

A HAWK'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLYMPICS – RIO 2016

In 1959 as an impressionable teenager in my penultimate year in school I saw the 1959 film *Black Orpheus* made in Brazil by French director Marcel Camus. It is based on the play *Orfeu da Conceição*, which itself is an adaptation of the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, set in the modern context of a favela in Rio de Janeiro during Carnival. The film was particularly noted for its wonderful soundtrack by the two Brazilian composers Antônio Carlos Jobim and Luiz Bonfá, whose songs became bossa nova classics. This fired in me a determination to visit Rio, most particularly in Carnival time. However, despite my having travelled all over the globe visiting all the continents and a huge number of countries during my career in the Royal Navy, I had never made it to Brazil.

Having left school, where I was Captain of Athletics and an athletic nut, and after my first term at the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, I travelled to Rome during the summer leave period, with a school friend to watch all the 1960 Olympic Athletic events. I still have many vivid memories of the races which were then held in the afternoon at the height of the Roman summer: Armin Hary deliberately psyching out his opponents by false starting before winning the 100m, a virtual dead heat in the 400m, Otis Davis inching out Carl Kaufmann, both being given the same world record time of 44.9s, Peter Snell in the 800m, Murray Halberg in the 5,000m and, way above all these, the majestic Herb Elliot, my hero, destroying the 1500m field and the world record for that distance. The magic of those days in what has always remained my favourite city in the world remained with me over the years as my naval career took me far and wide.

The thought of going to subsequent Olympic Games never even arose, as I pursued my career which would not have had the flexibility to allow one to disappear for long periods, besides which, when one did have periods of seasonal leave it was particularly important to spend it with one's growing family, the responsibility for which combined with buying one's first house left very little over from one's earnings and certainly not enough to cover a fortnight in the great capitals of the world. One caught up with what one could of the various Games that were subsequently held, sometimes at home in the UK and able to watch some, if not all, on television. My most vivid memory was, before going to work in naval shore establishment in which I was then based, screaming at the TV as the GB team in the 1976 Montreal Games almost held out as the East Germans rowed them down for the gold medal in the last few yards of the men's eight, presumably repeated from the night before in UK time. Then we came to the 1988 Seoul Games when I was working in the MoD and I think I was probably on leave because I was able to watch all the athletics on the bedroom television in the middle of the night. After only one night my wife moved out to one of the spare bedrooms, which was good because I could then turn the sound up, and after it was all over she said, "Right, we are not having any more of that. We are going to go to the next Olympics." I didn't point out that as the next Games were to be held in Barcelona there would not be this time zone problem, but eagerly made plans to go there and arranged to have my summer leave over the same period, the children having long since gone their various ways. Tragically my wife died very suddenly at the very beginning of 1992, so she never made it. We had the most wonderful, spiritually uplifting Service of Thanksgiving in the chapel of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich, some four months after the funeral after which I listened to my family who were telling me that she certainly would have wanted me to go on and so I did sharing her tickets between my son and my brother. Prime memories: Linford Christie and Sally Gunnell. I deliberately missed the Atlanta Games as I thought that the shortcomings of the infrastructure transport system in the

Georgian heat would have made life impossible. It seemed to turn out that way, even for the official competitors' transport. After that I went to all the Games on my own, except those in Beijing, for the reason that I like to make all my travel, accommodation and transport arrangement myself and not go through an agent (which beefs up the cost considerably) and, although I had been there before for Chinese government academic conferences I knew I couldn't crack their systems, especially for accommodation. The whole infrastructure and even the freedom to wander around would have been very constrained.

