

‘We Were Falconers’

CAPTAIN C.W.R. KNIGHT

1884 – 1957



The sport of falconry is rich in its collection of spirited characters who have taken up the art for a brief period or a lifetime. There have been illustrious statesmen whose names are known to all. There have been murderers and criminals whose names are known to some. And there have been great hearted individuals whose boisterous and welcoming personalities have popularized the ancient art, attracting to it younger men and women who carry it forward another generation.

In the latter group can be numbered Charles William Robert Knight. M.C. F.R.P.S., F.Z.S. known to his many friends, family, and admirers as ‘Captain’, ‘Chas’ and ‘Unk’.

Born in Sevenoaks, Kent on January 25th 1884, Charles was the third son of Charles and Emily Knight. He was educated at Sevenoaks Grammar School and had such a love for his community that he made it his home for life. Though he traveled to the far corners of the earth his heart was ever in the Kentish countryside.

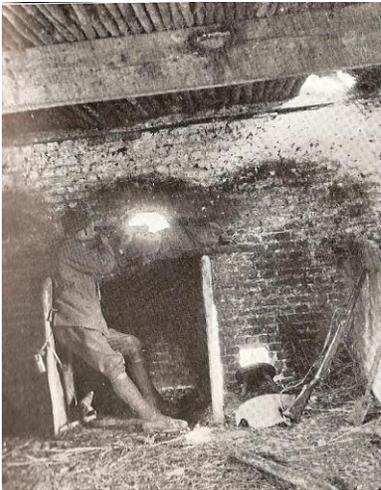
On leaving school his parents decided that he would go into the family business, Knight Brothers of London that had been started by his father and uncle in 1868 importing Cuban cigars. Knight was informed that he must learn the cigar business from the bottom up and so commenced working as an assistant in a tobacconist’s shop. He hated this job. By this time, he was a keen naturalist, photographer and enjoyed writing. At the age of 18, in 1902, he wrote his first book ‘Rabbits of the Past’ which he illustrated and gave to his sister Winnie. His soul was wedded to the out-of-doors, to the clean air of the countryside, and a shopkeeper’s life was not for him.

It was in 1913 that Knight and his brother Hugh first embarked on their falconry careers. Each had a Sparrowhawk and little knowledge of what to do with them. Knight was

fortunate that some of the great falconers of the 19th century were yet living. He received much help and guidance from Peter Gibbs, Falconer to Lord Hillingdon and with little shyness Knight wrote letters to J.E.Harting asking for advice on the Sparrowhawks, dashed off missives to E.B. Michell who became a mentor and friend, and even found a friendly soul in the great Gerald Lascelles. Letters were also written to other well known falconers of the day such as Gilbert Blaine, Stanley Allen and Robert Gardner, correspondents who remained Knight's friends for life. Knight also read voraciously, ingesting every tidbit of knowledge he could find regarding falconry, birds of prey, and the natural history of the countryside.

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 Knight immediately escaped the tobacconist's shop by joining the Army and, within a month, found himself in France with the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment. Knight was a crack shot and was soon selected as a sniper. His accuracy with a rifle quickly earned him the nickname of 'Sniper Knight' which dogged him for many years.

It was in France, whilst hidden in the ruins of an old barn on sniping duty that he found amongst all the carnage a nesting Golden Oriole. The beauty of this fragile creature



trying to safely raise her young with death all about her touched his soul. It inspired him to write "Wildlife in the Trenches" published in Country Life on December 18th 1915. This article was accompanied with photographs taken whilst being perilously exposed to the enemy in open ground and in trees.

During his time in the trenches Knight went 'over the top' on more than one occasion, seeing action at Ypres, Messines Ridge and the Somme. . Knight came close to death in France many times and for his valor was awarded the Military Cross. After being severely gassed his days in the trenches came to an end. In 1917 he was pulled from the battlefield and sent to join the 1st Battalion Honourable Artillery Company in America as

an Instructor. He was stationed at Camp Custer near Battle Creek in Michigan. This was to be the first of many visits to America.

When the War ended Knight returned home, left the Army in 1919, and unhappily took up his old job again. However he was not to remain in the family business for long. His article in Country Life had been well received and the editor told him he would welcome more of Knight's essays. Gradually Knight started to develop a living from selling photographs and articles on birds with a particular interest in birds of prey. He also purchased a cine camera and started to make films about birds, pioneering the use of tree top hides to capture footage never seen before.

Falconry, much missed during the war, was at the forefront of his interests. In September 1919, with the rest of his family in tow, the Knights embarked on their first proper season flying Merlins in the stubble fields near Bogner. Hand written notes show that the

Merlins were *Marmaduke (The Duke)* and *Wyndham (Winnie)* who were sometimes flown in a cast. On the first day of October *Marmaduke* was released back to the wild followed by *Wyndham* three days later after what appears to be a successful hawking season.

