



# Corbett Paper

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**Jutland, History,  
and the First World War**

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**KING'S**  
*College*  
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**University of London**

# Jutland, History, and the First World War

## Key points

- Collection of papers from leading scholars in the field discussing some of the latest research on the naval and maritime aspects of the British Empire's involvement in the First World War.
- Sets the centenary discussions of the Battle of Jutland into a broader historical, geographical, and conceptual context.
- Papers discussing the broader sweep of Anglo-German relations and the pre-War naval arms race, the role of Julian Corbett in shaping the Navy's strategic plans, the latest research on the Battle of Jutland, Australia's contribution to the global war at sea, and how the First World War affected the ethos of the Royal Navy after 1919.

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# Jutland, History, and the First World War

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The nature and significance of the naval and maritime aspects of the First World War have proven troublesome to convey to a general audience since the outset of the War itself. At the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 the Grand Fleet of Battle was the physical embodiment of British imperial, technological, and maritime might. A source of great national interest and pride, it is unlikely that any combination of naval victories could ever have matched up to the expectations projected onto the Royal Navy by elements of the Edwardian public. Thus, when the opening weeks of the conflict witnessed no ‘second Trafalgar’ and the Fleet proved unable to prevent the German navy from bombarding seaside towns – killing civilians and bringing the destruction of war to familiar British holiday destinations in the process - cries of ‘where was the Navy?’ were quick to emerge from incredulous elements within British society. Victories at Heligoland Bight, the Falklands, and Dogger Bank did little to assuage growing demands for the Fleet to do more and set the scene for the subdued and gloomy reaction to the inconclusive Battle of Jutland in 1916.

The indecision of Jutland was followed by further difficulties for the Navy, as it struggled to defeat the German submarine campaign against Allied shipping during 1917. Rationing was introduced across the nation the following year, making the perilous state of Britain’s food supplies obvious for all to see. Thus, even with the High Seas Fleet interned at Scapa Flow after the Armistice in late-1918, the Navy could not shake a sense of disappointment, frustration, and failure. Days after the end of hostilities with Germany the First Sea Lord, Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, described the situation: ‘The Navy has won a victory even more complete in its effects than Trafalgar, but less spectacular, and, because of this lack of display, one feels that the unthinking do not fully realise what the nation – indeed that the whole world, owes to the British Navy.’<sup>1</sup> As Wemyss realised, coming from a naval officer such words might easily have been dismissed as special

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<sup>1</sup> Wemyss to Beatty, 12-13<sup>th</sup> November, 1918 in B. Ranft ed., *The Beatty Papers, Vol. II: 1916-1927*, Aldershot: Navy Records Society, 1993, p. 12.

pleading. Yet it is notable that less partisan observers echoed his sentiments. Prime Minister David Lloyd George stressed the Navy's vital contribution to Allied victory on a regular basis in 1919, as part of his fight to defeat US President Woodrow Wilson's efforts to curtail the future effectiveness of British sea power at the Paris Peace conference. Reflecting on the War in his memoirs in the 1930s, Lloyd George recalled how there 'could have been no armies on any battlefield, had it not been for the complete command of the sea which our sailors and their auxiliary helpers on shore succeeded in maintaining, and the British people would have been driven to make peace in order to avert their famine.'<sup>2</sup> Both he and Herbert Asquith, the former Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party, felt the need to stress the contribution of the Fleet to a public they feared had overlooked the basis of British victory.<sup>3</sup>

These difficulties were mirrored a century later during the centenary commemorations of the First World War. The decision was apparently taken reasonably early to focus attention on the naval aspects of the conflict around the anniversary of the Battle of Jutland in March 2016. The message this choice sent – that the War at Sea was defined by battle and that the Royal Navy had somehow failed to capitalise in this key engagement of the naval war – was as problematic for today's Navy as it was historically. The Navy chose to combat the potentially damaging narrative of failure with a propaganda campaign predicated upon placing Jutland within the context of the 'blockade' of the Central Powers, thereby attempting to reassert the primacy of sea power in ultimate victory. Jutland thus became '[the Battle which won the First World War](#)', serving its place in the intense competition for public attention during a crowded centenary programme which was building towards the Somme centenary weeks later.

Insofar as it challenged the popular narrative of a war fought in the trenches of the Western Front the focus on Jutland was welcome. Perhaps inevitably, however, the demands of attracting widespread public attention conflicted with efforts to portray a more balanced account of the maritime war, or to translate much of the latest research on the Royal Navy in the First World War to a general audience. The onus is now upon the academic community to assist our colleagues in public history in enabling people whose interest in the naval aspects of the conflict has been piqued by the centenary to learn more about the Navy's First World War and to access some of the most recent, thought

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, London, 1933-36, Vol. V, pp. 2607-8.

<sup>3</sup> A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, Vol. V, London: OUP, 1970, pp. 297-98.

provoking work in the field. This Corbett Paper is one such offering. It combines short essays from five leading scholars of the Royal Navy in the twentieth century to enable those who have had their interest awakened by the centenary to expand their understanding of the conflict.

The essays in this collection aim to move beyond the familiar Jutland based narrative of the First World War at sea and to explore the conflict from a range of perspectives. The first two essays – from Prof Matthew Seligmann and Prof Andrew Lambert - set the Navy's wartime experience in the context of the notorious pre-War arms race with Germany and explain the strategic backdrop against which Jutland took place. Thereafter Dr John Brooks summarises his recent appreciation of the Battle itself, challenging elements of the existing narrative and questioning what impact some of the key decisions taken at Jutland might have had on the ultimate outcome. In the fourth contribution Dr David Stevens underlines the global and international nature of the Navy's war effort, focusing on the experience of the Royal Australian Navy in the Pacific. Finally, Rear-Admiral James Goldrick explores how Jutland shaped the culture and ethos of the Navy in the inter-war years and into the Second World War. Taken as a whole, these papers demonstrate the breadth and vibrancy of research on the Royal Navy in the First World War, and provide an excellent starting point for anyone wishing to expand their knowledge of the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Free audio recordings of the papers can be found on the Defence Studies Department Soundcloud, [here](#).

# The Reality and Dynamics of the Anglo-German Naval Race

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The Anglo-German naval race was a genuine contest. The two protagonists viewed each other with suspicion, recognized that their opponent could undermine their own policies and national objectives, and vied for naval supremacy to ensure this would not happen. To attain this clearly defined end, they built warships – principally battleships of ever greater size and power – in large and increasing numbers. On the face of it, these observations might not seem particularly remarkable or even contentious. After all, in the historiography of Imperial Germany there is little serious controversy over the fact that Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Secretary of State at the Imperial Navy Office, Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, built their new navy with the clearly expressed purpose (in secret internal documents, at least, if not in public statements) of challenging British maritime power.<sup>5</sup> Thus, such debate as there is falls on the question of the motive for this unprecedented act of naval rivalry rather than the fact of the challenge itself. Equally, on the British side, there has always been (and still is) a formidable body of literature that not only acknowledges the reality of the Anglo-German Naval Race, but elevates it to totemic status as the archetypal, even paradigmatic, modern sea-borne armaments competition. Peter Padfield's unambiguously titled work *The Great Naval Race* is a case in point. Both by name and in its broader content, this is a book that maintains that the pre-First World War naval building programmes of Britain and Germany – programmes that were explicitly aimed and measured against each other – represent the acme of great power maritime competition. Moreover, in making this case, Padfield not only epitomizes a major strand of modern historical thinking, he also mirrors the understanding of people at the time. Judging by the countless newspaper articles, the bitter party political debates, the striking metaphors found within popular literature, and the frequent public panics that all focused on the Anglo-German naval race, the contemporary British and German populations saw this competition in the same terms, namely as a major factor in the world

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, Michael Epkenhans and Frank Nägler (eds.), *The Naval Route to the Abyss. The Anglo-German Naval Race, 1895-1914* (Navy Records Society, 2015).

of global diplomacy and also as the defining issue in the fraught and deteriorating relations between their two countries. The psychological consequences of this are well-known and precisely documented. A regular trope of German popular culture was the so-called ‘Copenhagen complex’, the fear that the battleships of the Royal Navy would appear unannounced off the German coast and destroy the nascent German fleet at harbour in much the same brutal manner as it had eliminated the Danish navy in the Napoleonic Wars. Equally, the idea that the German navy would support a ‘bolt from the blue’ invasion of the British Isles featured prominently in British popular discourse, most famously in the best-selling adventure fiction of Erskine Childers and the serialized disaster novels of William Le Queux. As these distinct but equivalent national neuroses illustrate, in the world of naval competition, both sides suspected each other’s motives, feared their capabilities and gauged their rival counter-exertions against those of their expected opponent.

Given how familiar the above analysis has become over many decades of research and writing the reader might well wonder why it needs to be restated here at all, let alone so emphatically. The main reason is that in recent times this assessment of the Anglo-German naval race has come under sharp attack from a small group of self-styled ‘revisionist’ historians who argue that the expansion of German maritime power, far from spurring the Royal Navy into determined counter-action, actually left the British naval leadership largely untroubled.<sup>6</sup> It was France and Russia, or so we are told, that posed the real threat and it was their capabilities and naval force structures that drove British naval policy. In particular, it is suggested that as France and Russia had invested heavily in armoured cruisers (but Germany had not), they were the only powers with the ability to mount a determined assault on Britain’s lines of oceanic communication and trade and that this was the threat that really worried British officials. Accordingly, under the leadership of First Sea Lord Admiral Sir John ‘Jackie’ Fisher, the British Admiralty proposed to undertake a ‘naval revolution’ in which battleships would be abandoned and the Royal Navy would instead defend the British Isles with torpedo craft and control the high seas with swift battle cruisers. In this context, the German navy, composed of a battle fleet that could be bottled up in the North Sea, was little more than a defence mirage and the clamour surrounding the build-up of the German fleet was not a genuine sign of anxiety for the nation’s security, but simply ill-informed background noise

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, ‘Naval History by Conspiracy Theory: The British Admiralty before the First World War and the Methodology of Revisionism’. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38 (2015), 966-84.

exploited by a grateful Admiralty to extract ever greater budgets from a reluctant and otherwise parsimonious Treasury.

This argument is not just counter-intuitive, it is counter-intuitive at almost every level. To start with, it is hard to see what kind of threat Russia and France actually posed. At the start of the twentieth century, the Tsarist Navy was a by-word for inefficiency and incompetence and its capabilities were regularly disparaged in the most vigorous terms by the British naval attachés sent to assess it. So poorly did it perform in peacetime and so inadequate was it rated by expert opinion that the main anxiety it created in Reginald Custance, the head of Britain's naval intelligence department, was that in the event of conflict it would cower in port and refuse to fight. In the end, this hardly mattered. Such little threat as it posed evaporated when nearly all its major units were destroyed in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, a conflict that validated all of the negative assessments of British observers. The French navy did not fare so badly as the Russian in the eyes of contemporary British opinion. Unlike their Russian counterparts, French officers were seen as dedicated professionals and French sailors as well trained, smart and capable. There was also much to be said in praise of the quality of individual French warships (although not all of them). However, French naval policy as a whole was another matter entirely. In the last decades of the nineteenth century two competing groups espousing radically different, even mutually incompatible doctrines were vying for control of the future direction of the French navy. On the one hand were the traditionalists, who sought to build up a fleet of battleships that could contest command of the sea with the fleets and squadrons of the Royal Navy. Ranged against them were the advocates of the *Jeune École* or 'young school'. They believed that the Royal Navy would always be able to maintain a larger and more powerful battle fleet than France. As a result, they asserted that challenging Britain in this way was futile. Instead, they sought a more imaginative asymmetric means of attacking Britain. This did, indeed, involve building bespoke warships designed explicitly to seek out and destroy British merchant steamers along the international trade routes. Examples of these armoured cruisers were designed, ordered, and laid down whenever adherents of the *Jeune École* found themselves at the helm of French naval policy-making. However, this was relatively infrequent and rarely occurred for prolonged periods. The rest of the time control of the French navy rested with traditionalists who sought to prepare not for the *guerre de course* desired by the *Jeune École*, but for a *guerre d'escadre* against a foreign battle fleet. The result of these differences at the top of the French naval hierarchy was that control over the direction of



French naval policy, especially the ship-building programmes of the French fleet, lacked consistency. As one minister of marine was replaced by another so the thrust of French maritime armaments changed direction, leading to a fleet that was inadequately prepared both for the *guerre d'escadre* desired by the traditionalists and also for the *guerre de course* desired by those who adhered to the *Jeune École*. Its potential as a force for either eventuality was accordingly much diminished.

Under these circumstances, the fact that the Royal Navy pursued a clear and consistent naval shipbuilding policy paid huge dividends. The goal of the British Admiralty was to create a force structure that, in the words of Lord Selborne, would 'be strong enough to beat France and Russia for certain' no matter what the conditions or the form of attack. To this end, the British government ordered battleships and armoured cruisers in large numbers. The former formed the heart of battle fleets designed to overwhelm their French and Russian counterparts, should the naval leaderships of these countries feel brave enough – some might say foolhardy enough – to send their capital ships to sea in search of a fleet action. The latter could be used either to hunt down French and Russian armoured cruisers engaged in a *guerre de course* on the shipping lanes or, should this threat prove insignificant or illusory as many in the Admiralty suspected, to reinforce the British battle fleets and provide them with a fast wing that could catch and overpower a retreating enemy. For Britain, therefore, the changes and vagaries of French and Russian naval policy did not lead to a diversion of resource or a duplication of effort, but to a reinforcement of strength suited for all and any of the wars they anticipated. This meant that whether a *guerre de course* or a *guerre d'escadre* was in the minds of the Franco-Russian enemy the Royal Navy had the ships to deal with it. Indeed, in the case of armoured cruisers, Britain had an overwhelming superiority. As an Admiralty memorandum from October 1903 recorded:

During recent years France has built a number of armoured cruisers for use as commerce-destroyers ... Great Britain has replied by building a larger number of still more powerful armoured cruisers.... our present superiority ... will be even greater in the future, as we are building 22 more armoured cruisers against 10 building by France and none by Russia.

