

# CALL THE HANDS

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## Captain Edmund Anstice, RN

*The following is a brief passage from the memoirs of Geoffrey Dobbin who was both a Merchant Navy and Royal Naval Reserve Officer. Geoffrey Dobbin was related through marriage to Vice Admiral Edmund Anstice, RN who served on loan with the RAN from 1946 to 1948. At that time the Admiralty had generously offered the assistance of the then Captain Anstice, RN to advise on RAN Fleet Air Arm Matters. In Australia he was appointed Fourth Naval Member (Commodore 2nd class). Given his rapid promotion whilst in Australia he was most successful. This paper provides insight into his career as a pioneer naval aviator.*

### Arrival in London

After a brief call at Tilbury Deebank sailed to Falmouth for docking and I was able to bid farewell to Captain Rivett and Gravel Gertie, a drunken Radio Operator and my fellow officers with whom I had travelled halfway around the world and sign off and join P&O.

I travelled up to London by train and booked into a hotel in Lancaster Gate which was not too expensive and then thought about how I would spend the month before actually starting with P&O. An immediate telephone call was to my Mother's cousin, Lesley Anstice who, with her husband, Ned, lived in London and had asked me to come and stay,

Lesley Ritchie, as she was before she was married, was born in Australia and had fallen for a dashing Royal Naval Officer, married him and had gone to live in various naval posting around the world.

Ned had had a very interesting career in the RN. He had been a cadet at Osborne and Dartmouth, having joined the navy at thirteen, as was the practice in those days. It was the time of the First World War and Ned was then fifteen when the RN sent all the final year cadets away for training in a cruiser which came to a sticky end after meeting a German battleship and virtually all of the cadets were lost. This left a great gap in the fleet and there was an urgent need for Midshipmen so Ned and his other fifteen year olds were sent to war.

Ned was appointed to a cruiser which was to escort the Australian contingent to Gallipoli from Egypt. His role in the landing was to be in charge of one of the naval boats used to land the troops and in the process he was wounded by rifle fire. This put him out of action and he was sent home to the UK to recover in hospital and allow him to get a little older before risking his life again in the service of King and Country.



Captain Edmund W. Anstice in 1947

After the war, and by then a Lieutenant, Ned decided to specialize in Naval Aviation and so became a pilot. Naval aviation in those days consisted of seaplanes being launched off cruisers and battleships by a catapult and then having to land in the sea after the flight and be lifted back on board by a crane. A rather precarious lifestyle.

A later form of naval aviation was where the forward guns of some of the older cruisers were removed and a flat forward deck was laid in lieu. The ship was provided with several Walrus aircraft, fitted as amphibians, and these would be chocked at the after end of the foredeck. The ship would then be steamed flat out into a head wind, the aircraft engine started and also put full ahead, the chocks would be removed and with any luck the biplane would become airborne and not fall into the water and be run over by the ship. Getting back on board also necessitated landing the aircraft in the water and being craned back to safety. Ned's promotion was quite rapid as he managed to keep alive whereas many of his contemporaries did not.

With the advent of the Second World War Naval Aviation had progressed rapidly and there was a fully functional Fleet Air Arm of which Ned was a leading light although he had passed the combat flying age by that time unless he chose to go up in plane just to show that he could fly. Although no longer flying off the decks of carriers he was still heavily involved as the captain of Ark Royal operating in the Atlantic and Med,

I first met Ned and Lesley when they were living in Melbourne in 1946. Ned, by then a Captain and soon to be a Commodore, had been sent to Australia to start the Royal Australian Fleet Air Arm. We had been given the HMAS Sydney as our first carrier and she sailed from Devonport on 12<sup>th</sup>. April, 1949 with her Australian crew. Nearly ten years later I was to find myself as her navigator during my time with the RAN as a Reserve Officer.

I can recall meeting Ned in Melbourne and being somewhat overawed. I was a cadet in Mungana and we were lying in Victoria Dock when I got a phone call from Ned's secretary to say that he and Lesley would be delighted if I and one of the other cadets would join them for dinner and if so a car would collect us at 1800. This meant that Bob Champion, the other cadet and I went on a frantic search for clean collars, clothes brushes to get the coal dust off our black uniforms and ties that were respectable.

At 1800 a large black car drew up at the gangway with a naval rating at the wheel and a white ensign flying on the bonnet and Champion and I climbed aboard to the fond farewells of the other cadets and travelled in luxury so seldom experienced in our lowly world strata.

Dinner was a little overawing as Ned was there covered in gold braid and so also was an assortment of other high ranking naval officers and their wives. However, they all took a great deal of trouble to ensure that Champion and I were put at ease and made to feel part of the dinner party.

Later, we were returned to Mungana by the same car and driver and retired to the cadets half deck along with the multiple question from our fellow curious cabin mates. Champion did mention that he felt he was better suited to dining and conversing with the higher echelon of society rather than having to mix with lowly riff raff with which he was obliged to share a cabin. This resulted in him being taken forcibly on deck and having several buckets of fire water thrown over him.

Now, here I was in London and Ned had had even further promotion. He was now a Vice Admiral, CinC Fleet Air Arm, Fifth Sea Lord and a KCMG. It was still a little overawing as I was a sub-Lieutenant and you don't really get much lower on the pecking scale. However, Ned and Lesley made me very welcome in their rather luxurious and very big flat in Sloane Avenue where they lived with a large black Labrador. It was Spring and I would take the dog for a walk in Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park and other people who were walking their dogs would smile at me and say good morning as I was obviously of the class that did not need to work and was therefore presentable and of a status similar to themselves. If only they had known.

