

# Whose name was WRIT IN WATER

THIRTY years ago on January 4, 1967, Donald Campbell died on Lake Coniston attempting to become the first man to break the 300mph water speed record.

In this special Cumbria Life feature, writer Alan Air examines Campbell's amazing career and talks exclusively to his only daughter, Gina, about her tumultuous relationship with one of Britain's last great heroes.

**T**he water's not so good...I can't see much...I'm going...I'm on my back...I've gone." The last words ever heard spoken by Donald Campbell still haunt those who witnessed his traumatic death on Lake Coniston on 4 January 1967. The famous black and white footage of his jet-powered Bluebird lifting from the water, before viciously somersaulting and breaking in two, is still horrifyingly hypnotic. I remember, as a small child, watching the film on the television news, and then crying myself to sleep, shocked by the potency of the imagery. That Campbell's body was never recovered from the gloomy depths of Coniston adds to the terrible nature of his passing - a legendary man that history is sure to record as one of England's last great heroes.

Campbell's life was as dramatic as his death at the age of 46.

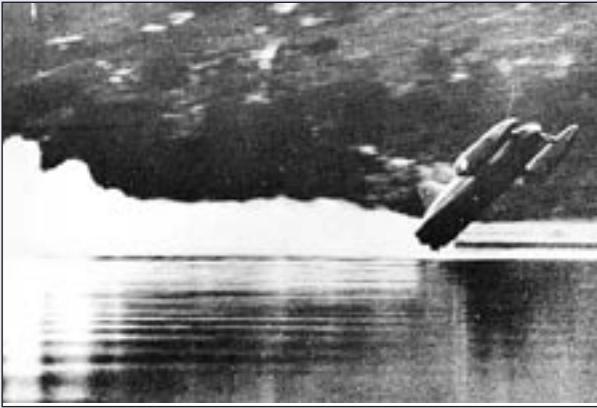
A complex character, descended from the Campbell clan of Argyll, he left home at the age of 18 to escape the strict regime imposed by his own record-breaking father, Sir Malcolm

Campbell. He became a successful businessman, first as an insurance broker at Lloyds, and later as a company director. It was his steady acquisition of wealth that allowed him to indulge his passion for speed and the re-writing of record books - an obsession that would eventually kill him. Campbell married three times, travelled the world extensively, enjoyed gambling, dabbled in the occult and his enigmatic personality either repelled or attracted others. The Times' obituary of Campbell said he was a "showman with the inherent flair that would probably have carried him to the heights of the theatrical world."

"My father had enormous charisma and depending on his mood could turn a funeral into a party. He could also turn a party into a funeral," confirms his only daughter, Gina, herself a record-breaking speedboat driver. "Unfortunately, I have inherited the same trait."

As we chat about her relationship with her father, she sounds world-weary and resigned, in marked contrast to her mood when I last encountered her a year ago. Then, visiting





