

# Admiral Sir James Eberle

## Outspoken Commander-in-Chief Fleet who became an effective Chairman of Chatham House

ADMIRAL SIR JAMES "JIM" EBERLE, who has died aged 90, was a successful Cold War warrior and chairman of Chatham House. When Admiral Sir Michael le Fanu, the First Sea Lord, became concerned that the naval promotion system did not give his admirals time to gain the breadth of experience they needed for the highest appointments in Defence, he dipped down the list and chose Eberle to be promoted to rear-admiral three years before the earliest date that could have been expected.

So in 1971 Eberle became Assistant Chief of Fleet Support, then in two-yearly steps he was Flag Officer Sea Training, Flag Officer Aircraft Carriers and Amphibious Ships, Chief of Fleet Support and a member of the Board of Admiralty, Commander-in-Chief Fleet and a major Nato commander, and, in a surprise sideways move, Commander-in-Chief, Naval Home Command. He was knighted KCB in 1979 and GCB in 1981. Having been groomed for stardom for so many years, it was thought that he was a shoo-in to become First Sea Lord, or Chief of the Defence Staff, or chairman of the Nato Military Committee. However, after a vetting by some of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's closest aides, she, quite rightly in Eberle's view, appointed Sir John Fieldhouse, who had just won the Falklands war for her, as First Sea Lord, while the other options closed.

Eberle's outspokenness included his views that Britain had an over-sufficiency of nuclear weapons, and that the nuclear deterrent should be paid for by the defence budget and not by the Navy alone. Offered the appointment of Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, he declined, and he retired aged 55. Unexpectedly, in 1983 Eberle became Chairman of the Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House. As a cadet at Dartmouth, he had been known as "Brain Box, and in 1970-71, rather than attend the Royal College of Defence Studies, and wanting time to think about wider issues, he had taken a year's fellowship at University College, Oxford, under the supervision of Michael Howard.

His paper, *The Management of Force*, was praised by Lord Mountbatten and by US Admiral Ike Kidd, who thought it was the best paper on command in the Nato infrastructure. So, when rumour spread that there was a dark horse candidate for chairmanship of Chatham House, the reaction was: "must be Eberle".

Eberle found that the institute was in decline. Morale was low, funds were short and many saw its famed independence as threatened. When it was learned that Brussels was funding some of its research, there were attacks from the Right of the Conservative party and sections of the national press.

Eberle had to raise funds from businesses and from charitable foundations; the institute's cuttings service was hived off to the British Library, and research programmes were realigned. Despite all the problems, Eberle expanded the institute's agenda to include subjects such the environment and space, increased the research staff, travelled widely and strengthened or forged new links with the Anglo-German Konigswinter conferences, the Anglo-Soviet Round Table, the UK-Japan 2000 Group and the US East-West Institute for Security Studies.

As a former Nato commander Eberle found it strange to visit Moscow as an honoured guest, but

the personal contacts which he made, while earning him the sobriquet [in *The Times*] of "the Red admiral", gave him invaluable insights into coming changes in Russia, before *perestroika*.

Obligated to choose, after his wife's death from cancer in 1988, between his interests in Devon and work in London, he chose the former. He retired in 1990, but continued to be employed on various missions by Chatham House and the ECO.

James Henry Fuller Eberle was born in Bristol on May 31 1927, the descendant of a Moravian church minister who came to the city in the early 19th century. He was educated at Clifton College, and he remained proud of his Bristol associations, being made freeman of the city in 1946, an active member of the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol from 1972 onwards, in 1984-94 chairman of the governors of Clifton College, and honorary doctor of Bristol university in 1989.

Eberle entered the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, in 1941, and served briefly in MTBs in the Channel, and in the battlecruiser *Renown* and cruiser *Belfast* in the Far East.

His specialist courses as a gunnery officer included a year's study of mathematics and science at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, and from 1953 to 1957 he served in the trials ship *Girdleness* when he proved equal to any of the scientists and technical officers engaged with him on the trials and development of Seaslug, the Navy's first guided missile.

Subsequently he alternated desk jobs in the Ministry of Defence with being second-in-command of the carrier *Eagle*, (1963-65) and commander of the landing ship *Intrepid* (1968-70).

His three slim volumes of biography published in 2007 covered his family's history, his career at sea, his life in international affairs and his lifelong love of hunting. Another book, *Jim, First of the Pack* (1982), was a history of the Britannia Beagles. He played tennis for the Navy, captaining the team, and was elected a member of the All England Tennis Club.

But it was in the field of hunting that he displayed greatest athleticism, bounding on foot up hillsides after hounds and leaving the field to straggle behind. Known as "Jim" to one and all, at the end of a day's hunting he could often be found sitting by some farmhouse fire with his shoes off. His intimate knowledge of the Devon countryside led him to become a valued board member of the Countryside Alliance and chairman of the Devon Rural Skills Trust.

Eberle also held the ceremonial appointments of Rear-Admiral (1988-94) and then Vice-Admiral of the United Kingdom (1994-97), but his proudest appointment was that of Master of the Britannia Beagles for more than 50 years. He was also chairman of the Naval Review.

His retirement was marred by two episodes. There was alleged to have been a Soviet spy at Chatham House, and when it was revealed that the Stasi had a file on Eberle, he was suspected, though later it was found that all the Stasi had were stolen copies of his passport. Then in 1998 he was caught in a sting by a newspaper, alleging payments to a young woman and the gift of an unwiped laptop which had belonged to Chatham House.

As he became increasingly frail Eberle told enquirers after his health that he was suffering from "IS" or "intermittent stupidity". "The intermissions," he would say. "get shorter and the stupidity gets greater".

In 1950 he married Ann Thompson.

He is survived by their two daughters and a son.

*Admiral Sir James Eburle, born May 31 1927, died May 17 2018*

