

Tribute to Edward Findlay Gueritz

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PROLOGUE

Family and friends, we are here to honour the memory of my father, who departed this life two months ago at the age of 89, in the middle of an especially cold winter. We knew that many of you would not be able to attend his funeral, and that in any case we would prefer to hold this Service at a more clement time of year, to give thanks for my father's life and work. I also wanted to bring my own family, my wife and two sons, Edward and Elton, to this service, to be proud of their grandfather and to take strength from the honour he has brought to our family.

When I last spoke at his funeral, the first shock was still upon us. I spoke about the fact that parents never leave their children, even though they may be physically absent. In the wider sense there has been the example that my father and others of his generation have set for us, and the honorable part that they played in the history of our country.

In the last two months I have had some time for reflection. For me, the frail octogenarian that he ultimately became has disappeared in my mind, and the man whom I remember and feel is very much still with us is that of Edward Gueritz in his late fifties or early sixties, who had already acquitted himself well in the Royal Navy and could have been forgiven for resting on his laurels, or even becoming somewhat eccentric in retirement.

CAREER

My father joined the Royal Navy two years before the start of the Second World War. In more peaceful times he might have gone to University and perhaps have become a history teacher. He loved the study of history and the lessons to be learned from it. However the circumstances demanded a military career: his exploits have been well described in the official obituaries and I will not go into them here. He was not the usual type of naval officer, or even a typical sailor. Dinghy sailing in The Solent as a recreation held little appeal for him, and neither did swimming or other aquatic sports. As he once told me, "swimming in water with burning diesel fuel floating on the surface tends to put you off", referring to at least two sinkings which he survived (the Jersey and the Saumarez).

His greatest exploits were onshore, supervising landings under fire in Madagascar, Normandy and Suez, all of which were very difficult but ultimately successful. His creative ability to envisage and manage complicated manoeuvres and operations made him, as I said before at his funeral, an outstanding staff officer. At Camberley and the Imperial Defence College, he was able to exercise a rare combination of naval and military intellectual skills and operational experience. Following a question on amphibious operations, Dad put his hand up to answer, whereupon his fellow students all roared with laughter, as they knew he was the ideal student there qualified to give that answer.

He was able to apply his intellectual strengths to both operational and theoretical tasks. He spent periods of time at the Admiralty and the Ministry of Defence in the 1960s, where with bowler hat and rolled umbrella, he would walk across Waterloo Bridge with other military gentlemen to his desk at the MoD. Once, he trudged back over the snowbound railway tracks of South-East London during the cold winter of 1962-3, when trains were cancelled due to freezing fog, and so he along with his MoD colleagues used their marching and survival skills to get home to their families.

As a family man he was caring and affectionate, and to the wider world he was sociable and warm-hearted, mixing easily with people from all parts of the world, at all social levels. As a family we were used to having many people come to dinner, and even more to drinks, a habit of hospitality that persisted long after he left the Navy, I am glad to say.

My father came to move in quite exalted circles, but he was at heart a modest and courteous man, who did not flaunt his authority and disapproved of those that did. He used to refer to the Edwardian era, in particular the Navy of that time, as "The Age Of The Bully", something he detested and strongly discouraged. The idea of the strong oppressing the weak, and conventional attitudes overpowering original and transformational ideas, was something he instinctively resisted.

My father had the gift of prescience, which did not work for personal advantage, but only to predict and warn. Like Cassandra, this gift does not always lead to universal popularity, the more so when events proved him right. Denis Healey's recent comments on Trident have vindicated my father's views on nuclear deterrence, which he had expressed at the time.

Some people have wondered why he did not continue to the top of the Navy. I have my own opinion on that. He would not have had the political skills, guile and ruthlessness needed to secure personal advantage at the top levels of a large and bureaucratic institution such as the UK Ministry of Defence. My father was a 'Tri-Service' man, a somewhat heretical tendency which would not have been popular with some of his Service superiors at the time and may have been the cause of his loss of preferment. As it was, he was deeply disappointed not to have been able to continue in the Navy, and tended to think of his subsequent career as something of a letdown. However, I do not agree, and I think that anyone would be proud of his achievements after retirement from the Navy, regardless of what he had done before.