Of the other Olympiads Athens was the easiest for tickets and accommodation, EU rules allowing common availability to all members. Sydney was spectacular, not least on the day Cathy Freeman met all Australia's hopes and dreams by winning the women's 400m. Highlights were, of course, Jonathan Edwards' triple jump and Denise Lewis's heptathlon victory in pouring rain, but, for me as a distance runner, the most exciting moment of all was the always smiling Haile Gebrselassie's (another of my heroes) victory by 5 hundredth of a second over Paul Tergat in the 10,000 metres. London, to my mind the best of them all, produced a wonderful atmosphere and a united country in supporting its own performers and welcoming the world with open arms. However, tickets were the hardest part of the equation and I was horrified to find that I could only get one ticket for the second day of the athletics on the second ballot and was disqualified from further applications because I had been "successful". Mind you, Britain has the most avid sports watchers in the world and the packed athletic stadium for all the morning sessions, an Olympic phenomenon, was testimony to this. Meanwhile I had to resort to desperate measures and trawled all around the European official websites and also that of Sportsworld, which had a franchise for tickets in addition to the official UK site and proved much more amenable. Of the Europeans the French proved the most fruitful, but I also used the Austrian, Norwegian and Dutch sites, again all this under EU regulations which will not be available in the future, given the approach of Brexit. In the end, by sheer hard work, I got a ticket for every evening of the athletics, all the rowing finals, a hockey semi-final and a gymnastic session. On Super Saturday I saw 5 of the 6 golds won that day, being at Dornay Lake in the morning for the first two and in the stadium by the evening to watch Britain's best ever athletic day with our 3 golds in the evening. The noise that was made as Mo Farah pushed for victory in the final stages of both his races was phenomenal, almost inhuman. 80,000 Brits cheering on Mo make more noise than 120,000 Aussies cheering on Freeman – something else at which we are better than them!

And so to Rio to fulfil my dream, if not at Carnival time. Once the venue for the 2016 Games had been decided, I realised that this would be the opportunity to fill this lacuna in my world experiences. The decision had been taken when Brazil was at the height of its prosperity under their charismatic president, Lula, and was included in the BRICS, the emerging nations tipped to move into the big time in international relations with their growing economic and political clout. By the time that the Games were imminent the wheel had turned and there had been a sharp economic downturn. Hosting the Football World Cup and the Olympics so close to each other in time stretched both the infrastructure and the economy and the completion dates were in danger of not being met. There were huge demonstrations against the Games and the authorities and often these became violent. Lula's successor Dilma Rousseff was unpopular and was under investigation for corruption, subsequently being subject to impeachment proceedings which commenced just as the Games were about to start. The favelas were centres of crime and disorder and considered a threat to visitors. As if all this were not enough, the Zika virus was seen as a potential threat to people who might want to conceive children, even though the Games were being held in the Brazilian winter

when there was little mosquito activity. All this cast a pall of gloom over the prospects for a successful gathering of the world for the Games and I am sure were contributory factors, together with inefficiencies in the ticketing organisation, to the rows of empty seats seen in many of the venues for the various sports.

As for me, by this time I had amazed my friends, my family and me myself to a certain extent, after 23 years on my own, by marrying again a year earlier to a lady who had a parallel background to mine and had herself been widowed, although not nearly as long as I had been. Her life experience had not included travelling around the world watching athletics, rugby and cricket at the highest levels, but she became genuinely interested in it all, although she finds rugby the most difficult to follow! So off we set on our great adventure, she with a degree of apprehension, given the bad publicity that had preceded the Games. We had hit the jackpot with our accommodation on a bed and breakfast arrangement in a lovely large house, really a villa, situated right at the foot of the mountain on which stands the iconic statue of Cristo Redento. The proprietors were charming and most welcoming and accommodating, even to the extent to being around to open the security gates as we returned home from the stadium in the early hours of the morning. Breakfasts were magnificent and shared with other visitors on short stays, compared with our stay of 12 days. We had a television in our room with about nine local channels covering various sports except for two which seemed to have 24/7 table tennis and wrestling, but we did not have a timetable to let us know what events were to be seen and when. We got round this by using the I-pad (which my wife was reluctant to bring because of the postulated security threat, but which was invaluable in so many ways and very safe locked away in our room and not taken out of the house) to look up the UK time of events on the BBC website and convert these to local time and then flick through the channels to find the right one. This became very important with the never ending flow of British successes.

