

Record

Rear Admiral Sir Edmund Irving, KBE, CB

Admiral Irving died suddenly at his home in Sole Street, Kent, on 1 October 1990, after returning from an evening with the Sea Cadets. He was born in British North Borneo on 5 April 1910. Spending much time with the servants when his father was absent on his duties as a District Officer, young Edmund was more fluent in Malay than in English when he arrived in England at the age of eight to enter prep school.

He went to sea from Dartmouth in 1927 as a cadet in HMS *Royal Oak*, joining the surveying service, in 1931, as a sub-lieutenant, in which he served afloat in peace and war.

He was first mentioned in despatches for his skill as a navigator in HMS *Scott*, when that surveying vessel was employed laying marker beacons for the guidance of a squadron of converted P & O liners, operating out of the Kyles of Lochalsh to lay anti-U-boat minefields in the Denmark Strait.

In 1942 'Egg', as he was known throughout the Service, found himself as First Lieutenant of the aged, coal-burning survey ship *Endeavour* in the Red Sea when Rommel's Afrika Corps stood at Alamein. The ship's task was to locate and survey anchorages off the coast of the Sudan from which stores could be landed in support of the Eighth Army, should they be forced to leave the Nile Delta.

Prior to the invasion of Sicily, Lieutenant Commander Irving joined the staff of C-in-C Mediterranean. During preparations for the crossing of the Straits of Messina by the Eighth Army, he devised a scheme, in collaboration with the Royal Artillery gunners, who were bombarding Reggio Calabria from the mountains south of Messina, whereby sites for six searchlights were surveyed into the gunners' triangulation. On the night of the invasion, three pairs of searchlights, beamed vertically into the night sky, provided back transits directing the three divisions of landing craft unerringly to their assigned beaches on the Italian shore.

In 1944 Egg, as a Commander, took over the surveying ship *Franklin* to undertake rehabilitation surveys of a number of heavily damaged ports along the north-west coast of Europe as they fell into allied hands. Beginning with the entrance to the Seine and Le Havre, *Franklin* worked her way along the Channel coast to Zeebrugge.

Even while the Germans still occupied the mouth of the Schelde, it was apparent that the river would have to be cleared of mines and sunken vessels if the potential of Antwerp as a supply port for the allied armies was to be realized. Egg persuaded the army to transport one of his sounding boats on a tank transporter to Bruges, whence it sailed through the canals to Terneuzen in the Schelde, from where it could commence surveying well before *Franklin* could be brought up the river.

Soon after VE-Day, Montgomery visited *Franklin* at Terneuzen to thank the ship's company for their part in opening up the vital ports. Irving fell in with the Field Marshal's suggestion to 'splice the mainbrace'. This subsequently ruffled some feathers in the Admiralty, where such an edict was considered to be the prerogative of Royalty and the Admiral of the Fleet. Commander Irving was awarded the OBE for his work in *Franklin*.

Admiral Day, later Hydrographer of the Navy (1950-5) had developed the idea of using the Decca electronic hyperbolic fixing aid, first used on D-Day, as a 2-range

system, with the master station embarked in the survey ship for hydrographic work. In 1948, Irving carried out field trials in HMS *Sharpshooter* which led to the 2-range Decca system for fixing a sounding vessel regardless of visibility.

In 1958 Captain Irving, then in command of *Vidal* in the West Indies, proved the efficacy of the newly introduced Tellurometer for measuring baselines electronically. From high points on Tobago and Grenada, with the line of sight skimming the surface of the sea at midpoint, he measured a distance of 85 nautical miles.

When he was appointed Hydrographer of the Navy in 1960, his staff immediately noticed an increase in the tempo of the work. He persuaded Lord Carrington, the First Lord of the Admiralty, that it was time to move the chart compilation office, unsuitably housed at Cricklewood since the war, to Taunton alongside the printing works which had been built in 1940. More importantly perhaps, he convinced Their Lordships that it was no longer acceptable to convert warship hulls into surveying ships, and that it would be more efficient and also bring about a saving of manpower to custom-build ships for surveying along merchant ship lines. This led directly to the building of the *Hecla* class of ocean survey ships, and later, to the *Bulldog* class of coastals.

Irving was President of the Royal Institute of Navigation from 1964 to 1967 at an important time when the proposed separation-routeing scheme for the Dover Strait, which the Institute had conceived, began to take shape. He chaired with considerable authority the first international meeting of the Institute's Working Party on the subject in 1961, from which time onwards acceptance of the scheme in shipping circles began to grow.

After retirement in 1966, Egg worked for Decca and regularly attended the international hydrographic conferences at Monaco, where he introduced Decca's newest survey systems to hydrographers from around the world, many of whom were friends of his of long standing.

From 1960 onwards he was on the management committee of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and was chairman of its boat committee from 1969 to 1978 – an important period when much new construction was undertaken. He was President of the Royal Geographical Society from 1969 to 1971 and in 1976 received the Patron's Medal for his encouragement of exploration. Among countless other organizational interests, he was a trustee of the National Maritime Museum.

As a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts he was Chairman, from 1980 onwards until his death, of the Thomas Gray Memorial Trust, which awards annually a Silver Medal to a Member of the British Mercantile Marine for a deed of outstanding professional merit. He also took the chair at annual Thomas Gray memorial lectures on a current marine topic.

Egg was tremendously energetic and enthusiastic in everything he undertook. He cared greatly for his ships' companies and never forgot a face or a name. He took the same approach towards the many civilian bodies with which he became involved, and his deep personal interest in the staff made him beloved at all levels from the director to the newly recruited typist.

G. S. Ritchie