

Sergeant 'Eddie' Edwardson

Alfred Fairclough 'Eddie' Edwardson was born in St Helens, Lancashire during the First World War and was destined to experience more than his fair share of action in the Second World War. He was one of seven children and growing up in the industrialised North-West of England was probably a far cry from the New Zealand environment that formed the backdrop for most of his post-war adult life.

He enlisted in the Royal Marines at Liverpool in 1934 and began recruit training at Deal before being drafted to the Gunnery School at Portsmouth Division. He then joined HMS DESPATCH in 1936, a light cruiser of the Mediterranean Fleet, before being drafted to the battleship HMS ROYAL OAK in Scapa Flow in 1938. He was fortunate enough to have joined HMS ACHILLES before ROYAL OAK was sunk at anchor by the German submarine U-47 on 14 October 1939, with the loss of 833 lives.

However, Eddie's seemingly lucky escape to the South Atlantic Fleet in the Leander class cruiser HMS ACHILLES was to provide an epic experience in itself; as ACHILLES, along with HMSs AJAX and EXETER, became embroiled in the Battle of the River Plate, the first major naval battle of World War 2. This engagement led to the scuttling of the German pocket battleship GRAF SPEE and must have been a major boost to public morale during late 1939 when the tide of war seemed to be turning against Britain. ACHILLES is reported to have fired 1242 6-inch shells during this engagement and ships' gunners, such as Eddie in 'X' turret, would have been on constant alert as ACHILLES and AJAX shadowed GRAF SPEE into Montevideo while trying to stay out of range of the Germans 11-inch guns.

Eddie had an earlier encounter with danger in 1939, while he was gangway sentry in the Port of Aden. He noticed an Arab had fallen in the water and appeared to be in imminent danger of drowning. He stripped off as much of his gear as possible before diving in to rescue the hapless local; although his immediate thought on hitting the water was: "What am I doing? There are sharks everywhere." His selfless and courageous act resulted in the award of a commendation from the Navy Board and, no doubt, plenty of ribbing from his messmates. He remained in ACHILLES for four years, during which time it was transferred to the New Zealand Navy from 1940 to 1943.

Eddie was promoted to Acting Corporal in 1942 and by the end of that year HMNZS ACHILLES was supporting troop landings at Guadalcanal as part of the American cruiser group Task Force 67. The ship was attacked by Japanese dive bombers on 5 January 1943 and 'X' turret received a direct hit, killing 13 men and wounding 8, with Eddie being one of the wounded. Eddie could recite their names by heart and it's something he never forgot. He was promoted to substantive Corporal later in the year and was then drafted to the light cruiser HMNZS GAMBIA, which had been transferred to the New Zealand Navy as a replacement for ACHILLES.

Eddie married Lena at Plymouth Registry Office on 27 January 1944 but within days GAMBIA sailed from Liverpool to begin two and a half years of active service. The ship deployed with the British Pacific Fleet searching for blockade runners off the Cocos Islands and later saw action off Formosa and Okinawa. GAMBIA was actually under air attack at the moment the ceasefire was announced and therefore fired some of the last shots of the Second World War. By 2 September 1945 HMNZS GAMBIA was in Tokyo Bay and Eddie, by now a Sergeant, had been landed in charge of a section of marines; amongst the first British troops to be ashore during the signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender.

Eddie completed his twelve-year engagement on 5 June 1947 and was released from Eastney Barracks and placed on the Fleet Reserve. He was awarded the Naval General Service Medal (Palestine), the 1939/1945 Star, the Atlantic Star, the Pacific Star with Burma Clasp, the War Medal and the Royal Fleet Reserve Long Service Medal. He also fought tirelessly to ensure that British servicemen attached to the New Zealand Navy during the war years were not disadvantaged by either government and with the help of a close friend, who happened to be a barrister, he eventually overcame petty bureaucracy to make sure that medals earned were duly awarded.

Lena and Eddie migrated to New Zealand in 1948 to raise two daughters, Patricia and Julie, and enjoy four grandchildren; all still living in New Zealand. He enrolled in the Police Training School in 1952 and after graduation was posted to Auckland; serving in a number of stations and working on plain clothes inquiries for a large part of his police career. He gained two commendations for his contribution on a couple of very prominent cases and had numerous arrests and convictions to his credit. He was awarded a 21-year clasp to his Police Long Service Medal and retired in 1977 after twenty-six years service.

Eddie's well documented attributes of conscientiousness, loyalty, dependability, forthrightness and moral courage were also evident in everything that he did on behalf of the New Zealand Branch of the Royal Marines Association. He was a fastidious editor of the newsletter and regularly attended Branch meetings despite being wheelchair-bound; especially enjoying the extended company afforded during Corps Birthday lunches.

He was also a devoted husband and family man and lovingly cared for Lena, who pre-deceased him. Eddie 'crossed the bar' after a short period in North Shore Hospital and a service attended by family, friends and former colleagues was held at the Hibiscus Chapel of Faithful Services, Red Beach, Orewa on 29 June 2009. Major Peter Collins Royal Marines recited the Corps Prayer and the RMA Standard was paraded prior to a private family cremation.

Eddie was a memorable man with high standards that he maintained throughout his life. He belongs to a group of men who, through their selfless contribution, made history while witnessing momentous events that shaped the World.

JWG