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A TRUE ACCOUNT OF THE  
BATTLE OF JUTLAND, MAY  
31, 1916

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# **Thomas Goddard Frothingham**

## **A True Account of the Battle of Jutland, May 31, 1916**

### **PREFACE**

The following is an account of the essential facts of the Battle of Jutland, amplified from the review in the author's book, *A Guide to the Military History of The World War, 1914–1918*, published this year by Little, Brown & Co. This gives a greatly needed description of the events of the naval action, with the forces of both sides placed in true relation, one to the other.

No previously published account had contained an adequate treatment of the manœuvres of both fleets, as certain important events of the action were not understood, and it had been assumed that situations existed for which there was no foundation in fact. All this has resulted in a mass of confused and erroneous narratives – and the Battle of Jutland has become one of the most misunderstood actions in history.

The British Admiralty has announced that an official record of the Battle of Jutland would not be given out. Instead of this, the official dispatches covering the action have been issued in the form of a Blue-book. The publication of these documents does not help to solve many vexed questions – and the need is all the more evident of a trustworthy account of the action.

The reader may feel sure that the real course of the great naval battle has been traced in the present version, and that the facts here given have been established beyond dispute. In this way a reliable basis has been provided for reading narratives of the action, for studying the details of its varying fortunes – and for correcting many erroneous impressions which have been current.

A portion of the text was published in the Boston Evening *Transcript* of October 9, 1920. Two of the charts have been reproduced from *A Guide to the Military History of The World War*, and the thanks of the author are given to Messrs. Little, Brown & Co. for their courtesy in allowing use of the text of the book.

# THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND

MAY 31, 1916

**Authorities quoted in the text are indicated as follows:**

**Admiral Jellicoe (J), Vice Admiral Beatty (B), Admiral Scheer (S)**

The Battle of Jutland has been made a matter of bitter controversy, and accounts of the action have been so molded to fit partisan theories that the actual events have become obscured. Yet these events can now be determined through means that were never before available in the case of a great naval battle. Both commanders have published their detailed accounts, and there is no longer any reason for uncertainty as to the essentials of the action. Many of the tales from Germany were obviously untrue, but Admiral Scheer, the German Commander-in-Chief, has given a straightforward story of the battle which supplements the version of Admiral Jellicoe, the British Commander-in-Chief.

When the wide field of operations is taken into account, the two narratives of the rival commanders agree to a surprising extent as to the events of the early stages of the action. The engagement between the two advanced forces, the advent of the German High Seas Fleet, and the running fight to meet the British Grand Fleet, are related in confirmation of Lord Jellicoe's report, and of the account in his book. Concerning the events of these first phases of the battle the various British narratives also practically agree.

Most of the differences and controversies relate to the ensuing stages. Concerning these events of the latter part of the action Admiral Scheer supplies much needed data, throwing new light upon manœuvres which had not been understood by the British – and no narrative has yet been published which covers this ground.

To understand the battle, it is necessary to remember that it had become the custom of the British fleet to leave its safeguarded bases in the north of the British Isles and make periodical sweeps through the North Sea. The Admiralty had ordered the Grand Fleet to begin such a sweep on May 30.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of his Report of the battle Admiral Jellicoe thus describes the situation:

“The Ships of the Grand Fleet, in pursuance of the general policy of periodical sweeps through the North Sea, had left its base on the previous day in accordance with instructions issued by me. In the early afternoon of Wednesday, May 31, the 1st and 2nd Battle Cruiser Squadrons, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Light Cruiser Squadrons, and destroyers from the 1st, 9th, and 13th Flotillas, supported by the Fifth Battle Squadron, were, in accordance with my directions, scouting to the southward of the Battle Fleet.” (J)

On May 31 the German High Seas Fleet was also on the North Sea. There had been an insistent demand from the German people for activity on the part of the battle fleet. In response, the new Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Scheer, had taken his battleships to sea at times. This change of tactics was a demonstration deliberately planned for effect in Germany, but Admiral Scheer had taken great pains to improve the efficiency of his command, and on that day he had with him all the strength

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<sup>1</sup> “In accordance with instructions contained in their Lordship's telegram, No. 434, of 30th May, code time 1740, the Grand Fleet proceeded to sea on 30th May, 1916.” (J)

he could muster, even including the available predreadnoughts. He was thus prepared to fight, if he could manoeuvre to engage the British fleet in part or under conditions advantageous for the Germans. This sortie of May 31 brought on the Battle of Jutland.

