OBITUARIES

Vice-Admiral Sir Alastair Ewing

Destroyer captain who protected convoys to Russia, and was faced with an agonising decision after being ordered to scatter

VICE-ADMIRAL SIR ALASTAIR EWING, who has died aged 88, was one of the boldest and most successful sea captains of the Second World War; he was awarded the DSC for his command of the destroyer *Offa* in the 17th Flotilla from 1941 to 1945.

Offa was commissioned late in 1941. Her first major operation was "Archery", on Dec 27 1941, when the cruiser *Kenya*, with *Offa* and three other destroyers, escorted the assault ships *Prince Charles* and *Prince Leopold*, with 600 Commandos embarked to raid Vaagsö and Maaløy islands in northern Norway.

The raid, supported by RAF Hampden bombers, was entirely successful. Enemy coastal guns were silenced by bombardment and bombing, while the Commandos landed at five separate points, to destroy shore installations, and take prisoners. Five enemy merchant ships and two patrol boats were sunk or driven ashore, and documents were captured, including cryptanalytic material giving full details of German coastal defences from Norway to France.

The raid also provided an unexpected bonus for the Allies, by reinforcing Hitler's obsessive fear that the Allies were about to invade Norway. Thus a large number of German troops were uselessly employed in the defence of Norway for the rest of the war.

Under Ewing's command *Offa* escorted 10 convoys to and from Russia. His leadership was most severely tested in July 1942, when *Offa* was escorting convoy PQ17. The convoy had lost four ships to heavy enemy air attack, but was still in good heart when, on July 4, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, deduced from Ultra special intelligence that the German battleships *Tirpitz* and *Admiral Scheer* were about to sail from their Norwegian base and attack PQ17.

Overruling the advice of his intelligence staff, Pound sent three signals, in increasing priority and growing urgency, with only 25 minutes' interval between the first and the third — which was "Convoy is to scatter."

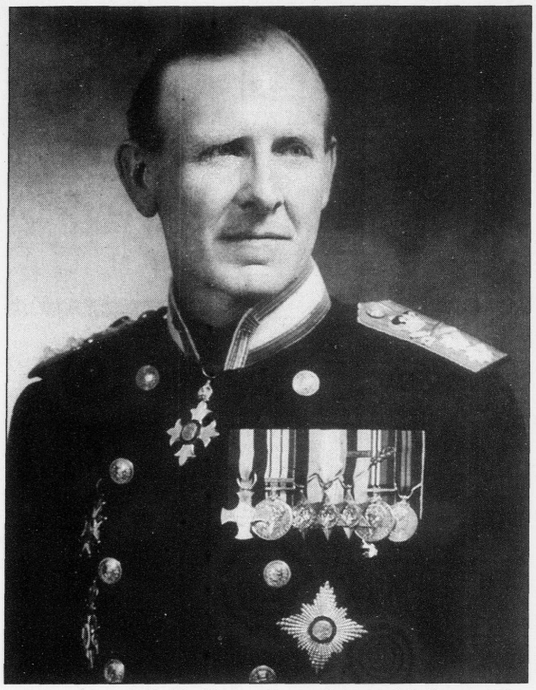
Such an order, normally only given by a commander on the spot and in the face of imminent danger, arrived like a bombshell on *Offa*'s bridge. Everybody there saw the look on Ewing's face as he signalled "God be with you" to the nearest merchant ship, while *Offa* hauled away to the westward at full speed with the rest of PQ17's destroyer escort.

Offa had an outstanding wardroom. Three of her officers were to rise, like Ewing himself, to flag rank. The "scatter" order went against all their professional instincts and training. A fierce argument broke out on the bridge, with more than one officer urging Ewing to disobey the order and turn back, or have a "breakdown", stop the ship, wait for the rest to disappear over the horizon, and then to rejoin the convoy.

But for Ewing, an order was an order, and judging by the urgency of those signals, *Tirpitz* might appear at any moment. So *Offa* went on and soon began to hear the first cries for help from merchantmen being attacked by U-boat and aircraft. In all, PQ17 had 23 ships sunk. *Tirpitz*, *Admiral Scheer* and the heavy cruiser *Hipper* did sail on July 5 but returned to harbour without achieving anything.