Given that we had a half mile narrow and very steep road to get up to our accommodation from the main road in the southern part of the city known as Corcavado, and I was no longer on my own but had a wife to care for, I hired a car, if only to get us up the hill. However, after finding our way from the airport to our residence with the aid of SATNAV, without which we would still be searching now, it was less reliable if one could not feed in a specific destination, which was usually the case, so early days were a bit of a lottery, compounded by traffic jams of great density, even way after midnight. Overall driving was a nightmare with cars coming from all directions and masses of motorbikes weaving in and out of the lanes of traffic in a random fashion, not least in the tunnel under the mountain which accentuated the hazards. Eventually we had a routine for getting to the stadium by driving into the northern part of the city, parking the car underground and taking the metro to the main station where one caught a train to the Athletic Stadium, some way past the famous Maracana Stadium, which was the sacred venue for football only, although it would have made a great main stadium. The train passed through some fairly insalubrious areas which were quite a contrast from the area in which we were staying.

In the morning and early afternoon we dovetailed our TV watching assignments with trips to the most spectacular of Rio's sights not least Ipanema and Copacabana beaches and their surrounding shops and restaurant areas. We were ideally placed for an early start on the train that took us to the hugely impressive statue at the top of the Corcavado Mountain with its stunning views and on our one free evening we had time to sip caipirinhas in a very agreeable bar at the top

of Sugar Loaf Mountain gazing down on Rio as dusk fell on the slowly darkening city and the twinkling lights – a magic experience. Since the Stadia would not let one bring in any food or drink, even lemon squash or water, although the latter could be found in the stadium, one had to eat and drink beforehand sitting down probably at about 4 p.m. for a lunch/dinner. After a while we found a perfect restaurant close to our residence with a limited, but very reasonable menu and a wonderful collection of beers from all over the world, and this became a regular fixture in our lives.

The day after we arrived saw the quarter finals of the men's 7-a-side tournament and as the athletic programme had not started, we took the opportunity of watching some rugby at the later stages of the event, which, in its shortened form had only just returned to the Olympic fold. We had to travel the recommended route by train from the Central Station a long way out to the west of the city and bizarrely walk back again towards the city a considerable way, only partly alleviated by a bus departing at indeterminate times to cover a small part of the route, in order to get to the stadium, which appeared to have its own adjacent station at which the train did not stop. The only good point about this was that on our walk we passed military barracks and the route was heaving with armed soldiers, some of them mounted. This was good for our morale and my wife was much reassured. In fact the whole city was crawling with police and military patrols and all police cars, whether underway or stopped beside the road, had all their lights flashing non-stop, advertising both their presence and their great numbers. As a consequence there was not one security problem throughout the whole Games period. The only incident was caused by a member of the USA swimming team who had claimed to have been robbed. On investigation it turned out that the claim was totally unjustified as he was drunk and had abused the taxi driver who had returned him to his hotel. He suffered justified retribution in that he was castigated in the most extreme terms by all the media when he returned home.

The venue for the rugby was in a small stadium which would have done justice to a middle category team in the English Rugby Championship (in effect the 2nd Division of English rugby) and the accompanying steady rain made the similarity even more evident. The Southern Hemisphere Commonwealth twangs of speech were very evident among the spectators, supplemented by quite a lot of Brit and French supporters and masses of Argentineans, it being virtually a local trip for them. GB played a mighty match against Argentina, taking an early lead, but being hauled back by their opponents around half time until the scores were level and there they remained until the final



whistle, resulting in unlimited extra-time to play for the sudden death golden try, which GB managed after 54 seconds, to the huge disappointment of the massed Argentine contingent. Of the other matches South Africa beat Australia, but the big surprise was that Japan beat France, while Fiji beat New Zealand, which was not such a surprise as the former had a

magnificent team of gifted players who hammered team GB in the final the next day. Nevertheless

the British 7s team did wonderfully well to win the silver medal, reflecting overall the peaking of performance by British teams and individuals at just the right time to produce their optimum result. The GB team, incidentally, was coached by Simon Amor (Hawks', St Edmunds 2000), while the Fijians were coached by Ben Ryan (Homerton 1995).