For some time after the action there were tales of other objectives, – to cover the escape of raiders, to get ships out of the Baltic, etc. Even Lord Jellicoe indulged in theories as to the object of the German sortie and the movements that led to the engagement. This question has been ended by Admiral Scheer's account of his definite order of May 18, 1916, for a raid on the east coast of England at Sunderland, including the dispositions of U-boats. Such a raid "would be certain to call out a display of English fighting forces as promised by Mr. Balfour." (S) After a delay on account of bad weather, this plan was modified in the operation of May 31, off the Skagerrak – and it was carried out with the hope, frankly expressed by the German Admiral, that his enemy "would afford us an opportunity to engage part or the whole of his fleet in battle under conditions favorable to ourselves." (S) This situation tended to bring on a naval action, especially as the Admiralty telegram gave the intimation that German naval forces would be out.

The opposing fleets in the Battle of Jutland were as follows:

1. An advance British force under Vice Admiral Beatty, consisting of six battle cruisers (four *Lions* of 28 knots speed, each carrying eight 13.5-inch guns, and two *Indefatigables* of 25 knots speed, each carrying eight 12-inch guns), supported by the Fifth Battle Squadron, under Rear Admiral Evan-Thomas (four 25-knot battleships of the *Queen Elizabeth* class, each carrying eight 15-inch guns, *Barham* (F), *Valiant*, *Malaya*, *Warspite*).

The fleet speed of this advance force was 25 knots.

2. The main body of the British Grand Fleet, under Admiral Jellicoe, flying his flag in the *Iron Duke*, consisting of a fast wing under Rear Admiral Hood (three 26-knot battle cruisers of *Invincible* class, each carrying eight 12-inch guns), a division of four armored cruisers under Rear Admiral Arbuthnot, and twenty-four dreadnoughts in three squadrons commanded by Vice Admirals Burney, Jerram, and Sturdee.

The fleet speed of this main body was 20 knots, and its formidable armament will be found in [Table I](#).

3. Twenty-five light cruisers, and seventy-eight destroyers, "47 with the Battle Fleet, 31 with Battle Cruisers." (J)

The German strength comprised:

1. An advance force under Vice Admiral Hipper, consisting of five battle cruisers (three *Derfflingers* of 28 knots speed, each carrying eight 12-inch guns, and two *Moltkes* of 27 knots speed, each carrying ten 11-inch guns).

The fleet speed of this advance force was 27 knots.

**TABLE I**

**THE BRITISH GRAND FLEET AT THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND**  
Make-up and Armament of the Battle Fleet

1 Div.	2 Div.	3 Div.	4 Div.	5 Div.	6 Div.
<sup>1</sup> King George V (F) 10 13.5-inch	<sup>2</sup> Orion (F) 10 13.5-inch	<sup>4</sup> Iron Duke (FF) 10 13.5-inch	<sup>5</sup> Benbow (F) 10 13.5-inch	<sup>6</sup> Colossus (F) 12 12-inch	<sup>7</sup> Marlborough (F) 10 13.5-inch
Ajax 10 13.5-inch	Monarch 10 13.5-inch	Royal Oak 8 15-inch	Bellerophon 10 12-inch	Collingwood 10 12-inch	Revenge 8 15-inch
Centurion 10 13.5-inch	Conqueror 10 13.5-inch	<sup>8</sup> Superb (F) 10 12-inch	Temeraire 10 12-inch	Neptune 10 12-inch	Hercules 10 12-inch
Erin 10 13.5-inch	Thunderer 10 13.5-inch	Canada 10 14-inch	Vanguard 10 12-inch	St. Vincent 10 12-inch	Agincourt 14 12-inch

<sup>2</sup> Flagship of Vice Admiral Sir W. Jerram, Commanding 2nd Battle Squadron.

<sup>3</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral A. C. Leveson, Rear Admiral in 2nd Battle Squadron.

<sup>4</sup> Fleet Flagship – Flag of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief.

<sup>5</sup> Flagship of Vice Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee, Commanding 4th Battle Squadron.

<sup>6</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral E. F. A. Gaunt, Rear Admiral in 1st Battle Squadron.

<sup>7</sup> Flagship of Vice Admiral Sir Cecil Burney, Commanding 1st Battle Squadron and second in command of the Grand Fleet.

<sup>8</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral A. L. Duff, Rear Admiral in 4th Battle Squadron.

