

**Exemplary service to Crown and Country:
Remembering HRH The Duke of Edinburgh**

By Sarah Ingham

Admiral of the Sea Cadet Corps; Colonel-in-Chief of the British Army Cadet Force; Air Commodore-in-Chief of the Air Training Corps; Admiral of the Fleet; Captain General Royal Marines; Field Marshal of the British Army; Marshal of the Royal Air Force; Colonel of the Grenadier Guards; Lord High Admiral.

It takes extraordinary character, innate command and commitment to the Armed Forces to be able to carry off all these titles, among many others. His Royal Highness the Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, succeeded. Bestowed on a lesser man, there could well have been the risk of a hint of Ruritania.

The Duke's death on 9 April 2021 was the opportunity to reflect on his contribution to public life in the United Kingdom and wider Commonwealth for more than 70 years. His funeral a week later allowed glimpses into a rich private life; whether the Land Rover he commissioned; his love of carriage driving, captured by the poignant sight of his riding gloves, cap and sugar lumps for his ponies; or the reading from Ecclesiasticus: 'Those who sail the sea tell stories of its dangers, which astonish all who hear them; in it are strange and wonderful creatures, all kinds of living things and huge sea-monsters.'

The junior officer who became globally famous as Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten was one of those who sailed the sea. According to one biographer, some of his earliest steps taken aboard the light cruiser, HMS *Calypso* which carried the 17-month-old Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark into exile and a nomadic, unsettled boyhood, living in a strange country far away from his parents. The funeral of the Duke who died aged 99 was threaded with references to the Royal Navy in which he officially served from 1939-1952. One contemporary, Lord Lewin said: 'Prince Philip was a highly talented seaman. No doubt about it. If he hadn't become what he did, he would have been First Sea Lord and not me.'

The Prince began his naval career at the Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth shortly before his 18th birthday, after five years at Gordonstoun. The school had been a haven. His maternal grandmother Princess Victoria might have lived in an apartment at Kensington Palace, but he had no permanent home of his own. His parents were separated. For most of his childhood he did not have his own bedroom: a cousin described him as 'a huge, hungry dog; perhaps a friendly collie who never had a basket of his own and responded to every overture with eager tail-wagging.'

At Dartmouth, he was to be awarded the King's Dirk as the best all-round cadet of his term and the Eardley-Howard-Crockett prize for best cadet at the College. Older students like him usually spent two terms at the College and two terms on a training cruiser. The outbreak of war with Germany in September upended the usual pattern.

'Philip of Greece'

Like many young men, Prince Philip was keen to see action, but he was initially hampered by his complicated ancestry. As his marriage certificate would later detail, his father was Andrew Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg, whose profession was described as 'H.R.H Prince Andrew of Greece'. As the great-grandson of both King Christian IX of Denmark and Queen Victoria, Philip was related to all of Europe's royal houses, including the ill-fated Romanovs. His sisters' marriages into the principal dynasties of Germany would prove awkward. In the First World War, Philip's maternal grandfather, Prince Louis von Battenberg had not only been compelled to resign as First Sea Lord but had to change his family name to Mountbatten. When he was at school in Paris, one new teacher was puzzled about why his pupil was simply 'Philip'. The young prince had to admit he was 'Philip of Greece'.

Despite his kinship with King George VI and his closeness to his maternal uncle, Lord Louis Mountbatten, then commander of the 5th Destroyer Flotilla, when war broke out Philip was not a British citizen. The bureaucratic machinery for naturalisation had been switched off for the duration. His status as a foreign neutral complicated his progress in the Royal Navy until the Italian attack on Greece in the Summer of 1940. Indeed, as it was not beyond the realms of all possibility that he might succeed to the Greek throne, the Admiralty were anxious to keep him away from action. On the

tactically justifiable grounds of not giving a propaganda gift to the enemy, in later decades senior commanders' impulse to shield a royal prince would also be experienced by Philip's son Andrew in the Falklands and grandson Harry in Afghanistan.

Early in 1940, as a midshipman he joined the battleship *Ramilles* on escort duty in the Indian Ocean, a long way from the European theatre of war. Reaching Aden in May, he was transferred to the county-class cruiser *Kent* and then to her sister ship *Shropshire* for operations in the Red Sea and off the east coast of Africa. In January 1941 he went to Alexandria to join the battleship *Valiant*, his fourth ship in 11 months: as his biographer Philip Eade notes, 'He did not have to wait long to experience the "hot war" he had yearned for.' Off the coast of Greece, at the Battle of Cape Matapan on 3 April 1941 fighting continued into the night. Philip was in control of one of *Valiant's* searchlights, which 'picked out the enemy cruiser and lit her up as if it were broad daylight', as he recorded. He was mentioned in despatches by Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, following a report by Philip's captain that 'thanks to his alertness and appreciation of the situation we were able to sink in five minutes two eight-in-gun Italian cruisers.' The battle left the Italian fleet 'outgunned, pounded, battered and sunk', declared a triumphant Movietone newsreel, shown in Britain's cinemas. It was 'a resounding victory.' As *Rule Britannia* played in the background, audiences were assured 'British sea power is still supreme.'