In this context, the so-called Franco-Russian armoured cruiser threat, even more than the Franco-Russian battle fleet threat, was, as the present author has previously remarked, a security mirage.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the German menace was self-evident to all and sundry. This most definitely included the Royal Navy's Naval Intelligence Department, which began to produce assessments of the potential danger posed by the German navy from the very start of the twentieth century. These reflected not only the scale of the German naval expansion, but also the perceived martial attributes of the German nation and the excellence of its armaments industry. In contrast to Tsarist Russia, the naval forces of which were a byword for inefficiency and incompetence, no one doubted either the excellence of German shipbuilding and engineering or the rigour and professionalism of the German navy's officer corps and trained personnel. In short, Germany was a rival to be respected and feared.<sup>8</sup>

The accidents of history and geography added to the sense of danger. Britain's Channel coast was well protected. Centuries of war with France had left a network of forts and defended harbours – Sheerness, Chatham, Portsmouth, Devonport and Pembroke – that provided secure anchorages that were admirably suited for operations during an Anglo-French confrontation. By contrast, Britain's North Sea littoral was both long and poorly protected, with many coastal towns and dockyards there lacking anything but the most rudimentary fixed armaments or defensive facilities. Moreover, a considerable portion of this coast was nearer to the German navy's ports than to the Royal Navy's, making it dangerously exposed to sudden attack. In effect, therefore, in the event of an Anglo-German conflict the east coast was both within easy reach of German forces and vulnerable to attack. While it might have been reluctant to admit this in public, Britain's naval leadership was well aware of this in private.

Another source of anxiety was Germany's ability to attack British commerce. Unlike their French and Russian counterparts, the German navy did not build specialist warships for this purpose, but then it didn't have to. The German merchant marine was the second largest in the world and possessed shipping lines that maintained a global presence. It was universally recognized that in the event of an Anglo-German war these

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, 'Britain's Great Security Mirage: The Royal Navy and the Franco-Russian Naval Threat, 1898-1906'. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35 (2012), 861-886.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, *Spies in Uniform: British Military and Naval Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

vessels would be unable to continue with their regular trading activities because, if they ventured onto the high seas as civilian steamers, they would be run down and captured by British cruisers and condemned as prizes of war. So what would they do? One option was to lie low in neutral harbours and wait for the conflict to end. This was certainly the safest option, but equally it was not one that would contribute at all to the German war effort. For this reason, Britain's Naval Intelligence Department considered that Germany was far more likely to adopt the more productive policy of converting many of its civilian vessels into men-of-war and releasing them onto the shipping lanes in order to prey on defenceless British merchant steamers. This was simple enough to do seeing that many of the officers and men of the German merchant marine already held positions in the naval reserve and were trained and eligible for such service. It was also likely to prove very effective. Given the number of German cargo vessels and their widespread distribution around the world, the conversion of even a fraction of them into commerce raiders - if planned with care - would inevitably stretch Britain's defensive capabilities severely, requiring the diversion to numerous quarters of the globe of cruisers that the Admiralty would have rather stationed in home waters. Yet, even this expedient, should it be undertaken, was not guaranteed to solve the problem, for the German merchant marine possessed an asset that could not be countered simply by dotting trade protection cruisers around the world. Numbered among the register of German flagged vessels were four remarkable transatlantic liners: the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, the *Deutschland*, the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* and the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. What marked these vessels out was their exceptionally high speed, which had led each and every one of them to win the blue riband for the fastest transatlantic crossing on at least one, sometimes multiple occasions. Indeed, these express steamers ensured that at the start of the twentieth century what has once been a distinction that was firmly in British hands now rested securely with Germany. This was not just a blow to British national pride – although it certainly had this effect – it also had significant military implications. Each of these four liners was designed and built with their rapid conversion into warships firmly on the agenda. Whereas the British naval authorities might speculate about which of Germany's numerous tramp steamers might be armed as commerce raiders in the event of war, there seemed little doubt that these four ocean greyhounds would be so augmented and so deployed; and in this capacity, their exceptionally high speed made them very dangerous. There were at that time no British cruisers built or building that had the speed, endurance and seaworthiness to run down these liners, meaning that once armed and let loose on the

shipping lanes, there was no way, short of good fortune, for the Royal Navy to halt their depredations. This was a threat of considerably greater significance than France's armoured cruisers, which took a long time to build, existed in small numbers, underperformed when completed and for which more than adequate counter-measures had already been taken.<sup>9</sup>

For all these reasons, the build up of German maritime power was hardly going to go unnoticed in Britain; nor was it likely to be ignored. But what was the nature of the response? Faced with a range of choices about the kind of maritime force they would construct, the German naval leadership decided to build a fleet of battleships designed to operate and fight in the North Sea. Such a fleet, they believed, would put genuine pressure on the British government. If Germany created a force of 60 battleships, the Royal Navy would need at least 90 to be certain of victory in battle. Tirpitz believed that such a force level was beyond the financial power of the British government to construct and incapable of being crewed, even if it should be built.

His calculation was wrong. The Royal Navy did not just respond in kind. It responded with vigour and determination. Tirpitz wanted a quantitative arms race only; the Royal Navy responded with a quantitative and a qualitative one. Adopting what would now be termed a cost-imposing strategy, they not only built more ships than the Germans, they also kept making them bigger, faster, more technologically sophisticated and better armed with a continuous stream of incremental design improvements. In effect, the race that the Royal Navy imposed was both in increasing numbers and in growing unit price. Most devastating of all for the revisionist theory of a 'naval revolution', it was not a race defined in terms of torpedo craft and battle cruisers, but one largely focused upon battleships. A total of 32 of the latest dreadnought and super-dreadnought battleships had been ordered for the Royal Navy by the time that war broke out in August 1914 and all of them were stationed facing Germany in the North Sea. They did not arrive as a result of a 'fit of absence of mind', but as a deliberate act of policy to face down the German challenge.<sup>10</sup>

The Royal Navy was similarly determined and pro-active in countering the threat of German commerce raiders. This was an area where British policy evolved rapidly. The

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, 'Germany's Ocean Greyhounds and the Royal Navy's First Battle Cruisers: An Historiographical Problem'. *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 27 (2016), 162-82.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, 'The Anglo-German Naval Race, 1898-1914', in Thomas G. Mahnken, Joseph A. Maiolo and David Stevenson (eds.) *Arms Races in International Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 21-40.

easiest and most obvious countermeasure was to build British liners of greater speed and power. Not surprisingly, therefore, this was the Admiralty's initial response. A government loan as well as an annual subsidy was provided to the Cunard Shipping Company on the understanding that it would build, maintain and run two transatlantic liners capable both of rapid conversion into men-of-war and of outpacing their German rivals. *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* were the products of this agreement. This like-for-like solution did not appeal to all naval officers, several of whom objected to a policy that was very expensive and which produced unarmoured vessels of great size and vulnerability. They advocated instead big, fast and highly seaworthy cruisers. The result of this was the first generation large armoured cruisers (latter termed battle cruisers) of the *Invincible* class.<sup>11</sup> These ships had both the engines and the freeboard to run down a transatlantic liner. They also, however, had the potential to serve in many other capacities, which was an irresistible temptation to naval planners to divert them to other uses. Accordingly, a series of other expedients were adopted. These included arming British merchant vessels for self defence and creating a global intelligence network that could route shipping away from raiders. All of these policies had been enacted when war broke out in 1914.<sup>12</sup>

Taking cumulatively, the quality of German naval materiel, the competence of the personnel, the depth and rapidity of the process of expansion, the ancillary asset of the German merchant marine, and the geographical difficulties of protecting the British east coast all combined to make the German threat a great deal more challenging than the poorly planned, uncoordinated and badly run Franco-Russian threat. Inevitably, it attracted the attention of the British public, government and naval leadership, all of whom agreed that it would need to be faced down and defeated. This was achieved and it was achieved as a deliberate act of policy that began, contrary to what revisionist historiography would have one believe, with the identification of Germany as the most dangerous naval rival.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, 'New Weapons for New Targets: Sir John Fisher, the Threat from Germany, and the Building of H. M. S. *Dreadnought* and H. M. S. *Invincible*, 1902-1907.' *International History Review*, 30 (June 2008), 303-31.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann, *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901-1914: Admiralty Plans to protect British Trade in a War against Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2012).



# An Edwardian Intellectual at War: Julian Corbett, and the Battle for British Strategy

Andrew Lambert (King's College London)

University educated, trained and practiced at law, but independently, wealthy Julian Corbett (1853-1922) dedicated himself to the service of the state, and especially the primary arm of national security.<sup>13</sup> His work reduced past practice to order, and used it to develop a systematic national strategic doctrine.<sup>14</sup> In 1914 his reputation as a strategist and educator had never stood higher. Corbett's key texts *England in the Seven Year's War: a Study in Combined Strategy* of 1907 and *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* of 1911 -the exemplary case study and the national doctrine primer - had been developed for the Royal Navy War Course. They emphasised the primacy of political direction, limited war, sea control, economic warfare, and inter-service co-operation.<sup>15</sup> Those principles would dominate *Naval Operations*, the Official History of the Great War, where he recorded the conflict as the basis of future naval education and doctrine development.<sup>16</sup>

In August 1914 British strategy was the limited/maritime method described and developed by Corbett across the previous decade. Yet the British Government committed the small British Expeditionary Force to France. The Asquith Cabinet, incapable of deciding or implementing a coherent national strategy without endangering its own cohesion, allowed itself to be swayed by newspaper headlines and political pressure into a decision that turned the Expeditionary Force, intended to support the Navy in securing and enhancing British sea control, into a continental army.<sup>17</sup> This was a clear break with

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<sup>13</sup> D.M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854-1922: Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe*. London, Royal Historical Society 1981 is more concerned to record the problems Corbett faced than assess his achievement. See pp.152-4. A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: Vol .V Victory and Aftermath*. Oxford: OUP, 1970, p.306. Marder dismissed *Some Principles* as 'not nearly as influential as Corbett would have liked', p. 373.

<sup>14</sup> A.D. Lambert, 'Doctrine: the Soul of Warfare': teaching strategy in the Royal Navy before 1914' in D. Delaney, & R. Engen, eds. *Military education and Empire*: forthcoming volume from the 2015 RMC Kingston conference.

<sup>15</sup> A.D. Lambert, 'Sir Julian Corbett, naval history and the development of sea power theory' in N.A.M. Rodger, J. Ross Dancy, Benjamin Darnell and Evan Wilson eds. *Strategy and the Sea: Essays in Honour of John B. Hattendorf*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> A.D. Lambert, 'The Naval War Course, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy and the Origins of the 'British Way in Warfare' in K. Neilson and G. Kennedy, eds. *The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856-1950: Essays in Honour of David French*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 219-56; J.S. Corbett, *[N]aval [O]perations* 1-111, Longman, London 1920-23.

<sup>17</sup> J.S. Corbett, *The Seven Year's War: A Study in Combined Strategy*. London, Longman 1907 I p.p.74-5.

pre-war plans, which contained no binding commitment to assist France, and with all previous British experience. When war broke out elements within the Army General Staff feared a limited maritime strategy would threaten their social, political, and professional agendas, promising to reinforce the primacy of the Royal Navy in defence policy, and sustain the levelling social programmes of a Liberal Government they collectively despised.<sup>18</sup> By contrast the Admiralty regime of Admiral Sir John Fisher, 1904-1910, had adopted Corbett's strategic thinking, and exploited his eloquent publications to sustain maritime strategy and naval primacy. For all the radicalism of his approaches to technology and social issues Fisher's strategic ideas were dominated by Corbett's analysis of past experience.<sup>19</sup> Transfixed by events on land no-one in the Cabinet, or the Naval high command had the insight or aptitude to oppose the dispatch of the Army to the continent. Fisher, the one Admiral who understood deterrence and grand strategy, was out of office in August 1914, unable to influence the crisis or the opening moves of the conflict. Corbett had recognised the danger, but he was powerless. He would spend the war trying to reverse the initial error.

Corbett spent the war at the Committee of Imperial Defence, leading the Official History project,<sup>20</sup> and producing a stream of memoranda for Maurice Hankey.<sup>21</sup> He also drafted Admiralty memoranda that were beyond the competence of the Chief of Staff, Vice Admiral Doveton Sturdee, including the general covering instructions sent to Jellicoe as Commander in Chief of the Grand Fleet!<sup>22</sup>

## THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY:

Corbett left his post in mid-October 1914 for minor surgery, he returned in late November to find that Fisher had returned in place of the lacklustre Battenberg.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore the battlefleet balance of naval power had shifted decisively in Britain's favour, and the

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<sup>18</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War1: To Arms*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp. 201-3.

<sup>19</sup> A.D. Lambert, 'The Army is a Projectile to be fired by the Navy': Securing the Empire 1815-1914' in P. Dennis, ed. *Armies and Maritime Strategy: 2013 Chief of Army History Conference*, Big Sky Publishing, Canberra, 2014, pp. 48-74.

<sup>20</sup> A. Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories, 1915-1948*, Abingdon: Routledge 2003, Corbett is mentioned at pp.7-9, but his leading role is ignored.

<sup>21</sup> These often appeared under Hankey's signature. In the index to Hankey's self-congratulatory memoir *The Supreme Command* Corbett, long dead, was dismissed as 'a Historian who worked for me.'