Two months later in December 1919, Knight had a major article printed in *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* with the title *Modern Falconry, - The flight with the Short-Winged Hawks*. This was a discourse on the training of two Sparrowhawks, *Melisande* and *Javert*. It earned him plaudits and a following.

In September 1920 Knight joined E.B. Michell, Captain Awdry, Colonel Sandford and Captain St. John at Avebury for the first time. This outing to Avebury was a family affair with Hugh Knight, Lizzie Knight and their daughter Judith Knight joining in. The Lark hawking that took place this year was described by Michell as being the most favourable, in respect of the weather for at least 50 years past and also to the exceptional excellence of the Merlins which had come from three nests in Yorkshire. One of the Merlins flown by the Knight's was *Eve* who had 73 flights and 63 kills,



In December, following the meet at Avebury, Knight's article *Modern Falconry – The Flight with Merlins*, describing the training and flying of *The Duke* and *Winnie* the previous year, was published. In the same month a further article *The Merlin, or Lady's Hawk*, also appeared in print. This article centered around the training of two other Merlins *Spook* and *Eve*, where Knight reports that *Eve* distinguished herself on Salisbury Plain.

In 1921 Knight's first book was published and his first film was premiered. Both had the same title, *Wildlife in the Tree Tops*. His film in particular received incredible reviews. The Film Correspondent for the Daily Newspaper in 1921 wrote, *In a small, private kinema theatre in London yesterday a privileged audience was transported for an hour into tree-tops where herons were feeding their young, kestrel hawks were learning to fly, and a man with a camera was hidden in the branches. Captain Charles Knight, F.R.P.S., was the man, and the remarkable natural history pictures he showed were a great tribute to his skill and perseverance and a delight to the audience. They are probably the best "close up" moving pictures of birds ever shown.....The kestrel hawk pictures from the top of an elm tree are just remarkable.* In a short space of time Knight was in demand and he was lecturing all over the country. He was immensely popular. He was larger than life with a gifted speaking voice that entranced his listeners. His fascinating talks were often amusing and always highly entertaining.

Falconry continued with the Merlins throughout 1921 at Shrewton with Stanley Allen, again with the Allens in 1922 on the Isle of Thanet, and in 1923 the Knight clan were to be found Lark hawking near Eastbourne. It was in Eastbourne that Knight lost one of his Merlins, which was later found by a member of the public and was subject of a local newspaper article expressing the finders surprise and delight at finding it.

On Thursday 17th July 1924, Knight married Eva Olive Margaret Bennet at Chevening Parish Church near Sevenoaks. Numerous friends and family attended including members of the Blockey and Glasier families. Robert Blockey, his nephew, fated to die in the next war, was there. Knight had become a father figure to him had coached him in the art of falconry which he loved. Nine year old Phillip Glasier, was also at the wedding. Glasier too learned falconry and photography from Knight, whom he called 'Unk', later becoming an internationally known falconer in his own right.

The honeymoon, if there was one, must have been spent in London preparing for the *Pageant of the Empire* which was held at Wembley. Knight had been asked to give a Falconry display and he did so in the arena dressed in period Elizabethan costume. He was assisted by his nephew, the actor Esmond Knight, also a falconer. They flew a number of falcons to the lure causing much excitement as many of the audience had never seen anything like it before. Performing in front of thousands of people thrilled Knight as much as his show thrilled the audience.

Prior to the *Pageant* Knight had given his show considerable thought. He describes being informed that one of the greatest living authorities on falconry was of the opinion that it



would be impossible, under such conditions, to give people any idea of a flight or the appearance of a hawk on the wing. Knight knew he would be up against considerable difficulties flying the falcons in such a small space. He decided he would give it a go, hoping to revive something of the enthusiasm with which people of this country regarded the sport in bygone days. He records in one of his books, “.....we gave most creditable displays, if I may say so, of real flying and real stooping to the lure. Much the same as one witnesses in the field, only, of course, a leathern lure decorated with feather was substituted for the

live quarry. The Hawks were flown loose. We flew them on every occasion that the Elizabethan and Henry VII episodes were enacted, and we never lost a single Hawk”.

In 1925 two great events occurred for the Knights. Their daughter Jean was born and Knight's second book '*Aristocrats of the Air*' was published. This work was widely acclaimed by the British public. Much of it was dedicated to birds of prey and it included a whole chapter on the Golden Eagle in the Highlands of Scotland, the bird with which Knight was later to be so closely identified with.

The year of 1926 was a busy one for the Knights. Work was continuing on yet another book and a film of the Golden Eagle. A lot of time was spent in Scotland, in hides filming and taking notes of eagle eyries. During the last weeks of filming Knight acquired his first Golden Eagle, 'Grampian'. 'Grampian' and her sibling had been under sentence of death from the local keeper so a decision was made to save them. The two eaglets though were so far advanced that the male was found to have left the nest and although close by it was not possible to catch him. The female, however, with some difficulty, was caught. Knight returned home with Grampian and commenced training her.

