

THE NAVAL SITUATION IN MAY 1916

Admiral John Jellicoe

It may not be out of place here to touch upon the general naval situation in the spring of 1916—that is, on the eve of the Battle of Jutland. What were the strategical conditions? To what extent was it justifiable to take risks with the Grand Fleet, particularly risks the full consequences of which could not be foreseen owing to the new conditions of naval warfare?

The Grand Fleet included almost the whole of our available capital ships. There was very little in the way of reserve behind it. The battleships not included in the Grand Fleet were all of them pre-Dreadnoughts and therefore inferior fighting units. They consisted of seven ships of the “King Edward VII” class, two ships of the “Lord Nelson” class, and four of the “Queen” class, all of these ships being in the Mediterranean except five of the “King Edward VII” class. They were required there either for work with the Italian Fleet or for the operations in the Ægean. Five of our light cruisers were also in the Mediterranean.

The French and Italian Battle Fleets were also in the Mediterranean, but, owing to political considerations and their duty in watching the Austrian Fleet, there was little prospect of their leaving that locality....

Earlier in the War, at the end of October, 1914, I had written to the Admiralty pointing out the dangers to the Grand Fleet which an intelligent use of submarines, mines and torpedoes by the Germans, before and during a Fleet action, would involve, and had stated the tactics which I had intended to employ to meet the expected German movement in order to bring the enemy to action in the shortest practicable time and with the best chance of achieving such a victory as would be decisive. I stated that with new and untried methods of warfare new tactics must be devised to meet them.

I received in reply an expression of approval of my views and of confidence in the manner in which I proposed to handle the Fleet in action.

Neither in October, 1914, nor in May, 1916, did our margin of superiority justify me in disregarding the enemy's torpedo fire or meeting it otherwise than by definite movements deduced after most careful analysis of the problem at sea with the Fleet and on the tactical board.

The severely restricted forces behind the Grand Fleet were taken into account; and there was also a possibility that the Grand Fleet might later be called upon to confront a situation of much wider scope than that already existing.

The position gradually improved after 1916. During the latter half of that year the remaining ships of the “Royal Sovereign” class joined the Grand Fleet, and greatly increased the ratio of strength of the Fleet as compared with the High Sea Fleet. Early in 1917 it was also possible to withdraw the four battleships of the “Queen” class from the Adriatic. This much eased the manning situation. And in April, 1917, the culminating event was the entry of the United States of America into the War on the side of the Entente. In December, 1917, the United States sent a division of battleships to join the Grand Fleet, and it was apparent that we could count upon the whole battleship strength of the United States Navy, if required, to second our efforts.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, the light cruiser and destroyer forces with the Grand Fleet increased steadily after the Battle of Jutland, and to a very considerable extent reduced the danger of successful torpedo attack on the Grand Fleet in action by surface craft. The inclusion of the K. class submarines—submarines of high speed—in the Grand Fleet in 1917 made it very probable that any losses suffered by us by submarine attack would be more than compensated by enemy losses from the same cause.

In spite of the fact that, in 1918, the situation in regard to battle cruisers was becoming unsatisfactory, the general effect of all these considerations upon the tactics of the Grand Fleet was bound to be overwhelming. The position was assured, and we could have afforded to take risks later on which, in 1916, would have been most unwise.