In September 1942 *Offa* escorted PQ18, another convoy which suffered heavy losses, with 13 ships sunk, the majority by torpedo bombers. At the height of the battle, Ewing gave a breathtaking display of ship handling when the freighter, *Macbeth*, loaded with tanks and war materials, was hit by two torpedoes. The ship was about to founder at any moment, but Ewing ran alongside her and, though *Offa* lost some guard-rails and stanchions, all *Macbeth*'s sailors "leapt like cats on to her".

Robert Alastair Ewing was born on April 10 1909, and went to Dartmouth as a cadet in 1923. His first ships as a midshipman were the battle cruiser *Hood* in the Home Fleet and the "County" Class cruiser *Suffolk* on the China Station.



Ewing: remembered by his officers and men as the best captain they ever had

His first destroyer was *Vanquisher* in 1931 and he later served in *Valorous* and in *Shamrock*, during the Spanish Civil War. In 1935 he went to HMS *Ganges*, the boys' training establishment at Shotley, as a divisional officer.

In 1937 he joined the new destroyer *Imogen* as first lieutenant, and was mentioned in despatches after she and *Ilex* sank U 42 southwest of Ireland on Oct 15 1939. In company with the destroyers *Escort* and *Inglefield*, and the submarine *Narwhal*, *Imogen* sank another U-boat, U 63, in the North Sea on Feb 25 1940.

Ewing's first command was the "Hunt" Class destroyer *Cattistock* in the 21st Flotilla, based at Sheerness, and engaged on coastal convoy escort and anti-E boat duties. She took part in a number of minor actions, and Ewing was again mentioned in despatches in 1941.

After leaving *Offa* in 1943, Ewing commanded the training cruiser, *Diomede*, until 1945 when he took command of the new destroyer, *Chevriot*, in the 1st Destroyer Flotilla in the Mediterranean.

Promoted Captain in 1947, Ewing went to the Admiralty on the staff of the Second Sea Lord and then in 1950 to Washington DC, to serve on the Planning Staff of the Nato Standing Group.

In 1953 he took over at short notice as captain of the battleship *Vanguard* for her last sea-going operational commission, and commanded her at the 1953 Coronation Review at Spithead.

From 1954 to 1956 Ewing was Director of the Naval Staff College, Greenwich, before returning to the Admiralty as Naval Secretary to the First Lord.

His last sea-going appointment in 1958 was as Flag Officer Flotillas (Mediterranean) at the time of the Enosis crisis in Cyprus.

Ewing was expected to go to the top of the Navy, but his final appointment, from 1960 until he retired in 1962, was the somewhat anti-climactic one of Admiral Commanding Reserves and Inspector of Recruiting. He was appointed CB in 1959 and KBE in 1962.

In wartime, when the majority of ships' companies were "Hostilities Only" ratings, with many going to sea for the first time, a destroyer captain needed to show leadership of the highest quality. On the bridge, with his height, brilliant blue eyes, and black furry Russian hat inherited from his grandfather, Ewing cut a striking figure. He had tremendous physical and mental stamina, able to keep his bridge and his concentration for days on end, with only occasional snatches of sleep, despite the bitterest Arctic weather.

Years later, officers and men who served with Ewing still remember him as the best captain they ever had. He had a personal motto, which he expected them all to live up to: "Good, better, best. Never let us rest. Till our good is better. And our better best."

In retirement, Ewing moved to America, where he dealt in real estate and became a yacht broker in Florida.

He married first, in 1940, Diana Smeed, who died in 1980; they had a son. He married secondly, in 1984, Anne Chichester, daughter of a naval officer, and the widow of another, whom he first met when he was a cadet at Dartmouth.

Jack Trefusis

Bold enforcer of the surrender of 60 Germans in Brussels

JACK TREFUSIS, who has died aged 82, was a civil engineer, a worker for Toc H, and chairman of the Prayer Book Society; in the Second World War, by contrast, he had single-handedly enforced the surrender of 60 Germans in Brussels.

In September 1944 Trefusis was a major on the staff of British 30 Corps under Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks, using his excellent German to assist forward units in dealing with capitulating enemy troops. He recalled "members of the Wehrmacht surrendering wherever one stopped" — though the SS were still dangerous.

