

Grand Fleet

By [Chuck Steele](#)

Summary

The Grand Fleet was Britain's most important manifestation of sea power in World War I. As the primary instrument of blockade in the North Sea, it was tasked with denying Germany the succor of oceanic trade while also holding that state's most formidable assemblage of naval might, the High Seas Fleet, in check throughout the war.

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The Fleet Forms

A month and a day after the [assassination](#) of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), [Britain](#) moved the Grand Fleet, formerly the First Fleet, to its wartime station at Scapa Flow. With hostilities likely, the Royal Navy had peremptorily moved into position to block [Germany's](#) access to the Atlantic. Containing a superior number of all types of warships, and most importantly a greater number of [dreadnoughts](#), the Grand Fleet possessed sufficient strength to enforce a distant [blockade](#) for the duration of the war. Indeed, as the conflict progressed, the Grand Fleet would increase in strength from twenty-one dreadnoughts in the summer of 1914 to approximately thirty-five (including a squadron of five American battleships) by the time of the armistice.

Jellicoe in Command

Initially under the command of Sir [George Callaghan \(1852-1920\)](#), the Grand Fleet was handed over to Sir [John Jellicoe \(1859-1935\)](#) on the day Britain declared war against Germany. Jellicoe would preside over the Grand Fleet's watch on the North Sea until being made First Sea Lord in November 1916. During his tenure as commander-in-chief of the Grand Fleet, Jellicoe was responsible for setting the conditions of the blockade and leading the fleet in its biggest engagement, the [Battle of Jutland](#) (31 May to 1 June 1916).

With over twenty dreadnoughts in service from the war's outset, the Grand Fleet was almost twice as numerous in that key class of ship as its German rival. Indeed, considering that the British also mounted heavier caliber guns, the hitting power of the British set the parameters for the conduct of the war in the North Sea. Specifically, the Germans sought to avoid encounters with the concentrated might of the Grand Fleet, opting instead to seek engagements that would allow for its defeat in detail.

Beatty, Battlecruisers and Distant Blockade

With the Grand Fleet's potency derived from its superiority in dreadnoughts, the need to sustain so many large warships dictated how and where the British deployed it. Primarily, the main striking force of the Grand Fleet operated from Scapa Flow, while the battlecruisers of Sir [David Beatty \(1871-1936\)](#) took station at Rosyth, on the Firth of Forth. The size and strength of the Grand Fleet was a limiting factor in its employment throughout the war. A fleet that large could not remain at sea for extended periods, and its maintenance was one factor that contributed to the choice of distant blockade.

Distant blockade, as opposed to close blockade, was also preferred for reasons of safety. The threat posed by relatively inexpensive [weapons](#), namely [mines](#) and [submarines](#), made it prudent to keep the dreadnoughts and battlecruisers well away from waters in close proximity to the High Seas Fleet. Thus, the Grand Fleet, despite having a significant advantage in signals intelligence, was hard-pressed throughout the war to concentrate against German sorties.

Notable Engagements

Despite the distance between the two rivals there were two notable engagements involving components of the Grand Fleet other than the Battle of Jutland. On 28 August 1914, cruisers and destroyers of the Grand Fleet mauled a force of German ships of a similar caliber at the Battle of Heligoland Bight, and on 24 January 1915 Beatty's battlecruisers bested the Germans at the Battle of Dogger Bank.

By far the best-known and most important naval engagement involving the Grand Fleet was the Battle of Jutland. The High Seas Fleet, commanded by [Reinhard Scheer \(1863-1928\)](#), sortied in the hopes of isolating and destroying Beatty's command before Jellicoe could respond. However, owing to superior signals intelligence, the Grand Fleet managed to meet the threat from Scheer before he could finish Beatty's force. At the end of the engagement the Germans could claim a tactical success, having destroyed more ships than the British, but operationally and strategically the fight confirmed Britain's command of the seas.

In November 1916, Jellicoe was replaced as commander of the Grand Fleet by Beatty. Although the Germans would sortie again, there were no more fleet actions in the North Sea. Despite its failure to engage the Germans in an industrial-age version of the Battle of Trafalgar, the Grand Fleet had accomplished its task.

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Citation

Chuck Steele: Grand Fleet, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-02-22. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10837](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10837)

External Links

- [Burrows, C. W.: **Scapa and a camera, pictorial impressions of five years spent at the Grand fleet base, London 1921 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)**](#)

- [Jellicoe, John Rushworth: The crisis of the naval war, London 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
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- [Wilson, Eugene Edward: Comrades of the mist, and other rhymes of the Grand Fleet, New York 1919 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

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Author Keywords

Dreadnought; Battlecruiser; High Seas Fleet; Jellicoe; Beatty, Scheer; Heligoland Bight; Dogger Bank; Jutland

GND Subject Headings

[Marine ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Großbritannien](#)

LC Subject Headings

[Great Britain. Royal Navy ; World War, 1914-1918--Great Britain](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Grande-Bretagne. Royal navy ; Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\)](#)

Key Person(s)

[Scheer, Reinhard](#); [Callaghan, George](#); [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este](#); [Jellicoe, John Rushworth Jellicoe, Earl](#); [Beatty, David Beatty, Earl](#)

Key Location(s)

[Dogger Bank](#); [Heligoland Bight](#); [Jutland](#); [Rosyth](#); [Scapa Flow, Orkney Islands](#)

Title

Grand Fleet

Author(s)

[Chuck Steele](#)

Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Organizations

Articles That Link Here

[Military Lessons of the First World War](#); [Great Britain](#); [Great Britain](#); [Warfare 1914-1918 \(Great Britain and Ireland\)](#); [Pre-war Military Planning](#); [High Seas Fleet](#); [Naval Warfare](#); [Room 40](#); [Room 40](#); [Naval Warfare \(USA\)](#); [Jellicoe, John Rushworth Jellicoe, Earl](#); [Beatty, David Beatty, Earl](#); [Keyes, Roger John Brownlow, Baron](#); [Jutland, Battle of](#); [Tirpitz, Alfred von](#) and [Imagined War](#)