

## **THE PASSING OF YOUR PRESIDENT J REAR ADMIRAL SIR EDMUND IRVING THE BIDDING –**

### **ADDRESS GIVEN BY REAR ADMIRAL G S RITCHIE AT THE CHURCH OF ALL HALLOWS**

**THURSDAY. 24 FEBRUARY 1991**

Admiral Irving was a hard man to follow as I have found on many occasions, and no less so to-day. I have heard him give addresses such as this which were always moving due to his deep love of people. I recall him giving one at a Thanksgiving Service for the life of Admiral Sir Guy Wyatt at St, Martin's in the Fields. The pulpit there is half as high again as the one above me here. Just before the service began the padre whispered something to Egg who was sitting beside me: He turned to me "Do you know what he asked me, Steve? Whether I would manage to mount to the pulpit!" When the time came Egg ran up the circular staircase two steps at a time.

I first encountered Irving when, as a Lieutenant Commander, he was the First Lieutenant of HMS ENDEAVOUR, a very ancient Survey Ship which survivors from the escape from Singapore and in which they had sailed to Suez. As the British Armies had been driven back dangerously close to the Nile Delta a number of surveying officers were gathered together to sail down the Red Sea in search of suitable anchorages and landing beaches in Southern Egypt and the Sudan from which the military could be supplied should the Delta be lost. The coal obtainable at Port Sudan coagulated in the firebars, our speed was down to four knots, work in the open boats in temperatures in excess of 100 degrees was arduous in the extreme yet, under a fine Commanding Officer, Egg, as No. 1, built up the finest team of Surveyors I was ever with.

After Alamein the ship was paid off and we Surveyors were scattered about the Mediterranean. I went with the 8th Army clearing captured ports through North Africa and Sicily, At the end of August 1943 my little party was camped among the Gunners south of Messina when 899. now on the Staff of C-in-C Mediterranean, arrived in his jeep. "Come on Steve, get. your theodolite, we've work to do". He had devised an ingenious scheme for directing our invasion forces across the Messina Strait to their appointed landing beaches on the Italian shore. He had gathered up, as only Egg could, a detachment of Royal Marines with six mobile searchlights which we surveyed into exact positions within the Royal Artillery Service triangulation, three along the foreshore and three in deep valleys in the mountains behind. September the six searchlights were switched on pointing vertically skywards thus providing three sets of back transits which led our three flotillas of landing craft exactly to their intended beaches.

In command of HMS FRANKLIN from D Day in NW Europe Commander Irving took part in port clearances along the French coast until he arrived in Zeebrugge. The ship was unable to enter the Schelde as the Germans had not yet (' been dislodged from the entrance by the Royal Marines and the Canadians. It was essential to start clearing the river and relaying the buoys as soon as possible, for Antwerp was clearly to be of major importance as a supply port for the Allied armies. Egg in his forceful and persuasive way was able to prevail upon the Army to carry one of his surveying boats on a tank transporter to Ghent, whence it sailed through the canals to Terneuzen to commence survey work in the Upper Schelde.

Shortly after VE Day FRANKLIN lay at Terneuzen where Montgomery paid the ship a visit to thank the ship's company for their fine work. Montgomery fell in with 5299's suggestion that 'Splice the Main Brace' would be ( appropriate. This caused some ruffling of feathers

when the news reached Their Lordships who averred that this divine right was restricted to Royalty and Admirals of the Fleet and did not extend to mere Field Marshals.

I was Assistant to Admiral Irving during his first three years as Hydrographer of the incident and activity during which Egg was able to convince Their Lordships that it was economic in both money and manpower, and 'was more efficient, to custom build Surveying Ships to Merchant Ship standards rather than converting aged men-of-war or using warship hulls. 899 was the first Hydrographer to get this message across in 165 years. This led to the building of the four Hecla Class ocean Surveying Ships and the four Bulldog Class Coastals which have formed the backbone of the Surveying Service for the past twenty- five years.

Irving also prevailed upon Lord Carrington, First Lord of the Admiralty, to authorise the building of a new chart compilation office alongside the printing works at Taunton. Just before Christmas last year I attended 'HYDRO 90', an international Hydrographic Conference at Southampton University which was opened by the Chancellor, Lord Jellicoe. When speaking of the major new oceanographic complex to be built in Southampton Docks, Lord Jellicoe said that he had first- learnt of the significance of oceanography when, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he had been briefed by 'that charming gentleman, the late Sir Edmund Irving who was Hydrographer at that time'.