**TABLE II**  
**THE GERMAN HIGH SEAS FLEET AT THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND**  
**Make-up and Armament of the Battle Fleet**

	Squadron III	Squadron I	Squadron II
	<sup>6</sup> König (F) 10 12-inch	<sup>10</sup> Ostfriesland (F) 12 12-inch	<sup>11</sup> Deutschland (F) 4 11-inch
	Grosser Kurfürst 10 12-inch	Thüringen 12 12-inch	Pommern 4 11-inch
	Markgraf 10 12-inch	Helgoland 12 12-inch	Schlesien 4 11-inch
	Kronprinz 10 12-inch	Oldenburg 12 12-inch	Schleswig-Holstein 4 11-inch
—	<sup>12</sup> Kaiser (F) 10 12-inch	<sup>13</sup> Posen (F) 12 11-inch	<sup>14</sup> Hannover (F) 4 11-inch
	Prinz Regent Luitpold 10 12-inch	Rheinland 12 11-inch	Hessen 4 11-inch
	Kaiserin 10 12-inch	Nassau 12 11-inch	
	—	Westfalen 12 11-inch	
	<sup>15</sup> Friedrich der Grosse (FF) 10 12-inch		

<sup>9</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral Behnke commanding Squadron III.

<sup>10</sup> Flagship of Vice Admiral Schmidt commanding Squadron I.

<sup>11</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral Mauve commanding Squadron II.

<sup>12</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral Nordmann.

<sup>13</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral Engelhardt.

<sup>14</sup> Flagship of Rear Admiral Lichtenfels.

<sup>15</sup> Fleet Flagship – Flag of Admiral Scheer, Commander-in-Chief.

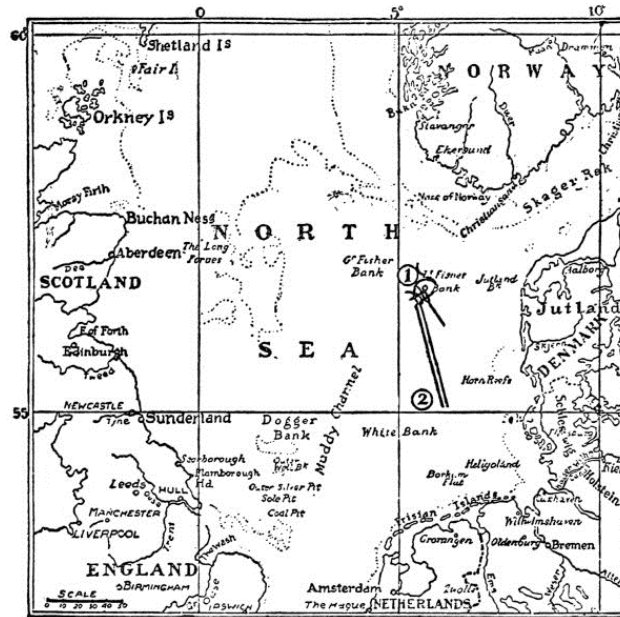
2. The main body of the German High Seas Fleet, under Admiral Scheer, consisting of sixteen dreadnoughts [*“König Albert absent”* (S)] and six predreadnought battleships.

The fleet speed of this main body was 17 knots, because the German dreadnoughts had been eked out with predreadnought battleships of less speed. Its less powerful armament will be found in [Table II](#).

3. Eleven light cruisers and about seventy-eight destroyers, divided between the advance force and the main body. (Admiral Jellicoe gives the Germans eighty-eight destroyers, but it is known that all were not in action.)

The above-described make-up of the opposing fleets must be kept in mind, when studying the course of the action. The day of the battle was cloudy, but the sun shone through the clouds most of the time. At no time was there anything approaching a sea. Visibility was reported as good in the first stages of the action, but later in the afternoon, there being little wind, mist and smoke hung heavy over the surface of the sea. These conditions must also be remembered, as the increasing mist had a great influence on the course of the action.

The following outline will bring the action to the stage at which detailed comment should begin.



From *A Guide to the Military History of The World War, 1914–1918*.

Chart showing the Battle of Jutland, in relation to the surroundings on the North Sea. (1) The Battle Field, May 31, 1916. (2) Position of British Fleet “at about 2.47 A.M.,” (J) June 1, 1916. (This chart is diagrammatic only.)

In the sweep through the North Sea, with the main body of the British Grand Fleet some seventy miles distant, Vice Admiral Beatty’s advance force was cruising to southward of Admiral Jellicoe May 31, 1916, when, at 2.20 P.M., the presence of enemy ships was reported by a light cruiser. Admiral Beatty altered course “to the eastward and subsequently to northeastward, the enemy being sighted at 3.31 P.M. Their force consisted of five battle cruisers.” (B) This was the German advance under Vice Admiral Hipper.

It is stated in Vice Admiral Beatty’s report that it was over an hour after the first news of the vicinity of enemy ships before he increased speed to 25 knots to engage, “at 3.30 P.M.” (B) Yet Vice Admiral Beatty reports that Rear Admiral Evan-Thomas’s Fifth Battle Squadron (the four *Queen Elizabeths*) was still 10,000 yards away when he made this move to engage the Germans with his battle cruisers. Consequently Vice Admiral Beatty failed to impose his whole strength upon his enemy’s detached force.