In November of the same year tragedy struck the Knight family. On the 19th at their home in Bessels Green, Eva gave birth to a baby boy. Sadly, something went wrong and both Eva and the baby died. Knight was totally shattered and devastated by what happened and Jean was to recall that he hardly ever spoke to her about her mother, finding it too painful to do so.

Knight lost himself in work and the following year saw the publication of *'The Book of the Golden Eagle'* and the release of *'The Filming of the Golden Eagle'*. The well reviewed book was dedicated to Eva and the inscription reads, *"TO MY WIFE whose sympathy, encouragement, and help contributed so largely towards the successes herein described, but who was fated never to share in the final realization of our hopes."* The film premiered at The Polytechnic Theatre in Regent Street, London and was also a huge success. A set of postcards was produced to commemorate the event and nowadays they are very rare.



In November 1927, the British Falconers' club was formed. Although he was not there for the formation he was a member and staunch supporter and attended a number of the Annual Dinners.

In 1928 Knight sailed to America on the first of many lecture tours. In New York City he showed the film of the Golden Eagle in the Scottish Highlands and also lectured on falconry. On this trip Knight brought with him his Goshawk 'Sligo'. Most hotels had objections to birds of prey being kept in their rooms and so Knight would often keep them tethered on the hotel's roof. Sometimes not everything went according to plan. Sligo managed to break free and spent the day wandering around Central Park before being captured by two boys. Although the first, it was not to be the last escape during Knight's travels. The great escape garnered him publicity in the newspapers, and that he enjoyed.

Whilst in New York, Knight met with the curator of birds at the Bronx Zoo and managed to man a Golden Eagle 'Valancia' that had been captured two years previously from the slopes of Mount Versuvius in Italy

By the time Knight returned to England two eaglets were due to hatch in Ben Gruinard, Scotland. A partnership between man and bird was soon to commence which would become world famous, perhaps never to be equaled again.

Knight had spent almost a year with Grampian, but things had not gone too well with her. She had a terrible habit of lashing out with her foot causing him injury. Fearing that she might end up attacking a child Knight eventually returned her to Scotland, releasing her on one of the Duke of Sutherland's estates where Golden Eagles were protected.

In July the eaglets of Ben Gruinard were removed from the nest and transported to London Zoo. Knight was given the opportunity of having one of them and he chose the female, 'Grampian II'. To Knight's dismay she too would lash out with her feet with little provocation. After a few bloody injuries she was exchanged for the other eagle, a male. The naming of the eagle caused some consternation. Originally Knight dubbed it 'Aquila'. Three year old Jean, however, had other ideas. In his book, named after the eagle, Jean is described as saying, "I like you. You look like Mr. Ramshaw". This appears not to be totally true. What she actually said was that the bird looked like 'her'. Jean was actually referring to Mrs. Ramshaw, her nanny. Howsoever the name came to be, "Mr. Ramshaw" it was forevermore.

Mr. Ramshaw turned out to be a bird with a charming disposition according to Knight. He did not resent being stroked and he was not bothered about having people around him even when the numbers were great. Children in particular he seemed to like and allowed them to stroke his head. He had an agile mind and in a very short space of time Knight had him flying free. Mr. Ramshaw was soon catching rabbits and hares quite readily, providing the Knight clan with a great deal of sport.



It was not long before Mr. Ramshaw became quite a celebrity, as famous in his day as the fictional Black Beauty, Black Stallion, and Lassie. Photographs of him were appearing in newspapers in Great Britain and across the United States including New York and Chicago. A 'talkie' was made of Mr. Ramshaw in action with headlines of 'A Golden Eagle trained for Falconry' and 'Britisher tames a Golden Eagle'. It came as no great surprise to Knight when he was asked to take Mr. Ramshaw to America and lecture in various cities. After some consideration and obtaining permission from the Zoo in Central Park to accommodate Mr. Ramshaw should the need arise he agreed to do it. The incredible adventures were about to start.

On New Years Day, 1929, Knight made the final preparations and readied himself for an early start from his home to Southampton Docks. The following morning Knight was to experience the first of many mishaps that traveling to America with Mr. Ramshaw would entail. On looking out of his bedroom window that morning he was shocked to find that Mr. Ramshaw had disappeared. He had broken his chain and there was no sign of him. Fortunately he was quickly found in a tree consuming a tasty rabbit. All attempts to encourage him down were fruitless. Bribes and entreaties had no effect. Knight ended up bringing his tree climbing sniper skills into operation and successfully managed to get down with him.

Knight sailed to America on board the Mauretania straight into storms which the ship's master described as continuous and the worst passage he had made in thirty three years of crossing the Atlantic. Waves had come over the decks smashing twelve plate glass windows on the upper promenade deck and a second wave which swept over the bridge

smashed another three windows in the wheelhouse. Although arriving late in New York, Mr. Ramshaw was none the worse for wear and posed well for photographs as Knight was checked through customs.