<sup>22</sup> Corbett Diary 15.8.1914: Schurman, *Corbett*, p.166 This diary is no longer extant.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher to Corbett 12.12.1914 in A.J. Marder, ed. *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Vol. III Restoration, Abdication and Last Years, 1914-1920*, London, 1959, p. 93.



world phase of the war would be over within weeks. Fisher had been recalled to office in late October, despite the protests of the King, and several old Tory Admirals, to bring 'elan, dash initiative, a new spirit' to the naval war. With his customary energy Fisher set about acquiring the hardware required to conduct a major offensive.<sup>24</sup>

Fisher's strategy was founded on pre-war Admiralty planning.<sup>25</sup> It did not require a mass army. The rationale had been laid out by Corbett, who explored the British contribution to a major Continental conflict, in *England the Seven Year's War* in 1907:

In the long series of wars between France and England ... The most telling move of France had always been to concentrate her operations against the Netherlands in order to get possession of them and so increase at one her own industrial wealth and destroy the security of the English naval position.<sup>26</sup>

Frederick II of Prussia, a high strategic authority, had advised the French to seize the Netherlands and invade Hanover to strike at Britain, because they were too weak to fight at sea.<sup>27</sup> Corbett wrote this passage after the Moroccan Crisis of 1905 had brought the German challenge to the forefront, and made the security of Holland a vital issue. Corbett was equally clear that Britain went to war to secure Imperial advantage, not continental success. In 1907, after the completion of the Entente system, he stressed that the British saw how maritime wars served their interests, and those on the continent did not.<sup>28</sup>

The strategic lessons of what quickly became Fisher's favourite book were direct, and compelling, and it was to this text that he turned to develop strategy in 1914-15. The loss of the Belgian coast in the autumn of 1914 had been a strategic disaster of the first order for Britain, one that Fisher and Corbett realised had to be rectified as soon as possible, while Fisher's strategy against Germany had always hinged on controlling the Baltic. He needed a coastal warfare squadron to help recover the Flemish coast, and then move on to threaten, or pass the Baltic Narrows, while fast merchant ships laid extensive minefields in the North Sea. While there were few mines in store, and those were not of the best quality, Fisher had between twelve and eighteen months to fill his arsenal with mines, and their role was to compel the Germans to undertake extensive minesweeping

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<sup>24</sup> Asquith to Venetia Stanley 2.11.1914 in M. Gilbert, ed. *Winston S. Churchill Companion*, London: Heinemann, 1972, Vol. III: 1914-16, p. 247; R.F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone*, Oxford: OUP, 1973, pp. 455-505 covers this period, but underplays the Baltic, accepting Churchill's self-interested post 1927 claim that Fisher never intended to carry through with the plan pp.463-4. This claim cannot be sustained.

<sup>25</sup> Grimes, S.T. *Strategy and War-Planning in the British Navy 1887 1918*. Boydell Woodbridge 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Corbett, J.S. *The Seven Year's War: A Study in Combined Strategy*. London, Longman 1907 I p.142

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* I p.66

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* I. pp.74-5. The missing words are Austrian and French, replacing them with French and German perfectly fits the situation in 1914.

before a fleet sortie – thus delaying their progress to sea. In his analysis of the Russo-Japanese War Corbett had shown that minefields were more important as an intelligence asset than a tactical weapon. He had also highlighted the importance of specialist coastal forces.<sup>29</sup>

The effective exploitation of naval command inshore and amphibious operations depended on supplementing the sea control fleet - the modern battleships - with a combination of obsolete and specialist craft for coastal work – a ‘siege fleet.’<sup>30</sup> Fisher ordered shallow draught, torpedo-proof heavy gun armed monitors, shallow draught battlecruisers, bulged cruisers, a host of submarines, destroyers and sloops, along with 260 motorised armoured landing craft for ‘Home Operations’.<sup>31</sup> This ‘siege fleet’ would be used aggressively for inshore work, and the Grand Fleet kept at a distance, to ensure command of the sea.

While Churchill shared Fisher’s enthusiasm for monitors, he envisaged using them in a direct assault on the High Seas Fleet, inside heavily defended harbours: ‘going in to fetch them’, because he did not think the Germans would risk battle at sea, and unlike Fisher had no idea how to force them to come out and fight.<sup>32</sup> Fisher wanted monitors to work with other, mainly obsolescent warships and a British army to clear the coast of Belgium, and then threaten the entrances to the Baltic, with an army on hand to occupy the Danish island of Zealand. This combined strategy would touch a raw strategic nerve in Germany, it offered the prospect of drawing the High Seas Fleet into battle, and of ensuring it fought to the finish. Unable to bring the Expeditionary Force, created to serve a maritime strategy, into concert with the Navy, Churchill fell back on purely naval, or in Corbett’s terms, ‘minor’ strategy. Without the designated military strike force all naval offensive options involved excessive risk. That Churchill chose to pursue naval attacks on Borkum and then the Dardanelles, despite receiving and retaining eloquent maritime strategy papers signed by Fisher, but written by Corbett, was a testament to his anxiety to do something, and his inability to secure War Council support for a true maritime strategy. Ironically, the first such paper was commissioned as a direct riposte to Churchill’s naval offensive schemes.

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<sup>29</sup> Corbett *Russo-Japanese War* 1994. In late 1914 signals intelligence replaced minefields as the indicator of German activity.

<sup>30</sup> Corbett, *NO III*. p.149. Corbett took the term from French literature.

<sup>31</sup> Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 490. The lighters ended up at Gallipoli, see N. Friedman, *Fighting the Great War at Sea*, Barnsely: Seaforth, 2014, p. 214

<sup>32</sup> Churchill to Fisher 11.12.1914: FISR 866

Fisher requested the paper over lunch on December 14<sup>th</sup> 1914. Corbett delivered it five days later. 'I have endeavoured to state your case for the Baltic as well as I can – setting out such objections as occurred to me and meeting them to show the difficulties had been considered'. The handwritten memorandum 'On the Possibility of using our Command of the Sea to influence more drastically the military situation on the Continent', survives.<sup>33</sup> It set out the Admiral's thinking on the Belgian coast and the Baltic, Corbett considered it the master-text of the war that should have been waged. He ensured it achieved a prominent place in post-war debates. In 1919 he allowed Fisher to publish the paper, re-titled 'the Baltic Project', in his memoirs, and placed control of the Baltic at the heart of the *Official History*, as the logical culmination of British strategy.<sup>34</sup> Corbett opened Volume II of *Naval Operations* with a clear statement of strategy and policy:

Now that the outer seas had been cleared the paramount need was to obtain a closer hold on the North Sea, with a view to the possibility of ultimately pressing our offensive into the enemy's waters. Such operations would involve coastal attack and inshore work, and required a special class of vessel.<sup>35</sup>

The 'closer hold' involved a military occupation of the Belgian coast.<sup>36</sup> At the War Council on December 1<sup>st</sup> Fisher 'pointed out the importance of adopting the offensive.'<sup>37</sup> Fisher and Corbett agreed that any such plan would require careful development, and could not be implemented in the short term. Fisher wanted to be ready for the possibility that passive sea control and blockade did not bring Germany to make peace. He envisaged extensive minefields keeping the High Seas Fleet out of the North Sea while British forces approached the Baltic.<sup>38</sup> His ultimate aim was to secure control of the Baltic and complete the maritime blockade of Germany; discussions of amphibious operations were a smokescreen, deployed to obscure his intentions from talkative politicians. Russian bases would be useful, but Russian troops were not required. Fisher

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<sup>33</sup> Corbett to Fisher 19.12.1914, FISR 1/17 874, Churchill College Archives Centre. The MS is in Corbett's hand, and has his corrections and changes, there are no indications of any other input. For typescript copies see: FISR 5/24 4337-8, 4344 where it is headed 'the Baltic Project'.

<sup>34</sup> Fisher to Corbett 22.7.1918 & 3.12.1919 in Marder, *Fear God III* pp.546 & 602; Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 472. Corbett delivered the paper by hand: Corbett to Fisher 19.12.1914; Fisher Mss Churchill College & Corbett diary for 3.12.1919, CBT 43/18, National Maritime Museum.

<sup>35</sup> Corbett *NO*. II p.3.

<sup>36</sup> Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 473; Fisher to Jellicoe 9.12.1914 & 16.12.1914 & Fisher to Beatty 11.12.1913 in Marder *Fear God III*, pp.90-3.

<sup>37</sup> War Council Minutes 1.12.1914 in Gilbert ed., *Churchill Companion*, p. 290.

<sup>38</sup> Lord Fisher, *Records*, London, 1919, pp. 217-222 & missing paragraphs in Marder ed. *Fear God III* p.45.

only mentioned them troops to connect his paper with Churchill's 'Baltic' letter to Grand Duke Nicholas of August 19<sup>th</sup> 1914.<sup>39</sup> As Corbett observed:

The risks, of course, must be serious; but unless we are fairly sure that the passive pressure of our Fleet is really bringing German to a state of exhaustion, *risks must be taken to use our Command of the Sea with greater energy*; or, so far as the actual situation promises, we can expect no better issue for the present war than that which the continental coalition was forced to accept in the Seven Years' War.<sup>40</sup>

In other words – defeat. Corbett was referencing the Prussian crisis of 1761, when the Russian fleet opened Prussia's vulnerable Baltic coast, leaving Berlin defenceless, only for a miraculous political change to avert the fatal stroke. This was Fisher's favourite passage, a point that invests these remarks with considerable weight.<sup>41</sup>

Corbett acknowledged doubts about the efficacy of economic warfare. Current Foreign Office directives restricted the application of seapower, in an attempt to avoid problems with neutral powers, especially the United States. Under a modified Declaration of London system an economic blockade of Germany could only be effective if the Entente Powers controlled the Baltic, as Russia had in 1761.<sup>42</sup> The paper was intended to secure War Council support for Fisher's concept, without revealing the details. Even Corbett was left guessing, which explains his erroneous assumption that the Grand Fleet would enter the Baltic.<sup>43</sup> Fisher had no such intention. Corbett also wondered how Fisher would prevent German mines closing the Baltic narrows.<sup>44</sup> Fisher planned to enter through mine free Swedish waters, and he had ordered 24 minesweeping sloops, as part of the 'Baltic' fleet.<sup>45</sup> Both men believed blockading the Baltic was the key to an Entente victory, with or without the destruction of the German Fleet.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> W.S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1915*, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1923, pp. 37-9.

<sup>40</sup> Fisher, *Records*, p. 222. The careful use of language and potent historical analogy leave no doubt this was Corbett's work. See *Fear God III*, p. 602 where Fisher refers to it as 'your Baltic paper'; Churchill, *World Crisis 1915*, p. 39; Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 472.

<sup>41</sup> See Corbett's *England in the Seven Years' War*, Vol. II, pp. 287-91; Fisher to Jellicoe 25.5.1916 in *Fear God III*, p.351. J. Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Years War*, Lincoln, Nebraska 2006, p.190 provides a modern account.

<sup>42</sup> Marder argued it was essentially Fisher's work, *Fear God III* p. 45 This judgement may explain why *Churchill Companion III* pp.284-7 does not even mention Corbett.

<sup>43</sup> Fisher, *Records*, p. 220.

<sup>44</sup> Schurman, *Corbett*, pp.159-60.

<sup>45</sup> The British had secured a wealth of information on Japanese minesweeping and the uses of advanced bases in 1904-1905: CAB45/1. Corbett had used this material for his Russo-Japanese War book, see R. Gray, ed. *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1906-1922*, London, 1988, p. 94; Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 494.

<sup>46</sup> Corbett diary for 12.12.1915, CBT 43/14; A.D. Lambert, 'The Possibility of Ultimate Action in the Baltic' *Die Royal Navy im Krieg, 1914-1916* in M. Epkenhans, J. Hillman, & F. Nægler, eds,

Churchill felt the political pressure for ‘Action this Day’, and anxiously looked for an early offensive operation to bolster his Cabinet credentials.<sup>47</sup> He was not prepared to wait on the steady development of economic and strategic pressure to win the war, let alone the completion of Fisher’s new coastal fleet - purpose built to force the Germans to risk the High Seas Fleet – or for the Germans to lose command of the Baltic. Nor was he prepared to challenge a taciturn Kitchener and the Army General Staff for control of the BEF, lacking support in a War Cabinet dominated by passive civilians, unable to comprehend the enormity of their responsibilities. Without an amphibious army British strategy would remain limited. Hankey told Corbett that Churchill was angry the Baltic Paper had been produced. Fisher’s scheme would take too long for an ambitious young minister anxious to hear the siren call of battle, and confident the war would be won in a year. He preferred an opportunistic, improvised, hasty scheme at the Dardanelles, based on a suggestion by Hankey.<sup>48</sup>

Hankey recognised that Fisher exploited Corbett’s mastery of strategy and history to deflect and disarm the ill-considered sketches that emerged from Churchill’s fertile mind in the hours of darkness whilst the First Sea Lord slept. Churchill’s proposal to attack Borkum, the westernmost of Germany’s Frisian Islands, produced on 2<sup>nd</sup> December was very different to the Fisher/Corbett scheme, wildly optimistic, and based on a range of unwarranted assumptions.<sup>49</sup> It was no accident that the arguments Fisher used to block Churchill’s naval attacks were couched in strategic/historical terms,<sup>50</sup> but Fisher and Corbett’s time would have been better spent planning to defeat Germany.

Fisher’s planning in 1914-15 developed from War Plan G.U. produced during his first term as First Sea Lord. He would continue to develop it after he left office in May 1915, significantly adding a note on the ‘New Danish Defence from Roeskilde to Kiøge, like the lines of Torres Vedras.’<sup>51</sup> Fisher’s desire to bring a British army onto the Belgian coast in early 1915 was linked to this Baltic project. He demanded the War Council sanction this operation on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1915, rejecting purely naval attacks on Belgian

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*Skagerrakslact: Voergeschichte \_ Ereignis \_ Verarbeitung.* Oldnebourg Verlag, Munich 2009; A.D. Lambert, ‘This Is All We Want’: Great Britain and the Baltic Approaches 1815-1914’ in J. Sevaldsen, ed. *Britain and Denmark: Political, Economic and Cultural Relations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Copenhagen, 2003, pp. 147-169.

<sup>47</sup> Asquith observed this in his letters to Venetia Stanley, and in discussion with his wife.

<sup>48</sup> Churchill had been thinking about the subject since 19.8.1914: *Companion* p.44, 75, 83, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Churchill memo. 2.12.1914: *Companion* pp.291-4. The use of historical examples in this paper reflected Corbett’s influence on Lewis Bayly, who worked with him as War Course director, and read his works, including draft of *Some Principles*.

<sup>50</sup> Corbett captured this information, and recoded it for posterity in the *Official History*. vol. II p.161.

<sup>51</sup> Fisher Papers CCAC. I am indebted to Michael Clemmesen for this reference.

ports as wasteful and inconclusive. His ultimate object was to recover the BEF, or at least a sizeable army, which would hold open the Baltic Narrows. Once the Flemish ports were secure British troops could be landed at Copenhagen, to secure the island of Zealand, which commanded the Sound, one of three channels linking the Baltic to the North Sea. The landing would be made in response to a German invasion of Danish Jutland, which Fisher predicted would result from a British naval incursion into the Baltic, either real or merely threatened. The synergy between the British occupation of Zealand in 1807 which Fisher had used to spark the ‘Copenhagen’ Complex’ in 1904-05, and his plan to hold the island against Germany in 1915 was neither accidental, nor novel. With Anglo-Danish forces holding Zealand, and keeping the Sound open, Fisher could operate powerful naval forces in the Baltic. He anticipated a Baltic campaign would bring on a major fleet action, which the British would win – not in the Baltic but in the main North Sea theatre.

