

The Surrender of The German Fleet

An eye-witness account
as recorded
in
The London Times

THE SURRENDER OF THE GERMAN FLEET

A Memorable Triumph of British Naval Power as recorded
by the "London Times" Special Correspondent on
November 21st, 1918.

The sun has just gone down on the most wonderful day in all the long history of war by sea. A great Navy, once proud in its young strength and its high Imperial mission, gave, this morning, into ignominious captivity more than threescore of its biggest and best ships. The finest vessels in the German Fleet, fashioned at heavy cost in taxes and debt, to be alike the symbol and the engine of Germany's world ambitions, have surrendered themselves as hostages to the Allies. Even as I write the captive ships lie but a few miles away in British waters fast bound in misery and iron, the tragic semblance of a Navy which has lost its soul. History tells of many a good ship which struck its flag under the stress of battle. History tells also of ships which faced destruction rather than surrender. Research may reveal cases in which a group of ships surrendered, as it were, in cold blood without the striking of a blow. But the annals of Naval warfare hold no parallel to the memorable event which it has been my privilege to witness to-day. It was the passing of a whole Fleet, and it marked the final and ignoble abandonment of a vainglorious challenge to the naval supremacy of Britain. I watched the scene from the flagship of the British Commander-in-Chief. Never has pageant so majestically demonstrated the might of Britain's Navy. The Dominions had their places in the spectacle. American and French warships too were there. But above all else, this was the day of the British Navy, the supreme reward of unceasing vigilance and unrelenting, noiseless pressure on the vitals of Germany.

For the last two or three days the Grand Fleet has breathed a quickening, electrified air. You detected its invigorating virtue in the half-stifled excitement of the men of the Fleet. Since Armistice night, when flag officers sang and danced on the forecastle deck with seamen and marines, every ship attached to the Fleet, from the flagship to the fussiest little motor launch, has been full of joyousness restrained in its expression, but real and irrepressible. In the **Queen Elizabeth**, the most crowded of all the ships, the anticipation of surrender day has grown almost hour by hour as messages flashed hundreds of miles through the air to and from the German High Sea Command. The coming of the **Konigsberg** and the historic meeting between Sir David

Beatty and Admiral Meurer were fresh in each mind when I came on board two days ago. In the moonlight that evening three merry young officers reconstructed the scene on the quarter-deck for me with mock solemnity. Yesterday the expectation of the unbelievable climax drove all other thoughts from the mind, and as time went by, and scraps of news passed from mouth to mouth, the atmosphere of eagerness grew even more intense. But it was still a controlled emotion. Naval men pretend to be as unemotional as jellyfish. Of course they are not. Yet it must be confessed that few in the **Queen Elizabeth**—the "Q.E.," as the Fleet calls her—spent as sleepless a night as your correspondent. Early in the afternoon a notice was posted as follows which deserves to be put on record :—

(1) It is to be impressed on all officers and men that a state of war exists during the Armistice.

(2) Their relations with officers and men of the German Navy with whom they may now be brought into contact are to be of a strictly formal character.

(2) In dealing with the late enemy, while courtesy is obligatory, the methods with which they have waged the war must not be forgotten.

(4) No international compliments are to be paid and all conversation is forbidden, except in regard to the immediate business to be transacted.

(5) If it is necessary to provide food for German officers and men they should not be entertained, but it should be served to them in a place specially set apart.

It was generally known that by the terms of the Armistice the German ships were to be unarmed and manned only by navigating crews, but the Navy does not believe in taking unnecessary chances. Treachery was not expected, but all was made ready to blow the German ships out of the water should any trick be attempted. Last night the Grand Fleet lay at its moorings in the Firth of Forth. Above the bridge were battleships, destroyers, and submarines, and conspicuous among them was the French armoured cruiser **Admiral Aube**, flying the flag of Rear-Admiral Grasset, which, with two destroyers, represented the French Navy in the final act of the great drama. Below the bridge were battleships, battle-cruisers, and light cruisers, and again a prominent place was taken by ships of a partner nation in the struggle, the **New York**, flying the flag of Admiral Rodman, with Admiral Sims and his staff on board, and the **Florida, Wyoming, and Arkansas**. H.M.S. **Canada*** was above the bridge

*Note.—Not a Canadian battleship but one named in honour of Canada

With the First Battle Squadron. **Australia** and **New Zealand** were below with the Second Battle Cruiser Squadron. Throughout the night the flagship was in touch by wireless with the German Fleet, noting its progress towards the place of rendezvous. At two o'clock in the morning the Fleet was reported about 70 miles from the spot. German envoys who came in the **Konigsberg** last Friday had stated that for some reason of which I am not aware, perhaps for want of attention and perhaps for lack of fuel, their fleet would be unable to steam at more than 12 knots. That, however would be speed enough for punctuality.

