

# HMS Warspite

## HMS Warspite at the Battle of Jutland

During World War One HMS Warspite formed part of the 5th Battle Squadron attached to Admiral Beatty's Battlecruiser Squadron based at Rosyth, in Scotland and acted as a deterrent to German ships raiding the northeast coast.

On the 31 May 1916 Warspite fought at the Battle of Jutland, the largest fleet action since the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. During the battle her steering gear jammed and as she circled in front of the German fleet she was pummelled with large shells.

The Navy converted Warspite into an aircraft carrier in 1934. The ship went on to serve in World War Two, becoming the most battle honoured Royal Navy ship in history.

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The 'super dreadnought'

HMS Warspite was the second ship of the Queen Elizabeth class of five fast 'super dreadnought' battleships. They were the result of the huge leaps in the technology of warfare and deterrence sparked by Anglo-German rivalry for supremacy of the seas.

The Queen Elizabeths could reach a top speed of 24 knots, meaning that they could keep up a pretty good pace with most Beatty's fast battlecruisers.

Their 15-inch guns and centre line turret positioning meant that the ships packed a greater broadside with greater armour penetration than previous battleships.

These were the first battleships to be oil fired and not only did this enable them to reach these higher speeds, but it also meant that they produced less smoke and were easier to refuel, which enabled better acceleration.

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## Position in Grand Fleet

Captain E M Philpott commanded HMS Warspite during the Battle of Jutland. HMS Warspite formed part of the 5th Battle Squadron under the command of Rear Admiral Evan Thomas, flying his flag in HMS Barham.

In 1916 the Admiralty had attached the 5th Battle Squadron, made up exclusively of the five Queen Elizabeth class battleships, to Rear Admiral Sir David Beatty's Battlecruiser Squadron, based at Rosyth.

The Grand Fleet, under the command of Admiral John Jellicoe, stationed itself at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, forming a blockade to German shipping.

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## Scheer's scheme

During the war Admiral Reinhard Scheer, in command of Germany's High Seas Fleet, sought to lure parts of the British fleet out in order to pick them off and reduce its size.

Scheer recognised that the British Fleet was superior in numbers, speed and armaments. He tasked Commander of the High Seas Fleet Scouting Forces, Vice

Admiral Franz Hipper, and his fleet of five battlecruisers with luring Beatty's Battlecruiser Fleet out of Harbour at Rosyth.

The squadron had conducted systematic raids to the northeast coast of Britain in the hope that they could entice Beatty out towards a deadly trap thus evening up the numbers between the High Seas and Grand Fleet.

The plan assumed Beatty would pass through an area where a large force of U Boats were concentrated and then Admiral Hipper's Force would draw the survivors of this action towards Scheer with the main High Seas Fleet.

Scheer's scheme did not go according to plan. British Naval Intelligence concluded from the increased German signal traffic, that the High Seas Fleet was probably at sea, or about to go to sea.

The two Admirals agreed to meet 90 miles west of Skagerrak off the coast of Jutland. On 30 May the Admiralty sent warning signals to Admiral Jellicoe and Rear Admiral Beatty. The Grand Fleet left Scapa Flow in the late evening of 30 May along.

The 2nd Battle Squadron, based at Cromarty, and the Battlecruiser Squadron from Rosyth followed at midnight.

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Memories from the Battle

Captain R A Poland of the Royal Marine Light Infantry who was in command of Y turret aboard HMS Warspite during the battle witnessed the action at Jutland.

He wrote a letter to his brother on the 9 June 1916. This account of Warspite's actions at the Battle of Jutland is peppered with timings and actions plotted after the actual event and with the aid of Poland's account to his brother.

Poland's 5 page letter can be read in full on this site by searching our database. In the letter Poland writes -

'As regards to the scrap, I can't tell you much, only personal impressions! Its all a confused impression, with one or two momentary exceptions, haze, paralysing terror, own gunfire and enemy's flashes and splashes and a hail of splinters.'

