

THE BRITISH VICTORY IN THE NORTH SEA

A Preliminary Survey by PERCIVAL A. HISLAM the well-known Naval Expert

Last week I published an article from the pen of Commander Bellairs on "German Naval Blunders." Naturally it was written some weeks ago, and dealt with past events in the progress of the war; but the title may have sounded rather unhappy in view of the news of the great Battle off Jutland, issued before THE WAR ILLUSTRATED had reached the public. It remains to be seen, however, whether this latest and greatest of all naval battles may not yet prove to be one more blunder of the German Naval Command.

There is no longer an atom of doubt as to the German Fleet having failed in its objective—whatever that may have been—and having had to return to its base before superior and unshakable British

strength. Facilely the German Navy, since the outbreak of war, has admitted the superiority of the British Fleet; at the Battle off Jutland it advertised the fact to all the world by retreating instantly our battle fleet was in touch.

In our sorrow for the loss of the many brave men who went down in this great engagement, this is the supreme fact to bear in mind. I have asked Mr. Percival Hislam, the well-known naval expert, to write a brief survey of the battle from the fragmentary and inadequate information at present at our disposal, and in later numbers of THE WAR ILLUSTRATED the whole story of Jutland will be fully and picturesquely told.—EDITOR.

IT is safe to say that since the beginning of the war Great Britain has known no more anxious hours than those immediately following the first official statement regarding the great naval battle off Jutland on May 31st. The German wireless had scattered broadcast over the world the announcement that their Fleet had won a complete and sensational victory; and when, many hours later, the British Admiralty issued their own report, its reference to "severe damage" and "serious losses" inflicted on the enemy was entirely overshadowed by the admission that we had lost three Dreadnought cruisers, three armoured cruisers of earlier design, and destroyers numbering anything from five to eleven. Anyone could be excused who, putting the British and the German official statements side by side, came to the conclusion that the British Fleet had sustained a severe and humiliating defeat.

That Admiralty Report

All the world knows by this time that it was the German and not the British Fleet that was beaten, and a good many hard things have been said about the

Admiralty for publishing a report in which everything else was overwhelmed by the magnitude of our losses. It is by no means certain, however, that what they did was not in the long run the wisest thing. When the Germans issued their claim to victory they did not know the extent of their own losses, still less of ours, nor did they mention that the end of the fight was signalled by the withdrawal of their remaining battered forces to their harbours, leaving the seas completely under the control of the British Fleet.

So far as its lack of full knowledge was concerned, the British Government was in much the same position as the German; but, fortunately, we lack that particular form of insanity which enables the Hun to claim a success when he knows that the facts, which must come out sooner or later, will prove him to have been not only a loser but a liar. In the circumstances, the Admiralty might have decided to say nothing until they had the whole of the facts; but that would have meant that for several days the world would have rung with the uncontradicted news of a German victory and the defeat of the

British Navy. They, therefore, took the only possible alternative. They published frankly all they knew at the moment, and as they naturally knew more of our own losses than of the enemy's, the former stood out with startling and disconcerting prominence. But as fresh news came in from the Commander-in-Chief the action rapidly assumed its proper perspective, until in the end the German Government stood convicted before the world of the greatest and most ludicrous piece of bluff that stands even to its discredit.

