



Michael Lapage

Wartime pilot who won a silver in rowing at the 1948 Olympics and became a missionary in Africa

MICHAEL LAPAGE, who has died aged 94, saw service in the Second World War as a Fleet Air Arm pilot, won a silver medal as an oarsman in the 1948 “austerity” Olympic Games in London and went on to become a Christian missionary in Kenya.

The son of a vicar, Michael Clement Lapage was born on November 15 1923 at Shaftesbury, Dorset, and was educated at Monkton Combe School, where he was in the school eight from 1940 to 1942. He won a place at Selwyn College, Cambridge, to read Geography but his ambition of making the Light Blue boat was put on hold when he volunteered for the Fleet Air Arm in 1942.

After wartime training, in 1944 he joined 807 Naval Air Squadron, flying the Seafire, a navalised version of the Spitfire, from the escort carrier Hunter. The Seafire’s undercarriage was too weak for deck landings, and on six occasions on the short deck of Hunter Lapage suffered damage or bounced into, over or through the flight deck barrier.

He flew reconnaissance and air-to-ground strafing missions during the Allied landings in southern France, and on one occasion was flying as wingman when his flight was told to investigate a ship off Marseille: they came under heavy fire and his No 1 was shot down.

He was more successful flying the Grumman Hellcat, an American fighter specially designed for shipborne operations, of 800 Naval Air Squadron in the escort carrier Emperor

during 1945. Deployed to the Far East, in July he narrowly avoided being shot down himself during a patrol off the coast of Malaya.

“I was rather foolish, really,” he recalled. “We got a radio message from the ship: ‘Two bandits, angels 12’. This meant there were two enemy planes at 12,000 feet. I was flying No 1 and my No 2 scarpered back to the ship, which was probably the smart thing to do.” As he looked up, Lapage saw a Japanese Zero flying down on him from above: “I was climbing, and I did a very sharp turn to port, turning into his approach. The tailpiece of my aircraft was hit – shot into pieces.” He managed to get back to the ship, though it was a difficult landing. “The Zero had been right on my tail. If he’d raised his sights only a fraction, I’d have gone.”

The British crew practising at Henley (Lapage is at No 7, third from the left)

By the time he got to Selwyn College in 1946 he had missed the Michaelmas term, and was thus ineligible for that year’s Boat Race crew. He was somewhat put out to discover that, unlike most university freshers, he was too old to qualify for the special provision in a time of rationing of bananas, which were only available from the college bursar’s office for “gentlemen under the age of 18”.

It took him two years to establish himself in the Blue boat, where he rowed at seven in the crew that won the 1948 Boat Race and would form the main part of the Olympic team later the same year.

On Wednesday July 29, Lapage and his colleagues attended the ceremony at Wembley Stadium at which King George VI declared the Games open. “It was over in two hours flat and during which we sung the Hallelujah Chorus,” he recalled. “There was no dancing or anything. They released all the pigeons and we put our hats on in case we got hit.” Apart from a free pair of underpants and malt drinks to refuel in the evenings, British athletes enjoyed little in the way of special treatment.

The rowing events were held on the Thames at Henley and the British eight, which had got together as a crew only a month or two earlier, had no great hopes of success. Yet they beat the Canadians in the semi-final, reached the final, against Norway and the United States, and led for the first 500 metres before the Americans pulled away to victory.

Lapage always wondered if rationing, which continued in Britain until 1953-54, might have had something to do with the British team’s failure to win gold. Although crew members’ butter ration was increased from two to four ounces a week, the big problem was lack of meat.

“We had about eight ounces,” he recalled. “I was about 13 stone and six feet but height and weight can be a handicap if it is not used correctly. The Americans had more meat. It was imported every day from the States, which was vital because it is muscle-building. With rationing we just accepted it. We ate the best food that was available, and we managed with other things.”

But he recalled the Games as “very amateur and pleasant”, and he enjoyed the sense of camaraderie and the riotous champagne and sherry-fuelled celebrations afterwards with the other crews.

After the Olympics Lapage resumed his studies at Cambridge then took up a teaching post at Winchester College, where he helped run the Scout troop and coached the school’s First Eight to victory in the Schools’ Head of the River Race and in the Princess Elizabeth Cup at Henley.

In 1950 Lapage’s Great Britain rowing team travelled to Australia and New Zealand for the Empire Games, the forerunner of the Commonwealth Games. “Our boat got lost,” he recalled. “We had to borrow one and we won a bronze, which was a good effort.” Even

better, there was meat for every meal they had: “For breakfast, we had steak with an egg on the top.”

Lapage’s evangelical upbringing, and the experience of nearly being shot down in 1945, eventually convinced him that he had been “saved to serve”, and in the late 1950s he went out to Kenya, where he served as a schools inspector during the Mau Mau uprising. After training for the ministry at Clifton Theological College, he was ordained in Kenya in 1961 by Bishop Kariuki Obadiah, the first Anglican Bishop of the Mt Kenya Diocese.

Returning to England in 1972, he joined Bedford School as an assistant chaplain, then, after three years in France with the Intercontinental Church Society in Lyon, he was appointed vicar of the parish of Walford and Bishopswood, Herefordshire.

In 1988 he retired to Tavistock, where he took the occasional service in his local church and enjoyed gardening and creating things. In 2012 he would carry the Olympic torch in the relay for the 2012 Olympic Games, in St Austell, Cornwall. The same year he joined the crew of 18 former Olympic oarsmen who rowed the barge *Gloriana* when it stole the show at the Henley Regatta.

In 1953 Michael Lapage married Margaret Butcher, the daughter of a missionary, who had played the organ in Mombasa Cathedral before the war. She died in 1995 and he is survived by two daughters and a son.

Michael Lapage, born November 15 1923, died July 20 2018

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