



Information on Cruiser Captains

Captains of HMS Ajax Leander Cruiser

Commissioned 15th April 1935 – 16 February 1948

VERO ELLIOT KEMBALL

CAPTAIN (Commander) OF HMS AJAX from 7 NOVEMBER 1933 to 11 SEPTEMBER 1934

Born 23 January 1893. Vero Elliot Kemball served as Midshipman from 15 January 1911 and was advanced to Sub-Lieutenant 5 March 1915. His promotion to Lieutenant-Commander was on 15 December 1920 and to Commander 15 December 1927. Commander (E) Kemball commanded HMS Ajax while building at Barrow-in-Furness. He was retired with the rank of Captain (E) 23 January 1943.

He died 9 June 1963 aged 70.

JOHN EDMUND SISSMORE

CAPTAIN (Commander) OF HMS AJAX from 12 SEPTEMBER to 16 DECEMBER 1934

Born 17 July 1896 in Surrey. John Edmund Sissmore served as a Midshipman from 15 January 1914 and promoted to Sub-Lieutenant 15 September 1916 and to Lieutenant 15 December 1917. He was appointed Lieutenant 15 December 1925 and Commander 31 December 1931.

Commander Sissmore commanded HMS Ajax while building at Barrow-in-Furness. He also sailed with her on the first commission as commander under Captain Thomson.

John Edmund Sissmore OBE DSC died 20 July 1975 aged 79.

COLIN SINCLAIR THOMSON

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 16 DECEMBER 1934 to 9 OCTOBER 1937

Born 27 May 1888. Colin Thomson served as Midshipman from 30 June 1905, as Sub-Lieutenant from 30 September 1908 and Lieutenant from 1 April 1911, when he was appointed to HMS Cameleon, a Torpedo Boat Destroyer. He was advanced to Commander June 1925 and Captain 30 June 1931. In 1922 he commanded HMS Viscount, a destroyer. On 16 December 1934 he was appointed to the newly-completed HMS Ajax, leaving Barrow for Portsmouth 12 April 1935 and commissioning on the 15th. On 11 June she sailed for the Mediterranean station, and was engaged on various exercises until July. On 3 August she sailed for Trinidad, and on the 12th proceeded to Caracas, Venezuela, which was the first visit by a British warship for three years. The rest of August 1935 was spent in the West Indies and in September she returned to join the Mediterranean fleet, Commander-in-Chief Rear-Admiral Max Horton, when Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia). In January 1936 Ajax spent some time in Malta refitting and in April she escorted King Farouk the Viceroy of India from Marseilles to Alexandria. From 28 July to 3 August 1936 she was Rear-Admiral Evans' flagship in the Mediterranean and then sailed for the West Indies and through the Panama Canal for the South American station.

On 28 December 1936 she sailed for the Falkland Islands and in January 1937 picked up the survivors of the RRS Discovery II expedition from South Shetlands. She then returned to South America, until March, when she proceeded to Barbados. On 6 August 1937 she came home to Portsmouth. Captain Thomson left the ship in November 1937 and his final command was of the Portland Naval Base in 1938, when he retired. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral (Retired List) 8 July 1941.

He died 24 July 1959 aged 71.

CHARLES HENRY LAWRENCE WOODHOUSE

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 9 OCTOBER 1937 to 22 APRIL 1940

Born 9 July 1893 in Nottinghamshire. Charles Woodhouse was educated at Osborne and Dartmouth. He received his appointment to Midshipman 15 May 1911 and served on board HMS Inflexible, an armoured cruiser in the Home Fleet's 1st Cruiser Squadron, from 17 May 1911. He was appointed to HMS Thunderer as Sub-Lieutenant from 6 May 1914 after which he transferred to the Malaya 18 December 1915 having been advanced to Lieutenant 15 May 1916 and was present in the Malaya at the Battle of Jutland. In this rank he served in HMS Excellent from 18 January to 16 November 1918.

