

Lt-Col Sir Evan Nepean, Bt

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LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SIR EVAN NEPEAN, 6th Bt, who has died aged 92, was one of the world's best-known operators of amateur radio, call sign G5YN; he was also the last surviving member of the British Political Mission to Tibet in 1936.

Radio was Nepean's lifelong passion - he was to become the longest serving member of the Radio Society of Great Britain, notching up 75 years' membership - and it was as a subaltern serving in the Peshawar District Signals on the North West Frontier of India that he went on the mission to Tibet.

It was in the summer of 1936 that Nepean and a fellow wireless expert in the Royal Signals, Lt Sidney Dagg, joined the mission led by B J (later Sir Basil) Gould.

Among other members of the party was Hugh Richardson, who would some months later become Britain's last diplomatic envoy in Lhasa.

The mission had been proposed by the government of Tibet, then under a Regency between Dalai Lamas. They wanted Britain to mediate for the return of the Panchen Lama, the second most senior religious leader in Tibet, who had fled to China in 1923 after falling out with the 13th Dalai.

Linked to this was the Tibetans' desire that the Panchen should return without a Chinese army escort, and that the British should review Tibet's army and advise on its improvement. This fitted in with Britain's wish to establish diplomatic representation in Lhasa to counter Chinese influence.

Communications between India and Tibet were rudimentary: mail deliveries were by mounted postal runner. Lhasa was on the end of a telegraph line, but beyond Lhasa there was no established means of communication for diplomatic traffic, so the mission had to take its own wireless equipment.

Lt Dagg had been to Calcutta to have this specially built, so that it could be broken down into loads weighing less than 80 lb.

Nepean, meanwhile, had gone to Simla to gain experience with the army group with whom they would be in contact. The two men then met up and made their way to Gangtok, Sikkim, from where the mission set off on July 31.

Down to the last servant, the party numbered 50 men, with 25 pack animals. The heaviest load, at 120 lb, was the engine for charging the radio batteries; four bearers carried it on bamboo poles.

The signals officers also had charge of a public address system, cine cameras and film equipment; they borrowed a 35mm projector from the Maharajah of Sikkim. On each stage of the journey, they set up their receiver to listen to BBC news broadcasts, and sent signals back to India.

They arrived at Gyantse, southern Tibet, on August 12. Due to difficulties that had arisen in charging the radio batteries, the mission proceeded without Nepean to Lhasa.

When they found that power was available there from a 220-volt hydroelectric plant, Nepean was sent for, and 13 days later he arrived with all the equipment.

He set up his tent, sharing it with the transmitter and the receiver, in the Deyki Lingka garden, the mission's base.

The aerial was supported on a 40ft mast, and regular contact was kept up with India on the 30-metre wave. Contact was also made with amateurs and Nepean's then call sign, AC4YN, became known around the world - AC4 being for Tibet, YN being two of Nepean's initials.

There were numerous official parties in Lhasa, as well as visits to the Potala and to the three great monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Kundun. Nepean also helped to film the mission with a 16 mm cine camera, and played football as a member of the "Mission Marmots" team against "Lhasa United".

On September 7, the mission reviewed the Tibetan troops near to the Trapchi (arsenal), where they were received by a guard of honour, various notables and the Prime Minister - who had never before inspected the army. All Lhasa turned out for the review.

Officials were accommodated in tents, in one of which sat a Chinese wireless operator (the Chinese already had a transmitter in Lhasa) - whom the British ignored.

Nepean and other mission members went to the bazaar, ostensibly to photograph the roofs of Lhasa but in fact to view the Chinese radio aerial, so as to guess what wavelength it used.

Nepean and Dagg also operated the public address system, a gramophone, the film equipment and the cine projector. This caused great excitement among the Tibetans, who were thrilled to see themselves on screen, and the Regent was delighted to hear his own voice booming out over loud speakers.

On November 2, the mission held the opening meet of the Lhasa Vale Hunt - a mounted paperchase which was partially hindered by the Tibetans' habit of sweeping up any odd bits of paper they found. In pony races on the Sera plain, Nepean was noted as the best horseman.