In this uncertain situation Trefusis was ordered to get hold of the former Burgomeister of Brussels, Mons van der Meulebroek, who was being held in a fortress some 30 miles to the south, and deliver him back to the city.

Using his contacts with the Dutch Resistance, he arranged for van der Meulebroek to be taken to Brussels. He himself managed to get into the city right under the noses of the German troops, and entered La Grande Place in the shadow of a German tank.

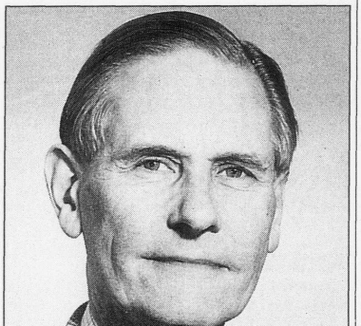
Taken by Resistance friends to a police station adjacent to the Hotel de Ville, he climbed out of a lavatory window and up the wall to the first floor, arriving in a room where van der Meulebroek was waiting with his terrier Rip.

In the library of the Hotel de Ville, Trefusis came upon more than 60 German soldiers who were pouring petrol on to piles of paper in order to set the building ablaze. "The British are here," Trefusis told them in German. "Lay down your arms and you'll be made PoWs and you'll be safe."

The Germans were so surprised at being ordered to surrender in their own language that they complied — though there were still German tanks in the square below.

Trefusis handed his prisoners over to the Belgian police, reinstated van der Meulebroek as Burgomeister and administered the oath of loyalty to the Belgian King. Shortly afterwards he appeared with van der Meulebroek on the balcony of the Hotel de Ville, to a rapturous welcome from the crowd below. The German troops left the square as fast as the Belgians poured in.

The next day Trefusis was invited to attend a meeting of Belgian military leaders, and to receive from them an official speech of welcome to the British forces. Another 24 hours passed before Lt-Gen Horrocks with 30 Corps moved into the royal palace at Laeken; without Trefusis's resolute action the centre of Brussels might not have been spared destruction by the retreating German troops.



Trefusis: Chairman of the Prayer Book Society

Robert John Rodolph Trefusis was born on Oct 15 1914 in the house of his grandfather, who was Bishop of Crediton from 1897 to 1930 and a grandson of the 17th Baron Clinton. The first baron, formerly John de Clinton, had been summoned to Parliament in 1299; and the family has remained prominent in the West Country ever since.

"Jack" Trefusis, as he was always known, was educated at Brighton College, before studying engineering at Swindon. Fluent in French and German, he joined an engineering firm that supplied Krupps, which meant that for some years he worked in Germany, making friends in anti-Nazi circles.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Trefusis was commissioned into the Scots Guards, and took part in the D-Day landings with the Guards Armoured Division.

On Sept 17 1944, shortly after his adventures in Brussels, First Airborne Division dropped at Arnhem. Trefusis was ordered to assist the Dutch Resistance in channelling intelligence about German troop movements.

Setting up in a café 11 miles behind German lines, and making use of reports from Dutch civilians on bicycles, he fed back useful information from an underground dugout equipped with radio. But the Arnhem operation ended in bloody failure. Later Trefusis went on into Germany with 2nd Army HQ.

After leaving the Army in 1946, Trefusis entered the Diplomatic Service and was posted for spells in Vienna and Copenhagen. But in 1954 he left the service to resume his former work as an engineer. He became a technical consultant in the hydraulics field, and served for many years as director-general of the Hydraulics Association.

In 1953 Trefusis had joined the London branch of Toc H, the ex-service associaton founded by the Reverend Tubby Clayton. He was chairman of the Talbot House Association for 29 years and devoted himself in particular to fostering links with Belgium.

He was trustee of St George's Memorial Church at Ypres. In 1987 his work for Belgian Toc H was recognised when he was decorated as an officer of the Order of the Crown of Belgium by King Baudouin.

A lifelong and dedicated member of the Church of England, Trefusis was for many years a churchwarden at St James's, Piccadilly, and a gentleman usher at Westminster Abbey.