He transferred to HMS St Vincent and then to the Conqueror and served again in HMS Excellent until 1919. He was appointed to the Ceres 15 July 1920, to the Excellent again from April 1922 until August 1924, to the Coventry and then the Royal Sovereign 12 July 1926.

He was on the staff of HMS Excellent from 8 April 1927 and promoted Commander 31 December 1927. He attended a SOTC Parts 1 and 2 at HMS Victory 14 October 1929 and was appointed to HMS Warspite 19 December 1930 acting as Squadron Gunnery Officer 1 January 1931 until 2 January 1933. Next followed spells at HMS Pembroke and HMS President 15 October 1934 then promoted Captain 31 December 1934 and Assistant DNE 28 February 1935.

He was appointed to HMS Ajax in 1937. In January 1939 they were in Chile at Valparaiso and Talcahuano in company with HMS Exeter when a severe earthquake occurred at Concepcion causing great devastation with over 30,000 dead. The ships rendered what assistance they could.

In August 1939 the zones of command were rearranged and Ajax and Exeter were transferred to the South Atlantic Command, Commander-in-Chief Vice-Admiral Lyons. Commodore Henry Harwood flew his broad pendant in Exeter. War being declared against Germany on 3 September, Ajax sank the German SS Olinda on the same day, the first enemy ship to be sunk; on the following day, the SS Carl Fritzen. On 3 October Ajax was in the Rio de Janeiro area and Exeter was ordered to join her. The SS Clement had been attacked and sunk on 30 September by a surface raider. HMS [later HMNZS] Achilles was to join Ajax on patrol in the Rio and River Plate areas and HMS Cumberland joined Exeter to carry out sweeps north of those areas. On 27 October 1939 Commodore Harwood transferred his broad pendant to HMS Ajax while Exeter went to Port Stanley for repairs.

On 29 November Ajax and Exeter were back in the Falklands. The Doric Star was sunk on 2 December and Achilles, Ajax and Exeter concentrated in the area of the River Plate. On 5 December Ajax intercepted the German merchantman SS Ussukuma; the ship was scuttled and the crew taken on board Ajax and later transferred to the Cumberland.

Commodore Harwood had always considered that sooner or later the raider would be tempted by the traffic off Rio de Janeiro and the River Plate. Twenty-four hours after he made his concentration, at 0608 on 13 December 1939 Ajax reported smoke to the south-east and Exeter was sent to investigate. Eight minutes later she signalled: 'I think it is a pocket-battleship'. Commodore Harwood divided his force into two divisions. Exeter engaged the enemy from the south and the two light cruisers from the east to force the German captain to divide his armament. The enemy was later recognised to be the Admiral Graf Spee, Captain Hans Langsdorff. With the help of radar the Graf Spee quickly found the range of Exeter. Exeter opened fire at 0620; Achilles at 0621; Ajax at 0623. Exeter was straddled by the Graf Spee's third 11" salvo, which killed the starboard tube's crew. Ajax and Achilles were in concentrated firing closing the range rapidly and gaining bearing on the enemy. The Graf Spee shifted one 11" turret onto Ajax. His secondary armament was firing alternately at Achilles and Ajax.

Ajax catapulted her Seafox, with Lieutenant E.D. Lewin as pilot, at 0637, but did not receive the first spotting report until 0654 due to delay in establishing W/T communication. Graf Spee made frequent alterations of course and made great use of smoke. By 0724 Exeter had been very badly damaged and was dropping astern. Ajax fired four torpedoes at a range of 9,000 yards. The Graf Spee at once turned 130 degrees to port and turned back three minutes later. The two light cruisers were firing very rapidly and accurately and the Graf Spee was being hit more frequently. At 0740 Commodore Harwood ordered Exeter to make for the Falklands. The German battleship had turned away under smoke making for the River Plate. Ajax and Achilles, in pursuit, continued the action, until Harwood decided to break off the fight until dark. The action had lasted one hour and twenty minutes.

