

Written by Paul LeBlond for Oceanography news letter

George Pickard died recently after a short illness; he was 93. He directed the Institute of Oceanography at UBC for many years and was a major player in the development of ocean sciences in western Canada. Many who took his courses, went to sea with him or studied under his direction will remember him as a kind, no-nonsense, supremely organized and dedicated scientist, with a taste for exotic exploration.

George Lawson Pickard was born on July 5, 1913 in Cardiff, Wales. Following studies in Physics at Oxford (D. Phil., 1937), he joined the Royal Aircraft Establishment as a researcher and, later in the war, was posted to the Operational Research Section of the RAF Coastal Command. He worked on the development of improved bombsights and designed the two-spotlight technique that enabled low flying aircraft to place depth charges behind German hydroelectric dams (as shown in the movie "Dam Busters"); he was awarded the MBE for his war-time contributions. After the war, George and his family moved to Canada, joining the UBC Physics Department in 1947, where he hoped to continue his research in low-temperature physics, interrupted by the war. "We don't do that here - that's for Toronto", said Gordon Shrum, then head of UBC Physics, as he steered George towards oceanography. Following a year learning the rudiments of this new discipline at Scripps, he returned to UBC and joined the newly created Institute of Oceanography, launching a systematic study of BC's coastal fjords and building up the academic infrastructure which would eventually mature into a first rate interdisciplinary institution.

Pickard's books on Descriptive Physical Oceanography and (with Steve Pond) on Introductory Dynamic Oceanography were a great success and introduced a whole generation of students to the physics of the oceans. His detailed surveys of the waters of BC fjords provide an essential base line for assessing the progress of climate change. In later years, George extended his interests to the South Seas, surveying the fjords of Chile and New Zealand, making major contributions to the oceanography of the Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea.

George Pickard was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a recipient of CMOS's Tully Medal. His wife Lilian -- they met and married while students at Oxford -- predeceased him (in 1994); he leaves a son, Andrew, and a daughter Ann.