

## LIEUTENANT ENGINEER DES MERCER:

Born 12 April 1926 into a naval family. Attended Portsmouth Grammar School on a scholarship.

Des joined the Navy at 15, beginning in a ship's engine room as an apprentice, literally working his way up to become a commissioned officer. For us now, the challenges of that role at such an early age can perhaps only be imagined. He went on to serve on 11 different ships over 29 years, and whilst based in Plymouth, Portsmouth, Rosyth, and Hong Kong sailed to all the corners of the world. Serving on board *Adamant* (three times), *Dampier*, *Marvel*, *Blake*, *Glasgow*, *Onyx*, *Caprice*, *Lysander*, *Tiger*, *Cochrane* (Rosyth) and *Tamar* (Hong Kong).

This career gave him the chance to develop technical and people skills that he would put to great use afterwards, and of course the opportunity to travel the world. To be frank though, as Dad was a reluctant raconteur, and because he was away from home for long periods, much of his sea-life remained untold – which was a pity because when he regaled you with a story it was great listening.

But episodes of his time on board ship did occasionally slip out: Highlights of his naval career included minesweeping around Borneo; Independence celebration at Barbados and Trinidad. Who knew, for example, that he survived a plane crash in the Maldives when the plane missed the runway? Did he ever mention the car crash after the Ambassador's cocktail party in Caracas, Venezuela? Or the part he played in searching for and finding HMS *Affray*, a submarine that famously vanished off the Cornish coast in 1951? How he saw the South Sea coral islands from the rear turret of a NZ flying boat? The 18 months' spent surveying in the South Pacific around Borneo? That he visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs, and Shanghai before communism in 1949? Or that he lined the route for Churchill's funeral in 1965? All these adventures were intermingled with the inevitable sadness of being in a service family during the war, when he lost his brother Ralph, whose ship was torpedoed in 1943. He ran a workshop with Chinese tradesmen in HK. He spent 3 years teaching marine engineering to national service artificers, surveyed off Fiji and the Solomon Islands. He was involved in commissioning the last major warship to be built on the Clyde;

He had many other admirable qualities. After leaving the RN in 1970 he successfully developed a second career: he took a management course, joined Shell Oil and then BP, becoming a technical lubricants representative to the shipping industry, working around the shipyards and oil refineries of the UK, including Sullom Voe in the Shetlands. Later, he worked for the MOD doing something he never told us. He could keep a secret. He believed in making progress, and had a quiet determination, ambition, to get on and provide for the family. He understood the value of a good education, something he instilled in, and desired for his sons.

After retiring from the MOD in 1987, he and Jean our mother, moved from Cheam to Sidmouth where they made many new friends. All seemed set fair for a long retirement together, but Jean died suddenly in 1995, and he missed her greatly. He found a second love, and renewed energy for life, when he met Mary at the Trafalgar Commemoration at Exeter Cathedral, and they married in 2001. They had happy times together - she brought out the best in him and him in her. As George, noted last year, they were an incredible duo, and theirs' was an amazing love story, which gave them a level of happiness in later life to which we all aspire.

He was much more than his work life. In retirement, he became active as lectures secretary for the Exeter Flotilla, which recharged his naval memories. A passionate reader all his life, especially of political biographies, he also loved his cricket both as a player and then as umpire, snooker at the Sidmouth Club, and bridge with friends. He could be a confident speaker – he organised and gave lectures on the Probus circuit, Brunel being his specialist subject. Until his very later years he liked going out, a member of the East Devon luncheon club, and especially enjoyed the company of friends especially Betty and Doug Goodall, of whom he always spoke most warmly, and was always appreciative of the support and friendship that Linda gave to him and Mary.

He had characteristics perhaps typical of his generation and background: a preference to contain rather than express emotion publicly, a strong respect for position and authority, and a belief that hard work and commitment were the keys to advancement. And he had a quite frankly exhausting preoccupation with punctuality - 1 o' clock for dad most decidedly meant 1 o' clock, not 5 to, and certainly not 5 past (as anyone who has been late for lunch with him will tell you). But all this should be balanced with an appreciation of the thoughtful, caring, and intelligent approach he brought to his life.

He took great pleasure in seeing his sons' achievements in their careers, and the happiness Yvette, Lorraine, and Helen and then Sue had brought to them. But he was perhaps at his most emotionally engaged, even passionate, when he met or was talking about his grandchildren, James, Imogen, and Melissa. I know he was immensely proud of all three of you.

And so, we return to his time at Kings Manor, Ottery St Mary - a time when I, and perhaps others, got to know him better than was possible before. He had real insight when talking about his declining powers. But despite this, he maintained a keen interest in the world around him, and the running of Kings Manor, often confiding in me that he was actually "helping out with the management" there. As ever, he liked to get involved – always a participant, never a spectator. He was treated with love and respect at Kings Manor and the dignity he deserved, and all the family are very thankful to everyone at Kings Manor for this.

It is poignant that Dad died on Mary's birthday. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, he had a visit from Phil and Lorraine in the morning; in the afternoon I am told he had taken a final, measured walk around the gardens; and that evening he tidied his room at King's Manor and put everything in order. It is not for me to suggest that he had had enough - but what I can say with some certainty is that after 94 years, I believe Dad had done all he ever wanted to do, and had done it to the best of his ability.

And so, it is we say goodbye one final time, and, in the tradition of the Royal Navy, wish Dad on his final voyage, a fair wind and a following sea.

Adrian Mercer