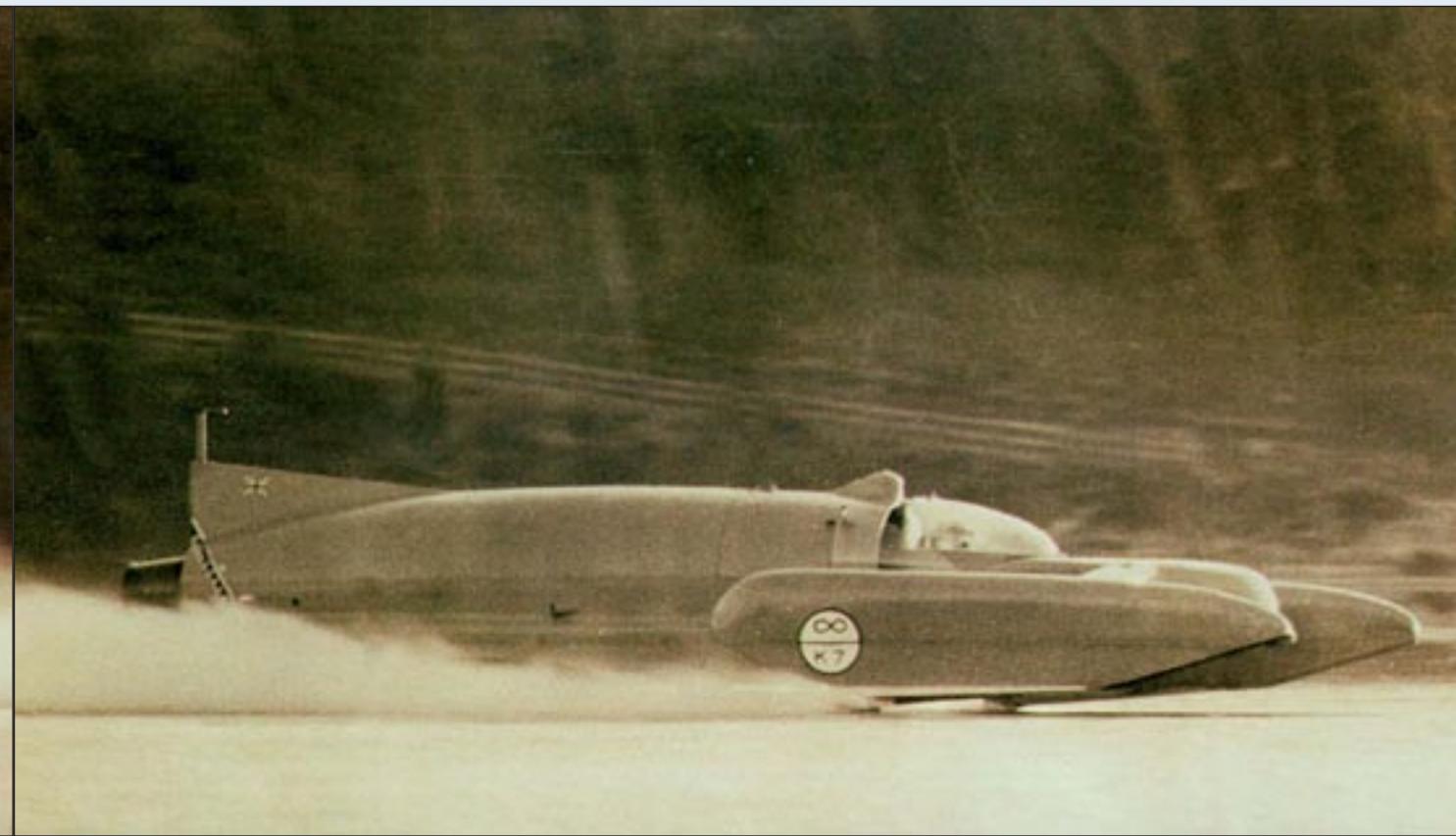
● The eerie 1967 footage of Bluebird in its death leap holds the same macabre fascination for people as the jumpy film of the Hindenburg airship crashing to the ground... ●



Ullswater to commemorate the 40th anniversary of her father's forgotten record, breaking the 200mph barrier on water, she was upbeat and cheerful, eager to deliver the crisp one-liners that were clearly rehearsed for the benefit of the media. However, she is frank about her own rollercoaster ride through life and doesn't shirk difficult questions, apart from those relating to

her first five years of life. "I DON'T WANT to upset my mother, put her through anything," she insists. So let the facts speak for themselves. When Gina was just a few months old, her father and mother, Daphne, divorced. Donald did not want the responsibility of child-rearing because of his helter-skelter lifestyle and Daphne was

given full custody. But shortly afterwards she fell in love with a man whose career with the Foreign Office took him abroad. As Gina recalled in the autobiographical, *Bluebirds - the story of the Campbell Dynasty*: 'I just did not fit in'. She was placed in a residential school-home for infants called High Tree near Gatwick Airport and became a 365 days a year boarder. ➤



➤ "It was as good a place to live as I had ever known," she wrote. When she was five years old a visitor came to High Trees and announced that she was taking Gina home. It was her father's second wife, Dorothy. "Her whole appearance had a tenderness about it, her face was warm and smiling, and most of all, her voice conveyed love in its velvet tones," wrote Gina, who now enjoys an extremely affectionate friendship with her step-mother, describing it as the closest relationship she's ever known. Dorothy later admitted that when she collected Gina from the home she looked like Orphan Annie, everything she owned fitted into two paper bags and her only clothes were a pair of brown Wellington boots.

Gina was re-united with her father, who, by this time was living in an Elizabethan farm labourer's cottage at Leigh, near Reigate in Surrey. Her childhood memories of the great Donald Campbell are far from flattering and she believes that part of the reason for his authoritarianism is that her father had desperately wanted a son to continue the patriarchal racing dynasty.