A few minutes before 4 o'clock the First Battle Squadron led by the **Revenge**, flagship of Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Madden began to move. The fog had lifted after five days, and the lower air was clear, but the clouds hid the moon and stars and made the night dark. Silently through the darkness ship followed ship down to the open sea an ominous awe-inspiring procession of black shapes, each indistinctly silhouetted against the sky and canopied with a smudge of smoke. The **Queen Elizabeth** took her place near the end of the line. By daybreak the Grand Fleet was at sea, and in the grey morning mist the squadrons took up position in two columns in single line ahead:

Northern Line: Squadron (four ships)

Sixth Light Cruiser Squadron (four)

First Cruiser Squadron (two)

Fifth Battle Squadron (four)

Sixth Battle Squadron (five).

Second Battle Squadron (nine)

Queen Elizabeth and **Lion**.

First Battle Cruiser Squadron (four)

Fourth Light Cruiser Squadron (five).

Southern Line Squadron (four ships)

Second Light Cruiser Squadron (four)

Minotaur and **Furious**.

Fourth Battle Squadron (five).

First Battle Squadron (nine)

Second Battle Cruiser Squadron (four)

Seventh Light Cruiser Squadron (four).

Between the lines were **King Orry**, **Blanche**, **Boadicea**, **Fearless** and **Blonde** to act as repeating ships. In this order the Grand Fleet approached the rendezvous, "X position, lat. 56 deg., 11 min. N., long. 10 deg. 20 min. W." According to programme the first Light Cruiser Squadron was due to meet the German Fleet at 10 minutes after 9 o'clock but the position of greatest honour was to be filled by the **Cardiff**, of the Sixth Light Cruiser Squadron, for she was "to direct the movements of the German main force and order them to

proceed, if possible, at a speed of 12 knots" Half-past eight came and with it the report that the German Fleet had been sighted by our Destroyers. An hour passed and the sun, rising in the heavens, began to tinge the sky with gold. Presently, three, four, or five miles away on our starboard bow there came into view a "sausage" balloon towed by the **Cardiff**. At first it was a mere faint speck in a grey mist, with a slight smoke trail stretching out below. Then behind the Cardiff there emerged from the murk the first of the German ships. At three miles' range they appeared to be little more than slowly moving silhouettes. On coming abreast of the German Fleet the British Fleet turned by squadrons, 16 points outwards, wheeling, that is to say, back on its own track, retaining positions on both sides of the Germans to escort them to their anchorage. The order of squadrons as already given for the northern and southern lines was thus reversed.

Between the lines came the Germans, led by the **Cardiff**, and looking for all the world like a school of leviathans led by a minnow. Over them flew a British naval airship. First came the battle-cruisers; the nine battleships followed at intervals of three cables; the **Castor**, flying the pennant of Commodore Tweedie, Commodore of Flotillas, led the 50 German destroyers, surrounded by nearly 150 British. This bald description of the plan of the operation will not convey to the mind any conception of the scene, but it must be placed on permanent record, for it indicates a disposition of hostile fleets such as has never been seen before, and will in all likelihood never be seen again.

The operations were perfect, both in organization and in execution. From the purely spectacular point of view the pageant was robbed of some of its splendour by the low mist, which blurred all outlines and refused to yield to the cold brilliance of the sunshine. But the significance of the meeting and the procession was more important than its appearance. Men in uniform watching the German ships come into view vied with one another in identifying them one by one, sometimes with the aid of books of silhouettes. But underneath the momentary excitement of determining whether this ship was the **Hindenburg** or that the **Derfflinger** there was deep satisfaction that the tedious task of the Navy had been fulfilled. There were one or two little evidences of this which could not escape notice. For example, there was a certain finality in the hoisting at the peak of the **Queen Elizabeth** of the Ensign flown by the **Lion** in the Jutland battle. Part of the Union Jack had been shot away, and if the few Germans who could be seen on the decks of their ships troubled to scan the flag it must have aroused bitter thoughts in

their minds. Again, the justifiable pleasure of the Fleet in a work well done was shown unmistakably by the cheers from the ships of northern line as they passed the stationary **Queen Elizabeth** on their way to harbour. From a dozen ships as they came abreast of the flagship, which had hoisted the blue pennant and drawn out of the line, there came the roar of full-throated cheers given in tribute, not only to Sir David Beatty personally, but to the majestic living force whose destinies he controls.