New Phase in Sea Fighting

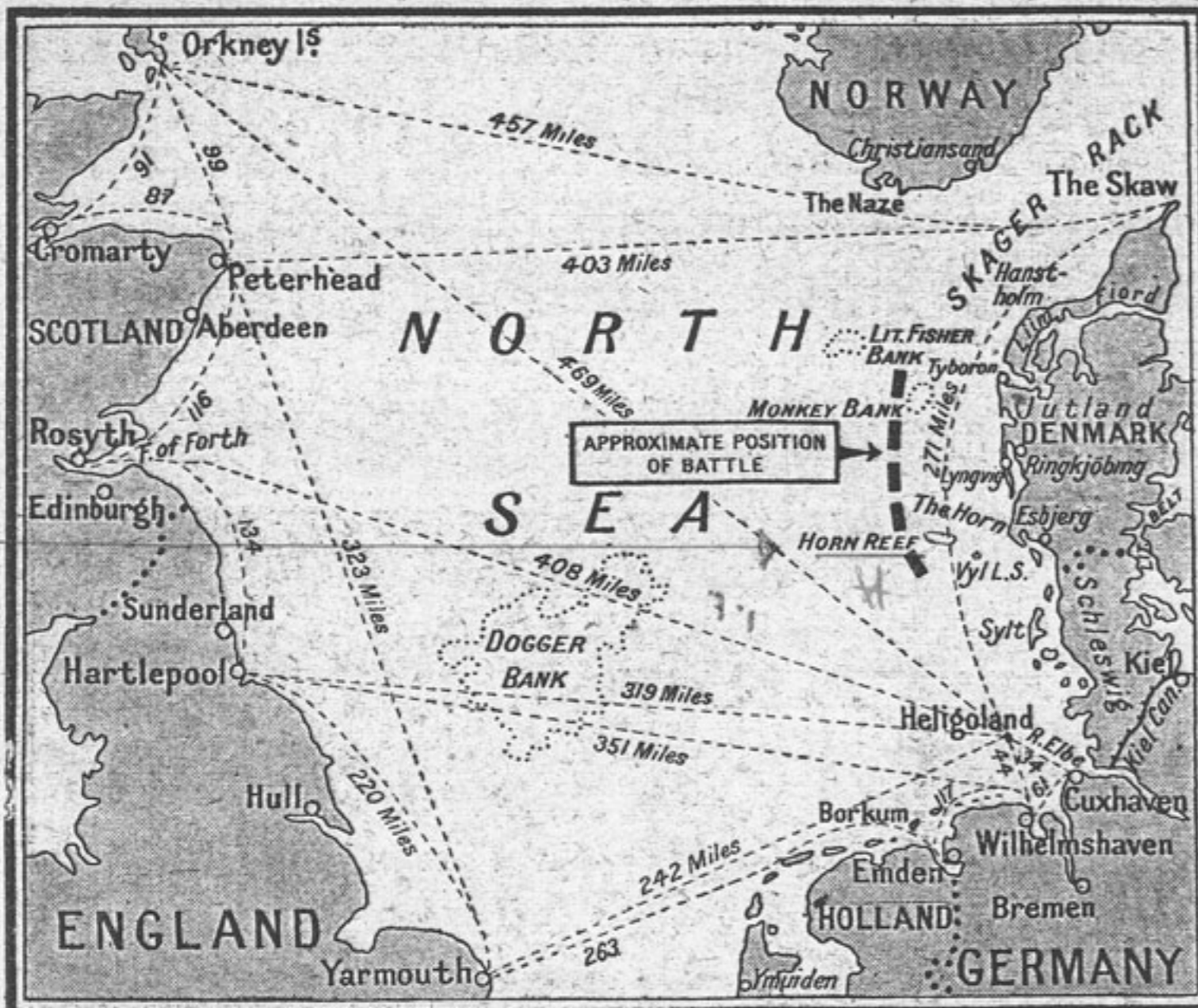
Until we are able to examine the detailed reports of the commanding officers of the British fleets and squadrons—and they are not likely to be available for some time to come—it is hopeless to attempt to analyse an action which will always be remembered in history as the first in which all the elements of modern naval warfare were brought into operation—submarines, aircraft, swift destroyers, light cruisers, armoured cruisers, battle-cruisers, Dreadnought cruisers, Dreadnoughts, super-Dreadnoughts, and, to use a term coined by Lord Haldane, "hyper-super-Dreadnoughts."

The action began about 3.30 in the afternoon of Wednesday, May 31st, in misty weather, which did much to rob the heaviest guns of their peculiar advantages, and lasted almost incessantly for twelve hours. The German Fleet seems to have been out in full force, with battle-cruisers and light craft leading, and the heavy squadrons of Dreadnought and other battleships many miles astern. The official German statements made no secret of the fact that the fleet, under Vice-Admiral von Scheer, had left its bases to carry out a "certain enterprise," and the whole significance of the fight turns upon the nature of that enterprise.

Admiral Scheer's Plans

The Germans may have planned to break out of the North Sea; they may have had in view another bombardment of seaside towns on the East Coast. It is possible that something in the plans of the German Staff demanded the immediate presence of a powerful fleet in the Baltic, and that the Kiel Canal route was for some reason unavailable. It is possible that while the advanced force of battle-cruisers was intended to occupy the attention of whatever British ships might be encountered, the battleships were detailed to break away to the west and convoy a raiding or even an invading army to the East Coast of England.

Whatever the object may have been, we may be sure that the whole of the German High Seas Fleet would not have been at sea on any trivial errand, and it is quite



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Chart of the North Sea, indicating the approximate area of the great naval battle which took place off Jutland on May 31st and June 1st. The relative distances between Heligoland and important points on the British coast are marked.

George Palmer - HMS Broke - Battle of Jutland 1916