



Obituaries

In August 1942, Vice-Admiral Curteis was appointed Senior British Naval Officer, Western Atlantic, based in Bermuda. John, accompanied by his wife Patricia, had been dispatched in advance to establish the office for this new command. It was the height of the Battle of the Atlantic and of the 49 ships that started, only 36 reached New York. Billeted at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel, Patricia woke in the night to see a light signalling from afar. Knowing it was morse code, John alerted a US Navy post. That night four German spies landed from a sub on Long Island on a mission to sabotage American defence production. Within a fortnight, they had been picked up. So shaken was German intelligence that no sabotage mission was tried again.

John remained in Bermuda until 1947, after which he was promoted Lieutenant Commander, serving on the aircraft carrier HMS *Implacable*; in 1952 he was posted to Hong Kong as Commodore's secretary. Promoted Commander in 1954, he returned to sea as Supply Officer in HMS *Birmingham* and then HMS *Victorious*.

As Naval Attaché to the British Embassy in Madrid from 1962, John secured a multi-million pound contract from the Spanish government to build British frigates, a deal scuppered after Harold Wilson called it 'Frigates-for-Fascists'.

John was appointed OBE in 1964. Retiring from the Navy in 1966, he stayed in Madrid, representing Hawker Siddeley and, from 1973 to 1990, acting as chief executive for Plessey. He then set up his own trading firm in Madrid, dealing in everything from aircraft rivets to sheep shears, which he ran until 2005. He also assumed chairmanship of the British Benevolent Fund of Madrid, which he ran until 2010 and made into a reliable charity for British expats.

John was a talented oarsman and tennis player. He was also a gifted craftsman whose skills embraced silversmithing, metalwork, carpentry and woodcarving, as well as restoring antique bird music boxes and other automata. These skills were given free rein at his *finca*, an old brickworks in the mountains of New Castile which he bought in 1964. Here he created, largely with his own hands, a house built almost exclusively out of salvaged materials. Without electricity and full of the artefacts that he collected, the *finca* became a living museum of Spanish rural life.

John also came across a collapsed church, in the rubble of which were hundreds of carved bits of wood, which he recognised as segments of a Mudéjar artonado ceiling. He acquired the remains with the blessing of the bishop of Sigüenza and spent over a decade restoring it, after which he created a building of the correct dimensions, and the ceiling was finally winched into place in 2004. It remains a permanent monument to John's tenacity and ingenuity. He became Madrid's, arguably Spain's, senior British resident, a trusted advisor to many ambassadors. He was also a stalwart of The Valentinos, a private dining club for American and British gentlemen resident in Madrid, founded in the 1960s. In recent years he hosted an annual Valentinos picnic at his *finca*, the last of which took place in May last year.

John died last June, two years after celebrating his 70th wedding anniversary with receptions in Madrid and London. Patricia and their two sons, Simon and Roger, survive him.