

Obituary

Major D.E.L. ‘Roy’ Homard, (Fig. 1) who died aged 94 on 20 May 2015, was an army engineer who played a critical role in two of the most significant British polar expeditions of the post-war era. He was also one of just 45 individuals to be awarded the Polar Medal with both Arctic and Antarctic clasps. (Awards of the Polar Medal include combined clasps. Data supplied by Glenn M. Stein FRGS).

Desmond Edgar Lemuel Homard was born in Dover on 18 January 1921, but spent his childhood in Sheerness, where he lived in very modest circumstances with his mother and father, a disabled former bicycle repair mechanic, and four siblings. Watching the daily trudge of the workers of Sheerness to and from the local dockyards swiftly determined the young Homard to seek a career that might lead to a more adventurous life. With this in mind, in 1936, after brief periods with the Co-op and with Short Brothers of Rochester, he accepted a place at the Army Technical School at Chepstow. It was at Chepstow that he earned the nickname ‘Romancer’ on account of his tendency to sit on his bunk and dream of distant shores. His peers subsequently abbreviated ‘Romancer’ to ‘Roy’, a name used thereafter by all but his closest family.

Shortly after the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, Homard proceeded to France as a Royal Army Ordnance Corps fitter, attached to the 4th Battalion, the Royal Tank Regiment. He thoroughly enjoyed his time with the British Expeditionary Force and was bitterly disappointed to be sent home after his father wrote to the Under Secretary of State for War to complain that he was below the required age for overseas service. Following a spell with a home Coastal Defence Maintenance Unit, in 1942 Homard received a posting to North Africa as a sergeant in the newly-formed Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. He then served in Egypt, Sicily, Italy and, finally, as a Staff Sergeant Artificer (Weapons), in Austria as part of the Allied force of occupation. During a period of leave in England, Homard married Vicky Jones, only to lose his wife to tubercular meningitis within a year of their wedding.

With the cessation of hostilities, Homard transferred from weapon to vehicle maintenance and, following his wife’s untimely death, he moved to postings in Hong Kong’s New Territories, in England and in Germany. In 1950, now promoted to Warrant Officer, he married for the second time, to Enid Allison, who would remain his companion until her death in 2009.

It was while serving in Germany that Homard applied to join, for its second year, Commander Jim Simpson’s British North Greenland Expedition (BNGE) of 1952–1954. This expedition, which had been designed to give its military personnel experience of living and travel-



Fig. 1. ‘Roy Homard at the midwinter celebrations 1956’

ling in Arctic conditions and to undertake an extensive programme of glaciology, meteorology, seismology and geology, had sailed from England to Young Sund on the northeast coast of Greenland in July 1952; from there RAF Short Sunderland flying boats had transferred the twenty-five-strong team to the glacial Britannia Sø, where they set up their base camp. Finally, Simpson had led a dog-sled team some 230 miles west onto the central ice plateau to establish ‘North Ice’, the expedition’s inland research station.

Replacing another REME engineer who had signed-up for just one year, Homard’s job was to maintain the expedition’s four Studebaker weasel tracked vehicles, which were intended primarily for the completion of gravimetric work and seismology. Although weasels had previously been used by the Norwegians in Finnmark towards the end of the war and by Paul-Émile Victor’s French Greenland Expedition of 1949–1951, they had a poor reputation and their selection was based solely upon the lack of any suitable alternative. Leaking radiators, seized gearboxes and broken suspensions constantly demanded attention and twice Homard only narrowly avoided disaster, once when he sustained carbon monoxide poisoning and, on another, when he was set alight by igniting petrol fumes. The struggles which he faced in keeping the vehicles serviceable and

his ingenuity and determination in achieving this end would become the hallmarks of his service in the polar regions.

The BNGE was one of the largest and most complex British expeditions to the Arctic for many years and its results were impressive. The surveyors, glaciologists, meteorologists, physiologists and geologists working at the base camp, at North Ice and on journeys throughout Dronning Louise Land all completed extensive research in their respective fields and much experience was gained in polar travel. Only the seismic weasel team, for which Homard was vehicle engineer, produced disappointing results, but these were due to geological conditions and not to any failings in men or equipment.

Like so many both before and after him, 'Romancer' Homard found that polar exploration possessed an almost irresistible allure. When, in 1955, Vivian 'Bunny' Fuchs announced his intention to prosecute the first surface crossing of Antarctica, Homard immediately volunteered. Indeed, so great was his determination to join that, when standing before the Queen to receive his Polar Medal for his part in the BNGE, he asked the monarch to support his application!

Homard's recent experiences made him an ideal candidate for an expedition which would be entirely dependent upon motor vehicles for the attainment of its goals and he served with both the eight-man advance party, which reached Antarctica in January 1956, and the main crossing party, which traversed the 2,000 miles between the Filchner Ice Shelf and McMurdo Sound between November 1957 and March 1958. During the

crossing, the vehicles, which included a Canadian-built muskeg tractor, more decrepit weasels and four Tucker snocats, repeatedly fell into crevasses and only through the ingenuity of Homard and the senior engineer, David Pratt, were they recovered and kept serviceable. The weasels and the muskeg were all abandoned according to Fuchs's plan and the party finally reached its destination aboard the four snocats which, by the end of the journey, were held together, quite literally, with baulks of timber and lengths of rope.

Following his return to Britain, Homard rejoined the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Granted a short service commission in October 1960, he served in administrative and training capacities, until he left the army, with the rank of major, in 1972. Thereafter, he worked with Marconi Elliott Avionics and as a procurement executive with the engineering branch of the Ministry of Defence. He retired in 1985 and for the remaining thirty years of his life devoted himself to gardening and to charitable work, remaining in regular contact with many of the men with whom he had shared his polar adventures.

Slight of build and with an occasionally prickly personality, Homard nonetheless became an absolutely integral member of the Arctic and Antarctic expeditions in which he took part and the eventual success of the TAE, in particular, was in no small part due to the combination of practical ability, imagination and tenacity of this remarkable engineer.

Stephen Haddelsey