After he left the Service he became involved in academia, politics and public affairs, historical research and broadcasting through his work as a defence consultant, his directorship of the Royal United Services Institution, his chairmanship of the Society for Nautical Research and his role as advisor to the House of Commons select committee on defence. He became more broad-minded, his views more considered in this wider arena, his wisdom more profound and his influence more far-reaching, through his contacts with public figures and through his media commentaries, than had he remained in the Navy. It also meant that he carried on working in his various activities in academia, politics, the media and the Church, long after the normal age of retirement and obscurity.

It was interesting work: he had dealings with former enemies, for example when he took part as one of a panel of judges on a wargaming exercise at Sandhurst on Operation Sealion. One of the other judges was Adolf Galland, the Luftwaffe fighter ace, with whom he got on well and not because Galland confused him with Admiral Doenitz.

My father has a large number of ties, denoting membership of various clubs, special forces associations, war veterans groups etc. One of these is the 'Drunken Hares Club', formed by a City banker who wanted to promote warmer relations with China, and who invited various people, including my father, to join as part of a *rapprochement* with the Chinese mission in London. The Soviet government had described China's moves towards the West, as well as their confrontational attitude to the Soviet Union at that time, as "swaggering like drunken hares", from which the club took its name.

I subsequently accompanied my father to dinner at the Chinese embassy, where the Chinese defence attaché was our host, and also to the reception in the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, given to the visiting Chinese Premier, Hua Guo-feng, which was hosted by Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph and others of the Cabinet at that time.

EXAMPLE

I do not want to sound pompous, representing my father as an embodiment of all the virtues, in the hope of some reflected glory. My father was a real human being with his faults and weaknesses. He was highly-strung, touchy and irritable at times, and did not enjoy being contradicted. He was vague on money matters and prone to bouts of pessimism. He never fully lost the insecurities of his childhood, with a father that was periodically and then permanently absent. He was bedevilled by the fear of failure and the shame it might bring, and this drove him on.

Spurred by this, he went to war as he had gone to school, with a strong sense of duty and commitment, to bring honour and credit to his family and country. He and other young men from his hometown, Cheltenham, joined the Services expecting to risk their lives to defeat tyranny and injustice, and to defend the values of civilisation. As the family doctor in Cheltenham told my father just after the war, "I didn't expect to see any of you again".

Few of us from the post-war generation and younger have been through such a test, of facing deadly danger, with the strong possibility of death or disability, as my father and others of his wartime generation had done. Those of them who did, and survived, would have seen life afterwards very differently. They would have known what it was like to pursue objectives in the presence of mortal peril with courage and determination, and they would have known the value of peace and goodwill as they endured the horrors of war.

Whatever interpretations on that conflict may be given now, my father's generation saw it as a fight for those moral principles on which civilized society is founded, at a time when all of those things were at risk of disappearing. What we have inherited, what my father has done for me, my sons and others, is to give that example of steadfastness and strength of purpose which was gained in times of terrible stress and uncertainty. Although I cannot call my father anymore and discuss matters directly with him as I used to, I always know what he would have said and what his judgment would have been. His values were uncompromising and simple to understand, and these have been handed down to us, to remember and to apply if we can.

EPILOGUE

At my father's funeral I made reference to the Great Naval Wardroom somewhere in that Higher Establishment and the celestial refreshments which I hoped would be available there. While not wanting to seem frivolous, I felt it necessary to remember above all my father's love of good company and good cheer, his warmth of character, his kind heart, his interest in others, and the many friendships which live on. I am sure that my father is here in spirit and would be glad to see you all here. We cannot hope for immortality in this life, but those values of courage and humanity which transcend human life do live on. My father and the times that he lived in have gone, but his presence and example are still with us. For that, and for his hard-won wisdom and honour, I commend him.

Please join me in giving thanks for my father's life and work.

Amen.