

NEW MEMBER ANDREW SMITH tells the story of his POLIO LIFE

My experience began in 1956 when I was 4 years old. I lived in a small village in Leicestershire when myself and two other children, one from each of two adjacent villages were diagnosed with polio. Unfortunately one child died, the other was paralysed from the chest down their life was restricted to being in, what was called at the time a 'bath-chair'. Then there was me.

I was paralysed from the waist down with both legs affected but my right leg more severely. I initially was put into Derby Children's hospital later transferred to the then Bretby Children's Hospital for rehabilitation. With lots of physiotherapy, electro-therapy, and time, I regained feeling in my legs and was eventually able to walk again, albeit with callipers and with difficulty.

Over that period my feet however had become very misshapen. To such an extent that it was virtually impossible to wear shoes. I remember having to wear special insoles in over-sized shoes. The idea being that, in time, my feet would straighten out. This did not happen so when I was about 9 years old I was back in Derby Children's Hospital for operations on both feet - 5 operations on the left and 6 on the right. They were all completed at the same time and, as I understand, tendons were cut and re-routed in order to pull my feet straight. After I was allowed home I had special reinforced plaster casts made that I had to wear every night. They were bandaged on to both feet and held them at right angles to my legs. If I recall correctly it was necessary for this to continue for about a year. I was able to recover and go through secondary school with no physical problems competing in all the usual school sports in the mid 60's.

I wanted to join the Royal Air Force (RAF) straight from school but settled into working as an apprentice electrician at our local colliery. In 1970 though, I decided to join the RAF. I was 18 years old. The procedure was, at the time, to have a Test, a Medical and finally an Interview where you would then be told if you were successful in your application or not.

My problem started at the Medical stage. It was a case of strip off to your underwear and have a full examination by an RAF doctor. When he saw all the scars on my feet and I explained what they were he said that I would not be eligible to join as I would not be able to cope with the physical side of being in the RAF. When I challenged this with my school report, specifically the PE section he said I would have to be referred to a specialist. At the appointment the 'specialist' had me jumping, walking backwards, squatting and doing all manner of, what i can only describe as, dance steps!

I was eventually contacted by the Royal Air Force to say I had passed my medical and was to attend a formal interview. I did and joined the Royal Air Force in June 1970. I went on to serve for 22 years, leaving in 1992 at the rank of Flight Sergeant. In all those 22 years, the polio I had all those years before did not affect any part of my career.

It was not until around the millennium that I began to be aware that I was finding it more and more difficult to carry weights. I was a funeral director by now. I put it down to just getting older but as the years went by I began to notice that my right leg was becoming thinner than the left.

I went to the doctors in 2011 because I was having trouble breathing, especially when in bed and also because I was starting to be breathless, sometimes at the slightest exertion. I had loads of blood tests and all came back normal and by now my right leg was randomly 'giving way' at my knee. It was in 2012, on another visit to the doctors and seeing a locum doctor that I was told, after she asked many questions and looked into my medical history, that I had PPS. To be honest, I had never heard of it before but both my wife and I were almost in tears knowing what was apparently wrong with me. Not because of the diagnosis but because we now know what is wrong and we can adjust our lives accordingly. As a funeral director, carrying was part and parcel of the job but my confidence had gone due to the randomness of my knee giving way so I retired early and stopped working.

Now, because of the weakness in my right leg, I am apparently compensating and now my left hip and lower back are causing problems.

I am 65 now and have no regrets only gratitude, especially to the doctor at Derby Children's Hospital, Dr Lunt, who after straitening out my feet, gave me the ability to have a really good career and life.