The following day was given over to sightseeing, including the Olympic boulevard, which we found a little disappointing. It was new and glistening and had a rock band playing (why not Bossa Nova?) on a big stage inside the entrance, but it seemed very spread out with a few food outlets, but not much else. Maybe we should have pushed further in, but distances were great and the rewards of doing so seemed somewhat speculative and we opted out of that one as there were still a lot of other things and sights to see.

Friday 12 August, the first day of the athletic events, dawned at last and fortified by watching in the morning Helen Glover and Heather Stanning retain the title they won in London, as



also did the men's Coxless Four, who included George Nash (Hawks', St Catharine's 2008), and also by a magnificent late lunch we set off for the Stadium. The section on the main-line train was much shorter than on the journey out to the rugby venue and there was a very jolly light-hearted atmosphere on board with time enough to talk to the passengers who were mainly putative spectators from all

sorts of countries, but also locals, sometimes even businessmen, returning to home in the suburbs. When we got out at the station we walked down a ramp from the station straight into the section of entry gates, all a far cry from the previous experience, albeit the crowds around the gates were huge, accentuated by the very slow passage through the baggage check area. However, here we found another bit of good fortune. People of a certain age are very well looked after, even respected, in Brazil and so as we approached the swelling mass of people we were guided down a special passageway which took us right through the crowds until we reached the very front of the crowd. I think they thought that my wife was my nurse! Subsequently on our daily train trips to and from the stadium I was more often than not offered a seat by a young person, but must have slightly spoiled it for the person concerned by immediately giving it to my wife. I am 75, but very fit and active, and am very happy to stand and don't think I act my age at all, but I must face up to the fact that, from the perspective of these young people, I am old! So we slipped easily through gates, although no food or drink was allowed in, not even a banana or water, over which I had a major altercation, much to my wife's embarrassment, on day one, but subsequently conformed, although you were allowed to take in plastic water bottles to be filled from water fountains inside the stadium. These are the most draconian rules I've ever experienced at an Olympics, designed to protect the sponsoring food and drink suppliers' interests from competition. Unlike other stadia, the rules were applied with total inflexibility – no bombs, yes, but no banana or apple for sustenance? That's ridiculous.

Having entered the precincts with time to spare, one entered a wide space, open, except for picnic tables and some stalls selling snacks and drinks at over inflated prices, but there was the opportunity to meet the world, in the form of total strangers and have a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences. We were also entertained by a microcosm of the Carnival in the form of a relatively small group of statuesque samba dancers in wonderfully sequined, and skimpy, costumes

and huge feather head-dresses accompanied by musicians shuffling rhythmically across the tarmac, so that one had just a little flavour of one of Rio's great art forms.

We then moved into the stadium, to be shocked to see that it was only about one third full, a state of affairs which never really got much better over the course of the evening. The other major disappointment was to appreciate that the women's 10,000 m., normally the highlight of the first evening, had been run in the morning session. Not only that, but Ethiopia's Almaz Ayana in only her second race at the distance had won in a world record time of 29:17.45, beating the previous time by a phenomenal 14 seconds, and with the first four women finishing inside 30 minutes – an incredible race. Actually one had a sneaking feeling of admiration for the programme planners who had decided that the morning spectators needed an exciting break, away from the mind-numbing prospect of interminable men's 100m. Heats!

From the British point of view it was a good evening. Greg Rutherford, the defending long jump champion, looked out of sorts in the preliminary event and slipped back to be out of contention for going on into the final the following day. However, he produced the goods in his last jump, a gritty performance, if ever there was one and reflecting his incredible determination. There was much better news of our other defending champion, Jess Enness-Hill, in the heptathlon as she was in the lead at the end of day one, with her compatriot Katrina Johnson-Thompson in fourth place, only 7 points behind. The latter had put in a fantastic performance in the high jump to clear 1.98 metres, together with the Belgian Thiam, a new British record, which put her in the lead, but her shot putt was very poor and she slipped back to fourth. On the wider scene the American Michelle Carter with her last throw prevented the great New Zealander Valerie Adams from winning her third successive Olympic title.