One day Ned asked me if I would like to visit the Admiralty in Whitehall. He had already arranged for me to visit the House of Parliament and have tea on the terrace with some members and also a quick tour of the Palace Gardens. I said yes I would love to see the Admiralty and he said it would be arranged. On the appointed day I repaired to Whitehall at 1700 and reported to the Royal Marine Sergeant at the main desk and was escorted, with some deference, to the Board of Admiralty.

I was greeted at the door by a Flag Lieutenant who welcomed me and said that the board would be entering any moment now and that I was very welcome. It was a very large room with a big oak table in the centre with finely carved chairs set around it. The walls were covered with paintings of former admirals and ships of the line and at the far end stood two stewards in white coats alongside a well-stocked bar.

Just then a door at the other end of the room opened and about ten or twelve men entered. This was the Board of Admiralty lead in by the First Lord of the Admiralty and he was followed by the Sea Lords and their assistants. They were all in civvies so there was not very much gold braid around.

Ned came over and greeted me and introduced me to several people whom I cannot remember and a steward handed me a gin and tonic. Mountbatten was the first Sea lord and very much a hero of mine and there he was actually in the flesh talking to somebody or other. After a few minutes he must have noticed the strange young face in the room and he came over and stood in front of me.

“Don’t think that we have met”, he said. “I’m Mountbatten and you are?”

“Dobbin, Sir”, I managed to say. Very much in awe at the great man to whom I was speaking. “A guest of Sir Edmund’s”, I added as some justification for being there.

“Ah yes”, he said. “Ned mentioned that he had somebody from Australia coming along this evening. What rank are you?” “Sub-Lieutenant, RANR sir”.

Mountbatten smiled and said, “Subbie eh! You know my father used to run this place and I did not get inside it until I was a commander. Congratulations, you better come with me and we’ll freshen up your gin.” He then took me over to the bar, had the steward give me a fresh drink and then took me around and introduced me to the First Lord and others whom I had not already met. He was a very gracious host and had that ability of putting people at ease.

By this time I had been seeing the P&O Officers Department, arranged the date when I would be joining Perim and had made all of the expensive and necessary visits to Gieves in Bond Street to be measured for all of my black uniforms, mess dress uniform and tropical uniforms. All at vast expense which I did not have but with the usual favourable credit system for which Gieves was famous.

Soon after this I was off to sea again but always saw Ned and Lesley when I was in port until they moved to Scotland when Ned retired.

## **Note: Career of Edmund Anstice, RN**

### **Naval Aviator**

On attachment to the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Air Force (all naval aviation being under the control of the RAF at that time), he attended No. 1 Flying Training School at Netheravon, Wiltshire, from June 1924 until January 1925 before being posted to No. 462 Flight, Fleet Air Arm, aboard the aircraft carrier *Furious* in the Atlantic Fleet, receiving the RAF rank of flight lieutenant on 1 July 1927. On 1 September 1927 he became Flight Commander of No. 464 Flight, FAA, aboard the carrier *Courageous*. He was promoted to lieutenant commander on 15 February 1928, and in October 1929 transferred to the battlecruiser *Renown*.

Anstice returned to *Courageous* in November 1930 to serve as Flight Commander of No. 463 Flight for the next two years. He was promoted to Navy commander on 31 December 1932, and to the RAF rank of squadron leader on 1 January 1933, and from 26 September was attached to the Directorate of Training at the Air Ministry. On 19 June 1936 he returned to *Courageous* once more, this time as Senior FAA Officer and Squadron Aviation Officer, receiving promotion to wing commander on 1 July. On 28 July 1937 he was appointed Executive Officer of the heavy cruiser *HMS Shropshire* in the Mediterranean Fleet, remaining there until receiving promotion to the rank of captain on 30 June 1939.

### **World War II**

Anstice spent the early part of World War II, from October 1939, serving at the Admiralty, and was appointed Deputy Director of the Naval Air Division in February 1941. He returned to sea duty in August 1942 serving briefly as Commanding Officer of the escort carrier *Striker*, before taking command of *Fencer* until 19 January 1944. In March 1944 he returned to shore duty at *HMS Monck*, the Combined Training Headquarters at Largs, Ayrshire, where he served as Chief of Staff for Aircraft Carrier Training.

### **Post-War Flag Officer**

Anstice was appointed Commanding Officer of Royal Naval Air Station Lee-on-Solent (*HMS Daedalus*) as a commodore (2nd class) on 30 October 1945.

In November 1946 he was appointed Director of Naval Aviation Planning for the Royal Australian Navy, and in October 1947 as appointed to the newly created post of Fourth Member of the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board to advise the board on all matters related to naval aviation.

Promoted on 10 July 1948 to rear admiral, he served as Flag Officer of the Training Squadron, then from 26 August 1949 as Flag Officer, Flying Training based at RNAS Donibristle, Fife (*HMS Merlin*).

Promoted to Vice Admiral on 15 September 1951, he served on the Board of Admiralty, as Fifth Sea Lord and Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (Air). Vice Admiral Anstice retired on 16 September 1954. He died on 30 August 1979.



Vice Admiral Edmund W. Anstice in 1951