Ramshaw made his first public appearance before an American audience at the American Museum of Natural History. He flew across the stage to a perch that had been draped with the Stars and Stripes and overnight he became famous.

Knight spent four months in America on this particular trip, lecturing in various cities around the country, but also spending a considerable amount of time on Gardiner's Island, off Montauk Point, Long Island, New York. Gardiner's Island is 10 miles long by 3 miles wide and was granted to the Gardiner family in 1639 by Charles I. It is home to a huge Osprey colony. The birds nested in trees, as one would expect, but as Gardiner's Island is virtually predator free they also nested on rocks, buildings and even on the shore itself. Knight estimated that there were between 300 to 400 pairs nesting there. He spent hours taking copious notes and filming the Ospreys, concentrating in particular on one nest containing 3 eggs. He recorded this entire osprey family event until the chicks fledged. At the time Knight felt that he had truly achieved something for his filming of the Osprey was way ahead of anything else he had done – or anyone else had done - so far.

During Knight's stay on the island Mr. Ramshaw was permitted to have flights over the Gardiner's land and would generally return to the lure when called. However, as was to happen on a few occasions, he got loose and wandered off. This particular time he was missing for two days before he was found and Knight managed to recapture him.

Knight returned home to England in August of 1929 bringing with him 4 young Ospreys and a Bald Eagle, "Miss America".

Knight had a special project in mind for the American Ospreys. The last known breeding pair in Great Britain was nest robbed in 1916 and the adults disappeared from their territory. Ospreys had been persecuted to virtual extinction by game keepers, shooters, and egg collectors and, after 1916, only the odd vagrant was seen from time to time. Ironically the eggs of the last known pair were revealed to have been stolen by an officer who came under Knight's command during the War. The soldier admitted to Knight that he had stolen them for a collector, having swum out to the island where they were located when the estate guards were away just before dawn.

In what was probably the first attempt to reintroduce the Osprey to Scotland, Knight



released one pair on the estate of the Duke of Sutherland and the second pair on Lord Cameron's estate where the last known breeding pair had been nesting. Once again, Knight published a set of postcards to commemorate the event and later made a film which starred his nephew Edmond Knight, a well known actor as the egg thief raiding the last Osprey nest.

Miss America, an eagle in full adult plumage, proved to be a challenge. She had been given to Knight by the Director of the Washington Zoo who was somewhat skeptical as to whether she could be tamed. The Director had remarked to Knight, 'No one has tamed the American eagle yet, and I don't suppose a Britisher will do it'. Knight readily took up the challenge and after some 13 weeks had her flying free. It was not long before both Mr. Ramshaw and Miss America were flying together and enjoying aerial acrobatics.

Knight did not just use his eagles as lecture birds but actively flew them on game at every opportunity. Though Bald Eagles had been kept in captivity for years, one notably being a mascot for a Wisconsin regiment during the American Civil War, Miss America may very well own the title of being the first Bald Eagle trained for falconry purposes. The British Falconer's Club report for the year 1931 records: "*Capt. Knight's Golden Eagle, Mr. Ramshaw, continues to take rabbits in a satisfactory way. It was seldom that he was taken out when he did not kill something. An American white-headed eagle was also trained, which caught one or two rabbits, but it was of very uncertain temper and almost impossible to hood*".

In June 1931 Knight was involved with another Pageant. The venue on this occasion was at Rochester Castle and Knight played a nobleman during the reenactment when Simon de Montfort carried out an unsuccessful attack on the castle in 1264. In November of the same year, following many requests, Knight returned to America for several months on what he described as his first real cross country tour. He visited many states, including Hawaii, with Mr. Ramshaw. His deep drawling voice and fascinating tales enchanted every audience he met with, winning him more fame and fortune. His trip was again not without mishap. Following a taxi ride in San Francisco he suddenly realized that he had left his falconry glove and Ramshaw's hood behind. Carrying an eagle around without a glove was not an easy thing to do and he had to improvise with a motoring glove. In the process he did end up with numerous punctures and scratches to his left forearm, souvenirs of his American visit he delighted in showing off.



On his return from America he brought back a Redtailed Hawk, possibly one of the first to be brought to the U.K. to be used for hawking.

During his lifetime Knight produced a number of films on natural history subjects that were shown in conjunction with his lectures or as newsreel shorts before feature movies. Quite a few other films, however, centered around or featured the sport of falconry. For many

people this was their first real look at the ancient art.

In 1933 Knight was approached by London Film Productions to provide some hawks for a falconry sequence in their film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. Initially he refused on

the grounds that it was not easy to find a sufficient number of birds in the numbers that Henry VIII would have had when he went hunting. After some difficulty Knight did manage it, coming up with three falcons, two tiercels, two Merlins and two goshawks. Once again the relations were involved. Nephew Esmond played a leading part in the hawking scene. Young Phillip Glasier was the cadger. The film was a huge box office success. The falconry scene, but a small part of it, whetted Knight's desire to see the sport more fully depicted for the screen.

