

OBITUARY

Although obituaries of retired officers are not normally published in the Journal, the early 'General List' experience of Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Rebbeck, and also his contribution to nuclear propulsion in the Royal Navy, make his life of particular interest. This account, written by Vice-Admiral Sir Louis Le Bailly, K.B.E., C.B., includes some material already published in 'The Times' of 13 July 1983.

Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Rebbeck, K.B.E., C.B.

'Bachy' Rebbeck, who died recently, will be mourned by several generations of naval officers of all specializations.

One of the few surviving engineer officers of the original Selborne-Fisher scheme, he helped greatly in the late nineteen twenties and early thirties, when he served successively on the staffs of the Royal Naval Engineering College at Keyham and the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, to inculcate that 'community of knowledge and lifelong community of sentiment' which Fisher had aspired to introduce when he brought engineer officers into the main stream of naval training and promotion.

This far-sighted concept, so unhappily for the Royal Navy, was put into reverse by a reactionary Board of Admiralty soon after 'Bachy' had gained his Bridge watchkeeping certificate and was starting his engineering training. Many engineer officers, then and thereafter, always referred to the Admiralty action as 'The Great Betrayal' but 'Bachy' would have none of that and his considerable influence, almost subliminal, on several years' output of Keyham and Dartmouth officers was strongly exercised towards producing a greater unity of purpose between engineer and seamen officers.

From Dartmouth he went to the Royal Yacht and then promotion and to war in H.M.S. *Emerald*. In both posts—so widely different in their requirements—his sense of fun, on which he based his remarkable capacity for leadership, never deserted him. Later, as assistant naval attaché in Washington, he helped most notably to lay the foundations of the post-war accord between the Royal and United States Navies, which, so happily for both, continues to this day.

As he rose in rank, two appointments in particular gave him the chance to exercise his influence, in a now much more receptive climate of naval opinion, in the support of Fisher's ideas. As the first ever engineer officer to fly his flag (in command of naval air stations) he showed that wide understanding of naval operational requirements which a narrow engineering education had always been alleged to inhibit. Secondly in the Personnel Department of the Engineer-in-Chief of the Fleet, a post now unhappily extinct, 'Bachy' was able authoritatively to deploy this wide view of the Navy's needs to the great enhancement of naval training generally.

A Navy hockey player of distinction in his younger days, his interest in the sport and the Navy's performance continued throughout his life.

But if 'Bachy's' contribution to the reawakening of the Fisher concept while he was serving helped towards the 'All of one Company' Fleet order of 1956, his membership of the Board of Vickers Nuclear after retirement was of equal importance. The development of nuclear propulsion in the Royal Navy, which might have made it first in the field, was stopped by political direction in favour of power station development, and so it was the United States Navy, in the shape of Admiral Rickover—a brilliant engineer who did not (and does not) suffer fools gladly—who took the lead.

So when the time came, as it so rarely does, that politicians turned their attention to the future needs of the Royal Navy, the benefits of nuclear

propulsion seemed suddenly very important. There was much catching up to be done and the novel technical problems facing Vickers, Rolls-Royce, the Royal Navy, and Admiral Rickover inevitably caused grave differences of view as to the best and quickest path to tread; and great heat was frequently engendered. 'Send for Bachy' was usually the order from the Controller of the Navy and when he came it was nearly always his intimate knowledge of the two navies, his engineering expertise, and always his quite imperturbable sense of humour which poured oil on the troubled waters and enabled good sense and good engineering practice to prevail.

Professor Potter, in his biography of Admiral Nimitz, has revealed how Admiral Fraser, 4000 miles from his base in Australia, could offer the British Fleet for only 8 days operations in each month (albeit the Fleet far exceeded that estimate). Nevertheless the fact that Admiral Sir Henry Leach could send out a Fleet, with no notice, to the worst weather in the world, 8000 miles from base, and that Admiral Woodward could operate it for over 120 days continuously in the face of enemy attack is a measure of the success of post-war Boards of Admiralty in their design and training policies: and a measure too of the influence of men like Admiral Rebbeck who, raised in the Fisher tradition, never ceased to preach that engineers and seamen must work together to give the Royal Navy, on, over and under the sea a greater and more prolonged operational capability than any other navy in the world.