Yet despite Fisher’s professional advice Churchill remained optimistic the war would be over in 1915. He refused to sanction Fisher’s new battle cruisers, declaring: ‘Long before they can be finished we shall have smashed up the German Navy *in harbour* with our monitors, or they will have fought their battle in blue water, or peace will have been signed.’<sup>52</sup> However, he did accept Fisher’s core argument: ‘The Baltic is the only theatre in which naval action can appreciably shorten the war.’<sup>53</sup> Hearing an echo of his own ideas Fisher left the energetic young minister to take the lead in public debates and cabinet council, while he concentrated on strategy and shipbuilding.

To secure his escalating resource demands Fisher frequently threatened to resign: withdrawing his resignation in late January he exacted War Council authority to order the *Courageous* class light battle cruisers, the largest units of the projected Baltic Fleet. Only then would he would support Churchill’s Dardanelles plan, which he used to distract Winston from the even more dangerous Borkum concept.<sup>54</sup> Recognising Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as the only other man of action in the Cabinet Fisher asked him to read the Baltic passages of Corbett’s *Seven Year’s War*.<sup>55</sup> This and Churchill reminding the War Council ‘that the ultimate object of the Navy was to obtain access to the Baltic..... this operation was of great importance as Germany was, AND ALWAYS HAD BEEN, very nervous of an attack from the Baltic. For this purpose special vessels were required, and the First Sea Lord had designed cruisers etc’, prompted Lloyd George

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<sup>52</sup> Churchill to Fisher 21.12.1914 in Marder *Fear God III*, p.105; Gilbert ed, *Companion*, pp. 323-4.

<sup>53</sup> Churchill to Fisher 22.12.1914 in Gilbert ed., *Companion*, pp. 325-6. My emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert, *Companion*, pp. 272-3.

<sup>55</sup> Fisher to Lloyd George 11.1.1915, LG/C/4/11/2, History of Parliament Archives.

to sanction the expenditure.<sup>56</sup> The *Courageous* class could use ‘the international highway of the Sound owing to her shallow draught’. The Swedish side of the Sound was not mined, but it was shallow.<sup>57</sup> As a result it was ‘quite impossible for any of our present larger ships or indeed the larger vessels of the enemy’.<sup>58</sup> Combining the firepower to deal with older German battleships, the speed to outrun anything more powerful, and very long endurance, the new ships were built to dominate the Baltic.

Ultimately Fisher’s ordered approximately 600 ships and vessels included five battle cruisers, 37 monitors,<sup>59</sup> a massive fleet of submarines minesweeping sloops, anti-submarine escorts, and motorised landing craft, and bought eight fast merchant ships to mine German North Sea coastal waters.<sup>60</sup> The ‘Baltic Fleet’ would be complete by early 1916, but in the interval Fisher projected an operation to secure the Belgian coast and close the German submarine and destroyer bases at Ostend and Zeebrugge. This would use obsolete warships, the first of the new monitors and much of the BEF. Success in Flanders would secure the Channel, push the Germans back onto their own coast and, critically, remove the BEF from the French line. This would provide an Army ready to move from Flanders to Copenhagen, once the ‘Baltic’ fleet had been completed. Corbett saw such combined operations as the proper use of British troops, a mission that dominated the *Seven Years War*, and was reduced to doctrinal orthodoxy in *Some Principles* in 1911, complete with a telling quote from Napoleon.<sup>61</sup> Alongside the greatest military commander in modern history Corbett also deployed Colonel G.F.R. Henderson’s argument that Antwerp remained the focus for any future British military intervention on the Continent, especially if Germany violated Belgian neutrality. Henderson’s ‘great maxim [was] that the naval strength of the enemy should be the first

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<sup>56</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis, 1915*, pp. 42-6; Fisher’s notes of the meeting in Fisher to Churchill 13.3.1918 in Marder *Fear God III*, pp. 521-2. Order approved by Treasury 23.5.1915, see Friedman, *Great War at Sea*, p. 179.

<sup>57</sup> Fisher to Churchill 25.1.1915 in Marder ed., *Fear God III*, p. 145; Lambert, “This Is All We Want”, pp.147-169.

<sup>58</sup> Director of Naval Construction minute 28.1.1915 cited in N. Friedman, *The British Battleship*, Barnsley, Seaforth, 2015, pp. 178-9.

<sup>59</sup> I. Buxton, *Big Gun Monitors*, Tynemouth, 1979 is an exemplary study of these craft.

<sup>60</sup> N. Black, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009, pp. 116-8 confirms that this was a ‘Baltic Fleet’ contra Mackay, *Fisher*, pp.459-76, a judgement based on significant new evidence. The X lighter, ordered in February 1915 completed between April and July – timing that would fit the projected Flanders offensive.

<sup>61</sup> J.S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. London, Longman 1911, p. 66. In this case Corbett quoted Napoleon’s own words, and provided a reference, to ensure the point could not be contested.

objective of the forces of a maritime power, both by land and sea.<sup>62</sup> An expeditionary army had a critical role in securing and maintaining command of the sea.

Not that Fisher was looking for anything as banal as a military operation. He wanted a deployable army to unsettle and confound the German High Command into political and strategic mistakes. As Corbett saw it:

it is for consideration whether, even if the suggested operation is not feasible, a menace of carrying it out – concerted with Russia – might not avail seriously to disturb German equilibrium and force her to desperate expedients, even hazarding a fleet action or to alienating entirely the Scandinavian Powers by drastic measures of precaution.<sup>63</sup>

Fisher wanted to manipulate the German High Command into acting as he desired, something he had achieved on several occasions.<sup>64</sup> He anticipated that threatening the Baltic Narrows would trigger a ‘drastic’ German response, the invasion of Jutland. This would facilitate a British army landing to assist Denmark secure Zealand, thereby holding open the Baltic narrows. In addition it would encourage Sweden and Norway to move towards the Entente, potentially cutting off trade with Germany. Regardless of Scandinavian attitudes, with the Danish Narrows open Fisher could deploy submarines and the new light battle cruisers to cripple German trade with Sweden. The threat to the Germany’s supply of iron ore trade would force the High Seas Fleet to fight. If it were sunk the British blockade could be extended into the Baltic, crippling the German war economy.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately the Baltic plan would complete the economic blockade.

Fisher was the only member of naval leadership, both civil and military, who realised how reluctant Germany was to risk the High Seas Fleet on offensive operations, because it depended on control of the Baltic.<sup>66</sup> Fisher knew that Germany only went to war in 1914 because the Kiel Canal had re-opened, allowing the High Seas Fleet to shift into the Baltic when necessary. He had anticipated this development in 1911, if not before.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War*, London, 1905, p. 28. Corbett used this quote in *Some Principles* and in his War Course Lectures

<sup>63</sup> Fisher, *Records*, pp. 221-2.

<sup>64</sup> See A.D. Lambert, *Admirals*, London: Faber, 2007, pp. 306-16.

<sup>65</sup> A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, Oxford: OUP, 1989 on the development of blockade ideas and Fisher’s thinking, pp.237-9 & 252; Black, *Naval Staff*, p. 119.

<sup>66</sup> The obvious explanation is that they were basing their analysis on a mirror image of British thinking.

<sup>67</sup> Hankey to Fisher 28.5.1917 in Fisher, *Records*, pp.214-5. Fisher to Hankey 28.5.1917 in Marder, *Fear God III*, p. 429.



Ultimately the Fisher/Corbett Baltic concept was never attempted. The War Office would not consider it, and the Cabinet did not dare challenge Kitchener and the General Staff. Instead they compromised on Churchill's foolish Dardanelles delusion, wasting the amphibious weapon in a futile naval attack and an under-resourced army operation. The failure to exploit the power of combined operations was criminal. Fisher never lost his belief that a Baltic operation, feint or stroke, was the only way that the British could use sea power to defeat Germany within the short time scale that the Asquith Government had effectively adopted. The decisive weapon would be a complete blockade. This was also the only way to avoid a total war military mobilisation, and the concept was drawn directly from Corbett's *Seven Year's War*.<sup>68</sup> Corbett shared Fisher's Baltic vision. At the end of the war he would lament its failure, and making the Baltic the central theme of the *Official History*. He meant it to be a warning to future generations, ensuring they would recognise how the best laid plans could be deflected into futile sideshows by political interference, how service agendas could ruin national strategy, and how men of genius acting in tandem could cancel one another out. The failure to act in the Baltic was, in Corbett's mind, the central tragedy of war; and Fisher the ultimate British strategist.

The explosive departure of Churchill and Fisher, sparked by the Dardanelles/Gallipoli disaster, marked the end of any serious challenge to the misery of the Western Front. In the ensuing chaos the Army asserted there was no alternative to the 'decisive theatre', employing this declaration of faith to secure a mass conscript army. In 1911 Corbett had demonstrated there was no precedent for such forces, nor any need: Britain had successfully waged limited maritime war against Napoleon. Corbett would spend the remaining years of the war looking for a way out of the 'German' method. In May 1916 Hankey consulted him:

to see if nothing could be done to break down rigid General Staff ideas of concentration in Main Theatre – he agreed concentration no good unless chances of getting sufficing preponderance for a decision – but he said they would not listen & even resented ministers asking how they were going to get on in France.<sup>69</sup>

This terrifying conversation reflected Hankey's experience of a War Council where the civilian leadership had long since capitulated to the soldiers.<sup>70</sup> The primacy of civilian

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<sup>68</sup> Fisher to Jellicoe 25.5.1916 in Marder, *Fear God III*, pp. 350-1.

<sup>69</sup> Corbett diary for 19.5.1916, CBT 43/15.

<sup>70</sup> C. Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: the Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945*, New York: OUP, 1994, p.80 provides a suitable example of the contempt in which 'Wully' Robertson, as CIGS held his civilian 'masters'. Such examples are legion.

direction of war, a core theme in Corbett's work, not to mention Clausewitz's, had gone by the board. In Britain the damage was far greater than in Imperial Germany, because the tradition had been far stronger. Spineless politicians who had never thought about war, tamely abandoned control to soldiers who had only ever thought about one kind of war, the kind that would justify their long-held ambition to create a mass conscript army for continental service. Corbett recognised that he could not challenge the dominant position of bloody sacrifice on the Western Front in the national memory, so he used the Official History to ensure strategy returned to pre-war maritime norms. In the process he coined a famous phrase. Ever on the lookout for signs of hope he found some encouragement in the minutes of an Anglo-French high level Conference in Paris in the summer of 1917, observing; 'our old British way of waging war seemed to be coming up again and clashing with continental ideas.'<sup>71</sup> Sadly the soldiers did not listen. Their strategy put service above state, sacrifice above sanity – and the politicians lacked the courage to restrain them. The belated revolt against the carnage of the Western Front, and the near universal denigration of Generals who led it, was no more than a return to deep rooted British cultural norms, norms that Corbett shared. In June 1918 he wrote a bleak letter to Fisher – one that should be read by every author who ever thought their work might make a difference:

I wept when I knew our whole Expeditionary Force was going to France, and felt what it would mean, and how Pitt would turn in his grave. Perhaps as Germany had got the initiative so completely, it could not be helped; but there is the cause of tears all the same. When the time came to strike amphibiously for a decision, we had nothing to strike with. The first chance, as you saw, was at the Dardanelles, and once the decision obtained there we could have passed to the final one in the Baltic. Oh these blessed Germanised soldiers with their 'decisive theatre.....

It is the most bigoted 'soldier's war we have ever fought, and this at the end of all our experience. Why didn't I devote my life to writing comic opera, or collecting beetles? I might just as well. But now my fate is to tell the stupid story of the war as it is; not, alas, as it might have been. I had hoped when you came back, but already the soldiers had entangled us too far even for you to drag us out. We deserve each other's pity.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Corbett diary for 1.8.1917, CBT 43/16.

<sup>72</sup> Corbett to Fisher 12.6.1918: *Fear God III* pp.538-9. He meant Pitt the Elder. Written in response to Fisher's paper 'The Strangest Thing in the War', passed to him by General Sir George Aston.

Corbett and Fisher knew that Britain had been rocked by a war that should have been waged with more intelligence, an intelligence shaped by past practice, and present doctrine. In pursuit of false goals Britain had thrown away a million lives, blasted many more, and wrecked the most successful economy in history, opening a veritable Pandora's box of misery stretching from the influenza pandemic to chaos and genocide. That theme would dominate Corbett's elegant Official History.

Fisher published Corbett's 'weighty memorandum' in 1919, as a criticism of Churchill's strategic judgement, a critique developed in Volume II of the Official History. Churchill responded in 1923, when both Fisher and Corbett were dead. While his claims were specious, and his evidence thin, his version was widely accepted. Ironically Churchill took the lesson to heart. In 1939 the newly restored First Lord dreamt up a bastardised, narrowly naval version of Fisher's elegant Baltic scheme. While 'Operation Catherine' was blocked by wiser men, the absurdity of the idea tarnished Fisher's project by association.<sup>73</sup>

Corbett spent his intellectual life developing a system of thought to explain how Britain, his Britain, an Empire of titanic scale, could be reformed and defended in a new century. He was obstructed by those who feared that his ideas would damage their own interests - small minded soldiers and sailors sharing the blame with ignorant politicians. There was something heroic, and tragic in the arc of Corbett's life, not the heroism of the quarter deck, physical danger and personal risk, but the heroism of a middle aged man taking on a task that required more time, effort and resource than he could hope to apply.

In the event his ideas survived the carnage. They inspired the post-atomic development of limited war theory that kept alive the idea that war could be a political act, not just the ultimate expression of nihilism. They outlived the ill-informed attacks of Cold War warriors, who failed to see the temporary and anomalous nature of major British peacetime military commitments in central Germany. When the Cold War ended Corbett's work emerged as the only intellectually coherent explanation of what makes British strategy unique and distinctive.

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<sup>73</sup> C.M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, Oxford: OUP, 2013, pp. 169-182.