The other heavy ships of the Grand Fleet had left the flagship well behind when the German and British destroyers came out of the mist. In ordered array, flotilla on flotilla moved across the sea, the Germans completely encased by the British. So vast was the area they covered that both the head and the rear of the columns stretched away into the haze and were lost to sight. The eye could not count them. They were in themselves a tremendous armada. All this time the great captive Fleet and the greater Fleet which encircle it were moving slowly-almost at a funeral pace, and certainly not at the 12 knots stipulated by Admiral Meurer - towards the anchorage appointed for the Germans off May Island, the rock island which stands in the middle of the Firth of Forth some miles eastward of the Bridge. Presently the German ships came to rest, and it was seen that on every side of them were their British warders. Then the main body of the Grand Fleet made its way back to the stations from which it started in the early hours of the morning. As the **Queen Elizabeth** steamed along the lines to her mooring she was cheered again and again by the men who crowded the decks of the ships she led. The day came to a peculiarly fitting close. About an hour before noon the Commander-in-Chief issued the following signal to the Fleet, and it was received beyond doubt by the Germans:-

“The German flag will be hauled down at sunset today (Thursday) and will not be hoisted again without permission.”

The German ships, I should explain, were flying the German naval flag at the main. At 4 o'clock all hands in the **Queen Elizabeth** were piped aft. They had assembled and were waiting, perhaps for a speech, when suddenly the bugle rang out “making sunset.” Instantly all turned to the flag and saluted. The next minute cheers for the Commander-in-Chief were called for, and given with deafening heartiness. Admiral Beatty acknowledged the tribute with a “Tnakf you,” and added: “I always told you they would have to come out. Then the ship's company went back to their duties. In the meantime the Germans in the 71 ships which lay out of sight in the mist had undergone the mortification

of seeing their flag hauled down, perhaps never to be hoisted again. Tomorrow. I understand, these ships will set out under a strong escort for Scapa Flow, to remain there until the Peace Treaty decides their fate.

The surrendered ships included 9 battleships, 5 battlecruisers, 7 light cruisers and 49 destroyers

BATTLESHIPS.

Friedrich der Grosse, flying the flag of Rear-Admiral von Reuter who was in command of the whole force
König Albert, *Bayern*,
Kaiser, *Markgraf*.
Kronprinz Wilhelm, *Prinz-Regent Luitpold*
Kaiserin *Grosser Kurfurst*

BATTLE CRUISERS

Seydlitz flying the broad pennant of Commodore Taeger
Derfflinger, *Hindenberg*,
Von der Tann, *Moltke*.

LIGHT CRUISERS

Karlsruhe, flying the broad pennant of Commodore Harder
Frankfurt, *Brummer*,
Emden, *Koln*,
Nurnberg, *Bremse*.

DESTROYERS

49 of the latest type from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th flotillas

Admiral Sir David Beatty's final message to his Fleet:

"I wish to express to the flag officers, captains, officers, and men of the Grand Fleet my congratulations on the victory which has been gained over the sea power of our enemy. The greatness of this achievement is in no way lessened by the fact that the final episode did not take the form of a fleet action. Although deprived of this opportunity which we had so long and eagerly awaited and of striking a final blow for the freedom of the world we may derive satisfaction from the singular tribute which the enemy has accorded to the Grand Fleet. Without joining us in action he has given testimony to the prestige and efficiency of the Fleet without parallel in history, and it is to be remembered that this testimony has been accorded to us by those who were in the best position to judge. I desire to express my thanks and appreciation to all who have assisted me in maintaining the Fleet in instant readiness for action, and who have borne the arduous and exacting labours which have been necessary for the perfecting of the efficiency which has accomplished so much."

**Published under the Auspices of the Dominion
Educational Committee, Navy League of Canada.**

103 Bay St., Toronto
Aemilius Jarvis, S.S.D.
103 Bay St., Toronto,

2 College St., Toronto.
J. Castell Hopkins, F.S.S.,
F.R.G.S.
2 College St., Toronto