He joined the Prayer Book Society in 1972 and the next year became chairman, a position he held until 1989. During that time he showed his gift for bringing out the best in everyone, and built up a strong organisation based on local groups in each diocese.

He started a newsletter, which was originally typed up by his wife and run-off on a duplicator, but which today has a print circulation of many thousands.

In retirement, Trefusis made his base in Devon and enrolled as a guide at Exeter Cathedral, where many of his family are commemorated.

Jack Trefusis married, in 1955, Shirley Scott Barton, whom he had met in the Embassy at Copenhagen; they had a son, who is an Anglican priest, and a daughter.

Klaus von Bismarck

Exemplar of the Prussian virtue of service in war and peace

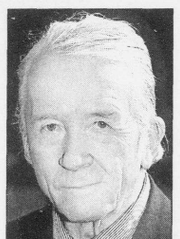
KLAUS VON BISMARCK, the great-great-nephew of the Iron Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who has died aged 85, served with distinction in the Second World War; later he repented the illusion that it was possible to fight with honour in Hitler's cause, and enjoyed a notable career of public service in West Germany.

Unlike many of his former comrades in arms, Bismarck was sympathetic to the exhibition which opened in Hamburg in 1995 about the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht on the eastern front. He himself served throughout the war, in Poland, France and Russia, was three times wounded and was awarded the Knight's Cross and Oak Leaves.

In the debate about the exhibition organised by *Die Zeit*, Bismarck said that he and most other members of the 4th Infantry Regiment, which he rose to command, lived on "an island of self-deception", believing they could "remain upright soldiers in a war that had criminal ends".

He described the shock of the *Kommissarbefehl* — the order issued in the summer of 1941, soon after the start of the invasion of Russia, to shoot all captured Red Army commissars. Bismarck, as a soldier and a Christian, refused to obey the order, as did some of his friends.

He also recalled the horror of seeing the corpses of Russian prisoners of war who had plainly been murdered. He protested to Field Marshal Busch, who was as horrified as himself, but who seemed powerless to act.



Bismarck: flawed honour

Bismarck realised the army was in the hands of a criminal but fought on to the bitter end, "under the spell of the Prussian military tradition", and because, "I had at that time the feeling that I could not abandon the troops entrusted to my care. All the more so because it was clear to me from 1943 that the war was lost".

Klaus von Bismarck was born on March 6 1912 on his father's estate of Jarchlin, in Pomerania, now part of Poland, into an agrarian elite strongly marked by its Protestantism, but not by its knowledge or understanding of developments in other parts of German society.

On leaving school, he studied and practised estate management, and enrolled as a reserve army officer. But after the war, his career took a completely different turn. He became engaged in youth work with the Protestant Church in Germany, and served on its synod. He was president of the Church's congress from 1977 to 1979.

From 1965 to 1976 Bismarck was the head of WDR, the state broadcasting company in Cologne, and from 1977 to 1989 president of the Goethe Institute, Germany's equivalent of the British Council.

He was notable for resolutely defending the independence of both institutions against attempts at political interference.

This liberal stance won him the surprised admiration of some of the left-wing television journalists at WDR, for Bismarck had owed his appointment to Germany's principal conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union.

Although his later pacifism contrasted with his military service, his whole career exemplified the Prussian virtues of tolerance and public service. He was a Prussian who did not, like some, campaign for the restoration of Germany's lost eastern lands, but instead dedicated himself to reconciliation with Poland.

He married, in 1939, Ruth-Alice von Wedemeyer; they had seven sons and one daughter.

His wife's sister Maria became engaged in 1943 to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian who was executed in the last days of the war for his part in the opposition to Hitler.

Marion Welchman

Indefatigable campaigner for dyslexics in Britain and overseas

MARION WELCHMAN, who has died aged 81, worked zealously to promote understanding of dyslexia, the condition which leads to word-blindness.

When Mrs Welchman discovered that her son, Howard, then aged about 11, whom she knew to be bright and intelligent, was having the greatest difficulty learning at school, she determined to find out why. Having found out about dyslexia, she travelled to America where the Orton Dyslexia Society put her in touch with a British teacher, Agnes Wollf, who had trained in the States.

