

Information sheet no 112

John Jellicoe

Jellicoe was born on 5 December 1859 at Southampton, the second of four sons of a Master Mariner. He entered the Royal Navy in 1872 and passed out from the training ship *Britannia* top of his term in the summer of 1874. His first sea-going appointment was as a Midshipman in HMS *Newcastle*. In 1877, he transferred to the battleship HMS *Agincourt*. With a first class certificate in seamanship and a promotion to Sub-Lieutenant, he was appointed to the Mediterranean Fleet's flagship HMS *Alexandra*. He gained promotion to Lieutenant in September 1880 and had to complete twelve months watch-keeping service at sea before undertaking gunnery training. He returned to HMS *Agincourt* from February 1882 for this purpose. In May 1882, during Arabi Pasha's rebellion in Egypt, Jellicoe distinguished himself by adopting native disguise to carry secret dispatches past the massed enemy troops to the British commander, Sir Garnet Wolseley. Following completion of active service, he went to HMS *Excellent* for gunnery training and completed the course with distinction.

He was appointed as Gunnery Officer in HMS *Monarch* in 1885 and later, briefly, transferred to HMS *Colossus* in April 1886 before returning to HMS *Excellent* as an experimental officer in December 1886. In 1889, the government passed the Naval Defence Act with the intention to extend Britain's naval power and increase the fleet. The Director of Naval Ordnance, Captain John "Jacky" Fisher, requested the transfer of Jellicoe from HMS *Excellent* as his Assistant. Jellicoe returned to active service in HMS *Sans Pareil* after being promoted to Commander in 1891. In 1893, he transferred as Executive Officer to the Mediterranean Fleet flagship, HMS *Victoria*. He survived the sinking of the ship after it had been rammed by HMS *Camperdown* off Tripoli in June 1893. He returned to active service in the autumn serving in HMS *Ramillies* for a three year commission. On his return in January 1897, he was promoted to Captain.

His first appointment was to the Ordnance Committee and afterwards as Flag Captain of HMS *Centurion* on the Far East Station. He accompanied the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Seymour, on an abortive attempt to relieve the legations in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. He received a bullet to the lung during the action.

Jellicoe returned home in September 1901 and was appointed to the newly created post of Naval Assistant to the Controller at the Admiralty. During a visit to the Clyde to inspect new ships under construction, he renewed his acquaintance with Florence Cayzer and the couple were later married in London in July 1902. They had five children, one son and four daughters. In 1903, Jellicoe was appointed to command the armed cruiser, HMS *Drake*. This command was soon terminated with Admiral Fisher's appointment as First Sea Lord in 1904. Fisher recalled Jellicoe to the Admiralty to be his Director of Naval Ordnance and to serve on the committee being formed to produce the first all-big-gun battleship, HMS *Dreadnought*.

In February 1907, Jellicoe was promoted Rear Admiral and hoisted his flag as Second-in-Command of the Atlantic Fleet in August. He was knighted in October 1907 and, a year later, became Third Sea Lord. His role was to ensure that the Royal Navy maintained the lead in warship construction over Germany. In December 1910, he was appointed Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet and promoted to Vice Admiral in September 1911. He served with the



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Home Fleet as Second in Command and commanded the 2nd Battle Squadron in May 1912. He was appointed to the Royal Commission to inquire into liquid fuels from August 1912 until January 1913, during which time he was also appointed as Second Sea Lord in December 1912.

His appointment as Second Sea Lord was cut short by the approach of the First World War. In July 1914, he was sent to Scapa Flow, the fleet anchorage in the Orkneys, with the acting rank of Admiral to assume control of the Grand Fleet. His flag flew from the super-dreadnought, HMS *Iron Duke*. Jellicoe's strategy was to maintain control of the sea by a distant blockade of Germany's ports. At the end of May 1916, the Germans attempted to break the stranglehold by bringing the Grand Fleet to battle off the coast of Jutland. The battle was an inconclusive engagement with both sides claiming victory – the Germans having sunk more British ships than they lost of theirs while the British maintained mastery of the sea with the High Seas Fleet remaining in port for the remainder of the war. Jellicoe's battle tactics will always be open to debate but administrative carelessness at the Admiralty increased Jellicoe's problems, as he failed to receive vital information deciphered German codes giving the course of the German fleet's retreat.

Following their narrow escape, the Germans decided to stake everything on an unrestricted U-boat blockade for which the British were ill prepared. Jellicoe was appointed First Sea Lord in December 1916. With the entry of the USA into the war in 1917, the convoy system was introduced to counter the German U-boat blockade. His cautionary approach to the war was not to the liking of the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, and Jellicoe was dismissed at the end of 1917. In January 1918, he was raised to the peerage as Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa and was promoted Admiral of the Fleet in 1919. Between 1919 and 1920, Jellicoe visited India, Australia, New Zealand and Canada to provide advice on naval defence. This resulted in the construction of a major naval base at Singapore. He was Governor General of New Zealand from 1920-1924 and he was rewarded with an earldom.

During his retirement, he was President of the British Legion and was also actively involved in the National Rifle Association and the Scout movement. He died, at his home in Kensington, on 20 November 1935, aged seventy-five. He was laid to rest in St Paul's Cathedral, beside Nelson and Collingwood and is also commemorated by a bronze bust in Trafalgar Square.