Shortly after midnight the Graf Spee entered Montevideo Harbour. Ajax and Achilles lay outside. On the night of the 14th the Cumberland who had been under repair in the Falklands, took the place of Exeter which shortened the odds once again. Force K, in the north - Renown and Ark Royal and further north, Neptune and three destroyers were ordered to Montevideo. Meanwhile, Captain Langsdorff contacted the German Admiralty giving his strategic position and requesting a decision. He was told to fight through to Buenos Aires if possible or to scuttle the ship. On the afternoon of the 17th the Graf Spee transferred her crew to German merchant ship Tacoma in the harbour. At 1815 she weighed and left harbour. At 2045 Ajax's Seafox reported: 'The Graf Spee has blown herself up.'

Captain Langsdorff was broken-hearted at the loss of his ship. That night he shot himself.

Ajax had five marines and two seamen killed, and thirteen wounded. Two of her 6" gun turrets were knocked out and others damaged.

Awards:

CB

Captain Charles Woodhouse

DSO

Captain Douglas Everett, MBE

Lieutenant Ian De'Ath, RM

Lieutenant Commander D.P. Dreyer

Lieutenant. N. K. Todd

Lieutenant E. D. C. Levin

Warrant Shipwright F. R. T. Panter

Warrant Engineer A. P. Monk

Gunner F. C. Biggs

DSM

Petty Officer A. E. Fuller

Chief Mechanician W. G. Dorling

Stoker B. Wood

Stoker F. E. Monk

Shipwright D. Graham

Electrical Artificer J. W. Jenkins

Sergeant R. C. Cook, RM

Marine T. S. Buckley

Petty Officer C. H. Gorton

Petty Officer J. W. Hill

Leading Seaman L. C. Card

Able seaman R. D. Macey

Able Seaman R. McClarnan

Stoker R. Perry

In early 1940, following immediate repairs in the Falklands, Ajax with newly appointed Rear-Admiral Harwood, visited Montevideo whilst Achilles went to Buenos Aires and then home to New Zealand. On 23 February 1940 the officers and men of the cruisers Ajax and Exeter and six of the Merchant Navy captains who had been prisoners on board the Graf Spee, received a magnificent welcome from King George VI and the citizens of London, when they paraded on Horse Guards Parade and then on to Guildhall. Ajax then went to Chatham for a refit.

Captain Woodhouse was promoted to the rank of Rear-Admiral 8 January 1944 and to Vice Admiral 21 April 1948. He was appointed Commander-in-Chief East Indies from 1948 to 1950, and was promoted Admiral (Retired List) 26 January 1952.

He was nominated KCB 9 June 1949.

He died 23 September 1978 aged 85.

EDWARD DESMOND BEWLEY McCARTHY

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 22 APRIL 1940 to NOVEMBER 1941

Born 15 November 1893 in Middlesex. Edward McCarthy was educated at the Royal Naval Colleges of Osborne and Dartmouth. He served as Midshipman from 1 September 1911 in HMS Vanguard, a battleship in the Home Fleet. He was made Sub-Lieutenant 15 May 1914, Lieutenant Commander 16 February 1924, Commander 31 December 1929 and Captain 30 June 1935.

Captain McCarthy was appointed to HMS Ajax in April 1940 at Chatham. She sailed for Liverpool on 31 July and proceeded to Malta in company with HMS York as escort to an army convoy on 22 August. They reached the island without incident.

On 12 October 1940 a small Italian destroyer force put to sea with the intention of attacking outlying units of the fleet who were escorting a small convoy. At 0200 Ajax, about 110 miles to the east of Malta, reported that she was in contact with enemy destroyers. One, the Ariel, blew up when Ajax opened fire at 4,000 yards. The second, the Airone, was also sunk but not before Ajax had been hit twice on the bridge structure and once amidships. While Ajax was dealing with the Airone the Artigliere came in from the starboard bow. She also was engaged and her guns silenced but Ajax received four more hits and her radar and one gun were put out of action. Two more destroyers were sighted and one turned to engage but after a few rounds withdrew behind a smoke screen. Contact with the enemy was lost. Two British officers and ten ratings were killed and twenty wounded. The Artigliere was sunk later by HMS York after her crew had abandoned ship.