## The Battle of Jutland: an ‘unpalatable’ result

John Brooks

The Battle of Jutland, or in Germany of the Skagerrak, took place on 31 May and 1 June 1916. It was the only encounter in World War I between what in Britain were called ‘grand battle fleets’, that is, combined forces of battleships, battlecruisers, armoured cruisers (though only on the British side), light cruisers and destroyers. In all, 151 British and 99 German warships were present. The battle ended with the British Grand Fleet still dominant in the North Sea and with the German High Seas Fleet retreating to the safety of its bases. But the price of this strategic victory had been no less than a tactical defeat. British casualties were 6,768 killed and wounded, while the German total was 3,058. The Royal Navy lost three battlecruisers and two armoured cruisers, Germany only one pre-dreadnought battleship; also, one German battlecruiser and a British armoured cruiser were so damaged that they sank before regaining harbour. Of the smaller vessels, eight British destroyers were sunk compared with five German: but only Germany lost light cruisers, four in all. Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the British Commander-in-Chief, wrote of the battlecruiser actions that ‘the result cannot be other than unpalatable’ but this verdict can apply equally to the whole battle. Part of the explanation lies in the greater tendency for fires in the British gun propellant, cordite, to develop into catastrophic magazine explosions. But why, despite its considerable superiority in numbers and even more in weight of gunfire, was the British fleet unable to inflict greater losses on its weaker opponent?

To begin with a brief outline of the course of the battle: just before 3.30pm on 31 May, the opposing scouting forces sighted each other – they were the British Battle Cruiser Fleet (the BCF) led by Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty and the German Ist Scouting Group (the ISG) commanded by Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper. Of the BCF’s three squadrons, that commanded by Rear-Admiral Horace Hood was with the battlefleet but temporarily Beatty had been given four fast battleships from the 5th Battle Squadron (the 5BS). Hipper reversed course to engage and to entice Beatty towards the advancing German battlefleet led by Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer. In this ‘Run to the South’, the British battlecruisers *Indefatigable* and *Queen Mary* were destroyed by cordite explosions. As soon as Beatty sighted the High Seas Fleet, he turned about to lead Scheer

in the 'Run to the North' towards Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet. Just as the two battlefleets made contact, at 6.15pm Jellicoe deployed his battleships from columns into single line, thereby seizing the tactical advantage as the British van 'crossed the T' of Scheer's line. Earlier, when Jellicoe had learned that Beatty was in action, the C-in-C had sent Hood's three battlecruisers ahead to rejoin the BCF, leaving the armoured cruisers as the battlefleet's only advanced force. Thus, as the Grand Fleet began its deployment, the armoured cruisers commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir Robert Arbuthnot were caught between the lines, his flagship *Defence* blowing up and *Warrior* being fatally damaged. Shortly afterwards, at the end of a brief action with the ISG, Hood's flagship *Invincible* also exploded, though not before her hits on Hipper's flagship had ensured that *Lützow* would not survive the battle. Visibility was now bad, especially for the Germans, and Scheer had to disengage by an action-turn-about, that is, a near-simultaneous course reversal by his whole battle line. But by making a second action-turn-about prematurely, he found Jellicoe once again crossing his T. To get out of trouble, Scheer had to order a third action-turn-about under cover of attacks by his battlecruisers and some of his destroyer flotillas. Threatened by the latter's torpedoes, at 7.22pm Jellicoe turned all his battle squadrons away, losing contact for good with the enemy battlefleet. About an hour later, with dusk approaching, Beatty briefly encountered the ISG and the German predreadnoughts but he did not follow them when they turned away. After dark, Jellicoe turned South for the night, with his flotillas and a light cruiser squadron five miles astern of his battleship columns: but Scheer decided that, at all costs, he must return SSE'wards past Horns Reef off the Jutland coast. As he crossed astern of the British battlefleet, his leading ships fought fierce engagements with the British light forces, during which one German light cruiser was sunk and two so damaged that they had to be scuttled. It was not until daybreak at 2am that the predreadnought *Pommern* blew up during a torpedo attack by the British 12th Flotilla. But by then the two battlefleets were already too far apart for Jellicoe to prevent Scheer from returning safely to his bases in the Heligoland Bight.

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Despite an earlier report of nearby heavy enemy ships, when Beatty sighted the ISG he had done nothing to concentrate his forces or form them into a single battle line; the fast battleships were trailing astern by more than seven miles and would take no part in the first phase of the coming action. Beatty still had six battlecruisers to the German five. But his approach was too steep; when Hipper opened fire, the British battlecruisers were still manoeuvring to free themselves from interference from their own smoke; in the main,

their ranges were inaccurate; the two rear battlecruisers were still struggling to get into line; not all the British turrets were bearing; and one German ship had not been selected as a target. By the end of the first phase of the Run to the South, Beatty's battlecruisers had scored only 6 hits but received at least 22, including those that sank *Indefatigable* and wrecked his flagship's Q turret. *Lion* veered away out of line for a time, which led to the concentration by *Seydlitz* and *Derfflinger* that destroyed *Queen Mary*. The British battlecruisers probably made only three hits in this second phase but the 5BS, now able to engage at long range, concentrated on the two rear German battlecruisers and made as many as seven. The ISG obtained at least thirteen more hits but, just after *Queen Mary* blew up, Hipper was forced to turn away by the 5BS's accurate fire and by a timely attack from Beatty's destroyers.

At the start of the Run to the North, the delayed turn by the 5BS left them trailing some three miles astern of the battlecruisers. Then, when the latter broke contact with the enemy for almost 25 minutes, the battleships were left to engage both the German battlecruisers and their leading battle squadron. Beatty also allowed his destroyer flotillas to remain on his disengaged flank, a position from which they could not pose any threat to the pursuing enemy forces.

After Jellicoe's deployment had enveloped the head of the German line, Scheer made his first action-turn-about at 6.36pm; from the British line, the enemy disappeared into the mist. After the sinking of *Invincible*, Beatty refused to pursue the ISG; instead, at about seven o'clock, he led the reunited battlecruisers through a complete circle, after which they were in a position to fire only a few ineffective salvos at long ranges as the battle reached its climax. After Scheer's third action-turn-about, his heavy ships were again lost to sight from most of the British battleships. At the same time, in part due to the hesitant leadership of the British van by Vice-Admiral Sir Thomas Jerram in *King George V*, Jellicoe had not yet reformed his battleships in single line ahead. With the attacking German flotillas posing a clear threat, at least to the rear British divisions, Jellicoe elected to turn his whole battle line away.

Up to midnight, costly attacks by British light cruisers and destroyers led to the loss of three German light cruisers. But even after these actions, three more flotillas were well-placed for a massed attack from ahead on the advancing German line; regrettably, this promising concentration was disrupted when Captain James Farie suddenly turned his 13th Flotilla sharply away from the enemy. Some of the remaining destroyers crossed ahead of the German van but they neither attacked from this favourable position nor

reported what they saw of the enemy. Later, at daybreak, the 1st Division, 12th Flotilla, led by Commander Anselan Stirling in *Faulknor*, sank the *Pommern* in a well-conducted attack. But then *Maenad* (Commander John Champion) leading the 2nd Division turned about after firing her first torpedoes, thereby obstructing the attacks of those boats that had been following her.

After dark, Jellicoe received one Admiralty signal stating clearly that Scheer had ordered his forces to return SSE'wards past Horns Reef, a course that was consistent with the firing that could be seen from the British flagship. But unfortunately the only clear report from one of Jellicoe's own ships gave the German course as South and he chose to believe that the enemy fleet was still following him rather than cutting across his wakes. At 2.30am, Jellicoe turned North but his hopes of quickly picking up his destroyers and encountering the High Seas Fleet were both disappointed. By the time that the Admiralty informed Jellicoe of the actual 2.30am German position, the enemy forces were already out of reach.

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Throughout the battle British commanders (knowingly or not) missed opportunities to inflict more damage on enemy ships, to limit losses to their own ship, or even both at once. If Beatty had formed his battlecruisers and battleships in one line and then made a less precipitate approach, each German battlecruiser would have been under fire from two British ships. Even though the concentrated fire of the battlecruisers would probably have been less accurate than that of the battleships, the effect on the ISG would have been overwhelming, especially on the rear ships. Most probably *Indefatigable* would have survived, there would have been no German concentration on *Queen Mary* and, even if no German battlecruisers were actually lost, the ISG would have been finished as a fighting force. Yet, however the Run to the South ended, Beatty must then have turned about to lead Scheer to Jellicoe. Whether or not the 5BS was trailing a few miles astern, it would have been in an exposed position. But, if Beatty had remained in action with his fire directed at the Hipper's battlecruisers, the 5BS would have been free to bring its formidable firepower to bear only on the leading German battleships. Also, Beatty missed opportunities for his destroyers to attack, either during the Run to the North or as the Grand Fleet deployed – an attack at the latter time might well have disrupted the already curved German line and its fire at *Defence*, *Warrior*, the circling *Warspite* and *Invincible*. As a separate possibility, *Defence* and *Warrior* might also have survived if Jellicoe had kept Hood's squadron as his more advanced scouting line, but there are too many

imponderables to decide whether or not, in that event alone, *Invincible* would have been lost.

After Scheer's first action-turn-about, his line was in some confusion, *Lützow* was limping out of action and the ISG had been forced to stop while *Derfflinger* cut away a torpedo net entangled in a propeller. But due to delayed British turns towards the enemy and Beatty's refusal to follow the ISG, these opportunities to attack while the enemy was vulnerable were not seen from the British forces. The moment passed but then Scheer made his premature second action-turn-about, allowing Jellicoe to cross the T once again. After Scheer's third action-turn-about, his fleet was more disorganised and vulnerable than it had been previously, but once again this was not visible from the British line. It probably did not enter Jellicoe's mind that the Germans had executed such a drastic manoeuvre directly away from him, in which case he would have assumed that they would soon turn back into line on a course not greatly different from his own. The pro-Beatty *Naval Staff Appreciation* with 20-20 hindsight roundly criticised Jellicoe for not turning his fleet by divisions (or four or even two ships) in pursuit.<sup>74</sup> But to do so would have ignored both the real torpedo threat to his rear and the risk that his columns might run head-on into an unbroken German battle line. However, there was another alternative, that only the rear British divisions should turn away and that those in the lead should form line before turning towards the retreating and (as we know now) disorganised enemy squadrons. But this would have divided Jellicoe's battle squadrons, at least for a time, and he would, as ever, have been apprehensive of further destroyer attacks. He chose to turn all his battle squadrons away which, with Scheer's rapid withdrawal, ensured that their fleets would not renew contact.

Even then, an opportunity remained while the enemy fleet was still in disarray for a massed attack by the two flotillas ahead of the British van. Instead, probably mindful of the defensive priorities for destroyers in the *Grand Fleet Battle Orders*, Commodore (Flotillas) James Hawksley moved out with only half a flotilla but, before he found the enemy, he was peremptorily recalled by Jellicoe. After this reprimand, Hawksley twice failed to support or follow up attacks by the 4th Light Cruiser Squadron although, on the second occasion at dusk, his determination must also have been undermined by Jerram's confused orders.

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<sup>74</sup> *NSA*, pp. 106-7.



During the early night actions, the British light cruisers and destroyers had to attack at once as soon as they encountered German ships. But Farie's flight from the enemy – there seems no other appropriate description – disrupted the British destroyers' best opportunity to deliver a massed attack from ahead on the advancing German line. Even then, those destroyers that remained were favourably positioned to attack as they crossed ahead of the enemy line but, despite clear signs to the contrary, many commanders would not accept that the ships were hostile. At daybreak, Stirling seized his opportunity to make the attack that torpedoed the *Pommern* but his flotilla was denied further successes by the wild manoeuvring of Champion's *Maenad*.

While it was still dark, the High Seas Fleet was clearly seen from the rear of the Grand Fleet heading in the direction of Horns Reef but these sightings were not reported to Jellicoe. If they had been, they might have persuaded him that the Admiralty's intelligence was correct and he must set a course to intercept Scheer at daybreak. But would this have been a final opportunity to damage the enemy further? The British battlefleet was almost unharmed but it would have been without nearly all its destroyers in an action that, in the poor visibility, would have been at short ranges. For a time the Grand Fleet's superior firepower might have inflicted more damage than it received, though there would always have been a risk that a German hit might cause another cordite explosion. But in any event Scheer would quickly have ordered a destroyer attack to cover a withdrawal, while Jellicoe, made doubly apprehensive by his lack of destroyers and by his long-held concerns about running onto mines and torpedoes, would not have dared to follow. Thus a dawn encounter would probably have been no more decisive than the previous day's actions.

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The battle began badly for the Royal Navy when Beatty made the elementary tactical blunder of not engaging with his whole force. The gunnery of his battlecruisers, which was not up to the standards of the battlefleet, was then compromised by his tactical leadership; he twice lost gunnery superiority, enabling his opponents to make sufficient hits to blow up *Indefatigable* and *Queen Mary*. If Beatty had supported the fast battleships throughout the Run to the North, they would have received less damage and inflicted more on the German battleships. He would not pursue the enemy battlecruisers either after the sinking of *Invincible* or when he encountered them again at the end of the day; at either time, even a few more hits on *Seydlitz* would probably have prevented her from struggling back to port.

Jellicoe earned his place among outstanding commanders when he made the best possible deployment with minimal information about the enemy. Unfortunately, it was marred by the destruction of Arbuthnot's armoured cruisers and *Invincible*, the unintended consequence of Jellicoe's decision to send Hood ahead. Since the outbreak of the War, Jellicoe had been apprehensive of attacks with torpedoes and mines and of his ships' ability to withstand underwater hits; these concerns discouraged him from pressing home his advantages, while Jerram's hesitant leadership of the van added to his tactical problems; eventually Jellicoe turned away from the enemy and lost contact for good. He undoubtedly misjudged Scheer's movements during the night but, if they had met near Horns Reef at dawn, it is far from certain which fleet would have inflicted the greater damage.

Of the destroyer leaders, during the day Hawksley did not attack again after his rebuke by Jellicoe. But *Pommern's* sinking by Stirling's flotilla showed what might have been accomplished during the night if Farie had not broken up the destroyer concentration that stood in the way of the retiring High Seas Fleet.

The strategic outcome of the Battle of Jutland would probably not have been much different anyway. But if British commanders had seized more of their tactical opportunities, the losses in ships and men would have been more evenly balanced and the tactical result would have been much more palatable.