"I used to fall over backwards trying to please him but I always failed. He would have preferred a boy to carry on the family name but he never did get a son," she says. "I remember him as very strict, frightening, a stickler for discipline. I always had the impression that I was a bit of a pain in the neck to him. I suppose to him I didn't seem like his own child because he never saw me in those early years. He was not a modern-day father. He believed children should be seen and not heard, out of sight and out of mind. He was brought up in a very Victorian way and he felt I should have the same upbringing. So I did not have the easiest or most normal childhood by any stretch of the imagination."

Consequently, Gina made a conscious decision not to have children of her own. "When I looked at myself there didn't seem to be much wrong with me but I seemed to have caused so much unhappiness that God forbid I'd do that to my own child," she explains.

The marriage to Dorothy collapsed after just five years. Campbell enjoyed a series of girlfriends before marrying glamorous cabaret artist Tonia Berne. Gina says her relationship with Tonia was often strained. A furious row with Tonia in the June of 1966 meant that Gina, aged 17, was not on speaking terms with her when her father died.

"During our argument I slapped her around the face. I remember her running upstairs screaming at my father that it was either her or me. By the time he'd gathered his thoughts and come downstairs I'd already started packing my bag," she says.

**CAMPBELL'S TEMPESTUOUS** private life throughout the 1950s and 1960s reflected the highs and lows of his racing career as he attempted to shatter world land and water speed records. As a young man, he first tasted the exhilaration of speed when he bought a second-hand Rex motor cycle for £15 and a love of aeroplanes and cars quickly followed. When his father, Sir Malcolm, died in 1949 leaving

instructions that his famous Bluebird boat must be sold, Donald, free of the paternal shadow, was determined to go against his wishes. Within seven months he had scrimped together every penny he had and bought Bluebird from the executors. However, with little experience of handling a boat at speed it took him six years to add his name to the record books. There were many failures including a disastrous accident on Coniston in 1951 when the original Bluebird sank. But his new jet-propelled Bluebird guaranteed his reputation when, in July 1955, he broke the 200mph water barrier on Ullswater. By the time of his death, 12 years later, Campbell had notched up seven world water speed records and one land record, and in 1964 he became the only man ever to have broken the land and water speed record in one calendar year. He was awarded the CBE in 1957.

But it is the manner of his death, as much as his phenomenal speed achievements, that has etched the memory of Donald Campbell in our collective consciousness, especially for those of us living in Cumbria, the scene of so many glorious feats. The eerie 1967 footage of Bluebird in its death leap holds the same macabre fascination for people as the jumpy film of the Hindenburg airship crashing to the ground in a ball of flames 30 years earlier.

Gina, who was working in Arosa, Switzerland, in January 1967, recalls her own



ABOVE: Donald Campbell and his daughter Gina.

"morbid fascination" with the photographs in newspapers at Geneva Airport the day after the tragedy. Many bore the simple headline: Campbell est Mort.

"I couldn't take my eyes off them and I felt detached, as though it was happening to someone else," she remembers. Of the film itself, Gina believes its power to shock is all the greater for being in black and white. "In those days accidents weren't caught on film with the

clarity that they are today. The media wasn't used for every sort of event like it is now. To capture something like that on film was one hell of a coup for the cameraman. And because they were looking for my father's body for weeks and weeks it continued to be very traumatic."

**UNTIL THE ONSET** of winter in 1966, Gina was living and working in the Lake District, near to where her father would pay the ultimate price for his sport. Having left home after her quarrel with Tonia, Gina travelled to Cumbria to work for hotelier Norman Buckley, a friend of her father who often timed his record-breaking attempts on the Cumbrian lakes. He owned Low Wood at Windermere and it was here that Gina met her first love, a "gorgeous, fair-haired, blue-eyed German called Helmut", who was head waiter at the hotel. At the end of the season they both went to Switzerland to work. But Gina had two last meetings with her father that summer. Tonia accompanied him on the first visit and she joined them for dinner at a local hotel.

Later, he visited Gina in October, "not with Tonia but with another lady friend of his, and that was the last time I ever saw him alive."

Campbell's last contact with Gina in Switzerland was via a Christmas telegram asking her to join him skiing in the Alps early in the New Year. This request convinced Gina that her father was not acting out a deathwish on Coniston on 4 January 1967 as some observers have claimed; their skiing holidays were always their happiest times together.