Ajax returned to Malta for repairs and was back in Alexandria by the end of October. On 11 November 1940 Ajax, with the Orion and the Sydney, and the destroyers Nubian and Mohawk, under Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell's command - Force K - left the fleet, which was on its way to attack Taranto, to mount a diversionary operation of their own against an Italian convoy. At about 0115 on 12 November they sighted the convoy of four ships and two destroyers off Valoma. One merchant ship was sunk and two set on fire and left sinking. The fourth escaped under cover of smoke. The two destroyers left at high speed after one of them had been hit.

While the fleet sailed to what was to result in the Battle of Matapan on 27 April 1941, Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell, with his flag in the Orion, had been ordered, with Ajax, Perth and Gloucester, and destroyers Ilex, Hasty, Vendetta and Hereward, to be south-east of Gavdo Island at daylight on 28 April, to cover the one convoy at sea in the danger area. Just before 0800 Pridham-Wippell reported to Admiral Cunningham, who was about 90 miles astern of him, that he had sighted three cruisers with destroyers, which he was trying to draw towards the main fleet. The Italian cruisers followed him, and opened fire at a range of nearly thirteen miles, concentrating on the Gloucester. At 0829, when the range had closed by about a mile the Gloucester opened fire, but fell short. The enemy altered course towards the westward and at 0855 ceased firing. Pridham-Wippell swung round to keep in touch. Just before 1100 he sighted a battleship, which immediately opened fire at a range of 16,000 yards. Our cruisers turned away under cover of smoke, and ran at full speed, being straddled by 15" shells.

Admiral Cunningham ordered the Valiant to go to the cruisers' assistance, and the Formidable's torpedo-bombers to be sent in. This relieved the pressure but made the enemy battleship turn away. They reported three hits and said that her speed was down to about eight knots, which, however, proved to be optimistic, as she could still do 12 to 15 knots. Swordfish from Maleme and RAF bombers from Greece also attacked. The torpedo-bombers reported that the battleship was the Vittorio Veneto.

At 1644 Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell was ordered to get into visual contact with the enemy. Admiral Cunningham's plan for the night was for a striking force of eight destroyers under Captain Mack of the Jervis to attack if the cruisers also made contact with the Vittorio Veneto, and for our battleships to follow up if necessary. The Formidable sent in a striking force of torpedo-bombers at 1830. The Vittorio Veneto was now 45 miles from the Warspite, travelling at 15 knots. The Italian fleet was in a bunch, with the battleship in the centre of two columns of ships on either side, one of cruisers and one of destroyers.

Admiral Sir Edward Desmond Bewley McCarthy, KCB, DSO & Bar died 8 June 1966 aged 72.

RICHARD GRAHAM STEWART

CAPTAIN (Commander) OF HMS AJAX from 2 JULY 1942 to 13 SEPTEMBER 1942

Born 5 August 1901 in Renfrewshire. Commander R. G. Stewart served as Midshipman 15 September 1917, Lieutenant 15 August 1923, Lieutenant-Commander 15 August 1931 and Commander 18 June 1939. He commanded HMS Ajax while she was refitting at Chatham from 2 July to 13 September 1942. He retired 30 December 1942 medically unfit.

He died 25 March 1950 aged 48.

JAMES JOSEPH WELD

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 14 SEPTEMBER 1942 to 8 SEPTEMBER 1944

Born 17 May 1899 in Surrey. James Joseph Weld served as Midshipman from 15 July 1917, Sub-Lieutenant from 15 March 1918, Lieutenant from 15 December 1919 and Lieutenant-Commander 15 October 1927. He was promoted to Commander from 30 June 1934 and to Captain 31 December 1940. Lieutenant Weld specialised in Gunnery in 1924. He had some connection with South America and was lent to the Chilean Navy in 1930. He was appointed to command the Gunnery School at Chatham in 1936.