Wollf was so successful at helping Howard that Mrs Welchman pledged herself to making such expertise more widely available. She invited Sally Childs, an American teacher who had been trained in multi-sensory teaching, to give a course for British teachers at Bath. This first took place at Easter 1969 and was repeated for the next five years, resulting in a large pool of teachers, from every sort of school, who understood and could help dyslexic children.

Marion Welchman then turned her attention to the parents. Having already, in 1966, established the Bath Association for the Study of Dyslexia, she travelled all over the country inspiring the formation of local associations of parents and teachers. In 1972 the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) was formed.

There are now more than 100 local associations and more than 75 corporate members. The BDA and the influence it brought to bear on behalf of dyslexic children, became her chief interest.

She was also active overseas — in America and in South Africa where a trust fund bears her name, in Europe where she firmly supported the European Dyslexia Association, and in Singapore where she opened the first meeting of the Singapore Dyslexia Association. Shortly after her 80th birthday, she helped to initiate the World Dyslexia Network Foundation and was delighted by the launch of the Dyslexia Research website last year.

She was born Marion Eves on June 6 1915, in Penarth, South Wales, where she went to school. She stayed in the town until she went to Cardiff to study nursing. She was a nurse for 17 years.

Her greatest pleasure came from the friends she made through contacts with the various dyslexia associations, and although these friends were sometimes daunted by her demands, they returned her devotion.

In 1992 Marion Welchman was awarded the International Leadership Award by the Orton Dyslexia Society, and in 1995 was appointed MBE. Travel, sewing and dressmaking were her chief hobbies.

She married, in 1943, Dennis Welchman, who died in 1984; they had a son and two daughters.

Oliver Pritchett

ANOTHER VIEW

Boots are made for walking (it says here)

A LOT of space on the front page of yesterday's *Daily Telegraph* was devoted to the story about the farmer who bought a new pair of green wellies and received a 24-page user's manual to go with them. All the work of the EU, of course. The manual, in 10 languages, gave much useful information, explaining, for example, that the boots, if dirty, could be washed in a light detergent.

If this story was supposed to illustrate the absurdity of EU regulations, it was mistaken and in very poor taste, as I will now try to show.

As most people know, the Wellington boot was named after the First Duke of Wellington. Apparently, he was at the gaming tables with the Fourth Earl of Sandwich one night when the Earl became hungry. He did not wish to leave the table, so he called to his servant and said: "Go out to the baker's shop down the road and get two slices of bread and put a bit of meat in the middle of them and bring them back to me."

> *'My lord, it is raining something horrible out there'*

The servant (whose name was William Errand, by the way) went out, but returned five minutes later without the snack. "My lord," he said, "it is raining something horrible out there and the street is full of deep puddles. If I go out, I am bound to get my feet wet and could easily catch a chill."

"Damn you for a miserable cur!" interjected the somewhat crusty Duke of Wellington. "You can borrow my boots, but take good care of them." The Earl of Sandwich and four other noblemen who were at the same table gathered round and pulled off the Duke's boots and put them on the servant. And that is how these boots became generally known as Wellingtons.

Incidentally, one of the other people present on this important occasion was Lord Gutter, who looked very thoughtful when the servant mentioned the depth of the puddles in the street. Soon after this, he cashed in his chips and went home, telling the others: "I think I've just had an idea." But that is another story.

A fortnight later, the Duke of Wellington was walking down the Strand when he happened to meet his old friend, Sir Josiah Manual. "My dear fellow," he told Sir Josiah, "I cannot get the hang of these damn boots at all."

"With your permission, your Grace, I shall write a booklet advising you how to get the best out of your boots," Sir Josiah replied. His recent booklet, *How to Get Out of Your Carriage without Falling Flat on Your Face*, had taken fashionable London by storm, so the Duke readily agreed. "By God!" he said. "Go to it, Manual."

Fragments of Manual's 256-page booklet survive. "Before he puts his boots on in the morning, his Grace should instruct his valet to turn each one upside down and to shake it vigorously. This is because all manner of spiders and crawling creatures may reside therein. If he sees them tumble out of his boots before he wears them it will put his mind much at ease for the rest of the day."

