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Michael Richey MBE Hon FRIN 1917–2009



Mike Richey was, without doubt, the greatest contributor ever to the formation, development and wellbeing of the Royal Institute of Navigation. He was Executive Secretary, to become Director, for the Institute's first 35 years and the founding Editor of the Journal of Navigation – a position he held for 37 years.

Michael William Richey was born in 1917 in Eastbourne but spent much of his childhood in Switzerland and Albania, where his father was for a time Inspector-General of the Royal Gendarmerie. Eventually he and his brother attended the Benedictine school at Downside Abbey. He was deeply religious and had planned to enter a monastery, but instead became apprenticed for three years to the sculptor and typographer Eric Gill. His particular interest was letter-cutting and he worked on both the UN building in Geneva and the Oxford Playhouse where, in 2008, he was invited on stage at the theatre's 70th anniversary celebrations to tell the story – and received a rapturous ovation. Ironically, the Institute's rebranding a couple of years ago – greatly resented by Mike – saw the adoption of the *Gill Sans* font for the new logo and correspondence.

But war loomed, and in 1939 he entered the Royal Navy on the lower deck, serving in the minesweeper HMS GOODWILL, in which he was blown up the following year, but survived. He quickly became commissioned and spent the rest of the war at sea in a variety of ships, including a Free French Navy vessel and an armed merchant cruiser in the South Atlantic. It was on the latter that his taste for astro-navigation began; he later admitted that, as there was little else to do, he took astro shots morning, noon and night for about a year. He became a specialist navigator at the Navigation School, HMS DRYAD, and spent the rest of the war as a navigator, putting his knowledge to particular use in preparations for the Normandy landings.

From late 1945 a series of meetings took place, mainly under the auspices of the Air Ministry, exploring the possibility of forming a *British Empire Institute of Navigation*, mirroring such activities already taking place in the United States. Within a year, a Steering Committee had decided that the body should become a learned society and had drafted a Constitution whose objectives remain today. The Director of the Royal Geographical Society, L P (later Sir Laurence) Kirwan, offered a room in the Society's building and also introduced an ex-Naval navigator, Michael Richey, as a possible full-time secretary. Both offers were gratefully accepted; the Steering Committee proposed a Provisional Council and recommended the appointment of Mr Richey as full-time Executive Secretary of the *Institute of Navigation* (the 'British Empire' was dropped) at an inaugural meeting in March 1947. Mike's first AGM was on 19 September 1947 in the RGS and he was in good company – first President was Sir Harold Spencer Jones, Astronomer Royal, with Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor and Sir Robert Watson-Watt as Vice-Presidents.

So an inseparable bond was formed between Mike and the Institute, much to the latter's huge benefit, for the subsequent 35 years. Mike quickly inaugurated a learned journal, *The Journal of Navigation*, which he edited and to which he contributed himself, proving to be an accomplished writer as well as highly respected navigator. In the Journal he set and maintained a remarkably high standard, carefully melding operational and technical issues in what became the world-class publication of today. He remained Editor until 1985. He also edited the Stanford Maritime Sailing Encyclopaedia and was for many years General Editor of Hollis and Carter nautical books. He was also the first recipient of the Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for Literature for his book *Sunk by a Mine*.

But Mike was not content to spend his entire time occupying an office in London and in the early 1950s he took up ocean racing, for some years navigating competitive yachts on either side of the Atlantic. And in 1964, perhaps encouraged by his friend Francis Chichester, who had won the first single-handed transatlantic race, he bought

for himself a yacht, *Jester*, from Blondie Hasler. *Jester*, conceived by Hasler and built in Portsmouth in 1953, was a 25 ft engineless folkboat with a characteristic junk rig and unstayed mast. A feature of *Jester* was that all lines for handling the rig could be reached from the control hatch and there was thus normally no reason for the crew to go on deck at sea. Making the most of this, from then on almost all of Mike's seafaring was to be single-handed. *Jester* had sailed in the first two quadrennial single-handed transatlantic races with Hasler, and Mike continued in this vein. In the following 24 years he completed all five solo transatlantic races – 10 passages – not really competing against the large and multi-hull boats and always coming last; but always finishing. The longest voyage was westbound in 1972, taking 59 days.

But in the 1988 race he had to abandon the boat due to storm damage some 500 miles off Halifax, Nova Scotia; Mike was taken off by a bulk carrier, but attempts to salvage *Jester* failed and she was lost. For Mike this was '*An occasion of immeasurable sadness which I found difficulty getting over*'. *Jester* was not insured and he was in no position to replace her. But admirers heard Mike's account of the tragedy at a Royal Thames Yacht Club presentation and were not prepared to let the story end there. A trust was set up and a replica *Jester* was built, albeit cold-moulded rather than planked, in time for the 1992 race. And Mike entered three more times. His last Atlantic trip was in 1997, when he entered the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest such solo sailor; he was 80 years and 31 days old on arrival.

Despite all his spectacular sailing exploits, Mike was of course primarily Institute Executive Secretary – to be re-titled Director. And he was the ideal man to nurture the Institute through its first 35 years; a fount of knowledge, highly respected and with the right contacts, providing a consistency behind the impressive, but ever-changing, hierarchy and quickly ensuring that the Institute punched well above its weight. He oversaw the granting of Royal patronage in 1972. As Director, he was also highly instrumental in forming the International Association of Institutes of Navigation (IAIN), from small beginnings in 1957 with just the French and Germans, to what now embraces 19 nations. Mike served as IAIN President at one time and more recently received its highest award. He was directly involved in IAIN's activities which led to the adoption of traffic regulation in the Dover Strait through IMO, and the adoption of WGS-84 as a worldwide air datum through ICAO.

Although he retired as Institute Director almost 30 years ago, Mike never lost his intense interest in its activities. Even in his 90s he had been a regular visitor to HQ, travelling up from Brighton on his own and always being wonderful company as well as a bottomless pit of anecdotes and history. He boasted that he had never missed an AGM, and he was indeed at last year's.

Michael Richey died of a heart-attack at home on 22 December 2009 at the age of 92. There is no doubt that he did more for the Royal Institute of Navigation than any other being either has or is ever likely to. We all owe him an enormous debt of gratitude, and those who knew him personally will miss him greatly.

David Broughton



Mike Richey in *Jester*