Action began at 1415 when the light cruiser HMS Galatea sighted what turned out to be the Danish steamer N J Fjord. At the same time a German destroyer also sighted this ship.

Beatty, at this time had signalled to all ships in his Fleet to turn to a course N by E on a course to rendezvous with the Grand Fleet as planned.

HMS Galatea and the other ships of the 1st Light Cruiser Squadron ignored this order, however and continued on an eastward course to investigate and the squadron soon came into contact with Hipper's Light Forces.

At 1427 Hipper turned his battlecruisers and attached ships on to a WSW course to support his Light Forces.

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Signal failure

At 1432 Beatty in HMS Lion makes a flag signal to all ships to turn to a course of SSE to support the British cruisers. However, funnel smoke and the direction of the flags obscured HMS Barham's view and the 5th Battle Squadron did not take in this signal.

The 5th Battle Squadron continued in a northerly direction for 10 minutes before HMS Tiger repeated the signal by searchlight. Though only a short time of 10 minutes, the signalling error led to a critical gap of 10 miles between Beatty's Battlecruisers and the 5th Battle Squadron.

In hindsight, many have criticised Beatty for his sloppy signalling. Beatty's miscommunication with the 5th Battle Squadron resulted in the battlecruisers losing the advantage of backup from the most powerful squadron in the world.

HMS New Zealand sighted the German battlecruisers at 1525 and five minutes later both Hipper and Beatty changed courses to SSE, in a move that led Beatty towards Admiral Scheer's High Seas Fleet.

At 1545 the German battlecruisers open fire on their opposite numbers when Beatty's ships were at a distance of about 14km. Minutes later the British battlecruisers responded, however, they had squandered their advantage.

The British ships out performed their German counterparts in speed, range and weight of projectile, and had the Germans in range for over 10 minutes.

But the Germans had the advantage of position. The sun was behind the British ships, giving the German gunners a clear

advantage in ranging and spotting.

HMS Warspite and the rest of the 5th Battle Squadron were still catching up in the attempt to join the battlecruisers and support their action and were about eight miles distance away.

As a consequence of Beatty's failed signals, the 5th Battle Squadron was unable to aid the battlecruisers with its superior firepower until 27 minutes after action.

During this crucial time the fierce action caused great damage to Beatty's ships.

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Fatal blows

At 1602 the German ship Von der Tann hit HMS Indefatigable with 11-inch shells causing the forward magazine to explode and it sank the ship with the loss of all but four of the crew.

German ships dealt HMS Queen

Mary a similar fatal blow at 1625 and it too sank with the loss of all but 20 of the crew. Five minutes later HMS Invincible was also lost.

One of the main causes of the severe damage at the Battle of Jutland was the large amount of cordite, a highly explosive substance used to propel the shells fired from the naval guns, carried and exposed on board the British ships.

If the Royal Navy had stored the cordite away to protect it from flash, or if they had used a safer substance, perhaps the damage wreaked at Jutland could have been avoided. Captain Poland writes of the incident:

'We then heard that Beatty had sighted enemy light cruisers. Closed up at 5 and went straight to it. BCS (Battlecruiser Squadron) had opened fire about 25 minutes earlier and â€ lost the Indefatigable 10 minutes after engaging. All the ships lost were sunk by gunfire as far as we can tell through a turret being hit and a chain of cordite fires being lit down the trunks to the magazines. (This can easily be prevented in the future).'

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The Fifth Battle Squadron enter the action

Beatty's three remaining battlecruisers continued to pursue the German battle cruisers and the 5th Battle Squadron was now able to open fire on the German battle cruisers with their 15 inch guns at a range of 20 000 yards.

The gunnery of the four ships of the Squadron was magnificent. They hit two ships of Hipper's line very quickly into the exchange.

It looked like the German fleet might not be able to withstand the new barrage without some back up from the German High Sea Fleet of Admiral Scheer.

At 1630 HMS Southampton of the 2nd Light Cruiser Squadron sighted the German High Seas Fleet. Beatty then ordered a reversal of course in order to draw the High Seas Fleet towards the Grand Fleet.

