

Major-General R C A ‘Joe’ Edge CB



Head of the Ordnance Survey who mapped Himalayan Peaks in the Thirties

Major-General R C A “Joe “ Edge the former Director General of Ordnance Survey who died age 87, had an adventurous career in which he climbed and surveyed hitherto unknown, inaccessible and politically sensitive territory in the Himalayas; with a fellow lieutenant, he made the first crossing of the Gupt Khal Pass (18,990 ft) over the Dhault and Alaknanda watersheds.

After retiring from the Army in 1971 he was appointed an independent inspector of Government projects, which included proposals to build the M11 Cambridge bypass, the M40 and M42, and the M3 Winchester bypass. “all these inquiries,” he recalled “were interesting, controversial and sometimes noisy, especially Winchester, where I gained some notoriety by ejecting the Headmaster of Winchester College from the meeting for bad behaviour.”

Raymond Cyril Alexander was born on July 21 1912; one of his cousins was the author John Masters. He was educated at Cheltenham, Woolwich and Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, and was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1932. He was a Prize Cadet at Woolwich.

In 1936, Edge was posted to India, where his family’s military service extended back to his great-great-great-grandfather, who had served in the Mysore Wars.

While stationed at Kirkee, Edge learned that instead of going with his company to the North West Frontier, he would be left languishing with the Training Battalion in place of an officer on leave. This caused him to develop a sudden interest in map-making, which would involve a transfer to the Survey of India, which at the time was mapping the Himalayas.

Edge’s first task was to survey the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas, to which he went with a party which included Sherpa Tenzing later to become famous as one of the first two men to set foot on the summit of Everest. Frostbite and snow blindness made these early ventures hazardous, but Edge made the first ascent of Uja Tirche (20,350ft). Later projects included mapping the jungles of the Deccan and an air survey of the North West Frontier.

After the outbreak of war in 1939 Edge was moved to more mundane duties in Delhi, but in 1942 he was posted with 3 Field Company to establish hurried harbour defences in Ceylon and the Maldives Islands. This task completed; he was posted to 14 Army in Burma as Assistant Director of Survey in 15 Corps.

He served throughout the Arakan offensive and the Japanese attempt to break through Imphal, and later witnessed the Japanese surrender ceremonies in Rangoon and Singapore.

In 1946 Edge, back with survey of India, was posted to the North West Frontier in a period of turbulent unrest. After partition in 1947 he became Director General of the new Survey of Pakistan and had the onerous task of determining disputed boundaries. On one occasion he prevented a lynching by driving a shot down pilot to safety in an open truck through a hostile mob.

After returning to England in 1949, Edge worked in survey at the War Office and in BAOR before being posted to Ordnance Survey as Deputy Director, Geodetic Control. In 1958 he was posted to Cyprus as Deputy Director Survey, Middle East, which encompassed Malta though to Pakistan and south to central Africa; much of this territory was experiencing unrest of one kind or another.

Edge returned to England and the Ordnance Survey in 1961, becoming Director General in 1965. He supervised the move of the Department from Chessington to new buildings at Southampton. Outside his official sphere Edge was active in many professional and scientific fields connected with the Survey and he made contributions to learned journals.

He was awarded an MBE in 1945 and mentioned in despatches. He was appointed CB in 1968.

Joe Edge had been a keen all-rounder in his youth, particularly at rugby, tennis, sailing and riding. He was always ready to listen and learn. He was a lover of music and latterly took up chess. Edge was endowed with a keen sense of humour, which proved invaluable in meetings, especially when noisy objectors sat with their backs to him in the audience. His ability to remain friendly and calm under pressure made him liked and respected.

He married first, in 1939, Patricia McKee, who died in 1982. They had a son and a daughter. He married secondly in 1983 Audrey Muers-Raby, who survives him.

(Daily Telegraph – January 14th 2000)