For his action in Matapan, Philip was awarded the Greek War Cross of Valour. More prosaically, he was presented with a certificate of qualification as a boiler trimmer, following the desertion of Chinese stokers on Nova Scotia-bound troopship. After they jumped ship in Puerto Rico, he was ordered to shovel coal in the heat of the Caribbean along with four other midshipmen. Afterwards, he returned to England to study for his sub-lieutenant's exams and was promoted in January 1942.

In June Philip was posted to the Shakespeare-class destroyer *Wallace*, operating out of Rosyth. She an escort for coastal convoys of merchant ships on their passage down Britain's east coast to Sheerness. In October he became first lieutenant, second in command of the ship. Aged 21, he was one of the Navy's youngest officers to hold the rank.

Under attack

A year later *Wallace* was sent to the Mediterranean to provide cover for the Canadian beachhead of the Allied landings in Sicily. On 8 July, the ship came under attack at night from Luftwaffe bombers. After the first round, everyone on board expected a second wave. On Philip's orders, smoke floats attached to wooden rafts were launched. These decoys fooled the enemy pilots who bombed them, allowing *Wallace* to sail away unscathed. On board was Harry Hargreaves: 'Prince Philip saved our lives that night ... He was always very courageous and resourceful and thought very quickly. You would say to yourself "What the hell are we going to do now?" and Philip would come up with something.'

Philip was second in command of the new destroyer *Whelp*, which sailed to the Indian Ocean to join the British Pacific Fleet. *Whelp* was in Tokyo Bay for the surrender of Imperial Japan and he was among the British officers on Admiral Halsey's flagship *Missouri* for the official ceremony ending the war.

What next? As for many of his generation, the adjustment from war to peace was disconcerting. He explained: 'I have spent all the years in uniform. When peace broke out, I found myself without any other clothes.' In addition, unless he became a British citizen, his career in the peacetime Navy would be blocked. Diplomacy could get in the way of his naturalisation: with Greece being destabilized by civil war, a wrong message might be sent if Britain backed a prince of Greece cutting all formal ties with the fragile country. In addition, Philip had his naval pay, but very little in the way of private income. To add to a sense of dislocation, his father had died in December 1944.

Posted to a shipyard in Newcastle-upon-Tyne to monitor *Whelp's* construction in 1944, he was tracked down by a local paper which had heard there was a prince in town. The female journalist was bowled over by the 'tall, ash-blond first lieutenant' who travelled to work by bus. Looking like 'a typical Prince in a Hans Andersen fairy tale' she surmised that many a girl worker in the shipyard would have noticed him. The wife of Michael Parker, Philip's shipmate, friend and future equerry enthused: 'Tall, with piercing blue eyes and a shock of blond hair swept back from his forehead. I was not at all surprised to hear that every unmarried Wren on the base had her sights on him.'

Gradually, it became known by the press that Philip had been noticed by Princess Elizabeth. He had acted as a guide to the heir to the throne and her sister Princess Margaret on a tour of Dartmouth Naval College in July 1939. During the war, they had written to one another and he had often spent part of any leave with the Royal Family. Moving to the naval training school HMS *Royal Arthur* at Corsham in Wiltshire in 1946, there were plenty of other opportunities to meet the Princess. In the Autumn he asked George VI for her hand in marriage. Delayed until after a Royal Tour and Philip renouncing his right to the Greek throne and becoming a British subject, on 9 July 1947 Buckingham Palace announced the betrothal of Princess Elizabeth to Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten RN. The following day, crowds gathered outside the Palace gates singing ‘All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor’.

The marriage took place on 20 November. Philip was made Duke of Edinburgh just before the wedding at Westminster Abbey. The Princess’s Private Secretary Jock Colville recorded: ‘A little colour and pageantry were restored to the country. The Blues and Life Guards put on full dress uniform for the first time since 1939 ... The war, it seemed, was really over.’

Despite having to juggle royal duties, his career in the Navy continued. In 1948, he attended the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich, the following year he was promoted to First Lieutenant and second-in-command of HMS *Chequers*, operating from Malta with the Mediterranean fleet. He was joined by Princess Elizabeth, where they led lives not too dissimilar from other young couples. He was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander and then appointed in command of the frigate HMS *Magpie*. Now the father of two children, a course appeared charted for a long career in the Royal Navy.

Consort

With the Queen’s sudden accession in 1952 following the unexpected death of George VI, the Duke of Edinburgh now had to serve the country in a vastly different role. There had been only four husbands of reigning monarchs, including George, another Prince of Denmark, consort to Queen Anne. An example might have been Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert who declared, ‘The position of a prince consort requires that a husband should entirely sink his own individual interests in that of his wife.’

At the Coronation at Westminster Abbey in 1953, the Duke swore fealty to the newly crowned monarch, swearing to be her ‘liege man of life and limb’. Michael Parker explained: ‘He told me the first day he offered me my job, that his job, first, second and last, was never to let her down.’

