

Captain Ian Powe, naval officer who led disaster relief after 1968 Sicilian earthquake – obituary



Ian Powe

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Captain Ian Powe, who has died aged 84, led the disaster relief after the Belice earthquake in Sicily and later was the first director of the Gas Consumers' Council.

On the night of January 14/15 1968 a severe earthquake struck western Sicily, killing several hundred people, injuring many more and leaving 100,000 people homeless. The Italian government asked for help from the Royal Navy at Malta, where Powe commanded the 7th Mine Countermeasures Squadron (MCMS), consisting of several small Ton-class minesweepers.

Without waiting for orders, Powe loaded his ships with disaster relief stores, medical teams and a small detachment of soldiers, and sailed overnight.



After the Belice earthquake, the statue of a saint is visible above the ruins: Sicily, January 1968 Credit: Mario De Biasi/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty

The squadron's entry next morning to the small port of Trapani was greeted by a violent aftershock which shook the sea and shore, and hundreds of refugees rushed from the town towards the jetty. Powe restored calm and in liaison with the mayor commandeered a convoy of lorries to take him inland to the Belice valley, where the damage was greatest; they followed debris-strewn roads which had been split and were hanging in ribbons over precipices, through villages which had been flattened or had fallen into the valleys below.

Powe set up a headquarters at Montevago, the soldiers erecting tents for accommodation and a marquee as a field hospital, while Powe's 40 sailors dug in the rubble and began to repair utilities. He was joined by 12 Italian Boy Scouts who had been on a camp, and two retired British aid workers from Save the Children who chanced to have retired locally.



The ruins of a town destroyed by the Belice earthquake, Sicily, January 1968 Credit: Giorgio Lotti Mario De Biasi Sergio Del Grande/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty

The immediate relief effort was hampered by a lack of planning at local level, excessive bureaucracy, a lack of supplies, and a tendency to treat outsiders with suspicion. After 36 hours soldiers from the Italian army arrived, who placed themselves under Powe's orders; they brought a searchlight which, when played on a White Ensign which Powe had ordered to be hoisted on the one standing telegraph-pole, brought in hundreds of survivors from the countryside.

For the next week, despite cold weather and several aftershocks which mainly struck at night, Powe oversaw the rescue efforts. Subsequently the 7th MCMS was awarded the Wilkinson Sword of Peace, while Powe himself was praised by his commander-in-chief for his "initiative and judgment in dealing with the situation, which was not only serious but required considerable tact and understanding".



An Italian fire fighter helping some goats among the ruins of the Belice earthquake: Salaparuta, January 1968 Credit: Giorgio Lotti Mario De Biasi Sergio Del Grande/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty

The people of Montevago named the main road in the rebuilt town “Via Comandante Powe” and an adjoining road “Via Marina Inglese”, and they invited the Powes to return in 2018 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the earthquake.

Ian Wilton Powe was born in Bognor Regis on October 17 1932. He eschewed the thriving family tailoring business, Hector Powe, choosing instead to join Dartmouth in 1946, where he was not sporting but academically above average and rose to be Grenville house cadet captain.

As a midshipman he served in the cruiser Kenya, the British flagship during the Korean War. In 1956 he became one of the youngest officers to qualify as a Torpedo and Anti-Submarine (TAS) specialist, and in 1958 was appointed to 845 Naval Air Squadron in the Mediterranean, which was then working up the tactical use of helicopters in anti-submarine warfare.

The Whirlwind helicopters were underpowered, a defect which resulted in many emergency landings, and Powe joined the Goldfish Club, an exclusive society for those who have crashed into the sea. He found himself submerged, disorientated and trapped inside a helicopter, and when he bobbed to the surface, his fellow crew members grinned and asked: “What kept you?”



The Telegraph's front page after the Belice earthquake, Jan 16 1968

In 1963 he lent his TAS knowledge to the submariners, a “highly fulfilling” appointment at the submarine school HMS Dolphin, where he developed tactics and procedures to exploit the full potential of sonar. His patient and persuasive manner transformed the submariners’ understanding of sonar. “He gave us a kick up the sonar backside,” said one senior officer. Powe received the rare distinction of being made an honorary submariner.

After a deployment in the Far East as first lieutenant of the frigate Londonderry, his was an early promotion to commander when he took command of the minesweeper Walkerton and the 7th MCMS. In 1969, when Powe’s squadron left Malta, crowds lined the walls of Barrakka heights to wave a sad farewell, the last to go after two centuries of British warships based on the island.

There followed a number of important appointments including command of the frigate Yarmouth during the Second Cod War, 1973, and 13 years of staff appointments before Powe left the Navy.

From 1986-96 Powe was chairman of the Gas Consumers’ Council, a role which involved regular visits to the Today programme studios, and he took up a number of other chairmanships. He was also chairman of trustees at Banksie Gallery, where he put the venture on a sound footing through his calm and insightful leadership, and he oversaw the Royal Watercolour Society’s bicentenary celebrations in 2004. Powe had a good eye for a picture.

The Powes married at St Paul’s, Knightsbridge, where he was a lifelong worshipper and latterly a churchwarden. There in 2000, after the incumbent claimed he was being

blackmailed by a former lover and had received a vindictive and homophobic fax, Powe and his fellow churchwarden were arrested and held for six hours at Belgravia police station.

Powe was shaken but dismissed the matter, saying: “Worse things happened at sea.” The police apologised for the arrest, which “was disproportionate and heavy-handed”, and for the distress caused.



Ian and Deirdre Powe

He hosted the Queen on three occasions: in Walkerton when he took her from Malta to Gozo; at the Guy's and Lewisham Mental Health Care Trust when he was chairman; and at Bankside Gallery.

A profound Christian, Powe was undemonstrative, quietly spoken but always a reassuring figure. A chief petty officer who served under him in the minesweeper Walkerton declared: "In all my 30 years in the Royal Navy I served with many captains, and there were few whom the whole ship's company held with such affection as we had for Ian Powe; we would have followed him anywhere."

Powe was devoted to Deirdre Fuller, whom he married in 1955 after meeting her at a dance at Queen Alexandra's House, South Kensington, where he and a rival young officer had tossed a coin to decide their dancing partners. "I'm a very fortunate fellow," he said, "and Deirdre's role in making me a very fortunate fellow cannot be overstated."

She survives him with their three sons and a daughter.

Captain Ian Powe, born October 17 1932, died September 2 2017