‘WEARY WAITING IS HARD INDEED’:
The Grand Fleet After Jutland

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Fate is not over generous in giving opportunities, and if you miss one you never
get another... the weary waiting is hard indeed.... We are never still all day and
manoeuvring about, and all acknowledge that we are advancing in efficiency day by
day... until our great day comes to prove that it has not all been wasted effort. The
fly in the ointment is the dread that that day may never come and all our efforts will
have been in vain.¹

So wrote Admiral Sir David Beatty, Commander in Chief of the Grand
Fleet, in a long letter to his wife written on the first anniversary of the
Battle of Jutland. Having achieved his ambition of becoming C in C,
perhaps the role that he saw as his destiny, the enemy refused to oblige
by ‘coming out’ and giving battle. Beatty was thus forced to develop
unfamiliar characteristics, above all, patience.

Given the scope of the war at sea during this period it is perhaps wise
to state the parameters of this chapter at the beginning. The first theme
is one of strategy and tactics: how the Grand Fleet, the cutting edge
of the Royal Navy’s sword, learned the lessons from Jutland, absorbed
them, and went on to prosecute the war between June 1916 and the
end of 1917. The Grand Fleet is defined as the capital ships based at
Scapa Flow and Rosyth and supporting elements based at harbours
along the British East Coast. This analysis will look at changes in
strategic command and direction which were made during the period,
plans to break the strategic deadlock in the North Sea, and operations
which actually took place.

The chapter will not bring in operations outside the North Sea theatre
and above all will not examine the introduction of convoy and the long,
complex campaign waged against the German unrestricted submarine
warfare offensive after 1 February 1917, except indirectly when the U-boat
campaign caused or affected other operations.

¹ Rear-Admiral W. S. Chalmers, The Life and Letters of David Beatty (London: Hodder
The second theme has little to do with grand strategy, but is arguably no less important. There sometimes exists a misapprehension that the Kaiser’s Navy did nothing after Jutland but swing at anchor, its ships becoming ever more rusty and its men ever more mutinous. This is not strictly true and this chapter will show that the German fleet remained a ‘clear and present danger’ in the North Sea and elsewhere, right up to the end of the war. It is, however, accurate enough to say that Admiral Scheer and the High Seas Fleet abandoned their dreams of Der Tag (‘The Day’), that single cataclysmic engagement which would wrest control of the oceans from the Royal Navy, soon after Jutland.2

Faced with victory, but a victory of the most unconvincing and dissatisfying sort, what were the British to do to remain active and confident as 1916 drew to a close and the war dragged on through 1917? More importantly, how were the men of the Grand Fleet, arguably the greatest assembly of largely inactive technology and manpower in the world at the time, to hold up their heads as their brothers in khaki laid down their lives by the hundreds of thousand on the Western Front?

Losing the Propaganda War: The Jutland Controversy

The Battle of Jutland was fought between 31 May and 1 June 1916. It was the only time that fleets of big-gun ‘dreadnought’ battleships, built at enormous expense between 1906 and 1914, actually came to blows, and it involved, on both sides, 250 ships and around 100,000

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2 Professor Eric Grove pointed out to me that Scheer’s abandonment of the fleet action as a strategic goal may well have been the result of being stripped of his U-boats for the unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, as the tactical use of U-boat ‘ambushes’ was an essential part of his plans for reducing British numbers before the fleets even met. However, according to his own account at least, after Jutland Scheer became an enthusiastic supporter of the unrestricted submarine warfare campaign before the decision had been taken to begin it. According to his memoirs (Germany’s High Seas Fleet in the World War) (London: Cassell, 1920), on 20 June he outlined his views in a memorandum to the Kaiser as follows: ‘I replied that in view of the situation I was in favour of the unrestricted U-boat campaign against commerce, in the form of a blockade of the British coast, that I objected to any milder form, and I suggested that, if owing to the political situation we could not make use of this, our sharpest weapon, there was nothing for it but to use the U-boats for military purposes.’ Had Scheer believed that the High Seas Fleet could still triumph, it seems odd that he did not argue more strongly for the U-boats to be retained in support of the fleet. I must therefore on balance ‘stick to my guns’ and conclude that Scheer no longer believed he could win a fleet action. I am, however, very grateful to Professor Grove for making me examine the issue in more detail.