Statistics compiled by the Press Association provide a snapshot of an extraordinary record: before his official retirement, the Duke had undertaken 22,191 solo engagements and made 5,493 speeches. This does not include those tens of thousands of occasions he accompanied the Queen in his chief role as Royal Consort. He was at her side on all 251 of her overseas tours. For those of us daunted at the prospect of getting dressed up for a work do or a fundraiser ahead of an evening of indifferent food and small talk with strangers, our sinking hearts must go out to the late Duke. Not for him crying off at the last minute or that extra glass of wine to help jolly things along. Year in, year out, he was permanently on parade. To have spent decades in the public eye, unflinchingly doing his duty, is testimony to him. A handful of off-the-cuff remarks is the most his critics can level against him. King Juan Carlos of Spain, Prince Ernst August of Hanover or any ‘playboy prince’ is a reminder of how much we took the Duke of Edinburgh’s decades of exemplary conduct for granted.

Initially he was treated with wariness by more hidebound courtiers, nervous he might be a loose cannon. He brought a more relaxed and modern style to the monarchy. This was symbolised at Buckingham Palace by the installation of an internal telephone system and the end of footmen’s powdered wigs. Many, including members of the Churchill Cabinet, tried to block his wish to begin flying training, fearing it too dangerous. Being made an Air Marshal in the RAF was an incentive to get his pilot’s licence.

Captain General

In March 1953 General Sir Leslie Hollis, Commandant General of the Royal Marines was tasked with the delicate duty of asking the Duke whether he would be the force’s new Captain General – instead of the Queen. The Marines thought he might be a better fit at dinners and mess nights: ‘As an ex-Naval officer, he would understand and appreciate allusions and jokes and Service slang that could not possibly be uttered in the presence of Her Majesty.’

In famously walking two paces behind the Queen, for decades Prince Philip offered the country moral leadership. In a pre-feminist era, many men would have balked at publicly subordinating themselves to any woman. As the man in the shadows to a woman in the limelight, the Duke pre-dated Denis Thatcher by more than a quarter of a century in time – and light years in public attitudes towards gender equality.

‘I do not have a job. I never set about planning my career,’ wrote the Duke to Tim Heald, one of his biographers. ‘I had two general ideas. I felt that I could use my position to attract attention to certain aspects of life in this country, and that this might help to recognise the good things and expose the bad things. I also believed I might be able to start various initiatives.’

Prince Philip’s decades as a royal consort would have been enough to earn him gratitude across the globe, but he gave so much more. Evangelical about science and technology, he was the first member of the Royal Family to present television programmes. He was involved in hundreds of charities, great and small, from the Society of Underwater Technology to the Junior Astronomical Society via the Alvis Owner Club. The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award was a counterpoint for millions of young people increasingly cocooned by a health and safety-obsessed culture, while the Duke himself wanted to build a green future long before the Ecology Party became the Green Party. His concern about the under-reported problem of global over-population – a concern more recently shared by environmental scientist James Lovelock – is worth revisiting.

The Duke was the personification of an action man. Known as a keen sportsman, he was less well known for a personal library of some 11,000 books, which included poetry and theology.

Had Prince Philip been a 26-year-old marrying into the Royal Family today rather than in 1947, much would have been made of his personal journey from stateless, penniless refugee to palace. Instead, as he said, ‘I just had to get on with it. You do. One does.’ This stoicism was apparent when he reflected on lost or wounded naval comrades. He observed: ‘It was part of the fortunes of war. We didn’t have counsellors rushing around every time somebody let off a gun . . . You just got on with it.’

In June 2011, the Duke celebrated his 90th birthday. He became Lord High Admiral, the titular head of the Royal Navy. In August 2017, he conducted his final solo royal engagement, with the Royal Marines. He regularly supported the King’s Lynn and District Branch of the Royal British Legion taking the salute at the veterans’ parades on the branch’s 80th and 90th Anniversaries in 2002 and 2012.

It must be wondered whether the Duke would have been rather pleased by his funeral, pared down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Devoid of the publicity-hungry trying to get into camera shot, it allowed viewers to focus on what mattered, whether the military pageantry in the quadrangle of Windsor Castle, the regimental flags, or the Queen and her wreath of white flowers – lilies, roses, freesia, wax flower, sweet peas and jasmine. It was very much a family occasion, shared by the nation and the wider world. With the Still, the Side and the Carry On being piped, along with Action Stations, the bugle call to scramble warship crew to battle positions, we heard an echo of Prince Philip’s naval service all those years ago.

Before the funeral service, General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff, spoke for many:

‘We all have a huge regard for him. We have a huge regard for his wartime record and the care that he showed for veterans and for those still serving, and it will be a sombre moment for us, but it will also be a celebratory moment, because it was a special life and a life that was well-lived.’

Recommended Reading

Philip Eade: *The Young Prince Philip* (Harper Press, 2011)

General Sir Leslie Hollis KCB, KBE: *The Captain General* (Herbert Jenkins, 1961)