He was appointed to the command of HMS Ajax, refitting at Chatham, in September 1942. After re-commissioning, Ajax proceeded to the Mediterranean, but her luck had changed. On New Year's Day 1943 she was hit by a 1,000 lb bomb while in harbour at Bone. Two of her boiler rooms were put out of action and a third damaged. Still, after temporary repairs had been carried out, she sailed under her own steam, first to Algiers and then to New York for repairs.

In June 1944 the ship was part of the bombarding force on D-Day off Gold Beach. Ajax and the Argonaut engaged the four-gun battery at Longues at 0530 but just before 0600 it opened fire on the HQ Ship Bulolo. By 0630 it had been silenced but soon after resumed the attack. After further engagements by Ajax and the Argonaut it was at last finally silenced at about 0845. Its reduction had required 179 shells from the cruisers - two of its four guns had been put out of action by direct hits through the embrasures. In August 1944 HMS Ajax was part of the bombarding force for Operation Dragoon, the invasion of the South of France; (TF 84 Alpha Beach, Gunfire Support Group). Again Ajax was the first to open fire. She remained in the area until 27 August.

Captain Weld left the ship in September 1944. He attended the Senior Officers' Course in 1948 and afterwards was Naval Attaché in South America.

He died 21 November 1957 aged 58.

JOHN WILSON CUTHBERT

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 8 SEPTEMBER 1944 to 19 MARCH 1946

Born 9 April 1902 in Glasgow. John Wilson Cuthbert was educated at Kelvinside Academy and the Royal Naval Colleges. He saw service as a Midshipman from 1919, as Sub-Lieutenant from 15 July 1922, Lieutenant from 15 August 1923 and as Lieutenant-Commander from 15 August 1931. He was promoted to Commander 30 December 1936 and to Captain in 31 December 1941. He was appointed to command HMS Glasgow in 1942 and was a member of the Joint Planning Staff in London from 1942 to 1944.

His next command was HMS Ajax in September 1944. Under his command the ship formed part of the liberation force that went to Greece in October of the same year. The Island of Santorin, north of Crete, surrendered to Ajax. The boats were used by Commander R.S. Foster-Brown, RN, and S.M. Medley of the Hussars took in the caique (Greek fishing boat) 'Santa Claus'. The German Garrison was rounded up and the shore party acted as real Santa Claus to the released prisoners-of-war. They distributed the mail which they had thoughtfully taken ashore with them in the caique. There were also presents for the islanders, including 30,000 tons of flour, 5,200 lbs of sugar, 1,850 lbs of butter and 2,600 lbs. of preserved meat.

On 24 December 1944 Winston Churchill slept on board. He had come for a meeting with Archbishop Damaskinos and M. Papandreous, the new Greek Prime Minister.

The war in Europe ended and Ajax was given several notable missions. While standing by at Trieste with the Orion she renewed her friendship with the 2nd New Zealand Division. In August 1945 as flagship of Admiral Sir John Cunningham, then Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, she visited the South of France to take part in the celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the Allies' landing and in the following month carried the Regent of Iraq from Naples to Istanbul. Ajax and escort of two destroyers were the first British warships to pass through the Dardanelles since before the war. On arrival at Istanbul sailors and marines marched through the streets and were given a rousing welcome.

In September 1945 Ajax took General Freyberg and representatives of the New Zealand forces to Crete to revisit the scenes of their gallant resistance and to attend memorial services for their comrades who died on the island.

Sailing from Malta in January 1946 after a refit, Ajax arrived in Santos on 23 January. After three pleasant days she sailed on to Rio de Janeiro where the flag of Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville, who was there in a personal capacity, was hoisted in the cruiser. Showing the flag the ship sailed on to Montevideo and then to Buenos Aires. It was on her return trip that she escorted the men of the Graf Spee being taken home to Germany in the Highland Monarch after their long internment.

