

General Information

OBITUARY



REAR-ADMIRAL G. STEVE RITCHIE, CB, DSC

On 8 May 2012, the international hydrographic community lost one of its most celebrated practitioners. Steve Ritchie was a most wonderful man both professionally and socially. He will long be remembered by those who worked with him or associated with him for his many interests and originality. He was born in Burnley, Lancashire, in 1914 of Scottish parents, Sir Douglas Ritchie and Lady Margaret Ritchie. His father had been the secretary of the Port of London Authority, although it seems to have been persuasion within the Navy that set him on his hydrographic career. He was educated at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, which he joined at the age of 13. He went to sea at age 17 and joined the Survey Service of the Navy in 1936.

His career in the Surveying Service extended over thirty years during which he surveyed in many different parts of the world and rose in rank from Lieutenant to Rear Admiral. His service covered the years of the Second World War during which he was active surveying the beaches behind the lines in North Africa, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) for bravery. It has been reported that during his war service he had a lucky escape when his commanding officer, Captain Hennessey, ordered him out of a boat just before it was blown up with the loss of all hands. During the invasion of northern Europe he was in command of *HMS Scott* being involved in the setting up of navigational systems for the invasion fleet. Altogether he was in command of four survey ships and his time aboard *HMS Challenger* clearly had a strong influence on his attitude to giving hydrography a broader oceanographic mission. The ship was tasked to take a very multi-disciplinary role and as well as conventional hydrographic surveying she was employed on oceanographic and research activities across the world from the Labrador to the Pacific islands. During the time that Steve Ritchie was aboard, a small contingent of scientists from the Department of Geodesy and Geophysics, Cambridge, which included the eminent oceanographers Tom Gaskell and John Swallow, was assigned to the ship. There is no doubt that the experiences on the *Challenger* had a very strong bearing on Steve Ritchie's wider interests in the oceans. A particularly interesting part of the ship's programme was to survey and locate the deepest depth in the oceans. This being in the Marianas Trench, where a depth of 10,863 metres was reported. Subsequently other researchers from the USA, USSR and Japan have slightly refined this measurement. At a later stage he was employed on more mundane aspects of hydrography, such as surveys in the Persian Gulf and the north coast of Borneo aboard *HMS Dalrymple* but during that time new technology was appearing on the scene, first in the form of Two Range Decca. This gave him a lifelong interest in new technical developments and a constant desire to keep up to date. In 1963, he commissioned *HMS Vidal*, a thoroughly modern survey vessel in which he visited the Soviet Union and carried out surveys in the North Atlantic. Once again he found himself in the more scientific aspects of hydrography in the international NAVADO programme in which a fleet of international survey ships measured geophysical profiles from side to side of the Atlantic. It also carried him to Trinidad and a glance of his very active social life!

As was expected of senior surveyors he spent time on assignments to the Hydrographic Office, no doubt learning much about the details of cartography and chart production. His first such assignment was as Superintendent of the Oceanographic Branch (SOB) and his last was as the assistant Hydrographer. Another aspect of his career was to assist New Zealand establish a Hydrographic Office. *HMS Lachlan* had been transferred to the New Zealand Government and provided the nucleus for that operation. Before leaving his final sea going billet he became ADC to the Queen in 1965.

In January 1966, Steve was promoted to Rear Admiral and became the nineteenth Hydrographer of the Navy, a post that he was to hold for five years. In 1967, he was made a Companion of the Bath (CB). During that relatively short period his actions were to have a major and long-term effect on British Hydrography, the production of nautical charts and the wider development of navigation. The first of these was the completion of the move and consolidation of the Hydrographic Office at Taunton. Part of this move was to acquire and install three new colour presses that permitted the printing of charts in colour rather than the previous tones of black and grey. This fortunately coincided with another move and that was the adoption of the metric system, in particular the move from depth units in fathoms to metres. Although the International Hydrographic Bureau had been encouraging the use of metric units, the UKHO had until that time resisted this change. Although there was considerable contention in marine circles on the way it should go he strongly supported the development of traffic separation schemes in the Dover Straits and later in the English Channel as a whole. It led to the first mandatory schemes being adopted by the International Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO). Finally, during his time in office he did much to encourage the construction of new survey ships.

After leaving his post as Hydrographer, in addition to taking a course on bricklaying that was available to all retiring naval personnel, he was invited to join Southampton University as a research fellow. Although he failed to complete his planned hydrographic history he did hold discussions with Alan Ingham which were to lead to a much wider communication between hydrographic personnel. This was the development of The Hydrographic Society of which he became the first President. Hydrography, which at one time had been mostly confined to the navy and government personnel, had taken on, with the development of North Sea oil, a much broader mission that was employing civilian practitioners and commercial companies. The Hydrographic Society initially established itself nationally but later became international, holding annual conferences, workshops and publishing the Hydrographic Journal. In 1972, Steve was elected President of the International Hydrographic Bureau in Monaco, which is the Secretariat of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO). He was re-elected for a second five-year period in 1977. The prime objects of the IHO are to encourage the uniformity of hydrographic charts and publications and to assist in the development of global expertise on the subject. One of the major tasks that he carried out to assist in these aims was to draft an international Convention which formed the administrative background for the detailed technical work. He took a particular interest in the work of the GEBCO (General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans). This programme brought together hydrographers and oceanographers in the production of a global set of charts describing the bathymetry of all the oceans. He retired from the IHB to live in Scotland in 1982.

Nothing has been mentioned so far about his 'other life'! In his work he was full of originality and hard work, socially he was a 'bon vivant' and in that capacity he will be remembered internationally by many people. He was flamboyant in his dress and many will remember his red socks and striped blazer. His ruddy face and a mass of curly white hair topped this image. Some of us will remember seeing him at a Hydrographic Society Christmas party dressed as Father Christmas and dancing with a beautiful American girl! Taking advantage of his ship visiting Trinidad he became part of a 'band' during Mardi Gras celebrations. Dressed as a butterfly he joined the dancing, something he was to repeat in other years. In the Pacific Islands we find him dressed in a grass skirt and drinking Kava with the local Fijians. From this we go to the formality of a visit by Princess Anne to the Hydrographic Office where we see him dressed in his uniform as a Rear Admiral – whether he was wearing red socks on that occasion is not known! His time in Monaco had its own special social occasions as a member of the Monte Carlo Club, including social exchanges with Prince Rainier and as a member of the local *boules* team. He met his wife Disa in 1942 on board the *SS Ceramic* on a voyage from Canada to South Africa. They had three sons and a daughter; a grandson has followed in his grandfather's footsteps and is a hydrographic surveyor.

Yet another life was his life as an author and scholar. He wrote four books about hydrography and numerous articles in scientific literature. These can be found in publications such as the Journal of Navigation and the International Hydrographic Review and he also published in Hydro International a series of highlights of hydrographic history in the Old Hydrographer's Column. These were subsequently published together in book form. During his time as Hydrographer of the Navy he was responsible for the production of numerous charts which bear his name and especially noteworthy are the annual reports of the UKHO during that time.

Adam J. Kerr

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