Knight realized the drawing potential of a movie portraying the romance of falconry and set about producing a film that would be enticing to the paying public, particularly the American audience who had never visited the shores of Britain. The film *Falconry in Old England* was made and showed the thrill and pageantry of English hawking during the time of Henry VIII. A second film, *Sweeper of the Skies*, was later produced further depicting 16th century falconry. Knole House, built in 1486 in Knight's hometown of Sevenoaks, and its extensive parkland were used as the background. Knight considered that he had to attract both audiences that were interested in birds and those that were not and so concocted a melodrama that might have general appeal. The entire Knight family was once again involved. The film centered on the myth of a Golden Eagle carrying off a child. The child in question for the film was Knight's daughter Jean. The 'Jean' carried off by the eagle, (Mr. Ramshaw of course!) was in reality a dummy, very light in weight so as to enable Mr. Ramshaw to bear it away. Young Phillip Glasier raises the alarm and Esmond is the hero poacher who climbs the cliff to the eagle's eyrie and rescues the child. When it was shown some of the audience believed they were watching a real child being carried off, so good was Knight's trickery and Ramshaw's performance. A more serious film, *Monarchs of the Air*, on the natural history of the countryside involving Peregrines, Buzzards and other birds soon followed.

Esmond not only participated in his uncle's movie making adventures but, as a frequent visitor, would often enjoy falconry outings with him. One August afternoon Knight and Esmond went out for a few hours hawking on the marsh near to their home. On this occasion Knight was flying his falcon 'Bess'. The afternoon had not proved too successful but as they walked back across the fields towards home they saw a solitary rook, in the next field, close enough for a flight with Bess. Knight loosened her hood in readiness and they moved closer. Suddenly the rook was away and commenced climbing. Bess's hood was struck and she was away in pursuit. They soon became specks in the distance but Esmond ran after them and as the light faded he finally heard the faint tinkling of bells. As he approached her he saw that she had in fact caught a crow having given up on the rook for an easier kill. As Esmond knelt down beside her to assist in the plucking he was horrified to find that Bess's breast feathers were hanging loose and realized that her crop was almost severed from her body. He picked her up and raced back to Knight who thought she might recover but sadly, by morning she was dead.



In December 1932 Knight put the finishing touches to his next book, *Mr. Ramshaw, My Eagle* which was published the following year. Once again it was a huge success both in the U.K. and the U.S.A.

February 1933 found Knight back in America, on his fifth tour, showing his new film, *Falconry in Old England*. The film had already been running daily for some six months in a London theatre and his American audience found it equally delightful.



Knight's next adventure took him to South Africa for the first time. His daughter Jean had moved there to live with his sister Winnie and Knight thought filming African birdlife would be an interesting departure from his work in Britain. He spent some five months in South Africa filming the usual African wildlife but also took a special interest in the Martial Eagle. Knight acquired an immature Martial Eagle whose parents were under sentence of death due to sheep killing. Knight started training 'James' on the voyage back to Southampton and by the time he arrived James was already flying to the fist.

In January 1934 Knight is back in America on what has now become an annual tour. Mr. Ramshaw is of course with him but on this occasion the eagle was refused entry on arrival in New York. Customs suddenly declared that 'nothing with feathers on could be landed in this country without a special permit from Washington'. After a short delay however he was allowed to disembark and the tour went ahead without further delay.

When at home Knight often wrote articles for magazines and letters from him would appear in newspapers in reply to items relating to birds and other wildlife. One interesting letter appeared in *The Times* on 2nd April 1935 with the title 'Hawks at Sea'. Knight recounts a story told to him some two years earlier of a Merlin that had been spotted perched in the rigging of a ship sailing from Southampton to New York. The Merlin was kept under observation and viewers enjoyed seeing it indulge in joy flights about the ship and hunting forays to catch Storm Petrels on which it fed exclusively throughout the voyage. When the ship arrived within sight of Long Island the Merlin left. The narrator of the story was a W.F. Russell. This of course is William F. Russell, Jr. an American falconer residing in New York and author of *Falconry, A Handbook for Hunters* which was published in 1940. Knight is mentioned in this book.

Knight returned to America in 1935, this time with both Mr. Ramshaw and James the Martial Eagle. One of his lectures at Cornell University inspired the collegians to start their own falconry club. At the time falconry in New York State was illegal but flying to a lure was not. A newspaper article on December 21st reported: "*Wings flap, a hawk stoops, claws strike, and in the revival of an ancient and kingly sport, the students and faculty of Cornell University have just become the latest devotees of falconry. Already the new falconers are training bald eagles, goshawks, sparrow hawks and peregrines. But since hunting with falcons is forbidden by the laws of New York State, Cornell's new sport stops short of actual game-killing. Despite this restriction, however, the hawk-masters are getting thrills a-plenty by training their birds to fly to lures*".