Rowing again set the tone before the second day of athletics with the women's eight winning silver, to be followed by a magisterial performance by the men's eight, leading all the way to



get the gold medal. This crew included Tom Ransley (Hughes Hall, 2008). The Olympic Stadium again was sparsely attended and I could sit anywhere I wanted in the back straight stand. In the final



of the long jump Greg Rutherford was never at his best and was briefly in a medal position before slipping out of contention, but with one mighty effort on his last jump he got himself the bronze medal, a truly gritty performance fighting until the very last.

The second day of the heptathlon produced a terrific competition between our Jess and the Belgian Nafissatou Thiam, who had a significant 7 metres more than the former in the javelin. Johnson-Thompson had a really poor throw in the javelin which put her out of

contention for a medal. By the last event Thiam had a lead of 142 points, worth nearly ten seconds in the tables. In the event Jess finished first in the 800 metres, but Thiam ran her fifth lifetime best of the event and finished just seven and three quarters of a second behind to win the gold by just 35 points ahead of Jessica.

However the hero and performer of the day was Mo Farah in the 10,000 metres. In past races one such as the 5,000m final in London, one had seen him trip in the close proximity of others and almost fall, but this time he really did go down with a heavy fall that turned him in the wrong direction. I didn't see it at the time as I was watching from the other side of the stadium and also may have been distracted by a field event at just that moment, but I would have feared for his chances had I done so, even though it was in the first third of the race because you can be really winded and hurt from such a fall. As far as I was concerned he made his steady progress first in the middle of the group and then slowly moving up. He suddenly lifted his pace with two and a half laps to go and moved easily to the front, where he really began to push for home. At the bell he was still in charge, but as he just came up to the beginning of the back straight the Kenyan Tenui passed him and led all the way down the back straight. In every race until this one when Mo had taken the lead he defended it against all attempts to pass him. Other runners might get slightly ahead, but he defended his position with such resolution, that they could never get far enough ahead to cut in front of him: they had to remain on the outside. So, this was a rather scary moment. One had never seen him in this situation before. Was he about to lose his Olympic crown? No. As they entered the home straight, he accelerated clear of Tenui, who had put everything into his push down the back straight and had nothing left as Mo swept to gold medal glory, roared on by every Brit in the crowd, though not at the London level due to the sparsely populated stadium, but it was a sublime moment.



When, on the last day of the Athletic programme Mo also won the 5,000m, many commented on the fact that he had reached the level of the only other man to have won gold medals in both races in two consecutive Olympiads, Lasse Viren at Munich in 1972 and in Montreal four years later. What I did not see recorded was the fact that Farah's achievement matched Viren's in another fascinating dimension in that he too fell in one of the 10,000m races, the only differences being that it was the first of all his races, it was roughly at the half-way point and he got up to break the World Record, largely because David Bedford had run the first 6,000 metres at World Record pace.

The next day, day 3 in the programme, we arrived to find the stadium virtually full, this being due to the fact that a certain Usain Bolt was running in the men's 100 metre semi-final and, one assumed, in the final a couple of hours later. I heard it said that the Brazilians didn't really understand athletics, but they did understand celebrity. I would add to this that the stadium would have been equally full had Marilyn Monroe been alive and decided to attend. Nonetheless he did not disappoint – he never does - and he dominated the field, not least the silver medallist, Justin Gatland who had faster times than Bolt coming into the Games. His name was roundly booed by the spectators aware of his previous conviction for using drugs several years earlier.