In the event, the mission never went beyond Lhasa, as the Panchen Lama died before he could return from China. Trouble then blew up on the North West Frontier, and Nepean was ordered back to India.

He left Lhasa on December 14, with a bearer and two pack animals. As far as Nangartse - two days' trek - they were accompanied by mission member Freddy Spencer-Chapman. "All gaze at Nepean's yellow fur-lined Afghan coat," Spencer-Chapman noted - and Nepean was still wearing the coat 65 years later.

Evan Yorke Nepean was born at Holt, Wiltshire, on November 23 1909, the only son of Sir Charles Nepean, Bt, who had succeeded his father in the baronetcy in 1903. Evan's mother Mary was a daughter of the Rev W J Swayne, Vicar of Heytesbury.

The Nepeans came originally from St Just, in Cornwall. The name derives from the Cornish words nans pedn (head of the valley), and has been variously spelt Nanspean, Nanpaen and, from 1660, Nepean.

The baronetcy was created in 1802 for Evan Nepean, who was successively Secretary to the Admiralty, Secretary of State for Ireland, a Lord of the Admiralty and Governor of Bombay. The Nepean River and Nepean Point in Australia were named after him.

It was as a boy in Wiltshire that Nepean's passion for radio was sparked by a local garage owner and radio ham. During his schooldays at Winchester, he built a crystal set, stowing it in the cupboard of his study bay.

To avoid detection by prowling schoolmasters, he connected an earphone to the set via a wire run down his coat sleeve. By leaning on his arm and writing with the other hand, he could keep up the pretence of studying.

He became adept at Morse code, obtaining a Post Office "receiving" licence when he was 16, and a "transmitting" licence two years later.

From Winchester he went up to Downing College, Cambridge, to read Natural Sciences. Although transmitting equipment was not allowed in college, he set up a receiving aerial in the bay window of his sitting-room.

In the university OTC he learnt signalling and equitation. On graduating he hoped to join Marconi, but lacked the required qualifications and so plumped for the Army - a decision, he said, which he never regretted.

In early 1933 he was commissioned into the Royal Signals Corps, then a mounted cavalry regiment. He joined the young officers' course at Catterick, and in 1935 was sent out to the North West Frontier Province.

He acquired two cavalry chargers, a motorcycle and a bearer, and learned to speak Urdu. He also whipped-in to the Peshawar Vale Hounds, hunting jackals - which, he found, "were not as cunning or as fast as the British fox".

As war loomed in 1939, he was recalled home from India to work for MI8, working on codes and ciphers and running a training school for wireless operators.

In 1941 he was sent to Iraq, and then on to the 8th Army in Egypt after the fall of Tobruk. When his CO was on leave, he had temporary command of the 8th Army's Signals' Line of Communications and when Churchill visited was presented to him.

He ended the war in Cyprus, from where he was posted home to Signals HQ, Catterick. He joined the staff of Southern Command in 1947, and from 1950 to 1953 was GSO1 Royal Signals at the MoD.

Then came two years in Singapore, where, having inherited the baronetcy on his father's death in 1953, he was known as "The Bounding Baronet" - from the enormous bounding run-in he would take when bowling in cricket matches.

In 1955-56 Nepean was posted to Germany, on attachment to the RAF's Air Formation Signals. He would have liked then to retire from the Army and take up a position at Marconi; but he missed the chance when the Suez crisis obliged him to stay on in the Army for a further six months.

From 1959 to 1973 he held a Retired Officer's Staff appointment in the Chief Signal Officer's branch at HQ Southern Command.

Nepean was a keen gardener, and sailed until he was 70. Having given up his boat, he took up bell-ringing, while his enthusiasm for amateur radio remained undimmed.

On marrying, he had agreed never to keep radios in the bedroom, and consequently wherever he lived he established a radio room. He received his final radio call sign on March 11 this year.

He is survived by his wife Cicely (nee Willoughby), whom he married in 1940, and by their three daughters.