

Rear-Admiral Colin Cooke-Priest, who has died aged 81, overcame sea- and airsickness, qualified twice-over for the Goldfish Club, and rose to be Flag Officer Naval Aviation.

Cooke-Priest was one of six Old Marlburians to enter Dartmouth in September 1957. His first ship was a small minesweeper in the unquiet waters off Scotland, where he was “as sick as a dog” and a sympathetic senior officer had him moved to a larger ship. All Cooke-Priest wanted to do was drive ships, and for two years he served worldwide at sea, but when the Admiralty decided that more long career officers were needed in the Fleet Air Arm, he was pressganged into flying training as an observer (as the Navy calls its air navigators). However, discovering that he also suffered very badly from airsickness, he then failed the high-altitude selection test, thus ruling him out of fixed-wing flying and limiting him to helicopters, “which I really didn’t want”. Rather than excuse himself on medical grounds and return to general service, Cooke-Priest persevered and completed the course, demonstrating his willpower and determination, qualities which combined with his intellect and personal charm contributed to his subsequent, successful career.

He gained his wings in 1962 before joining 814 Naval Air Squadron, and for the next few years he flew in anti-submarine helicopters as the “brains” who directed operations from the cabin of the aircraft. In the carriers *Victorious* and *Albion*, he saw service in Aden, the Far East and in Borneo.

Two Wessex helicopters sank under him. At night on September 10, 1963 in a “hot and glassy calm, when it takes enormous skill to slither into a hover at 40 feet, a couple of inexperienced pilots were a bit insensitive with the controls and the tail went in, followed quickly by the rest of the helicopter”: Cooke-Priest and all the crew were rescued by the frigate *Eskimo*. The second ditching occurred on November 13, 1969, while on exchange with the Royal Australian Navy. While transferring stores to the destroyer *Vampire*, the winch cable snagged on the ship’s superstructure, snapping as the ship rolled, and rebounding into the helicopter’s rotorblades, causing it to crash into the sea. Again, all were rescued. Cooke-Priest mused that underwater escape drill “was total second nature ... one just has a drink with the pilot afterwards, and that’s an end to it.”

Colin Herbert Dickinson Cooke-Priest was born in London, son of the distinguished Army dermatologist Dr W H D Priest.

Promoted commander in 1973, Cooke-Priest commanded the frigates *Plymouth* 1975–76 and *Berwick* 1976, before becoming the ‘future helicopter desk’ in the Ministry of Defence where he helped to write the first specification for the Merlin helicopter. In 1979 he was appointed naval assistant to Admiral Sir Jim Eberle, the Commander-in-Chief Fleet. Promoted to captain, he returned to the MoD Assistant Director of Naval Air Warfare 1981–82, where with his professionalism, his sharp staff work, and his ability to get the best out of people, he rose to the challenge of restoring morale after the misguided Nott defence review and helped put the Fleet Air Arm on the front foot during the Falklands War.

Later appointments included command of the new-built frigate *Boxer* 1983–85 and *Brilliant* 1987–89 when he was also Senior Naval Officer Middle East responsible for patrols in the Persian Gulf.

He held two appointments as a rear-admiral: as Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff (Operations) to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe 1989–90, and Flag Officer Naval Aviation 1990–93, when he was the first observer to head the FAA. His last function in uniform was to award wings to his son.

After the Navy, Cooke-Priest was CEO of the Trident Trust 1994–99, an educational charity whose principal activity was placing over 150,000 young people annually in work experience from 60 offices nationwide.

He was made FRAeS in 1992 and master of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots in 2009–10, was active in several charities, and a gentleman usher to HM the Queen from 1994 onwards. Appointed CB in 1993 and CVO in 2009, a very senior officer said Cooke-Priest “was one of the vertebrae which make up the backbone of the Service. Totally reliable, loyal, extremely able in every job he tackled, and above all one of the nicest and most good-humoured colleagues one could possibly work with”.

Colin met his wife Sue Hobler at Hal Far, Malta, where she was the Wren giving orders with a “golden voice in the control tower”: he hurried to find her, and they arranged meetings via Morse. They married in 1965 and she survives him with their two sons and two daughters.

Rear-Admiral Colin Cooke-Priest, born March 17, 1939, died April 6, 2002.