

Arbuthnot, Sir Robert Keith, fourth baronet 1864-1916, rear admiral, the eldest son of Sir William Wedderburn Arbuthnot, third baronet, by his wife, Alice Margaret, daughter of the Rev. Matthew C. Tompson, vicar of Alderminster, Worcestershire, was born at Alderminster 23 March 1864. Entering the navy in 1877 Arbuthnot won the Goodenough medal for the sub-lieutenant who passes the best examination of the year, served in the royal yacht, and was in 1885 promoted from it to the rank of lieutenant. In 1897 he became commander, and in 1897-1898 served under the director of naval intelligence. Afloat and ashore he gained a high reputation as an energetic and scientific officer. He was injured by an accident to a 6-inch gun in 1901, and in 1903-1904 was flag-captain at Portsmouth to Sir John (afterwards Lord) Fisher. Thenceforward he was continuously employed. In 1910 in a speech at a private dinner, he expressed his fear of the imminence of war with Germany; this speech, which was reported, gave great offence to the Kaiser, and was made the subject of formal complaint by the German government. The Admiralty in consequence was obliged to punish Arbuthnot by removing him from his ship, Lord Nelson; but it immediately appointed him to serve on the submarine committee, and a few months later in the same year made him commodore of the third destroyer flotilla, where he did work in which he excelled, the training of young officers. In October 1913, a year after his promotion to rear-admiral, Arbuthnot was appointed second in command of the second battle squadron, flying his flag in the Orion, and this position he held in the grand fleet at the outbreak of the European War. He was at sea with the six battleships of the squadron, under Vice-Admiral Sir George Warrender [qv.], when German battle-cruisers bombarded Hartlepool and Scarborough on 16 December 1914, and his squadron, with Admiral Beatty's force of four battle-cruisers, had a narrow escape from the German high seas fleet, eighteen dreadnoughts strong. On that occasion Arbuthnot made a determined effort to bring to action the German light craft which passed near the British battleships. Shortly afterwards (January 1915) he was appointed to an independent command, that of the first cruiser squadron, comprising four old-type armoured cruisers of large displacement but low fighting quality. In this squadron, with his flag in the Defence, he was serving at the battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916. By the battle-orders his position was in advance of the screen of destroyers covering Admiral Jellicoe's twenty-four battleships, and was therefore well ahead of the latter. The orders laid down that the first duty of the British cruisers, in the event of a fleet action, was to engage the enemy cruisers. As the afternoon drew on the air was full of wireless signals indicating the proximity of Beatty's battle-cruiser force in action with the Germans, and at 4.51 p.m. Jellicoe signalled to the Admiralty, Fleet action is imminent. A haze overhung the water and it was difficult to see clearly. Presently from the south-east came bright crimson flashes and detonations as the battle drew nearer to Jellicoe's main force. At 5.46 p.m. Arbuthnot signalled to Jellicoe, then about four miles distant, the general position of the enemy; he was fast closing in on the Germans; but still from his ships only the flashes of guns could be seen in the mist and smoke. At 5.53 p.m. he signalled to his squadron to open fire and engage the enemy. Near him were four German light cruisers of Rear-Admiral Boedicker's second scouting group and the twelfth half-flotilla of destroyers screening the German battle-cruisers. It was the obvious duty of the British cruiser force and destroyers to deal with this German advance guard, and they attacked with such vigour that Boedicker's force did not detect or signal to the German command the approach of Jellicoe's twenty-four battleships. By the grand fleet battle-orders, in the event of bad visibility, the battle-fleet was to deploy by the wing nearest to the enemy, and not away from the enemy as it subsequently did, for reasons explained in the British official history [Corbett, iii, 359-363]. Arbuthnot with Defence and Warrior pushed in on the German light craft in execution

of his task. Fiercely engaged with the German light cruiser Wiesbaden, he passed across the bow of Beatty's flagship Lion, only 200 yards or so away, and put his adversary out of action. He must have seen that Beatty was heavily engaged, but all the evidence shows the smoke and mist to have been so troublesome that the German heavy ships were difficult to make out. At this critical moment Arbuthnot was suddenly sighted by the German battle-cruiser Lützow and battleships Grosser Kurfürst, Markgraf, Kronprinz, and Kaiser, which opened a crushing fire on him at a range of 7,000 yards and upwards. At least two salvos caught his ill-protected ship; a huge furnace was seen to glow for some seconds under her fore-turret, and then there rose from her to a great height a pillar of flame and smoke in which Arbuthnot and every soul in the Defence perished (6.20 p.m.).

Arbuthnot was an officer of the highest moral and physical courage—as gallant and determined as ever lived (Admiral Jellicoe)—who knew how to maintain strict discipline without losing the affection of his subordinates. A vigorous thinker, he had attracted the notice of Lord Fisher, though he was not in complete sympathy with all Lord Fisher's policy. He died, as Jellicoe's dispatch stated, doing his duty nobly, and performing a task of great difficulty as leader of the cruisers which were covering the battle-fleet. From this task with all its dangers he was the last man to shrink.

Arbuthnot, who was posthumously awarded the K.C.B., married in 1897 Lina, daughter of Colonel A. C. Macleay, and left one daughter.

A portrait of Arbuthnot is included in Sir A. S. Cope's picture *Some Sea Officers of the Great War*, painted in 1921, in the National Portrait Gallery.