

Transcript of Eulogy - Richard Moss

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Monday July 26th 2010, Church of St Edward, King and Martyr, Cambridge

It is a tradition in British funerals that the men should wear a black tie, and as you will observe I am wearing a black tie today. It is, however, adorned by miraculous, multi-coloured tropical fish, as a reminder of Richard's happiest hours spent sailing in tropical seas where such iridescent creatures abound. Richard was one of an endangered species: the true engineer. Everywhere he travelled he took a tool kit and an oilcan with him. He oiled everything, including on one occasion a bicycle, when he and a friend were going to go cycling, resulting in oil all down his trousers. It was the only occasion that Richard Moss ever conceded that some things actually performed better without too much lubricating oil.

Richard would have revelled in the fact that today, from the work on Peas Hill, we can hear engineering sounds percolating through our deliberations today. He was born when World War I was at its height to loving, romantic, close and affectionate parents, who within two years were dead. They died in that dreadful epidemic of Spanish 'flu, that took more lives at the end of the war than had been lost throughout its duration. He was brought up by relatives, to whom he remained eternally grateful. He went to prep school, then to Marlborough, and finally did a double first at his beloved Trinity here in Cambridge. He came to study Engineering but his friends assured him that Natural Sciences was something of a doddle so he decided simply to do both. He also had an abiding interest in and love of music, and it was through a mutual love of music that he met his beloved wife of so many years, Celia.

He then went to the Royal Naval College at Greenwich and in the early years of the war he and Celia became married, somewhat precipitously because he was called to the United States to serve, as a civilian marine engineer. Girl-friends and fiancées would not be taken though there was a chance he would travel with his wife. In the end, the two of them settled into a sparse, bare apartment in Washington DC and at the end of every month, when the pay cheque came in, Richard and his wife would go and buy a significant further item of furniture to furnish their abode. They bought well – some of the items they bought then lasted them throughout their long married life.

He went subsequently to South East Asia, which he greatly enjoyed. He spent time in Hong Kong, and many years in Singapore where he became the Commodore of the naval yacht club and one of the most familiar of the expat faces in that former colony. He sailed every moment that he could. The children remember that in the summer holidays he would take them sailing to Brittany, sometimes across treacherous waters with swirling tides and howling winds but always in that calm, avuncular, methodical way that could make any crisis seem like an everyday occurrence.

He served also in Korea where he was the Fleet Engineer on HMS Belfast. Those who see it moored near the Tower of London can spend a moment or two to reflect on Richard's crucial role. He had great adventures in World War II. Once in Boston, in New England, they were firing some new shells. One of them fired perfectly, the other one fired when not expected to, veered off inland, landed (with rare symbolism you

might think) in the gateway to the cemetery, and failed to explode. Richard pointed out afterwards that it was discovered through this accident that the sound shock-waves from firing the first shell inactivated the sensitive trigger mechanism in all the other shells in the batch. And had that not been rectified the British forces would have been firing blanks at the enemy, with catastrophic results.

Richard is a man that many of us had the privilege to know, and that's because when he gained his OBE and decided to retire from active life that he settled again in Cambridge to renew contact with his beloved Trinity. At a time when most people would think of putting up their feet Richard of course was full of energy. As late as 1978 he sailed single-handedly across the Atlantic – well, he did have a crew member but the poor man was sick for almost all of the journey – and Richard did it with a £17 digital watch that Celia, his daughter, bought him from Boots the Chemist, and a sextant. And when he arrived at Plymouth Hoe his destination was bang straight ahead. His dead reckoning was always a unmatched.

Once he settled in Cambridge he decided to address a pressing concern that had dogged him throughout his life, a failure to engage with engineering. He set up Polynous, a group which would bring together retired and senior engineers and scientists and like-minded people, who would discuss, pay visits, and hear lectures that would be delivered on subjects that would keep their minds active and alive. He knew, and often said, that it was a strange paradox in life that people often retired from jobs just when they had reached their peak, and this he was determined to address.

He was equally concerned to wrestle with the fact that the word 'engineer' had acquired different connotations in this of all countries, where engineering in many ways was born, to how it is regarded in nations across the seas. He knew that in South East Asia, in Poland, in Germany, that the term 'engineer' is concomitant with abilities like those of a brain surgeon, whereas in Britain it is somebody who shows more of his rear end than he should when fixing your car or tinkering with your washing machine. To him, engineering was one of the great mental disciplines and he was determined to see it advance, which led him to an enduring campaign. There is hardly a newspaper editor in this land who would not wince when the words: "Richard Moss is on the line" were mentioned.

And that puts me in mind of a comment that arose from the innumerable letters of affectionate and tribute that the family have received since his sad demise; with a note from Ian Fells, an eminent professor, one of our leading academics in the field of the study of energy, said how much he will miss, when the phone rang and he heard that voice saying "Richard Moss . . . here".

And how prescient those words are today; for Richard Moss always *was* here, when we discussed engineering policy, attitudes to science, or the future of energy provision. And believe me, he will be here with us for an interminable time yet to come. Richard was a colleague to most, a friend to some, a much loved and deeply missed relative to a few. But he was a role model to everybody, no matter how old . . . or how young.

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