he managed to arrange a seat for her on a UK-bound plane and the couple were reunited in 1967 when British troops pulled out of Aden.

The couple then travelled the world as David completed his service, with Christiane improving her English as they travelled.

They had two children – David and Michelle – and now have a six-year-old granddaughter. The couple settled in St Ives in 1988 after two years in Somersham, when David was posted to RAF Wyton.

Christiane, 61, has worked at Marks & Spencer in Cambridge for 17 years, while David runs a successful IT business and helped RAF logistics command fight the Millennium Bug before his retirement as a Flight-Lieutenant engineer.

On Sunday, the couple will fly out to Madagascar for the first time since their wedding to return to the cathedral where they married and will pose for a photograph outside it on their anniversary.

David said: "There will be some mixed emotions going back. We were so young when we were there last, but it was one hell of an adventure."



**BONJOUR:** David McCandless tries out his French on a gendarme in 1966.