He ordered the leading ship of his battlecruiser group with the others to follow

â€œin successionâ€ rather than â€œturn togetherâ€ which exposed the squadron to the German guns, a move that was later criticised, and had great repercussions for HMS Warspite.

At 1651, however, some confusion over signalling again meant that the 5th Battle Squadron was still steaming towards the German High Seas Fleet, bringing the Squadron within range of its battleships.

Three minutes later the 5th Battle Squadron turned to follow Beattyâ€™s battlecruisers by again â€œturning in successionâ€ â€œ exposing each ship in turn to the guns of the German battleships.

As the 5th Battle Squadron turned its two ships in the rear, HMS Malaya and HMS Warspite, suffered damage from German ships with Warspite sustaining damage particularly in the steering compartment. Poland remembers the sensation of the strike:

'As we turned we got our first hit (the only one I actually saw). It got us very low down right aft and threw up a big cloud of grey smoke and shook the ship all over.'

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The Grand Fleet come to the rescue

The Flagships of the Battlecruiser Squadron and Grand Fleet, HMS Lion [Beatty] and HMS Iron Duke [Jellicoe] sighted each other at 1800.

15 minutes later Jellicoe deployed the Grand Fleet to the south and east in order to get between the High Seas Fleet and the German Base, blocking their retreat.

Action was now taking place continuously between the light forces on both sides. The Germans scored several hits on HMS Defence at about 1820, occurring right in front of Warspite. Poland recounts the horrific event:

'I saw three salvoes fall across her in quick succession, beauties. A flicker of flame ran aft along her forecastle head and up her fore turret, which seemed to melt. Then "whoof, up she went a single huge sheet of flame 500 meters high, mixed up with smoke and fragments. As it died I saw her crumpled bow, red hot sticking up about 30 or 40 feet of it, at an angle of sixty degrees and then it sank. I nearly vomited " God it was an awful sight.'

Also during this time the Germans badly damaged the cruiser HMS Warrior. The 5th Battle Squadron was at this stage seeking to fall into line astern of the Grand Fleet.

The damage to Warspite's steering

caused its helm to jam during the manoeuvre and she completed two full circles around HMS Warrior before the rudder was in working order again.

This mishap protected the cruiser, but put the battleship in great danger. The German fleet pummelled HMS Warspite with shells. Captain Poland's account to his brother details his feelings during the onslaught:

'The hit aft appears to have upset our steering gear and we careered off out of the line, heading towards the enemy and made two 32 point turns. The others of course went on and we had to take all that at least a couple of divisions of the HSF (High Seas Fleet) could give us. I gave up hope of seeing Rosyth again! Altogether it was a most unhappy period.'

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HMS Warspite withdrew and halted for repairs. The 5th Battle Squadron's Commander, Rear Admiral Philpott, considered Warspite too

damaged to continue and ordered the ship to withdraw and return to Rosyth.

Poland recalls the repair work and the relief of seeing the Grand Fleet (GF) appear to aid the beleaguered squadrons:

'We had about ¼ hr of hammering and then the GF arrived. I've never been so thankful for anything in my life. It was like feeling ones feet on the bottom again after being carried away by a strong tide. Lord, did they look fine! We were stopped, and remained so for about an hour and the last I saw was the light cruisers scrapping briskly to the W. of us. Eventually we turned around and got underway at 15 knots.'

For HMS Warspite the Battle of Jutland ends there, the action itself went on into the early hours of the next morning, only ending where Scheer's High Seas Fleet were able to escape back to port during the night.

Aboard HMS Warspite however, Poland remembers arriving back to safety the next day:

'Eventually an escort of TBs (torpedo boats) met us 30 miles E. of May Island and we got under the bridge about 5pm Thursday, damn thankful to be afloat. We had worked up to full speed, although the experts were doubtful if she'd stand it. We made rafts all over the upper deck as one torpedo would have finished her. It was an anxious and busy forenoon. The chippies worked like Trojans shoring her up. The damage is pretty extensive and spectacular, though by the grace of Heaven not vital in any place.'