With the help of many detailed illustrations of the anatomy of the tibia and the foot, and quoting several discovered scientific laws, Sir Josiah explains how it is inevitable that the sock on just one leg will slip down inside the boot and bunch up around the toes. He points out that, if you walk any distance with it like this, it will cause discomfort — or "hard pounding" as he calls it.

The user's guide, written by Manual, tells how to stand on one leg to remove the boot, draws attention to the risk of losing your balance while adjusting the sock, and warns that the discarded boot will, by now, be lying on its side, just out of reach, five hops away.

"To perform successfully the manoeuvre of replacing the boot will require the assistance of a minimum of three trusted and loyal manservants," he concludes.

Sir Josiah's booklet also explains why, however hard you shake it upside down, there will always be a bit of sharp gravel in the left boot. He also has interesting things to say about why one boot is always more difficult than the other.

Manual soon became famous and successful with booklets such as *How to Light the Right End of a Cigar* and *The Safe Way to Close a Piano Lid*, so he plucked up his courage and asked the Duke of Wellington's permission to sell his user's guide to boots to the general public.

"Publish and be damned," Wellington replied. "Now you must excuse me for I am on my way to dine with my good friend Dr Martens."

Sa'dallah Wannus

Syrian dramatist who satirised politics

SA'DALLAH WANNUS, the Syrian dramatist who has died aged 56, was known throughout the Arab world for his dreamlike allegorical plays that combine a cerebral and intensely political approach with the enchanted style of the Arabic folk-tale.

His best-known play, *Evening Party for June 5th*, first published in 1968, was a brave and biter satire on the politics that led to the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War. It expressed the mood of disillusion, anger and soul-searching that absorbed the Arab world in the aftermath of the war, and was an instant success.

In a series of experimental plays Wannus sought to realise his goal of a theatre that would educate his audience politically, using techniques inspired by Brecht.

In *Evening Party for June 5th* he placed among the audience actors who stand up and argue against the version of events being given on stage. Speaking as eyewitnesses to the war, they give a starkly different version, reflecting the contrast between the official account of the war given at the time by Arab governments and the ignoble reality.

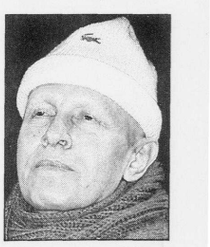
The ensuing argument is brought to an end when actors playing the authorities of the state enter the theatre and arrest the entire audience.

Sa'dallah Wannus was born in 1940 in a village near the port of Tartus to a family belonging to the Shi'ite Alawite sect.

He studied journalism at the University of Cairo, graduating in 1963, and began his career at the Syrian Ministry of Education.

In 1966 a bursary allowed him to travel to Paris where he encountered the work of Anouilh, Ionesco and Brecht.

Before *Evening Party for June 5th*, Wannus wrote a number of one-act plays employing the techniques of puppet theatre. Notable among these was *The Elephant, O King of the World*, an allegorical tale showing the corrupting effect of a tyrannical ruler. Everything Wannus wrote was political, though his targets were generally veiled in allegory, and he dealt with the excesses of power as something timeless and universal.



Wannus: brave and bitter

Wannus continued to write plays and criticism in his post as a teacher at the Institute of Drama in Damascus. His output in the last five years of his life, as he struggled with cancer, was more prolific than ever. His final play, *Rituals of Signs and Changes*, was critical of those Arab intellectuals who volunteer their services to autocratic regimes.

In 1995 he resigned in protest from the Syrian Writers' Union when the organisation expelled the leading Arabic poet Adonis for allegedly calling for better relations with Israel at a Unesco conference. Wannus made it clear that he was defending not so much what Adonis was saying as his right to say it.

In March of last year, he pronounced gloomily on the future of theatre in a speech for Unesco's International Day of Theatre.

He saw it as fighting a losing battle against "illuminated gadgets, coloured screens and other vulgar idiot boxes." Despite this, he said, "theatre will remain the ideal realm for man to reflect upon his history and existence".

He and his wife Faiza Shawish had one daughter.

"Sa'dallah Wannus." Daily Telegraph, 27 May 1997, p. 23. The Telegraph Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/IO0704320914/TGRH?u=tou&sid=bookmark-TGRH. Accessed 9 July 2024.