

Information sheet no 003

Andrew Cunningham

Born 7th January 1883 in Dublin. In January 1897, Andrew Browne Cunningham entered the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth, from which he passed out in May 1898. His first service was as Midshipman on the HMS *Doris* in 1899, serving at the Cape Station when the Boer War broke out. By February 1900 he transferred into the naval brigade as this promised opportunities for bravery and distinction in action. In spite of front line service, he was omitted from a list of those noted for early promotion due to accusations of nepotism.

In 1902-3 Cunningham took sub-lieutenant courses at Portsmouth and Greenwich. His first service as a Sub-Lieutenant was on the battleship HMS *Implacable* serving in the Mediterranean for six months. In September 1903, he was transferred to HMS *Locust* to serve as second in command. He was promoted Lieutenant in 1904, and served in HMSs *Northampton*, *Hawke* and *Suffolk*. In 1908, he took command of HM Torpedo Boat no.14. In 1911 he was given command of the destroyer HMS *Scorpion* and served in her throughout WWI. In 1914, HMS *Scorpion* was involved in the shadowing of the German battlecruisers *Goeben* and *Breslau*. During the attack on the Dardanelles in 1915, HMS *Scorpion* was always at the forefront of the action, and Cunningham was rewarded by a promotion to Commander and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. In 1918, he took part in numerous actions by the Dover Patrol including the Zeebrugge Raid on April 18th, for which he was awarded a bar to his DSO the following year. He served on HMS *Seafire* during the post war campaign in the Baltic in support of the White Russians under Admiral Cowan and he was awarded a second bar to his DSO along with promotion to Captain in 1920.

During the inter war years, he was appointed Captain of the 6th Destroyer Flotilla in 1922 and 1st Destroyer Flotilla in 1923, and given command of the destroyer base at Port Edgar in the Firth of Forth from 1924-6. Between 1926 and 1928, Cunningham was Flag Captain and chief staff officer to Vice Admiral Cowan while serving on the America and West Indies station. Cunningham married Nona Byatt in 1929 while at the Imperial Defence College. After a year at the College, Cunningham was given command of the battleship HMS *Rodney* - a position marking him out as a captain of great promise. Eighteen months later, he was appointed Commodore of HMS *Pembroke*, the Royal Naval barracks at Chatham. He was promoted to flag rank and Aide-de-Camp to the King in September 1932, and appointed as Rear-Admiral (Destroyers) in the Mediterranean in December 1933. He was appointed a Companion of the Bath in 1934. On his promotion to Vice Admiral in July 1936, due to the inter-war naval policy, further active employment seemed remote. However, a year later due to the illness of Sir Geoffrey Blake, Cunningham assumed the combined appointment of commander of the Battle Cruiser Squadron and second-in-command of the Mediterranean Fleet, hoisting his flag in HMS *Hood*. He retained this command until September 1938 when he was appointed to the Admiralty as Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, although he did not actually take up this post until December 1939. He accepted this shore job with reluctance since he loathed administration, but the Board of Admiralty's high regard of him was evident. For six months, during an illness of First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Roger Blackhouse, he acted as his deputy on the Committee of Imperial Defence and Admiralty Board.

In June 1939 Cunningham was appointed Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean station, with the acting rank of Admiral, his flagship being HMS *Warspite*. In the same year he was appointed as Knight Commander of the Bath.

© National Museum of the Royal Navy, 2014

The information contained in this sheet is correct as far as we are able to ascertain from our sources. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete history of the subject. Please contact the library for a list of further reading materials, if available

Andrew Cunningham



Information sheet no 003

When war with Italy broke out in 1940, Cunningham's immediate aim was to restore and maintain British supremacy in the Mediterranean with the policy of 'seek out and destroy'. He insisted Alexandria and Malta must be maintained as British naval bases to sustain communications and provide support for the army and RAF. Under Cunningham's leadership, the Royal Navy scored two notable successes in the Mediterranean while the war was going badly elsewhere. The first was the Fleet Air Arm attack on Taranto on 11th November 1940, and the second was the defeat of the Italian battle fleet off Cape Matapan on 28th March 1941, the first large scale naval action for 25 years. He was also promoted to Knight, Grand Cross of the Bath (GCB) in the same month. However, Cunningham needed all his powers of leadership to overcome setbacks at Scarpanto in May 1941 and the withdrawal of Allied troops from Crete, which left him with virtually no air protection from which the Mediterranean fleet suffered severe losses.

From June to October 1942, Cunningham was with the combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington, as head of the British Admiralty delegation and the respect he achieved here was underlined when he was selected as Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force. In recognition of his continuing services, Cunningham had been created a Baronet in July 1942 and resumed his position as Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean and was also promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in January 1943. He oversaw the successful landings in North Africa in November 1942 as well as the landings at Sicily in July 1943 and later at Salerno in September 1943.

In October 1943, he was appointed as First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, the post in which he remained for the rest of the war. In January 1945 he was created a Knight of the Thistle, an honour which he prized above all others. Further honours followed the conclusion of the war, when he was raised to the peerage in September 1945, as Baron Cunningham of Hyndhope, of Kirkhope, county Selkirk. In 1946 he was raised to become a Viscount, and in the same year, he was appointed to the Order of Merit when he relinquished the office of First Sea Lord. He received many foreign orders and decorations as well as honorary degrees, and the freedom of the cities of London, Edinburgh, Manchester and Hove. Cunningham died suddenly on the 12th June 1963, in London, and was buried at sea off Portsmouth.