



Before Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters, August 1914–February 1915 by James Goldrick.

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With the outbreak of the Great War in summer 1914, the generation-long Anglo-German naval rivalry devolved into a stalemate in the North Sea. Germany's powerful fleet was too formidable to be ignored, but not strong enough to stand up to the British battle line in an all-out naval engagement. Since the Germans were unwilling to risk the destruction of their High Seas Fleet and the British to reduce the strength of their battle fleet, both sides faced a dilemma. Neither had found a way out of the impasse inherent in the strategic geography of their situation as well as the balance of forces. Because the island nation of Great Britain dominated the sea approaches to Germany, the Royal Navy could easily interdict German trade, but the High Seas Fleet commanded the entrances to the Baltic Sea—and access to Russian ports—and threatened Britain's line of communication with its troops in France. So long as both navies remained in being, neither could seize an advantage. As a result, the North Sea became a kind of nautical no man's land, effectively an extension of the Western Front.

Matters were complicated by the dramatic technological advances that had accompanied the rapid expansion of the battle fleets, especially since the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) had provided the opportunity to test modern warships and weapons in combat. Heavy caliber guns, mines, torpedoes, and bombs all functioned with ever increasing efficiency, while combat occurred at unprecedented ranges and speeds. Parsimonious peacetime training budgets meant that the potentials of the new technologies had not been fully explored before the First World War, while command structures had changed little since the Napoleonic wars. Fleet commanders thus spent the first six months of the war learning to cope with the new realities of naval warfare.

This process is the subject of *Before Jutland*, a revised, expanded, and updated version of a book¹ James Goldrick wrote over thirty years ago as a lieutenant in the Royal Australian Navy. The new edition incorporates lessons learned in a further twenty years' active service by now Rear Admiral (ret.) Goldrick, late head of the Australian Defence College. What was a good book is now a very good book indeed.

Before Jutland concentrates exclusively on naval operations in northern European waters during the first six months of the war, one of the more active periods for surface ship operations in northern waters, despite Kaiser Wilhelm II's confinement of most of the High Seas Fleet in port for much of that time. Both sides engaged in mining operations from the outbreak of hostilities. German battlecruisers frequently raided the British east coast, German torpedo boats ventured into the Channel, and German light vessels attacked the Russian defensive position in the Gulf of Finland. The British successfully raided the Heligoland Bight and launched daring air attacks on German zeppelin sheds, using shipborne aircraft (seaplanes) for the first time. Fittingly, the book concludes with the Battle of the Dogger Bank, a setback that cost the Germans the armored cruiser *Blücher* and nearly the *Seydlitz*,

1. *The King's Ships Were at Sea: The War in the North Sea, August 1914–February 1915* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1984).

their battlecruiser flagship. But the battle was a near-run thing that exposed problems in command and control and fundamental design flaws in both German and British ships.

Goldrick stresses the difficulties of maneuvering large groups of diverse ships (fast battlecruisers, slower dreadnoughts, even slower pre-dreadnoughts, small cruisers, even smaller destroyers and, on occasion, submarines) in the bad weather and poor visibility of a North European winter, made worse by the roiling clouds of black smoke belched by coal-fired warships steaming at high speed. The existing systems for controlling these masses of rapidly moving vessels were inadequate to the task: though wireless had reached the stage where it could be used for operational control, commanders in combat still relied on signal flags.

Matters were not helped by the fact that there were many prophets of the new technology, whose predictions were revolutionary—and often prescient—but did not reflect the realities of the day. The necessary preoccupation of commanders at sea with the practical issues of operations was different from the debates that went on over future force structures and new construction. There was, of course, a dynamic relationship between the planners and practitioners and the achievement of operational status by new technology could be remarkably fast, but the acceptance of proposals for new force structures with their associated operational concepts did not equate to immediate adoption within contemporary doctrine. Many of the statements of those responsible for capability development ... had to be understood in the future tense, even when the rate of change of technology was so rapid. On the other hand, operational commanders and staffs had always to keep in mind what was achievable with the tools at hand. (41–42)

The “tools at hand” came together in what the British conceptualized as the Grand Fleet of Battle: “This was an attempt to create a force capable of matching any kind of gun or torpedo threat by bringing together battleships, battlecruisers, and other scouting units and light forces into one tactical formation” (42). This was certainly ambitious. Although most navies were evolving along similar lines, the new command and control requirements pushed the available systems and technologies to their limits. Too often, it came down to the intuition and initiative of independent commanders, who, isolated from their own forces by bad weather and handicapped by poor communications, had only a vague sense of their overall tactical situation.

Moreover, the British suffered from the undeveloped state of the technologies in their efforts to direct submarines from surface ships and combine them with the battle fleet, and to include seaplane carriers (which had to stop to launch their aircraft) in the battle line. Though visionary, such tactics were hard to achieve in prevailing circumstances of battle.

The period did, however, witness the striking utility of battlecruiser forces. The most interesting ships on both sides, these heavy vessels, ably commanded by Vice Adm. Sir David Beatty and Rear Adm. Franz Hipper, were directly involved in most North Sea naval operations. The respective fleet commanders—Adm. Sir John Jellicoe and Adm. Friedrich von Ingenohl—recognized the need to concentrate their main forces. The overly cautious Ingenohl was further constrained by the Kaiser’s reluctance to risk the main fleet. The Russian commander in the Baltic, Adm. Nikolai Ottovich Essen, made similar use of his armored cruisers, but was kept on a tight rein by his high command. The Imperial Russian Baltic Fleet remained on the defensive throughout the war.

The submarine was the least understood of the new weapons systems available to the battle fleets: Goldrick notes that each nation had to suffer its own disastrous “Aboukir, Cressy and Hogue” moment to grasp the threat submarines posed for surface ship operations. But the submarine was not yet sufficiently developed or understood to have much impact on fleet operations in northern waters, though the British did demonstrate in the Baltic the disproportionate influence a few vessels could have on the operations of a large fleet.

Goldrick lays all this out in seventeen chapters, beginning with surveys of the state of the British, German, and Russian fleets, followed by a chapter blandly entitled, “Operational Challenges,” and another on war plans. His stress on operational matters allows him to sidestep the current debate about prewar British naval policy and strategy. His subject is the respective fleets and the men who were serving in them.

Goldrick relies too heavily on English-language published sources. His thorough knowledge of his subject is founded on memoirs and secondary material in English. Though he has consulted the official German history (*Der Krieg zur See*) and other German-language sources, the core of his research is the postwar British Naval Staff Monographs series, accessible online.² Although he tries to be evenhanded, Goldrick’s focus is primarily on the Royal Navy. German fleet commanders, admirals von Ingenohl and von Pohl, get less space than Jellicoe and Beatty, or, for that matter, First Lord Winston Churchill or First Sea Lords Prince Louis of Battenberg and Sir John Fisher. Alfred von Tirpitz and Hipper receive more attention, likely due to the existence of published biographies. The chapters on the Baltic—although sound—add little to our understanding³ of that hidden corner of the war. The Imperial Russian Navy in particular awaits comprehensive treatment in English.

Before Jutland is, nonetheless, a fine book, with a good balance of narrative and analysis. James Goldrick’s intelligent discussion of the challenges of operating large fleets of coal-fired ships provides texture and depth to the narrative. The volume is well illustrated and its maps are excellent throughout. The photographs, too, are helpful, if poorly reproduced.⁴

2. At the Royal Australian Navy website – www.miwsr.com/rd/1614.htm.

3. Or to Paul G. Halpern’s *Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1994).

4. A startling typo substitutes “Hitler” for “Hipper” (222).