When a telephone call came through that fateful morning from her real mother, Gina, who was aware of her father's record-breaking attempts in the Lake District, went rigid. "I knew it was bad news. No-one would have rung me socially at that time. I blubbed my eyes out for an hour," she says. Gina flew back to England the next day in a state of shocked disbelief. "It took an awfully long time for it to sink in that my father was dead. Sometimes I don't think it has sunk in - the fact there was no body, no funeral, no grave. Sometimes I have eerie thoughts, fantasies, that he escaped, swam to the shore and disappeared sticking two fingers up to the world."

While Gina's escape fantasies about her father are normal human reactions against sudden and unexpected loss, it is much more difficult to explain away the persistent stories that Campbell had a premonition of his own death during a card game, the night before his ill-fated run on Coniston. In the book *Donald Campbell CBE* by Arthur Knowles, it is claimed that he drew the doom-laden Ace of Spades and the Queen of Spades - the same cards that Mary Queen of Scots is said to have drawn the night before she was beheaded.

"I have the most awful premonition that I'm going to get the chop this time," Campbell allegedly told a reporter.

Gina confirms that her father was definitely superstitious, used the Ouija board and Tarot cards and was very interested in spiritual matters. It is alleged that he even contacted a clair- ➤

# Whose name was WRIT IN WATER ...Continued

► voyant to get in touch with his own father. While Gina is superstitious, refusing to wear the 'green' colours of her golf club, she has "never felt there is something up there." But she relates two curious tales, the first concerning her stepmother, Dorothy, who now lives in New Zealand. "She is the most down-to-earth person I know, but one night when driving home from the theatre in pouring rain, her car went into a violent spin. She looked at the wheel and could see my father's hands on top of her own hands. He righted the car out of the spin and his hands disappeared. She wouldn't have had the ability or knowledge herself to pull the car round on a wet road," says Gina.

**THE SECOND STORY** reflects Gina's own negative feelings about Coniston. Twenty years after his death, she flew back from New Zealand to co-operate with Melvyn Bragg in a re-make of a documentary that Border TV had first produced called *The Price of a Record*. After initially turning down directorial appeals to go out on the lake in a boat - "it would be like walking on my father's grave" - Gina eventually agreed to the request. As she made her way out onto the water, the pleasant autumnal weather was suddenly swept aside by a howling wind and torrents of icy rain. Filming was impossible and the boat returned to shore and was dragged back onto its trailer while the film crew waited for the tempest to subside.

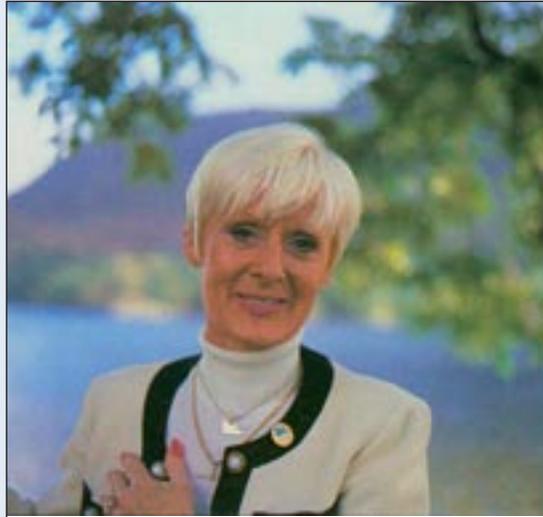
"The storm did pass so again we got the boat out but it blew up once more," recalls Gina. "It happened three times and by this time I was feeling really horrible and my stomach was churning. It affected the director too and he said, 'To hell with it', and we went up to the Sun Hotel at Coniston to do the interview. The sun started pouring through the windows, it was so bright that we had to shut the curtains. It was as if someone was saying, 'Go away - this is my patch, you ought not to be here.'"

Gina shies away from specifically referring to her father's spirit or soul but there is no doubting her sincerity when she says wistfully: "I always have strange experiences at Coniston - it makes me feel sick. I don't know... there is something there."

Certainly, the lake, known as 'Ruskin's favourite,' had always posed problems for Campbell and his enthusiastic team of supporters. In his book, *The Record Breakers*, Campbell's long-serving mechanic, Leo Villa, confirmed that it had historically given them "headaches" and he details how the weather was particularly unforgiving at Coniston in the nine weeks that Campbell practised there prior to the doomed 4 January attempt. A sharp exchange between the two men, over the wisdom of practice runs without manned rescue launches, on 27 December, prompted Campbell to prophetically retort: "So what? It's doubtful if the rescue boats could get to me in time if anything did happen."