This article summarises some of the conclusions of John Brooks, *The Battle of Jutland* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

# Maritime Strategy for a Medium Power: The Australian Navy Experience, 1914-18

David Stevens

Between 1914 and 1918 Australia was alone among the British Dominions in fielding a credible ocean-going navy. In this context, credible does not describe a fleet able to confront one of the great power navies in their primary theatre of operation. Rather, it refers to Australia's possession of efficient and flexible warships that proved ready to perform a variety of tasks across the spectrum of maritime operations.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, and despite a lack of operational experience, these ships proved capable of sustaining their activities at a significant distance from home base while routinely demonstrating an ability and willingness to work within, and on occasion command, ad hoc coalitions.<sup>76</sup>

A maritime strategy rests upon communications and, in particular, ensuring that global links remain functioning. Since the beginnings of European settlement in 1788, Australia's prosperity had been built upon these oceanic connections. Just as vital, when the island continent federated in 1901 it still possessed virtually no internal transport network, leaving the Australian states and their remote regions almost entirely reliant upon coastal shipping for maintaining contact.

As a member of the world's greatest and most complex empire, one built upon the military and social foundation of sea power, Australians understood both the benefits and the vulnerabilities bestowed by such a maritime construct. The Royal Navy had long been the ultimate guarantor of their security, yet by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century suspicions had grown that the British Admiralty's attention had increasingly turned inwards, leaving the empire's periphery dangerously vulnerable.

Not surprisingly, Australia readily accepted the 'Fleet Unit' naval proposal put forward at the 1909 Imperial Conference. The product of the fertile mind of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, the fleet unit was to be centred on a fast and powerful battle cruiser and its high-speed scouts or light cruisers. When combined with a local

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<sup>75</sup> See *Australian Maritime Doctrine: RAN Doctrine I*, Royal Australian Navy, Canberra, 2010, Chapter 6, 'The Spectrum of Operations'.

<sup>76</sup> For further details, see D Stevens, *In All Respects Ready: Australia's Navy in World War One*, Melbourne: OUP, 2014.

defence flotilla of destroyers and submarines, the package represented an ideal force structure; small enough for a dominion to manage in peace, but in war capable of effective operations as part of a combined Pacific fleet. Fisher enthused that the scheme would allow Britain to leave distant naval defence to the dominions: ‘We manage the job in Europe. They’ll manage it against the Yankees, Japs and Chinese as occasion requires out there’.<sup>77</sup>

Led by the flagship, HMAS *Australia*, the newly built ships of the Royal Australian Navy’s fleet unit arrived at Sydney on 4 October 1913. Regrettably, with Fisher’s departure from office in 1910, the wider scheme lost its momentum and no other dominion followed Australia’s lead. Fearing that their navy might be rendered an isolated force, the antithesis of what they had planned for, Australian politicians sought another imperial conference to reforge the links between local and imperial defence. At the same time, the navy’s governing body, the Australian Commonwealth Naval Board, progressed its own preparations, seeking not only appropriate war orders from the Admiralty, but also to develop its own operational and strategic planning framework.<sup>78</sup> The aim of the latter was to produce an alternative maritime strategy; one that took account of Australia’s limited resources and unique geographic circumstances so that, if necessary, it could function independently of imperial assistance.<sup>79</sup>

Although by early August 1914 these plans had not all been completed, a solid foundation had been created and there is no doubt that the navy was the most professional and effective force that Australia had to offer the British Empire. On the declaration of war, the fleet commander, Rear Admiral Sir George Patey, was at sea in *Australia* and the battlecruiser would be a key player in his subsequent maritime campaign; one that ranged across half the globe and sought to secure allied interests in the face of a clear and capable enemy threat.

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<sup>77</sup> Fisher to Esher, 13<sup>th</sup> Sep 1909, cited in AJ Marder ed., *Fear God and Dread Nought: Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord John Fisher*, Vol. II, Jonathan Cape, London, 1956, p. 266.

<sup>78</sup> See D Stevens, ‘The sea is all one’: the dominion perspective, 1909-1914’, in G Kennedy (ed.), *Britain’s War at Sea, 1914-1918: The war they thought and the war they fought*, Routledge, Oxford, 2016, pp. 165-182.

<sup>79</sup> See D Stevens, ‘“Defend the north”: Commander Thring, Captain Hughes-Onslow and the beginnings of Australian naval strategic thought’ in D Stevens & J Reeve (eds), *Southern Trident: Strategy, History and the Rise of Australian Naval Power*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2001, pp. 225-41 and, ‘Australian Naval Defence: Selections from the Papers and Correspondence of Captain WHCS Thring, 1913-34’ in S Rose (ed.), *The Naval Miscellany Vol VII*, Ashgate for the Naval Records Society, Aldershot, 2008, pp. 407-62.

In the first instance this threat came in the form of the German East Asian Cruiser Squadron, commanded since 1912 by *Vizeadmiral* von Spee. Comprising the two armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and up to three light cruisers, the squadron had its main base at Tsingtao within the German concession in China, but roamed as far south as Rabaul, the German colonial capital in what is now part of Papua New Guinea. The squadron's war plans sought to be proactive. By stalking trade routes and colonial possessions, and even raiding dominion harbours to acquire coal and supplies, the Germans aimed to take advantage of the British Empire's greatest strategic vulnerability—its enormous dispersal.

Frustrating these designs was the Australian flagship for, even by herself, the battlecruiser was powerful enough to defeat the German armoured cruisers. Von Spee understood the futility of entering any encounter he could not win. Therefore, when war broke out he simply abandoned plans for commerce warfare in Australasian waters, first disappearing into the vast Pacific, then determining to move east towards South America to act as a fleet-in-being. The German admiral left only the light cruiser *Emden* to operate independently in the Indian Ocean.

The British, however, remained unaware that von Spee had been deterred, and so Australia's first combat operation of the war was planned as a surprise night torpedo attack on his squadron, which signals and human intelligence suggested was anchored at Rabaul. Devised by Rear Admiral Patey, the operational plan involved three destroyers escorted by the light cruiser *Sydney*, making the final approach, while the battle cruiser remained in the rear to provide cover. With Rabaul poorly charted, and potentially fortified and mined, the operation was not without risk. Nevertheless, Patey was confident in his fleet's capabilities. That the attack could be mounted within a week of the war's outbreak, 2000 miles from the main Australian base at Sydney, highlights the high level of readiness he had engendered.

Expecting to fight the largest naval battle since Tsushima in 1905, the Australians made their final approach to Rabaul on the night of 11-12 August 1914. They found the harbour empty, so we will never know how the battle might have evolved, but this was just the first in a series of operations that now aimed to deprive the Germans of their strategic communications and potential bases.

Here the Australian fleet unit again proved its worth, for the balanced assortment of warships and auxiliaries under Patey's command essentially gave the Admiralty an

independent and flexible task force, capable of a remarkably modern conception of maritime power-projection operations. Within the month Patey had destroyed the German wireless stations at Nauru, Bitapaka and Angaur, and enabled the successful occupation of German territories in Samoa and New Guinea.

The latter operations were both joint and combined. The expedition to Samoa involved nearly 1400 New Zealand troops, escorted by Australian, French, and British warships. In addition to the practical and political benefits of possession, planners hoped that, by directly threatening Germany's colonial territories, von Spee might be compelled to intervene, thereby disrupting his plans for commerce warfare and indirectly protecting allied trade. So as to further encourage an enemy response, *Australia* maintained a covert posture during the approach to Samoa; sending her message traffic through the French armoured cruiser *Montcalm*, which both sides knew was no match for the German squadron.

The occupation of German New Guinea was primarily an Australian operation, involving more than 1500 troops, but again with some British and French naval support. With control again assured by the fleet, the first landings by naval reservists took place before dawn on 11<sup>th</sup> September. It was during this assault that Australia suffered its first wartime casualties but, equally noteworthy, Patey had assembled at Rabaul more than twenty warships, submarines, transports, oilers, colliers and naval auxiliaries; the latter including, hospital, supply and depot ships. In effect, the naval commander possessed his own floating fleet base, from which he could launch more distant operations into the Pacific. The flexibility of such an arrangement meant that by October, when von Spee revealed himself far to the east off Tahiti, the base could be readily moved the 1800 miles to Fiji and re-established there. Once it became clear that the German Cruiser Squadron had reached South America, Patey's fleet was dispersed to other tasks and he detached with *Australia* and a collier to take command of a combined British-Japanese force off Mexico. This was just one of six separate formations that the Admiralty had ordered to converge on von Spee. Each was individually more powerful than the German ships, ensuring that enemy could neither escape into the Atlantic or Indian Oceans, nor return west across the Pacific.

In the meantime, the Australian Naval Board had been working to assemble, convert and eventually protect the transports intended to ferry Australasian troops across the Indian Ocean to the European theatre. Complicating matters, was the lack of certainty regarding the whereabouts of von Spee's ships, particularly after *Emden* appeared in the

Bay of Bengal in mid-September and began her successful campaign as a commerce raider. Also posing a threat was the German light cruiser *Königsberg*, last seen off Zanzibar, when it destroyed a British cruiser at anchor. Forced to strengthen the planned convoy escort by the increasingly strident protests of dominion politicians, the Admiralty redirected *Sydney* from Suva to join with her sister ship *Melbourne* in Western Australia, where the first Anzac convoy was due to assemble.

The departure of twenty-six Australian and ten New Zealand transports, carrying 30000 men and 8000 horses, was delayed for three weeks while the additional escorts were gathered. Convoy 1 finally sailed from Fremantle for Colombo on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1914 under the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Naval Member of the Naval Board. The escort was commanded by the captain of the British armoured cruiser *Minotaur* and, in addition to *Melbourne* and *Sydney*, it now included the Japanese armoured cruiser, *Ibuki*. A week later, the Admiralty ordered *Minotaur* to the Cape of Good Hope, there to join the forces blocking von Spee's access to the Indian Ocean. This left *Melbourne* in charge when news came the next day of a strange ship approaching the British Cable and Wireless Station in the Cocos Islands. In what the Admiralty later a thought a valuable study in convoy work, *Melbourne*'s captain recognised his own responsibility to stay with the convoy and instead detached *Sydney* to investigate.

Details of *Sydney*'s subsequent victory over *Emden*, the destruction of von Spee's Squadron a month later off the Falkland Islands, and the successful entrapment of *Königsberg* in the Rufiji River may be found elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> The end result though, was the almost complete clearance of enemy forces from the Indo-Pacific region. As well as removing the immediate threat to the movement of the empire's manpower and resources this also meant that Australia's major warships could be redeployed to theatres of greater imperial need.

For the remainder of the war, RAN ships could be found operating as part of the Royal Navy all over the globe; as far afield as East Africa, the West Indies, the Atlantic, the North Sea and the Mediterranean. Interoperability was assisted by interchangeable equipment and personnel but, because in most cases the far larger imperial presence overwhelmed the Australian contribution, there is little need to elaborate here.

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<sup>80</sup> For a recent account, see M Carlton, *First Victory - 1914 – HMAS SYDNEY's hunt for the German raider EMDEN*, William Heinemann, Sydney, 2013.,

There were exceptions, however, and one of the more interesting was the maritime campaign conducted across the China and East Indies Stations between 1915 and 1917. This theatre embraced some of the more important allied resource zones. Not only was it a primary source of raw materials like rubber and tin, but also it included the major population centres of India, China, and South East Asia. The uninterrupted supply of troops and native labourers from these areas was a vital, if still under appreciated, contribution to the functioning of the allied war machine. By 1918 there were close to a million foreign workers in British and French labour units, working behind the lines and freeing up an equivalent number of European troops for the front.

With the added challenges of religious and colonial tensions, the political intrigues in the Indo-Pacific were at least as complex as those of Europe, with belligerent, neutral and rising powers all competing for long-term influence, and thereby posing a clear risk of disruption to the status quo. Moreover, and notwithstanding the early loss of its Pacific colonies and distant warships, Germany still retained strategic and business interests in the Far East, and significant settlements in neutral territories.

The British were well aware that the Germans had cultivated links with Indian revolutionary parties, but not until August 1915 did a turned agent reveal the full scope of their planning.<sup>81</sup> From a headquarters in Shanghai, the Germans ran three covert organisations in Batavia, Bangkok and Persia. Each aimed to raise native rebellions in the nearby British colonies using weapons procured in the Americas and shipped via neutral ports. The most immediate danger came from a scheme to transport arms, ammunition and 150 German reservists from Sumatra to the Bay of Bengal. There they intended to seize the prison for Indian independence activists at Port Blair during Christmas 1915, and convey the combined force to Rangoon. In response, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) China Station concentrated one Australian and two British warships at immediate readiness in the Andaman Islands and left them there until he could be certain the German plan had been abandoned.

Although other plots were less coherent, none could be allowed to develop momentum. British authorities determined that the most effective way to achieve this was to disrupt German communications by capturing their agents, seizing their contraband and intercepting their mail. In practice it meant establishing ongoing naval patrols off the major ports of India, Burma, Siam, China, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines.

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<sup>81</sup> For a more detailed account see Stevens, *In All Respects Ready*, Chapters 12 and 13.



Like the maritime operations conducted for more than 25 years in the Middle East, these patrols required the regular visit, board and search of merchantmen, and the acquisition of timely intelligence to allow the interception of key targets.

In theory, the required naval forces would come from the British and French ships already on station, together with those offered by Japan. But due to the higher priority accorded European operations, suitable vessels were always in short supply, and on occasion more than half the fourteen or so vessels employed were actually provided by Australia. More important than numbers, however, was individual unit and flotilla capability and the RAN's ability to integrate seamlessly with the Royal Navy.

The French destroyers based in Indo-China, for example, were already fully employed off Malaya, and in any case too small for patrolling in open waters during the monsoon season. There were also reported to be language difficulties and an underlying lack of British confidence in French methods.

Problems with the Japanese contribution included overly restrictive rules of engagement and a hesitance to accept orders from a foreign officer. More troubling, was a growing awareness that Japanese priorities devolved primarily from their own plans for regional expansion; tending to make their appearance off neutral territories unwelcome. Finally, there was an underlying doctrinal opposition to involvement in operations that were not seen as directly offensive. As one Admiralty staff officer wrote, 'Japanese officers are not only handicapped by regulations, but also by [an] inability to realize that visiting and searching ships and general police work is just as much a part of a Naval Officer's duty as firing cannons and torpedoes.'<sup>82</sup>

The Australians by contrast, shared a common doctrine with the British and readily fitted in with the C-in-C China's requirements. From September 1915 until April 1917, when America's entry into the war effectively solved the problem of neutral assistance to Germany, the RAN variously deployed its sloops, destroyers, and older cruisers for operations. Of particular value was the auxiliary ship, *Esturia*, which kept the flotilla supplied with fuel, provisions, ammunition and medical services, while also acting as a holding ship for enemy suspects and a target-towing vessel. This was a capability unavailable to any other force in the area. Most usefully, it allowed the Australian ships to extend their patrols out to weeks rather than days, therefore making them of great value for watching and interception at choke points and off neutral ports.