During Irving's last two years as Hydrographer I was in command of the surveying ship VIDAL which on three occasions wore his Flag for a week or so. Many captains would not relish the presence of their admiral onboard, and this might apply more where the limited accommodation is shared. however, it was truly a delight to have Egg onboard who was here, there and everywhere about the ship. The only disadvantage as I saw it was that towards the end of his stay I began to realise that he knew more about my men and their families than I did myself.

I took Admiral Irving to Cadiz to seek permission from the Spanish Hydrographer for me to establish Decca Lambda stations in Spain for the control of a survey» of the western approaches to the Straits of Gibraltar; to Hamburg for discussions with the German Hydrographer on the workings of the newly established North Sea Hydrographic Commission; and to Leningrad to establish relations with the Soviet hydrographer. In all these missions Egg was completely successful.

I only saw Egg at a loss for words on one occasion and that was when I accompanied him on his call on Admiral Baikov, Flag officer Leningrad. The massive Admiral, a long line of medals crossing his chest diagonally, suggested to Irving that I should be promoted Rear Admiral from the moment I brought VIDAL into Soviet Territorial waters the previous day. Egg said he had no authority to make such an immediate promotion "What!" said Baikov "Doesn't the Royal Navy have the means to promote an officer in the field? to which Egg could only mumble a negative reply. However, as soon as Irving' met Admiral Rassokho, the Hydrographer, they took to each other at once and after a series of very friendly meetings we left with a full set of Soviet charts such as we hadn't seen since world War II.

No HM Ship had been to the Soviet Union since the aircraft carrier BULHARK had visited Leningrad eleven years earlier. he I went through her Letters of Proceeding I found that she

had been defeated 12-0 on the soccer field by Leningrad Command. I mentioned to Egg, during the planning stage, my apprehension that our much smaller crew could be even more soundly beaten. "That's alright" said Egg "I've got that under control". Sure enough, he was bringing with him in VIDAL a number of Civil Servants from the office among whom was a draughtsman who played in goal regularly for Brentford Football Club. We lost honourably 2-0, but referring to the football match at a reception that evening, Egg inadvertently referred to 'his Secret Weapon'. The following year when Admiral Rassokho came to London River in his Survey Ship NIGOLAI ZUBOV the Captain declined the invitation to play football against Nore Command, fearing perhaps that Irving would have the whole Brentford team ranged against them. They settled for darts!

Thirteen years later, as president of the International Hydrographic Bureau, I visited Admiral Rassokho who was still Hydrographer in Leningrad. As I entered his room the very first words he said to me were "How is my old friend Admiral Irving?" Admiral Irving had been involved with the development of Decca for surveying purposes from the earliest stages. On retirement from the navy he became associated with the Decca Company for many years and regularly attended the International Hydrographic Conference at Monaco where he would advise the World's Hydrographers, many of them personal friends, on the latest Decca developments.

Egg loved a bit of fun. One night during the 1967 Monaco Conference, when I was attending as UK Hydrographer, we found ourselves together with Admiral "Muddy" Waters, the US Oceanographer, and Admiral Baptiste the Brazilian Hydrographer in Rosie's famous Bar where members of the Brazilian Survey Ship's Company were teaching us how to play rumba music on improvised musical instruments. I can see Egg now employing Rosie's icebox, a broom handle and a piece of string to provide the double bass.

Two of my staff officers planned to drop into Rosie's on their way home to their hotel, but on hearing the racket emanating from the Bar decided there was trouble within and passed by on the other side.

Canon Langdon in the Bidding has referred to the great number of institutes and organisations with which Admiral Irving became associated. If he gave his name he gave his all. Often he became President and always chaired vital Committees of whatever body he joined. He was Chairman of the Thomas Gray Memorial Trust of the Royal Society of Arts for a number of years, and one of his duties was to present the RSA Silver Medal for a deed of outstanding merit at sea. Captain Beetham in his obituary of Admiral Irving in the RSA Journal tells us that after Irving had presented a tugmaster with the medal the latter said to Beetham "I've often heard of gentlemen but I had never met one until I met Sir Edmund Irving tonight". As Captain Beetham says "I think that sums him up very well".

REAR ADMIRAL G S RITCHIE

24 February 1991