Prince Louis of Battenberg

Prince Louis of Battenberg (1854-1921), of Polish-German descent, was born in Graz, Austria. He became a naturalised British citizen in 1868 and thereafter joined the Royal Navy, which he eventually rose to command as First Sea Lord in the immediate pre-war years from 1912-14.

He married, in 1884, Victoria Alberta Elisabeth Mathilde Marie of Hesse, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. They had two sons, the youngest of whom was Lord Louis Mountbatten, subsequently Earl Mountbatten of Burma; a grandson was Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

Among other roles in the navy, Prince Louis served successfully (and admired by luminaries such as Admiral Fisher) as Director of Naval Intelligence in 1902 and thereafter as rear admiral, admiral and part commander of the Home Fleet, before his appointment as Second Sea Lord in 1911. The following year he was made First Sea Lord.

Reporting to First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, Prince Louis was instructed to bring the navy's ships to a state of war readiness following a test mobilisation in July 1914; war with Germany followed within a matter of days. Although criticised by some at the time for his decision to maintain the fleet in readiness, it did prove beneficial once war was at last declared.

His wartime career was brief however, lasting under three months. The victim of a press campaign centred upon his German heritage, Prince Louis, who spoke with a German accent, seemed at first surprised by the nature of the attacks.

Less astute than King George V, who chose the appropriate moment to renounce his German titles and to change his name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor, Prince Louis endured a barrage of criticism, even retaining his German estates until 1917, before finally tendering his resignation on 29 October 1914. He was replaced by the returning Fisher.

In 1917 Prince Louis renounced his German titles and belatedly changed his name to Mountbatten; he was thereafter created 1st Marquis of Milford Haven.