

Information sheet no 077

David Beatty

David Beatty was born on 17th January 1871 at Stapeley in Cheshire. He entered the Navy at the age of thirteen when he joined the training ship *Britannia* at Dartmouth. He remained there for two years and on passing out, became a Midshipman on HMS *Alexandra* serving in the Mediterranean. In 1890 he went to Portsmouth and then the RNC, Greenwich to undergo more training. He emerged with certificates in torpedo warfare, seamanship, gunnery, pilotage and navigation. On completion of his training, he was promoted to Lieutenant in August 1892 and was appointed first to HMS *Ruby* and followed this with appointments to HMSs *Camperdown* and *Trafalgar*, spending most of this period in the Mediterranean.

However, Beatty found the general routine of naval service very mundane and was eager for action. His chance came when he was selected by his Captain, Sir Stanley Colville, of HMS *Trafalgar* to be second in command of a small gunboat force in the Nile to support Kitchener's expedition to recover Sudan in 1896. The force had not got very far before they were engaged by the Dervishes, and Colville was badly wounded. Beatty was left in command and he decided to take the initiative by leading the flotilla further upstream out of reach of the opposing forces. Beatty reached Dongola after continuing heavy fighting and occupied the town. His leadership reached the notice of General Kitchener and was highly praised for his efforts. In addition, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

In 1897, he was again in action on the Nile in a gunboat flotilla on behalf of the Egyptian government. He survived the capsizing of the gunboat he was commanding and commanded a shore battery during the battle of Atabara. For his continuing efforts, he gained an early promotion to Commander well in advance of his age and above those ahead of him in the seniority list. In 1899, he was appointed to HMS *Barfleur* on the China Station and again saw action during the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900. Beatty was in command of a naval brigade landed at Tientsin to support the garrison there and the brigade was in various actions ashore. During one action Beatty was ambushed and badly wounded. He managed to continue and ensured his brigade party returned. Following this, he took command of a detachment to rescue the Commander in Chief from Hsiku. His gallant services were rewarded by a promotion to the rank of Captain at the very early age of 29.

In 1901, Beatty met and married an American widow, Ethel Tree. She was a wealthy woman and his marriage allowed Beatty to be financially independent. In 1902, Beatty was appointed to command HMS *Juno* and this was followed by various other commands in HMSs *Arrogant*, *Diana*, *Suffolk* and *Queen*. During these commands, his wife gave birth to two sons. He was also appointed a Member of the Royal Victorian Order (MVO) in 1905. By 1910, he had reached the top of the seniority list of Captains, but had not served the qualifying six years at sea to attain flag rank. However, because of his previous war services, he was promoted to Rear-Admiral by a special Order-in Council on 1 January 1910 and became the youngest flag-officer since Nelson. However, he did turn down the appointment of second in command to the Atlantic Fleet, which many saw as a gamble at an early stage in his flag career. However, in 1911, he was appointed Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB), a continuing recognition of his talents.

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In October 1911, Winston Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty and the following year, appointed Beatty as his naval secretary, despite his lack of experience. Churchill felt that his knowledge in the techniques of war were suitable qualifications. Churchill appointed Beatty the command of a battle-cruiser squadron in 1913 and he hoisted his flag in HMS *Lion*.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Beatty was second in command to Admiral John Jellicoe in the Grand Fleet. On 28th August 1914, Beatty took part in the battle of the Heligoland Bight and was able to secure a victory for the British squadrons. He was awarded with a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB). On 24th January 1915, he led another successful offensive at the battle of Dogger Bank against Admiral Hipper. However, his flagship was damaged early in the action and he was forced to command the action via flag signalling, which Beatty found unsatisfactory. In December 1915, he was promoted to Vice Admiral and commanded three battle-cruiser squadrons of the Grand Fleet.

When Admiral Scheer became Commander in Chief of the German High Seas fleet in 1916, it became clear that he intended to engage the British fleet more intensely than had been done previously. The climax came at the end of May 1916 when, by sheer co-incidence, the British fleet were also preparing for operations in the Skagerrak, the area where Scheer had decided to draw out the enemy. At 3.25pm on 31 May 1916, Beatty sighted the German fleet and engaged in battle. His handling of the battle caused controversy, as he engaged in battle without a supporting squadron of battleships, and hazarded his ships by being in close range of the enemy. His tactics, however, were successful in that the German fleet did not see the supporting squadrons coming into battle and were forced into a vulnerable position. The battle of Jutland lasted until the following day. It was the only major naval confrontation of the war and has proved to be the most inconclusive. The British fleet lost more ships and men than their opponents, but the long term aim of preventing the High Seas Fleet from putting to sea for the duration of the war was secured. Beatty was appointed Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order (KCVO) and Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath (GCB).

At the end of the year, Jellicoe became First Sea Lord and Beatty succeeded him as Commander in Chief of the Grand Fleet and Acting Admiral. He did not however achieve a decisive victory that he craved due to the naval strategy changing with priority given to defeating the U-boat warfare that Germany had engaged in. Battleships also needed to be modified in light of the losses at Jutland and communications during battle required some attention. In 1917, he was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (GCVO) In November 1918, Beatty took the surrender from the German High Seas fleet after the Armistice had been signed. On 1 January 1919, Beatty's rank as Admiral was confirmed. Four months later, he was promoted again to Admiral of the Fleet and this was followed in November with the appointment of First Sea Lord. He remained in this post until 1927, the longest period any single person had served for. In 1919, he was appointed to the Order of Merit (OM) and later raised to the peerage as an Earl.

During his time at the Admiralty, he was concerned with the need to maintain a strong navy in the light of the needs of national economy and world peace. He managed to negotiate the retention of a core number of ships for the British navy at the Washington Naval Conference in 1921. He insisted on obtaining full dockyard facilities in

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Singapore to allow for a Far Eastern fleet to be maintained, in view of the Japanese alliances with Germany. He was in dispute with the Air Ministry over the Fleet Air Arm, transferred into the Air Ministry after the war. Beatty maintained that the Admiralty should maintain this service as an essential element of naval warfare. This was only resolved after his death with the Fleet Air Arm returning to Admiralty control.

Beatty retired from naval service in July 1927, but was granted the privilege of being sworn in as a Privy Councillor. In November 1935, despite suffering from influenza, he was a pall bearer at the funeral of John Jellicoe. Four months later, on 11 March 1936, he died and was given a funeral at St Pauls Cathedral. His eldest son, David, succeeded to the Earldom.