However, for once Bolt did not have all the limelight because his final followed directly after one of the great Olympic performances of all time. The South African Wayde van Niekerk running in the outside lane of the 400m and only third fastest runner in the field behind the 2012 Olympic champion Kirani James and the American LaShawn Merritt, blasted out of the blocks and ran a perfect race with no-one ahead on whom to draw, smoothly accelerating further and further ahead down the home straight to win in the phenomenal time of 43.03, breaking Michael Johnson's world record of 43.18 set in 1999. It was a perfect race run alone from gun to tape, just as David Rudisha had done in the 800m in the London Olympics and an equally sublime moment. It was appropriate that David Rudisha himself, after a very troubled time overcoming injuries in the intervening years, was back in form and the next day won the 800m and retained his London title. This time he didn't run all the way from the front, but took the lead after 550 metres going smoothly and really strongly away from the field with total authority – a perfect 800m race.

Two days later the stadium was full again to watch Usain Bolt win the 200m final. He had only run one 200m race before the Games and was only 5th fastest in the list of times, but he soon established his mastery of the event. In his semi-final, the second of three races, over the last few yards he turned to chat to his nearest rival and sometime training partner Andre de Grasse. The subsequent photo shows him clearly smiling in the direction of de Grasse. In the final there was no such levity and he powered home on a cool night, which took its toll since his time was the same as that run in his very relaxed semi-final. Poor Adam Gemili, the young GB sprinter finished in the same time as the Frenchman, Christian LeMaitre, but was agonisingly given 4th place. The crowd also had the privilege of seeing Ashton Easton (USA) emulate Daley Thompson in retaining the title he had first won four years previously. He dominated his fellow decathletes. The crowd returned the next day to see Jamaica, anchored by Bolt winning his third gold of the Games. They won it easily, followed by Japan and the USA, who were later disqualified for a first change outside the permitted zone, letting in Canada for the bronze. On the same evening one also saw one of the biggest blow outs in the Games. The Ethiopian Ayana who had destroyed the field in setting a new world record in the women's 10,000m on the first day took over from where she had left off in the woman's 5,000m final, establishing a huge lead. But this time she had bitten off more than she could chew and with a kilometre to go she had run out of steam and was being caught by the chasing Kenyans, Cheruiyot and Obiri passed her for gold and silver, but Ayana just hung on for the bronze.

The next and final day saw Team GB win bronze in the women's 4 x 400m relay, the men's team having been inexplicably and controversially disqualified in the heats the day before. However the highlight of the day had to be Mo Farah's victory in the 5,000m. This time, after tracking in the middle of the field with no danger of a fall, he suddenly shot to the front with five and a half laps to go, way before his normal practice and pushed hard from there. Unlike in the 10,000m he resisted all attempts to overtake and, boy, did they all try their best as a string of them took him on: one feared that one of them would crack him after such a long time at the head of the field? His most persistent challenger was the ex-Kenyan, Paul Chelimo, now nationalised as an American, who looked to be closing fast as they entered the home straight, but he couldn't sustain it and Mo came across the line giving his Mobat symbol for his huge historic achievement of winning double gold in

the long distance events in two successive Olympics – a wonderful way for us to finish our experience in being at the XXXI Olympiad.

Throughout our stay in Rio we had followed all team GB's results assiduously and were delighted to see us move up to second place in the medal table very early. We didn't expect it to last and thought we would be ground down by the Chinese, but it never happened and we went on winning medals left, right and centre. There was no doubt that morale in the camp was sky high and each new sport fed on the success of those who had competed earlier, probably illustrated best by the wonderful victory of the women's hockey team. All this made a huge impact on the rest of the world in the form of spectators, officials, competitors and the locals.

After the Games were over we flew a thousand mile inland to see the Iguassu Fall on the point where Brazil meets both Argentina and Paraguay, the biggest complex of waterfalls in the world, dwarfing all others such as Victoria and Niagara, a stunning example of the might and power of nature at its most overwhelming level, but that's a story for another time. We saw the falls from both the Argentine and Brazilian sides and for the former we had to provide our passports as we crossed the border. The outfit organising the bus for this trip had to get the details of the passports of all those making the journey. When my turn came he looked at my passport and said, "Hmm, British. Second overall. Beat the Chinese". It was a very good place to be a Brit then!