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# Victory (?) at Sea

*The Great War and modern naval conflict.*

BY JOSEPH F. CALLO

**T**he Battle of Jutland reverberates powerfully in the history of naval combat, and it does so with a resonance that equals or exceeds that of such history-shaping sea struggles as Salamis in 480 B.C., Lepanto in 1571, Trafalgar in 1805, and Leyte Gulf in 1944. Now, in *Jutland*, Nicholas Jellicoe gives us a timely perspective on the events of May 31–June 1, 1916, in the North Sea—with copious detail and an opportunity to think about its present relevance.

The happenings at Jutland were the epicenter of the violent transition from the wind-powered naval combat of the Age of Sail to industrialized warfare at sea. In addition, the battle was the culmination of an Anglo-German naval building race, a competition that threatened the British naval dominance established by Lord Nelson with his decisive victory over the combined French-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar. The German historian Michael Epkenhans helps set the stage in an insightful foreword:

this battle was a showdown between the most highly developed battle technologies, with what were essentially state-of-the-art weapons that had been the achievements of domestic industrial ability and had been developed and produced over many years and at great expense. . . . [Jellicoe] not only describes the battle's origins, he also gives the reader a view from both above and below deck and a sense of the ordeal of naval action.

Along with the radical modernization of combat at sea, the 20th century also introduced broad, more sophisticated and more complex ideas about

*Joseph F. Callo is the author, most recently, of *The Sea Was Always There*.*

## Jutland

*The Unfinished Battle*

by Nicholas Jellicoe

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the geostrategic role of sea power. These new concepts had emerged from the writings of turn-of-the-century sea-power visionaries led by Alfred Thayer Mahan in America and Julian Corbett in Great Britain. These new ideas, along with new technology, elevated sea power from a narrowly defined military significance to more sweeping global, geostrategic importance.

The specifics of the new ways of war at sea on display at Jutland included iron and steel ship construction, armor plating, steam propulsion, lethal torpedoes, and breach-loading, turret-mounted guns of large caliber that hurled explosive shells with accuracy for many thousands of yards. Adjuncts to new battleships included wireless communication, more sophisticated mine warfare—and, particularly for Germany, submarines.

The symbol of this transition to the manufacturing of death and destruction at sea was the “dreadnought,” a quantum jump in naval lethality and the centerpiece at Jutland. Jellicoe gets beyond the tactical features of the new ship type when he writes about the namesake of its kind, Britain’s HMS *Dreadnought*: “She was . . . a double-edged sword because overnight she rendered all other fleets obsolete, including a significant proportion of the Royal Navy’s strength.”

Jellicoe also introduces the important geopolitical realities leading up to World War I and Jutland:

The century that followed Trafalgar was one in which no other nation came close to challenging British sea power until Kaiser Wilhelm II, emboldened by a deep jealousy and hatred of his British birthright, set Germany on a course that inevitably would lead to war.

Jellicoe also cites specific British actions, along with deeply embedded German attitudes that were leading to the approaching cataclysm at sea. Those actions and attitudes included Britain’s impressive naval reviews, which Jellicoe sees as “an awesome and premeditated display of imperial maritime power,” and Germany’s steady progress towards “*Der Tag*, its day of reckoning.” Statistics reinforce Jutland’s significance: It extended over two days, involved 250 ships and 100,000 sailors, and spanned five separate phases. Combined British-German deaths exceeded 8,000.

Not surprisingly, Nicholas Jellicoe, as grandson of the senior Royal Navy commander directly involved at Jutland, shows a strong interest in the personalities of the commander of Britain’s Grand Fleet at Jutland, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, as well as the commander of Britain’s Battle Squadrons at the fight, Admiral Sir David Beatty. He identifies the two as “a contradiction, not a team.” Jellicoe was “calm, deliberate, and realistic,” while Beatty was “highly strung, impatient for action, and supremely confident of his superiority over his enemy.” These differences became a significant part of the controversy that extended beyond the actual battle—a subject still argued in places like the bar of London’s Royal Naval Club!

Here, appropriate attention also is devoted to the senior German naval leadership on the scene: Vice Admirals Reinhardt Scheer and Franz Hipper. The two admirals are called “men from the same mould,” and, in contrast to their British counterparts, are tagged in more positive terms, with Scheer being characterized as “popular, quick-witted, and handsome,” and Hipper described as “the most instinctive” of the four leaders, as well as “a natural leader of men.”



Against this complex background of differing personalities and geopolitics in flux, Jellicoe provides a detailed description of the major actions during the two days of extended combat between Britain's Grand Fleet and Germany's High Seas Fleet. And along with tactical details, he manages to work in vivid examples of the horrors of industrialized warfare at sea, combat vignettes that serve as vivid reminders of the human suffering behind the statistics and after-action analyses.

Germany's main objective was to break out of its home ports and operate freely in the Atlantic and beyond. Britain's primary objective was to maintain its longstanding sea control and protect its ocean commerce. To a significant degree, Britain was attempting to maintain the global status quo in the broad terms of sea power; Germany was attempting to shatter that status quo. When the smell of cordite cleared at Jutland, Germany was the most successful tactically, in that its forces sank more British ships than the number of German ships sunk by the Royal Navy. (The actual count was 14 British ships sunk against 11 German ships sunk; the disparity in tonnage was even more strongly in favor of Germany.)

On the other hand, the British were the more successful strategically since they preserved the operational capabilities of their main fleet and their overall dominance at sea. Careful analysis might lead one to say that the event was, when viewed from a distance, a draw; unfortunately, from the British perspective, there was no such balanced view. The Royal Navy and the British public were still in the thrall of Trafalgar, and nothing less than an unequivocal victory would suffice. As a result, for the British, the lack of an overwhelming, unarguable victory was, in fact, a defeat.

Much of the subsequent recrimination focused on tactics, and that mindset led to a never-ending blame game among the Royal Navy's leadership, its political leaders, and the British press and public. Moreover, the focus of analyses on combat tactics precluded attention to other important matters.

There was, for example, the subject of "combat doctrine," defined as the overall attitude a leader brings to battle, something that takes over during the mind-numbing carnage of combat. Ever since Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, his combat doctrine (described in a letter to Lady Emma Hamilton as "the boldest measures are the safest") was a popular subject in Whitehall, at the Admiralty, and with the public—at least until Jutland.

This narrow focus on tactics might



*Admiral Sir John Jellicoe*

explain why Jellicoe refers to Jutland as the "unfinished battle." Perhaps we are missing a major, perhaps *the* major, lesson of Jutland: It was not just a really big battle but, in a more thoughtful context, a shift in the very idea of naval warfare.

We might even extend our thinking to consider that, as we enter the era of cyber warfare, we are once again approaching a transition that will change everything we think we know about war in general, and naval combat in particular. The tempo and degree of destruction we can anticipate in cyber warfare at sea is almost beyond imagination. But imagine it we must. ♦