It is hard to explain this situation except by believing that Vice Admiral Beatty was confident that his six battle cruisers alone would be able to cope with the enemy. Allowing his force to remain divided by such an interval was unfortunate, and it cannot be said that the best use was made of the British advance force in the first stage of the engagement.

At 3.48 “the action commenced at a range of 18,500 yards, both sides opening fire practically simultaneously.” (B) The British battle cruisers fought on a course curving to the southeast, and then on a south-southeast course, and the five German battle cruisers fought them on a parallel course, instead of edging away from the superior British force. It is now easy to see that the trend of the action was absolutely in the direction of the approaching main body of the German High Seas Fleet, but this, very naturally, was not apparent at the time to Vice Admiral Beatty.

The first phase of the battle may properly be studied as a fight between the British and German battle cruisers, in consequence of the before-stated gap separating the two parts of Admiral Beatty’s command. This interval of 10,000 yards prevented the Fifth Battle Squadron of *Queen Elizabeth* dreadnoughts from being a factor at the time. Vice Admiral Beatty reports that this squadron “opened

fire at a range of 20,000 yards,” and he continues: “The Fifth Battle Squadron was engaging the enemy’s rear ships, unfortunately at very long range.” Only two of the German ships were really under fire from the Fifth Battle Squadron, and these two battle cruisers were but slightly injured in the run to the south.

In this part of the action came the first of the many upsets of prewar calculations. Comparing the given strength of the two opposing squadrons in action, it will be seen that the British battle cruisers were greatly superior; in fact, the odds would have been considered prohibitive before this battle. Yet it was the British squadron that suffered, losing one-third of its ships. “At about 4.06” (J) the *Indefatigable* was sunk, and “at about 4.26” (J) the *Queen Mary* met the same fate. In each case there was a great explosion up through the turrets, suggesting that a weak turret construction is really a dangerous conductor of fire to the magazine in case of a heavy hit, and pointing to the need of better separation of the supply of ammunition from the magazine.

At 4.15 there were attacks “simultaneously” (B) by British and German destroyers which resulted in a lively fight, but no damage to any of the capital ships. Yet the possibilities of such torpedo attacks were so evident, here and later in the battle, that the destroyer at once attained a greater value as an auxiliary of the battleship. A British airplane had been sent up from a mother ship just before the engagement, though Admiral Beatty reports that it was forced to fly low on account of the clouds, and had a hard task “to identify four enemy light cruisers.” (B) There was apparently no chance of a wide observation that would have warned Admiral Beatty of the approaching German High Seas Fleet. In this short hour were concentrated many new problems of naval warfare.

The advancing German High Seas Fleet was reported at 4.38 by a light cruiser, the *Southampton*, and sighted at 4.42 by the British battle cruisers. A few minutes later Vice Admiral Beatty’s ships turned right about (180 degrees) in succession. The German battle cruisers also turned to a northwesterly course.

One great advantage was gained for the British in this manœuvre. By the turn in succession the four *Queen Elizabeth* battleships, the Fifth Battle Squadron, were brought into position to fight a rearguard action against the greatly strengthened force of the enemy. The leading German battleships, which were of the *König* class, fell into line, closely following Admiral Hipper’s battle cruisers, and the battle was continued at 14,000 yards on a northwest course.

In the meantime, from the north, the British Grand Fleet had been closing at utmost fleet speed on south and southeast by south courses, disposed in six divisions, numbered from port to starboard, on parallel courses as shown in [Table I](#). Admiral Jellicoe had received no certain information from Vice Admiral Beatty as to the positions of the engaged ships, and he had been proceeding in the general direction of the running fight, instead of having in mind any definite point for joining forces with Vice Admiral Beatty. It must also be realized that conditions of increasing mist and intermittent fog, which rendered observation very uncertain, had become prevalent.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is from this stage of the action that the tactics of the battle have become involved in controversy – and a new account of the ensuing events of the battle is greatly needed.

In the first place, it should be stated that a broad tactical situation existed that was almost beyond the hopes of the British. This was irrespective of any moves of the British Commander-in-Chief, or of the Commander of the British advance force. By its own act the weaker German fleet was out in the North Sea, committed to an enterprise which had taken it away from its bases. Not only that – but, by bringing out the squadron of predreadnoughts, Admiral Scheer’s fleet speed was reduced to 17 knots. Casting aside all details of tactics, this constituted the established condition that the weaker fleet of inferior speed had offered the opportunity to the British fleet – and evasion by flight alone was impossible. Looked at in this light, it was a better chance than could ever have been

expected. Yet a combination of circumstances, including weather conditions, tactics, and methods, prevented a decision, where such a result seemed to be insured.

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