On the fateful morning, Villa observed that the early morning air was still and the water appeared flat calm - essential to the success of Bluebird cruising safely through the 300mph barrier. At just after 8.40am Campbell complet-

ed his first run clocking up a staggering 297 mph. Villa wrote: "I was still waiting for him to come to me over the radio to ask whether his wake had died down when, to my bewilderment, I heard him say, 'Stand by. I'm making my return run.' He had been barely four minutes on the turn-around. I could do nothing now except stare towards the southern end of the lake." Villa watched in disbelief as Bluebird's bows lifted out of the water, soared up into the air and violently somersaulted over the surface.



ABOVE: Gina Campbell.

Photograph: Jonathan P. Becker

Campbell must have died instantly when Bluebird snapped its back on impact with the water. An ejection seat was never fitted because Bluebird was too narrow and it is doubtful whether one could have saved Campbell given the suddenness and severity of the accident. While his helmet, his teddy bear mascot, Mr Whoppit, his life jacket, boots, shattered seat cushion, even his gloves and socks all bobbed to the surface as rescuers scoured the lake, Coniston never relinquished the body of the man hailed a hero as news of his death filtered through to the outside world.

Within 24 hours he was posthumously awarded the Queen's Commendation for Gallantry for courageously attacking the 300mph record. And while his daughter emphatically denies that Campbell - suffering from emotional and financial difficulties at the time of his death - chose to deliberately end his own life in such spectacular fashion, Villa ponders whether frustration, exhaustion or worry prompted Campbell to make his second run without giving the lake surface time to settle down. While experts wrangled over the exact reason for the crash - now almost universally acknowledged to be caused by Bluebird hitting its own wake - author Arthur Knowles mused: "To the laymen who had witnessed the whole thing, the answer seemed simple. Bluebird, they felt, had reached such a speed that air - rather than water for which she had been designed - became her natural element."

**CAMPBELL'S DEATH** triggered off a complex range of emotions in his teenage daughter who rushed back to Switzerland after her father's memorial service at St Martin-in-the-Fields in London on 23 February 1967.

"I didn't feel cheated by his death at all," says Gina. "It may sound strange but it was almost a relief. Although I missed him enormously I didn't have to match up to what he expected anymore."

But her grief was real enough and for months she would fly off the handle or burst into tears at the slightest provocation. She stole off onto the slopes and pistes - pursuing the pastime that always brought her close to her father. Later, in her adult life, Gina managed a farm with stables, was a successful showjumper, launched life-saving water safety schemes in New Zealand (where her stepmother lives), took out New Zealand citizenship and opened a successful restaurant called the Bluebird in Lymington, Hampshire. She still manages that business at weekends but now lives in Leeds during the week where she enjoys a "pretty perfect" relationship with a successful businessman who produces own brand cakes for the large supermarkets. Gina has always worked and never believed the world owed her a living just because she came from a famous family.

"People used to think we were a wealthy family - we weren't. My father left me £500 with which I bought a car and I inherited a trust from my grandfather. But my first husband got half of that when we divorced. I've never been able to hold on to funds at all. But I am fiercely independent and will not live off charity. What I earn is for me and if I can't afford something then I do without," she insists.

Gina admits to being her father's daughter in many ways, sharing his fiercely competitive nature and overwhelming desire to succeed - in her private and professional life. Like her father, and his father before him, Gina has been married three times, held world speed records and always lived in the media spotlight. "As I've grown older I've realised just what a great man my father was," she says. "He was very brave, knew exactly what risks he was taking and was one of our last true British heroes."

The 30th anniversary of her father's death is likely to prompt much media attention but Gina never commemorates 4 January. "I always send flowers to his memorial at Coniston on 23 March. That was his birthday. I prefer to remember the day he was born, not the day that he died."

At Campbell's memorial service, it was said of him: "Britain and the world have such need of the indomitable spirit, the sheer dedication, the unconquerable determination he had. Another writer observed that Tennyson might have written of Donald as he wrote of another:

*'Such was he: his work is done  
But while the race of Mankind endure,  
Let his great example stand  
Colossal, seen of every land,  
And keep the soldier firm,  
The statesman pure;  
Till in all lands and through all human story  
The Path of duty be the way of glory.'*

The suggestion that Keats' epitaph would also have suited Donald Campbell seems perfect: 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water.' ►