Knight's 1936 visit to America was a humorous mirror image of the first. He arrived in New York City on New Year's Day, occupying his favorite room at the Hotel Gotham. Mr. Ramshaw was berthed on the roof. On the 18th the nine year old eagle broke away from his tether and went sight-seeing around Manhattan. He landed on the hood of a taxi cab whose startled driver, aided by Patrolman John Timothy, was able to catch him and hold him in a cell at the station house. The Times reports that "at the same time an unidentified woman hysterically called Lieutenant Henry Devlin, in charge of detectives, and informed him that 'an eagle was kidnapping a baby on Madison Avenue'." She must have seen Knight's movie or had a nip too much. On a happier note, 1936 also saw the publication of Knight's latest book, *The Adventures of Mr. Ramshaw The Eagle*. He delighted in signing them "Eagley yours, Charles Knight" for his many fans.



The year 1937 was a busy one for Knight. His next book, *Knight in Africa*, was published recounting his past visit there and the wildlife he had encountered. A chapter describes James's life in the nest and his eventual capture saving him from certain death. Mr. Ramshaw, perhaps the most traveled eagle in history, had accompanied Knight on this adventure and Knight proudly describes his hunting forays across the African Veldt. The book contains some sixty photographs of African animals and birds and once again it was a huge success. Knight's reputation as Britain's most popular naturalist was cemented with this adventure volume.

Later in 1937 Knight returned to Africa. He had been approached by the National Geographic Society and asked to lead an expedition in search of the Crowned Eagle. The invitation was readily accepted. After several weeks filming various other creatures in South Africa, Knight received a message that Crowned Eagles were nesting in the Zuurberg Mountains and he left to film them immediately. Knight described the filming of these Eagles, known to the locals, as 'Leopards of the Air', as being extremely hard work with more moments of despair than anything else he had ever attempted. It was almost impossible to film them but as luck would have it a second nest was found which was far more accessible. Knight was able to build a comfortable and well camouflaged hide and filming commenced. As can happen many times two chicks hatched but only one survived, the younger being killed by its sibling. It was during filming that Knight was informed that the local farmers were not happy about these Eagles and had made up their minds to shoot the parent birds. The chick by this time was a brancher and the decision was made that in order to save these splendid birds they had to remove the chick. With the assistance of a friend this was done. "Coronation" became Knight's fourth eagle.



During the summer of 1938, three eagles, Mr. Ramshaw, James and Coronation were flown daily. On occasion all three were flown at the same time but because of the risk of crabbing they normally flew separately. Knight was fascinated by the different hunting methods of the three eagles. Ramshaw would often follow on from tree to tree in the hope something would bolt. Coronation would go straight up,

some 40 or 50 feet above the ground and would sit, immovable, watching and waiting. James was totally different. He would climb to vast heights, a dot in the sky and then, with half closed wings, would drop at terrific speed, flatten out, and take prey with the greatest of ease. The film of the Crowned Eagle was released later in the year and was aptly name, *Leopard of the Air*.

In December Knight made his annual trip to the U.S. to show his new film. On this occasion he took Coronation with him leaving Ramshaw at home. Knight was severely criticized and was told in no uncertain terms never to come on a lecture tour again without Ramshaw who was, if anything, more of a celebrity than his owner. Knight heeded this advice ever after.

Back home in England Ramshaw once again broke loose and this time spent some two weeks free, taking various quarry when the need arose. He was finally caught but very nearly lost his life. It appears that he may well have killed a sheep as he was found consuming the head. Knight's friend Leslie Hoyle serendipitously turned up amongst a number of farmers and gamekeepers who were deciding which one of them was going to shoot the eagle. On his return Knight had to pay the princely sum of £3 to the owner of the sheep.

In the summer of 1939, following Knights return home, Miss America, who had been cared for by a friend during Knights recent tour was returned and all four eagles were flown at game on a daily basis. They were not all flown at the same time though Ramshaw and Miss America were often flown as a cast. Although they would fight with quarry one or the other had caught they did not fight each other as a bond had formed between them. At the end of August some more filming took place with the four eagles. Kent was enjoying a long period of beautiful weather and hundreds of feet of film exposed. As Knight turned towards home he spoke of some more filming, hoping for even better results - but they were never obtained. A few days later World War II broke out.



Knight had no vision of what the future held. By now he was in his mid 50's and active service was not an option to him. After careful consideration he decided that he could not keep the four eagles at home. A food shortage was no doubt imminent. Miss America

was transferred to London Zoo, James went into the care of a friend at the Scottish Zoological Park and Coronation was cared for by Leslie Hoyle and later by another friend. Mr. Ramshaw, however, remained with Knight. He could not part with him.