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<sup>82</sup> Comments by DID, 19 Feb 1917, The National Archives (TNA), ADM137/372.

For instance, although the Gulf of Siam was a French responsibility, C-in-C China had grown increasingly frustrated that merchant traffic out of Bangkok had never been subjected to serious interference. This changed in January 1916 with the arrival off Bangkok of the Australian destroyers accompanied by *Esturia*. Using aggressive tactics that involved withdrawing just over the horizon during the day, and then pouncing as local intelligence dictated, three destroyers boarded 74 vessels over 28 days. The combination of inevitable interception, thorough search, and the arrest of suspects was assessed to have paralysed all German activities in Siam.

Australian participation also delivered less obvious benefits. Naval presence missions, better known as ‘showing the flag’ formed an important part of the patrol routine, and the Australian sloop *Una* proved particularly suitable. She had been captured during the operations in New Guinea, but before the war had been familiar in the region as the German Governor’s yacht. Her appearance in the same ports, but now flying the white ensign, did much to show neutrals and natives alike that imperial forces remained in full control of even the most distant outposts of empire.

Conversely, the mere fact that the warships were visibly and vocally Australian allowed British commanders a certain degree of plausible deniability. The C-in-C China’s intention was to maintain an assertive patrol policy, yet this risked the neutrals complaining that their merchant vessels and citizens were being harassed and their sovereignty infringed. The Australian ships managed to regularly push the boundaries of what was allowable, largely because they were recognised as not belonging to one of the major powers. In consequence, the C-in-C and Admiralty tended to overlook their transgressions; half-heartedly apologising that ‘in the case of Australian officers ...zeal sometimes outruns their discretion’,<sup>83</sup> but likewise reporting that ‘...our representatives in all parts are beyond praise for the keenness they are displaying in helping us to stop all enemy movement and communication...’<sup>84</sup>

Here we need to recall that, although all naval operations are ultimately backed by hard power, not all will require the actual use of force. Often it is the ability to finely tune a response that is the critical factor in achieving the political or military objective. ‘Smart power’ is the term increasingly used today, and the Australian flotilla proved extremely

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<sup>83</sup> C-in-C China to Admiralty, 13 May 1916, TNA, ADM137/1220.

<sup>84</sup> C-in-C China, General Letter No. 15, 24 Feb 1916, TNA, ADM137/371.

adept at employing it.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the two year campaign on the China Station represented typical naval tasking. Designed more for prevention than cure, its ultimate triumph should be measured less from actual developments, and more from the failure of enemy plans to materialise.

Although the word ‘good’ is seldom used in relation to the First World War, it would not be out of place to suggest that the Royal Australian Navy had a good war. It achieved success in every operation it commanded, lost only a dozen or so men to enemy action and, for its size, arguably had a greater influence on the war’s outcome than the troops of the Australian Imperial Force. More importantly, the RAN’s varied and wide ranging operations continue to speak to us about a medium power’s enduring strategic interests, the value and challenges of operating in coalitions, and the ongoing need to maintain a truly national and comprehensive maritime strategy.

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<sup>85</sup> See for example, ‘Talking “Smart Power” with Admiral Stavridis’, *Small Wars Journal*, 25 Jul 2013, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/talking-smart-power-with-admiral-stavridis>, accessed 20 May 2016.

# Emerging from the Shadow of Jutland

James Goldrick

The Royal Navy mourned over Jutland. Whatever the pride felt from individual actions during the engagements, or from the realisation that the Grand Fleet's strategic advantage had been fully confirmed through its effective possession of the North Sea after the enemy had fled, at every level the legacy of the battle was, 'never again.' There was regret for tactical and material failures and the catastrophic losses they caused, regret for the deficiencies of reporting and communications and, above all, an even deeper regret for the absence of enterprise and initiative on the part of so many who should have known better.

There may well have been 'too much Jutland' in the years that followed and perhaps too much emphasis on the mechanics of fleet action. Yet it is also clear that the Royal Navy between 1916 and 1939 functioned in relation to the battle as a 'learning organisation' and consciously so. While there was attention to the mechanics, what may have proved even more important – and much more valuable between 1939 and 1945 – was the accompanying focus on restoring the spirit of the tactical offensive.

The response to the Grand Fleet's material problems was remarkable, and something of a tribute to at least one facet of Jellicoe's leadership. It may be that there was a deliberate effort to draw attention away from the admirals' earlier condoning of the appalling state of anti-flash precautions, neglected in the cause of higher rates of fire. At least some of the additional armour applied to the battle cruisers may not have been absolutely necessary. But it is also true that anti-flash procedures were both improved and much more strictly applied, while there was a host of other improvements. These included not only the most obvious efforts to improve the quality of heavy shell, but other modifications to internal fittings, damage control equipment and training, to fire control and communications, action messing, and medical support.

To suggest that the command and control of the fleet moved to a looser and more flexible regime, particularly after Beatty took over as C-in-C from Jellicoe in November 1916, would be to over-simplify what happened. Many of the practical problems remained and had to be endured. The action seems to have confirmed that the battle fleet was too big – Jellicoe himself had decided that 16 units was the maximum practicable for

one man to command.<sup>86</sup> A 24 ship line six miles long was certainly too extended for the limited visibility of the North Sea and not much better elsewhere. But, given the forces available on either side, the battle fleets of the First World War would always be larger than tactically desirable because a smaller formation was always at risk of being overwhelmed. Arguably, the Washington Naval Disarmament Treaty of 1922 may have been settled in part by recognition of the ideal size for a battle fleet. The initial British total of 22 allowed 8 ship fleets in Home waters and the Mediterranean, with a spare for each and a mobile four-unit battle cruiser squadron.

There was certainly a new emphasis on squadron and divisional tactics and a greater understanding that subordinate flag officers needed the authority to respond individually to an emerging situation. But it is notable that the drive within squadrons and divisions was to an even greater degree of coordinated manoeuvre, not less. The reason for this was that concentration of fire became the new focus of gunnery innovation, first with two ships and then with up to four as a single gunnery 'unit'. Much effort was devoted to developing the new techniques and proving both the system and the required components of spotting, communications (special wireless sets were rapidly produced and distributed to the capital ships) and information exchange to allow effective control of fire.<sup>87</sup>

Night fighting was the subject of new attention, with the realisation that the uncertainty of combat in the darkness could only be mitigated by the systematic development and equally systematic practice of procedures and tactics that were understood by all. Before Jutland, the Grand Fleet's purely reactive attitude to action in the dark, and the doctrine and training which resulted, had been based on the assessment that a night encounter with no warning in the open sea was a practical impossibility. This was because detection and counter-detection ranges were severely limited, even on the clearest of moonlit nights. It had been demonstrated time and again during the pre-war Grand Manoeuvres that torpedo craft despatched to attack the opposition at night rarely succeeded in finding them.<sup>88</sup> At least part of the German interest and expertise in night fighting derived from their earlier expectation that they would be fighting defensively in the Heligoland Bight, with limited sea room and a very clear idea of their own position –

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<sup>86</sup> US Naval War College Historical Collection RG 8: Naval Attache Notes: January 1917 'Notes of Interest to Bureau of Navigation' 1 January 1917, p. 140.

<sup>87</sup> For a summary see C.B. 902 'Progress in Naval Gunnery 1914-1918' Gunnery and Torpedo Division, Naval Staff, Admiralty, July 1919, pp. 31-32. UK National Archives (TNA) ADM 186/238.

<sup>88</sup> 'Naval Manoeuvres 1913 – North Sea Strategy' C-in-C Home Fleets, letter 1266/Home Fleet 7S, dated 28 August 1913. TNA ADM 116/3130.

as well as that of other friendly forces. However, given the extent to which Jellicoe had worked out the realities of a likely encounter with the High Seas Fleet in the conditions which prevailed in the North Sea and the speed-time-distance factors involved, it is surprising that he and others had not also realised before Jutland that a major fleet encounter that started after noon would *inevitably* involve night action, particularly when it was not high summer. After June 1916, the Grand Fleet understood this.<sup>89</sup>

Control and precision were emphasised in another area – reporting the enemy. By 1918, detailed analysis was being produced in the wake of each major Grand Fleet tactical exercise. This not only set out what had happened but critiqued decisions and formation commander and individual ship performances. It also included an annex which listed every reporting signal sent and assessed not only the accuracy and timeliness of those signals but also their content and relevance. There were even occasional comments as to when signals should have been sent, but were not – a particularly significant change, given the reluctance of many at Jutland to report what they had observed to the C-in-C. Keeping one’s head below the transmission parapet was no longer acceptable, particularly in a scouting unit.<sup>90</sup>

However, there was more to this process than greater control and precision. There was also the slow regeneration of a spirit of enterprise. There were several causes for its frequent absence on the 31<sup>st</sup> May and the 1<sup>st</sup> June. The Navy’s culture of obedience to the senior officer present was one, particularly as the full implications of the ‘virtual unreality’ created by the assumption that radio contact equated to such presence had not been worked through. Nevertheless, Jellicoe must bear a considerable part of the blame for his subordinate’s apparent inability to exercise their initiative. Practically every piece of direction, instruction, and advice that he had issued as C-in-C between 1914 and 1916 was founded in good sense and a clear eyed recognition of the operational realities, but it is undeniable that much was written in a way that could only dampen enthusiasm and erode élan. His strictures to destroyer captains on the vital importance of fuel economy and the need to change station not by increasing to maximum stationing speed or using maximum wheel are typical of this. In urging them simply to slow down and let the main body pass when taking station astern, Jellicoe wanted to ensure that his light forces could maintain their capacity to screen the fleet and have a reserve for high speed in the event

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<sup>89</sup> For which see the late November 1916 revisions to the Grand Fleet Battle Orders. TNA ADM 116/1342.

<sup>90</sup> See for example C-in-C Home Fleets Memorandum 0037/135 dated 23 September 1918, ‘Remarks on Tactical Exercise Carried Out on 23 August 1918’ TNA ADM 137/1994.

of action, for it was the endurance of the destroyer force which determined the operational radius of the Grand Fleet as a whole. That this was inadequate was because pre-war destroyers had not been designed with an understanding of the submarine threat. The operational challenges of the North Sea required their remaining in company with the capital ships for prolonged periods at high speeds, but they consumed a lot of fuel in doing so. Yet the wording of the memorandum and the failure to emphasise that there would be opportunities at other times for the destroyers to practice the high speed manoeuvres which were central to the culture of the torpedo craft – and central to their employment in battle - could only cut away at the morale of young commanding officers.<sup>91</sup>

Whether or not the way that he led and trained the Grand Fleet was a factor, Jellicoe himself was bitterly disappointed by the lack of enterprise displayed by a number of admirals and ship captains at Jutland, a disappointment that was part of his later admonition against the ‘virtual unreality’ of assuming that the admiral knew what each ship commander did: ‘Never imagine that your C-in-C sees what you see.’<sup>92</sup>

What is notable about Jutland, although hardly surprising, is the extent to which the leadership of the navy from 1916 to 1945 was present at the battle. This even continued well beyond the Second World War. The commander of the British and Commonwealth naval forces at sea off Korea in 1950-51 was a midshipman at Jutland. The First Sea Lord from 1951 to 1955 was there as a Lieutenant in the *Malaya*. Mountbatten, First Sea Lord from 1956 to 1959 and Chief of the Defence Staff until 1965 missed the battle by a few weeks. Some of the Jutland veterans, such as Tovey of the *Onslow*, earned immediate recognition for their bravery, but there were many others – only two First Sea Lords between 1916 and 1943 were not at Jutland (and one, Roger Backhouse, was commanding a light cruiser in the Harwich Force). The statistics for the other naval members of the Board of Admiralty are almost as telling. Many had their individual regrets about failures to act during the battle – Guy Royle, later to serve as Fifth Sea Lord and then head the Royal Australian Navy, always felt that he should have engaged the target that he saw at night from the control position of the battleship

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<sup>91</sup> C-in-C Grand Fleet Memorandum H.F. No 499/9 dated 27 April 1916 (hand annotated ‘still in force 1/7/17’) TNA ADM 137/1975.

<sup>92</sup> Arthur J. Marder *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, Vol. III, *Jutland and After (May 1916 to December 1916)*, Second Edition, London, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 219.

*Marlborough* rather than seeking permission from his captain. The latter assumed that the ship looming up in the darkness was friendly – but it was a German battle cruiser.<sup>93</sup>

The Jutland veterans were not alone in their experience of failure and their feelings of regret during the First World War. A.B. Cunningham was in command of the destroyer *Scorpion* and present when Rear Admiral Troubridge refused action with the battle cruiser *Goeben* in August 1914. He was later forced to watch impotent on the first day of the landings in the Dardanelles when British troops were being enfiladed by the entrenched Turks, entrenchments that he had been forbidden to engage with his destroyer's guns – 'an order', Cunningham later declared, 'which should never have been given'.<sup>94</sup> An officer who was a captain in 1918 wrote that the Navy had 'an insufficient insistence on the imperative need of really coming to grips.'<sup>95</sup> This summed up the attitude of the majority of thoughtful officers.

It is too much to say that there was an immediate revolution after 1918, particularly as the retrenchments and economies of the 1920s were dead hands on any initiative that required financial resources. But the sense one gains is of increasingly well-coordinated efforts to improve, which gained momentum as the 1920s gave way to more substantive improvements in the 1930s. The influence of officers who had direct experience of their seniors' failures was very important. Such experience matters – it may be that the greatest value of combat experience is not for conducting the next war, but in those who have to train the younger people who will have to face that future war.

There were a number of strands of effort to renew the offensive spirit. The creation of a Tactical School was a key innovation. It established a much better balance between calculations of hit probabilities and the development of tactics which could confuse the enemy and create opportunities for well-handled forces. Smoke screens, adaptive formations and evasive manoeuvring were just a few of the techniques. There was a healthy dialogue, including the regular publication of 'Progress in Tactics' with the results of exercises and trials.<sup>96</sup> To be fair, the inter-war Navy had the priceless advantage of time which had not been available before 1914, but it is also clear that there was a sophistication which had not been present before. What also helped was a growing realisation that the Royal Navy would not necessarily enjoy technological superiority

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184.