From 1949 to 1950 Captain Cuthbert commanded the Vengeance; he was Deputy Controller at the Admiralty from 1951 to 1953; Flag Officer Flotilla Home Fleet from 1953 to 1954; Admiral Commanding Reserves 1955 to 1956; Flag Officer Scotland from 1956 to 1958. He was promoted Rear-Admiral 8 January 1951; Vice-Admiral in 1954. He entered the retired list in 1958. He was nominated CBE in 1945; CB in 1953; and KBE in 1957. He died 7 December 1987 aged 85.

STANLEY BRIAN DE COURCY-IRELAND

CAPTAIN OF HMS AJAX from 19 MARCH 1946 to 26 FEBRUARY 1948

Born 5 May 1900 in Yorkshire, Stanley de Courcy-Ireland joined the Royal Naval College, Osborne, as a naval Cadet 1 January 1913 and the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth in 1915. As Midshipman he served on board HMS Bellerophon, then with the 4th Battle Squadron, Grand Fleet, based at Scapa Flow from 1 January 1916 and was present at the Battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916. He was transferred to the destroyer HMS Pellew and served in the ranks of Midshipman and Acting-Sub-Lieutenant from 1917 until the ship was torpedoed in June 1918. Promoted to the rank

of Sub-Lieutenant in 1918 he served on board the destroyer HMS Westcott until 1919 and was present at the scuttling of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow, then saw active service in the Baltic.

Acting-Lieutenant de Courcy-Ireland then took courses at Ganville and Caius Colleges Cambridge from 1919 to 1920 and following promotion to Lieutenant, served in the destroyer HMS Venomous in the Home Fleet.

From 1922 to 1924 he was lent to the Royal Australian Navy and served at Flinders Naval Depot for new entries. He was transferred, from 1924 to 1926, to HMS Frobisher then flagship 2nd Cruiser Squadron Mediterranean Fleet. In 1926 he specialised as Observer, Fleet Air Arm, and in 1927 served on board HMS Furious.

He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Commander in 1928 and served at RAF Station Leuchars as a ground instructor. From 1929 to 1934 he served on board HM Ships Argus, Home Fleet; HMS Hermes; RAF Kai Tak in China; and HM Ships Furious and Courageous in the Home Fleet. In the latter he was Senior Observer in 1934.

In 1935 he was promoted to the rank of Commander and until 1936 he was Staff Officer Operations to Vice-Admirals Sir Alex Ramsay and N. F. Lawrence during the Abyssinian crisis. Commander de Courcy-Ireland then had a spell at the Air Ministry on the staff of the Director of Training and Staff Duties, then served on board HMS Newcastle as Second-in-Command until 1941. He returned to the Air Ministry from 1941 to 1942 as Acting-Captain to serve as Liaison Officer between Air and Naval staff.

He was promoted to the rank of Captain in 1942 in command of RNAS Fearn (HMS Owl) and from 1944 to 1945 he was Deputy Director (Naval) Combined Operations H.Q.

Captain de Courcy-Ireland took command of HMS Ajax in 1946, then in the Mediterranean Fleet. The main task between 1946 and 1948 was divided between dealing with Jewish illegal immigrants to Palestine, holding the ring in the Adriatic between Tito and the Italians and supporting the Greeks in their fight against Communism, thus alternating between SNO Haifa, SNO Adriatic (in turn with the US Navy) and in Greek waters. Captain de Courcy-Ireland's term of command was extended so that he could bring the ship home.

The Government attempted to sell HMS Ajax to India, and then to Chile, South America but this fell through. In 1949 she rebelled against the end decreed for her by the Admiralty. En route to the breakers she ran aground on mud banks at the mouth of the River Usk and for more than a week defied all efforts of a veritable fleet of tugs to shift her.

After leaving Ajax Captain de Courcy-Ireland served as Deputy Director Naval Equipment from 1948 to 1951. He was appointed ADC to King George VI in 1951 and retired in August of the same year.

Captain de Courcy-Ireland was present at the commissioning of the new Ajax at Cammell Laird's yard, Birkenhead, on 11 December, 1963.

He died 11 November 2001 aged 101.