The early months of the War had little effect on Sevenoaks, and Knight, not to be put off by hostilities, made his first war-time crossing of the Atlantic, returning to New York with Mr. Ramshaw for yet another lecture tour. Radio shows were all the rage in America and Knight, with Ramshaw, appeared on one of the most popular, comic Fred Allen's program. Ramshaw once again escaped his owner and flew around the studio throughout the program causing no end of humorous havoc. The recording of the radio program is as funny today as it was over sixty five years ago.

On his return to England in early 1940 Knight immediately made plans for a visit to France to entertain the troops with Mr. Ramshaw. Whilst there he was able to return to the battlefields he had fought on in the "war to end all wars". Knight stood on the same spot where he had been 24 years previously and he recalled clearly the darkness, the evil smelling mud, the greasy duck-boards, the scent of H.E. (High Explosive) the roar of gun-fire and the water filled shell holes. Knight remained in France until May 10th. On that morning the enemy commenced the invasion of the Low Countries and he was evacuated to Britain. By the time he arrived home, Arras, where he had been had fallen to the enemy.

By this time the outlook for Britain was bleak and many people believed that an invasion was imminent. In every hamlet and village old soldiers of the last war organized Local Defense Volunteers (later known as the Home Guard) to help defend their country against the invader. Knight was one of these old soldiers. He worked from morning to night organizing map reading classes, day and night operations, giving instruction in how to get from point A to B without being seen and how and where to shoot someone with rifle or shotgun. Whilst this was going on Knight was also putting together a new film, *Britain Carries On* which, in part, would show Ramshaw carrying on in spite of the war.

In October 1940 Knight boarded the Dutch Liner *Volendam* with Mr. Ramshaw to once again cross the Atlantic for what was to be his seventeenth trip to America. Ramshaw was given his own private quarters in the form of a disused lavatory. On the third night out the ship hit a mine and the order went out to "Abandon Ship". Knight was distraught



as he could not get to Ramshaw, horrified at the thought of leaving him to a watery fate. Knight, broken hearted, boarded the lifeboat when ordered. As the lifeboat was being lowered it smashed against the side of the ship and became jammed. The passengers were asked to return to the ship and reboard via rope ladders. This time Knight was able to work his way through the wreckage and quickly rushed to Ramshaw, finding him safe and sound. The lifeboat though was soon back in working order but Knight made the decision to remain onboard and take his chances. He could not leave Ramshaw. Knight wished everyone good luck and watched until the boat reached the water. Some two hours later, with the remaining crew now abandoning ship, he was ordered into the last lifeboat. The crew forced him to abandon

Ramshaw. Some three hours later by pure chance their boat was rescued by a British destroyer.

Knight remained on the destroyer for several days until it berthed in Scotland and he then made his way to Glasgow. After many anxious inquiries he was informed that the *Volendam* had sunk. Knight was distressed and in shock at the loss of Ramshaw.

As he made plans to return home Knight received a phone call with the astounding news that the *Volendam* had not sunk and had been safely beached at the mouth of a Scottish river having been towed there by another destroyer. The following day he boarded the ship which was partly submerged. Knight made his way down to Ramshaw's quarters. He recalls, *"There was a good deal of water here through which I had to wade and I unlocked the fateful door with considerable misgivings. The hinges creaked dismally as I pushed it open and peered into the semi darkness. The place looked deserted and smelt musty, Ramshaw's crate had parted company with its moorings and was floating forlornly among bits of board and straw bottle-cases and there was no sign of Ramshaw. I was actually looking about for his body when I heard the familiar "toot-toot" of welcome above me. I peered up and there was my old friend perched on the partition, between which and the roof there was just enough room for him as long as he maintained a crouching position. I don't remember – I don't think I ever knew – just what happened at that moment. I imagine that whatever I did or said was largely sub-conscious, but that I muttered "Hullo, old boy. I am glad to see you," or words to that effect. Again I do not know, but it is just possible that Ramshaw, perhaps for the first time in his life, was pleased to see me too."*

Two days later Knight was back in Sevenoaks with Ramshaw who was none the worse following his experience. Knight was not a person to be put off from sailing across the Atlantic just because of one mishap and it was not long before he had booked another passage to America. His ship did not sail on time and during the delay the docks were bombed by enemy aircraft. The ship was not hit and soon Ramshaw and Knight were westward bound. Knight spent the next six months in America lecturing and flying Ramshaw often accompanied by William (Bill) Russell. It was whilst they were in Florida that once again Ramshaw broke free from his chain leash. Luckily he was found and recovered the following day.

Following a further visit to America in 1941 Ramshaw and Coronation were being flown daily at Sevenoaks but quarry was becoming increasingly short and obtaining food for both birds was becoming a serious problem. Reluctantly Coronation was transferred to a Zoo. Knight continued with his film making. Ramshaw obviously became the main star of the new movie



"Ramshaw's Dream of Glory" in which the eagle forms his own Squadron and flies to Scotland to look up some of his pals and get them to join, a spoof film but nonetheless a morale booster for the British public. Once the film was complete Knight commenced a tour of Britain visiting R.A.F. Stations with Ramshaw. His tour continued into 1942 and culminated in Ramshaw being elected the Official Mascot for 209 Squadron.