<sup>94</sup> Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham *A Sailor's Odyssey* (London, Hutchison, 1951), p. 72.

<sup>95</sup> Admiral Sir Barry Domvile *By and Large*, London: Hutchinson, London, 1936, p. 57.

<sup>96</sup> See UK National Archives ADM 186/143, 186/144, 186/180 and 239/142 for the majority of the inter-war reports.



over its opponents. Even with an ever thickening veil of secrecy, it became apparent that the Japanese were spending large amounts to modernise their battle fleet, more than the British could afford. It was already clear that the Americans were doing so. This placed a premium on identifying tactics which would minimise British disadvantages and was why they spent time improving their night fighting techniques even further.<sup>97</sup>

Another vital element was the selection of officers for senior seagoing rank. The reductions of peace gave the Admiralty one priceless advantage by comparison with the expansion of the pre-war era. It could be highly selective. The weight given to proven initiative was clearly considerable and the advantage this gave to former submariners and destroyer captains obvious. The promotions to flag rank bear this out. Those to Vice Admiral on the active list between 1934 and 1936 show what happened. Of 15 officers, 9 had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order and, of these, 3 had earned it in submarine command and 3 in destroyers. Rear Admirals of the same seniority tell a similar story - 4 submariner and 4 destroyer DSOs out of a total of 28 officers, 12 of whom had the award.<sup>98</sup> It is worth noting that a 31 year-old Lieutenant Commander in 1914 could be a 41 year-old Captain in 1924 and a 51 year-old Rear Admiral in 1934. This age group included Andrew Cunningham, Bertram Ramsay and Max Horton, to name only three. All were born in 1883, while James Somerville was just a few months older.<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, no matter how brilliant the specialist officer, nor how significant their staff or ship service, all were placed under a microscope. A key testing ground was big ship command. His squadron commander's comments about H.G. Thursfield, a founder of the *Naval Review* and a very distinguished torpedo specialist who had been the war staff officer in the Battle Cruiser Force from 1916 to 1918, typify the approach. In giving the thumbs down on Thursfield's promotion to active flag rank, his admiral wrote that, had Thursfield 'chosen any profession not demanding extended influence over others, I feel sure he would have got to the absolute top'.<sup>100</sup> Much more was also expected than demonstrated extreme bravery – people such as Gordon Campbell, with a

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example: Jon Tetsuro Sumida 'The Best Laid Plans: The Development of British Battle Fleet Tactics, 1919-1942' *The International History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (November 1992), pp. 681-700; James P. Levy 'Royal Navy Fleet Tactics on the Eve of the Second World War' *War in History* Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 2012), pp. 379-395; and James Goldrick 'Buying Time: British Submarine Capability in the Far East, 1919-1940' *Global War Studies* Vol. 11, No. 3, 2014, pp. 33-50.

<sup>98</sup> See *The Navy List* (London, HMSO) for January 1934 monthly to December 1936.

<sup>99</sup> Cunningham was born on 7 January 1883, Somerville on 17 July 1882, Ramsay on 20 January 1883 and Horton on 29 November 1883.

<sup>100</sup> Vice Admiral Sir William Fisher Letter dated 22 May 1931. TNA ADM 196/91: Thursfield.

VC and two DSOs earned in Q ships did not get promoted to flag rank on the active list either.

The desire to improve the officer corps was not confined to its upper levels. One important stream of activity was improving the initiative and self-reliance of junior officers through changes in the regime of education and training. Mike Farquharson Roberts has looked at this in his thesis *To the Nadir and Back: The Executive Branch of the Royal Navy 1918-1939*, published by Palgrave Press as *Royal Naval Officers from War to War, 1918-1939*.

Risk taking in battle tactics was accompanied by a willingness to take risks with ships, a willingness that may have grown as the battle hardened reformers reached flag rank. Officers such as Chatfield, William Fisher, Cunningham and Somerville all contributed. The wider attitude being engendered was summed up by Fisher's response to Captain Philip Vian's frank admission of fault in a berthing accident. 'I was told to be more careful in future, but the Commander-in-Chief added a paragraph in the sense that he had liked the manner of the confession.'<sup>101</sup> Fisher himself put his money where his mouth was by forcing a night action by the Mediterranean Fleet on the Home Fleet during the 1934 manoeuvres. Andrew Cunningham was not alone when he made his assertions that broken eggs were inevitable in making an omelette.<sup>102</sup>

The insistence on seizing the moment was not only applied to exercises. During the Spanish Civil War, the Italians secretly supported the Nationalist Fascist cause by despatching submarines to attack shipping. Their efforts were less than discriminating. But in 1937 when one attacked the destroyer *Havock*, the latter's apparently less than aggressive response was immediately addressed by Somerville, the Rear Admiral (D). Since *Havock* did not immediately retaliate, Somerville ordered her captain to "pursue the hunt with the utmost energy and try to make up for your outstanding lack of initiative."<sup>103</sup> *Havock* did not catch the submarine, but her captain must have taken the words to heart, since he finished the Second World War with a DSO and Bar and a DSC and Bar.<sup>104</sup> Given the ability for even the most private of messages to be robbed from the broadcast, one can only suspect that Somerville's signal was intended as much *pour encourager les autres* as for the *Havock* alone.

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<sup>101</sup> Admiral of the Fleet Sir Philip Vian *Action this Day*, London, Frederick Muller, 1960, p.16.

<sup>102</sup> S.W.C. Pack *Cunningham the Commander*, London, Batsford, 1974, pp. 62 & 66.

<sup>103</sup> Brodhurst *Churchill's Anchor* p. 97, citing SMVL 5/5, Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville, Churchill College Archives.

<sup>104</sup> Commander R.E. Courage, DSO & Bar, DSC & Bar, RN.

There were misdirections. Whatever the benefits of games for ship spirit and for individual fitness and alertness, there were excessive claims about the relationship between sport and fighting instincts – and perhaps too much effort devoted to competitive inter-ship sport, as opposed to encouraging group activity. The problem reached a peak during Admiral Sir Roger Keyes' tenure as C-in-C Mediterranean from 1925 to 1928, when his concentration on polo and the favouritism involved created considerable bitterness.<sup>105</sup> Safety also sometimes exerted too strong an influence. Night operations by submarines were almost non-existent and restrictions on their interaction with surface forces created tactical unrealities.<sup>106</sup> But it is also true that the consequences of any submarine accident were likely to be much greater than all but the most serious of surface encounters – and, despite their precautions, the British still lost several boats between the wars.<sup>107</sup>

It is also true that unanimity on the subject of command and control was not complete. There was a fissure over the management of fleets and the role of staffs. Much commentary, particularly in relation to the celebrated falling out between Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse and then-Rear Admiral Bertram Ramsay, has been devoted to the problem of over-centralisation *within* staffs and commanders who attempted to do too much themselves.<sup>108</sup> But an equal problem, arguably one that has continually dogged the Royal Navy in the years since the era of the Grand Fleet – and which still bedevils it and other navies – was that of over-centralisation *into* staffs and the misemployment of such staffs on uncreative work, particularly that of minding the individual business of worked up ships, rather than thinking creatively about tactics, operations, and war.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> The atmosphere is best captured by Leslie Gardiner *The Royal Oak Affair*, London, Blackwood, 1965, especially pp. 16-18.

<sup>106</sup> Rear Admiral Ben Bryant *Submarine Command*, London, William Kimber, 1958, p. 39. A highly successful wartime submariner commander, Bryant makes the comment that he did not do a single night dive between 1927 and 1938. This is confirmed by other submariners.

<sup>107</sup> The Royal Navy lost five submarines in collisions at sea between the wars. See <https://www.submarine-museum.co.uk/what-we-have/memorial-chapel/submarine-losses>

<sup>108</sup> Until the publication of Andrew Gordon's definitive biography of Admiral Ramsay, the best source for the affair remains Rear Admiral W.S. Chalmers *Full Cycle: The Biography of Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1959, pp. 40-47. For the wider debate see Brodhurst *Churchill's Anchor*, pp. 104-106; Admiral Sir William James *The Sky Was Always Blue*, London, Methuen, 1951, pp. 141-143 and 155-156; and particularly, Chatfield *The Navy and Defence*, pp. 225-230 which lays out this very capable and experienced officer's ideas of the role of a staff and its relationship with the fleet commander.

<sup>109</sup> For an extreme case of over-staffing – the Royal Navy at the end of the 1950s, albeit from a very junior officer's perspective see 'Vermis' (then Sub Lieutenant now Commander D.B. Mansergh) 'Worm's-eye View' *The Naval Review* Vol. 50, No. 2, May 1962, pp. 143-155.

Despite this, by 1939, the Royal Navy had successfully learnt most of the lessons needed to achieve effective remote coordination of operations at sea and the associated exercise of local initiative and aggression. Admiral Sir Dudley Pound who commanded in the Mediterranean between 1936 and 1939 and went on to be First Sea Lord deserves some recognition for this achievement. Pound had his faults of over-control and over-centralisation,<sup>110</sup> but his reputation has been diminished by the lack of popular understanding of the difficulties he faced in dealing with Winston Churchill, who repeatedly demonstrated in 1940 and after that he had not learned the same lessons of operational command from 1914-18.<sup>111</sup> Pound himself had been determined to instil a culture of enterprise as an admiral at sea. For him the unforgivable sin by a naval officer was a failure to act. Even Philip Vian of *Altmark* fame commented on Pound's 'leaning towards dangerous manoeuvres' with head-on, close quarter approaches and line of bearing intersections of columns. Vian emphasised that these manoeuvres were ordered to be executed before it was possible to calculate a solution.<sup>112</sup> Captains just had to make a judgement and trust to being able to adjust to the situation as it evolved. Pound was desperately anxious that commanders at sea would not hesitate to make such judgements. This was his way of ensuring it.

Thus, when the three British cruisers under Commodore Henry Harwood encountered the *Graf Spee* off the River Plate in October 1939, the British had set the conditions for the encounter. Harwood had considered and gamed – imaginatively – the problem and knew what to do. As the captain of the cruiser *Exeter* noted afterwards, not one signal was exchanged between the cruiser, which formed the independent second division, and the commodore between first contact with the *Graf Spee* and *Exeter's* being disabled.<sup>113</sup> Like Waterloo, it was a 'damned nice thing, the nearest run thing you have ever seen in your life.' Not everything went well for the British. The *Exeter* was very nearly sunk and the *Ajax* and *Achilles* were lucky to have escaped relatively unharmed. But the *Graf Spee* suffered critical damage and was driven into harbour, from which she

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<sup>110</sup> See the discussion in James P. Levy *The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 28-29.

<sup>111</sup> Churchill's behaviour as First Lord and Prime Minister in this regard was the subject of bitter debate by Stephen Roskill (see *Churchill and the Admirals*, London, Collins, 1977 and Arthur J. Marder 'Winston is Back' *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace, 1915-1940*, London, Oxford University Press, 1974. The author inclines more to Roskill than Marder on this matter, although both make some very good points.

<sup>112</sup> Vian *Action this Day*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>113</sup> 'D.L.R.N.' (Admiral Sir Douglas Nicholson) 'Review of *The Battle of the River Plate* by Lord Strabolgi' *The Naval Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No.2, May 1940, p. 334.

would emerge only to be scuttled. One small but significant subtext is that Admiral Pound, monitoring events from Whitehall in company with Churchill, had to devote much effort to restrain his political master from sending directive signals. On this occasion he was successful.<sup>114</sup>

In the wake of the action, Pound wrote to Harwood to praise him for his achievement and to declare that it had set the standard for the war to come, a matter which he felt was of ‘great importance.’<sup>115</sup> Pound emphasised not only that Harwood had acted correctly, but that he would have been right to engage the *Graf Spee* even if his entire force was sunk. Harwood himself believed that the battle had succeeded in restoring the balance and that the spectre of the *Goeben* debacle and Jutland had been laid. What is equally to the point, so did the rest of the navy.<sup>116</sup>

An Australian element may provide a last example. In the Mediterranean in July 1940, Captain John Collins, a product of service and training in both the RAN and RN,<sup>117</sup> decided on his own initiative to reposition his ship, the light cruiser *Sydney* (accompanied, ironically, by the *Havock*), by nearly a hundred miles, keeping radio silence to maintain surprise. The result was the rescue of a group of embattled British destroyers and the destruction of the Italian light cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni*. The exchange with Cunningham, the C-in-C, after *Sydney* got back to harbour is significant on both sides. When asked what made him move as he did, Collins jokingly replied ‘Providence guided me, Sir’. To which Cunningham said, ‘Well in future you can continue to take your orders from Providence’.<sup>118</sup> At the end of 1940, Cunningham himself wrote, ‘Many a time when confronted with a difficult situation I cast my mind back...and the answer always comes the same – to take the bold and direct course – and it pays.’<sup>119</sup> Balance had indeed been restored, but are we balanced now?

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<sup>114</sup> Arthur J. Marder ‘Winston is Back’, p. 138. See also Brodhurst, *Churchill’s Anchor*, p. 134.

<sup>115</sup> Eric J. Grove *The Price of Disobedience: The Battle of the River Plate Reconsidered*, Stroud: Sutton, 2000, pp. 171-172.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Admiral Ronald Hopwood’s poem ‘River Plate. 13<sup>th</sup> December 1939: In homage to all who served in H.M. Ships *Ajax*, *Achilles* and *Exeter*’ *The Naval Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, February 1940, pp. 1-2. See also the analysis of the battle by ‘Fauteuil’ (Captain B.H. Smith) ‘Notes on the War at Sea’ on p. 15 of the same edition.

<sup>117</sup> Collins was a member of the first class of cadet-midshipmen to enter the newly opened Royal Australian Naval College in 1913, as 13 year-olds. He later became the first RANC graduate to head the Royal Australian Navy. See Peter. D. Jones *Australia’s Argonauts*, Canberra, Echo Books, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Vice Admiral Sir John Collins *As Luck Would Have It: The reminiscences of an Australian sailor* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1965), p. 88.

<sup>119</sup> Admiral Sir William James *Admiral Sir William Fisher* (London, Methuen, 1943), p. 157.





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