

Mapmaker, mathematician and irrepressible adventurer - Anthony Bomford

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A friend once called Tony Bomford, a former director of National Mapping, Australia, "a renaissance man". He was certainly in that mould.

Professionally he was a brilliant surveyor, mapmaker and mathematician, while his wider interests ranged from travel in wild and remote places and kayaking to stamp collecting, poetry, music, making woollen rugs to mathematical and geometric designs and carving polyhedrons from red box timber.

Two of his rugs with designs based, in technical terms, on "tessellations of the infinite hyperbolic plane", are in the final processes of being accepted into the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

A larger-than-life figure, Tony Bomford, who died in Canberra on May 10 of pancreatic cancer, aged 76, was essentially a restless, irrepressible adventurer. And his "glad passion for surveying" was a passport to seeing country no-one had seen before. Of surveying, he once said, "there was nothing I would rather be doing", adding that "if I'd been born in Captain Cook's day, I'd have wanted to be one of his lieutenants". He gloried in the challenge of little-known landscapes, kindled early in his career when he undertook several mapping projects for the British Schools Exploring Society on expeditions to Northern Quebec, Iceland and Lapland. But what gave him most satisfaction in his many years of surveying was his secondment from the British Army in 1955 to Duncan Carse's South Georgia Survey as its chief surveyor. In six months, Bomford and his seven companions surveyed the whole island in atrocious weather, man-hauling heavy sledges over mountainous terrain, living in small two-man tents and negotiating innumerable first ascents.

His map of the British-owned island south of the Falklands won him the Ness Award of the Royal Geographical Society, the citation stating that his work had established a new standard in Antarctic mapping.

For more than 40 years his map has remained the definitive map of South Georgia, and one of the sharp spires marked on it bears the name Bomford Peak. His lucid narrative of the expedition, superbly illustrated with photos taken by himself and others, is preserved in the Port Stanley museum in the Falklands.

Bomford was born in India, of English parents, on January 17, 1927. The family was in India because Bomford's father, Guy, an officer of the Royal Engineers, was attached to the Survey of India, of which, with the rank of brigadier, he later became director. Brigadier Bomford, the British Army's noted geodesist, went on to be head of survey for General Slim's 14th Army in Burma, before later teaching geodesy at Oxford University.

With that background, it was not surprising that he would follow his father into the Royal Engineers and elect to serve in the Survey Corps, after enlisting in the Army in August 1944 straight from Shrewsbury School. The opportunity for tertiary education came when the Army gave him two stints at Cambridge.

A few years later he was back at Cambridge's Pembroke College to do the engineering tripos. Again he graduated with a first, as well as winning an extra year - giving him three years in all - to do specialist studies in mathematics.

While at Cambridge in 1951 he married Adelaide-born Elizabeth Honey, whom he had met the previous year. Back with the Army, he went on a two-year secondment with the British Overseas Survey to Tanganyika (now Tanzania). While there, interest in Australia, which his marriage had stirred, led him to take leave in 1954 to visit.

Four years later he was back on exchange from the British Ordnance Survey to work with the Australian Army Survey Corps. He worked on mapping projects in central Queensland and the Kimberleys where, in the more difficult country, surveying was done with the use of helicopters, an innovation at that time. His work in the Kimberleys led to one of the features he mapped being named Mt Bomford.

Bomford then returned to Britain determined that he would make his future life here. He spent two years with the Ordnance Survey before moving to Australia and joining the Division of National Mapping in 1961 as a senior surveyor.

The next 20 years at National Mapping saw him become supervisor of geodetic surveying, assistant director and then director in 1977. He remained director for five years, before taking early retirement in 1982. This gave Bomford what he said were the best 20 years of his life, opening the door to creative work at home and adventurous travel abroad.

Sometimes on commercial treks or cruises, but more often on private trips with just one or two companions, he walked and climbed in many parts of North and South America, Iceland, the Himalayas and other countries; kayaked in Greenland, New Guinea and other waters; and revisited South Georgia. Every trip yielded a written and illustrated narrative.

In the eyes of those close to him, he was a warm-hearted, generous man with a gift for friendship, invariably exuding cheerful matter-of-factness in trying circumstances. To any task in hand his commitment was absolute. However, his abounding enthusiasm was sometimes a trial to his colleagues, especially in the field when he would insist upon working, even on lie-up days.

When cancer was diagnosed early last year, he was given about six weeks to live. In the event, he had a year and three months, enabling him last November to undertake one last adventure - a visit to Heard Island and some of the other more remote islands of the South Indian Ocean. He died on one last kayaking outing on Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin. His wife Elizabeth, two sons (Richard and Philip) and two daughters (Mary and Annabel) survive him.

Anthony Gerald Bomford, born January 17, 1927; died May 10, 2003.