The following year, 1943, another film was produced by Knight for the British public, *Mr. Ramshaw Battles the Blitz*, which was soon followed by publication of his next book, *All British Eagle*. Virtually the whole of 1943 was dedicated to touring Britain, ‘doing his bit, in his unique way, for a great cause’.

As the war entered 1944, Knight learned about the sad loss of his friend and protégé Robert Blockey, shot down over Berlin whilst on a huge bombing raid. The brilliant Bobby Spens, a hawking companion on many Knight outings, had died earlier in the war and Blockey’s loss only compounded his sorrow. Knight had fought in the Great War so that no others would ever die in battle again. There was a taste of bitterness in his mouth as the war ground on and more friends and neighbours were added to the toll.

During the remainder of the war Knight continued lecturing across Britain with Ramshaw by his side, giving the British people a morale booster. His touring was exhausting and included forays into Scotland and Ireland. Ramshaw again nearly lost his life when bombs were dropped. He had been housed in an empty garage and during the bombing the plaster ceiling collapsed on top of him. He was found sitting in amongst a pile of debris, no worse for wear.

At the end of the war, life slowly returned to normal and Knight resumed his trips to



America with more films to show and adventurous stories to relate. He was also cast in his friend Michael Powell’s acclaimed 1945 film “*I Know Where I’m Going*”, appearing with Mr. Ramshaw as the best friend of the romantic lead. Knight pretty much played himself, a boisterous welcoming man of large appetites with a passion for falconry. There are some fine shots of longwing hawking in the film and Ramshaw gets to relive his sheep poaching episode on camera. A fine ad-lib by Knight was left in the film. Whilst swinging

the lure for the camera it became caught in the branches of a shrub. With great disgust Knight blurted out, “There ought to be a law against trees”. Spend a few moments with this film and you will know Knight.

In 1949 Knight completed a new film “*An Eagle’s England*” which was made at the request of the National Geographic Society. The film showed British field sports in general and post-war rural life in England. Of course it included a demonstration of falconry! The movie was shown for the first time in London in November for the Royal Geographic Society with Mr. Ramshaw making a personal appearance. Knight then returned to America for the formal premiere in Washington, DC. The film received huge reviews.

On his return home he and his daughter Jean found employment as animal trainers with several major film makers. Although not always credited they assisted with “*Gone to Earth*” in 1950, “*The Wild Heart*” in 1952 and in 1955 Mr. Ramshaw had a starring role in the film “*Geordie*”.

In 1955 Knight’s health was failing badly. He had first been taken ill onboard a liner in 1953 whilst returning from America and nothing was ever quite right again. For a time Knight continued to live in Sevenoaks with Mr. Ramshaw as his sole companion. Jean had married and was now living in Kenya, so far away.

At age 71 Knight found himself unable to continue on alone. Time had taken its toll. He made his final public appearance on British Television in 1956 and then reluctantly packed his bags for Kenya to live with Jean. Many of his young falconry protégés, men like Jack Mavrogordato, Geoffrey Pollard and others of the BFC, were dismayed he was forsaking his beloved cottage at Sevenoaks. He had been a great voice for falconry in the UK, and a force championing the beauty and existence of the country’s wildlife to the world.

Knight’s heart was broken when the Kenyan authorities refused to allow Mr. Ramshaw entry into the country. As a result, a partnership that had lasted nearly 30 years came to an end. Knight sent Mr. Ramshaw to his friend in Detroit at the Zoological Society and then left Sevenoaks forever in November 1956.

Perhaps the separation proved too much for both of them. Mr. Ramshaw died in January of 1957 from what was described as an accumulation of ailments of old age. On the 17th May Knight himself passed away, surviving Mr. Ramshaw by less than four months.



Knight once wrote “*There can never be another Mr. Ramshaw. What a personality; what poise; what dignity! And how tremendously alive he is! Nothing seems to escape his crystal-clear eyes or – for that matter – his keen ears. I have only to peep round the door at him, and, at once, that sleek head and those searching eyes will be turned expectantly in my direction*”.

If Mr. Ramshaw were able to pen his thoughts in return they would surely read: *“There can never be another Captain Knight. What a personality; what poise; what dignity! And how tremendously alive he is! He is a man of the countryside, generous to family and friends, ready to share his joie de vivre with all. He saved me from a life of boredom in a cage, and together for thirty years we entertained and educated people the world over. I have only to look over my shoulder, when in trouble or not, and his searching eyes will be turned in my direction. Friend and companion, there can never be another Captain Knight.”*

Paul Beecroft (U.K.) & Peter Devers (U.S.)

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British Falconers' Club

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