

When biggest-ever warship fleet gathered in the Forth

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By **ALASTAIR DALTON**

The centenary of the “last act” of the First World War, the largest gathering of warships ever seen, is being commemorated with an exhibition in Fife.

The surrender of the German high seas fleet in the Forth off Cockenzie ten days after the Armistice involved an unprecedented 300 naval vessels, including 70 German ships.

The Scotsman described the spectacle on 21 November, 1918, as the “most remarkable event in the history of naval warfare”, which featured the “greatest collection of ships of war ever seen in the world’s history”.

The exhibition, being staged by North Queensferry Heritage Trust at the village’s railway station, continues until March, including daily until 1 December.

It also covers the build-up to the

war in the area, including at nearby Rosyth naval base, and the Battle of Jutland in 1916.

Naval historian Andrew Kerr, who helped with the display, said: “It is unique and deserves to be noted for the depth of investigation that has gone into it.

“This has resulted in a superb exhibition of this worldwide event.”

Garry Irvine, one of the organisers, said: “Along with ships from the Royal Navy, Australia and New Zealand representing the Commonwealth and our US and French Allies, over 300 ships were part of this ‘last act of the war’.”

The German fleet was taken to Scapa Flow in Orkney while a wrangle over its fate ensued between the Allied powers.

Many of the ships were scuttled there by the Germans in June 1919, helping to clear the way for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles a week later, formally ending the war.

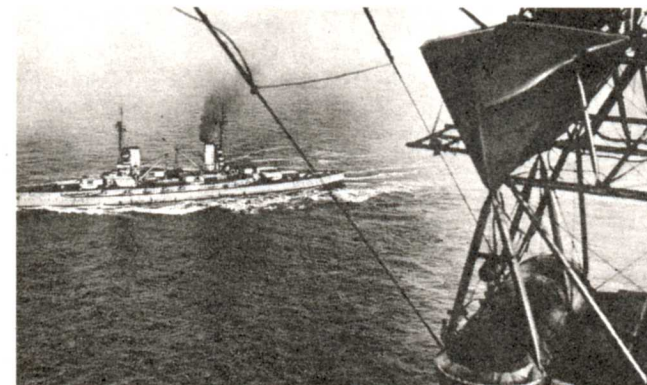


Germany’s Admiral Meurer boards HMS Queen Elizabeth, and one of his ships sails up the Forth. Photographs:

Hulton Archive and Rex/Shutterstock

Boyd Williamson, another exhibition organiser, said: “When the Armistice document was signed, it called for an immediate ceasefire on land, the surrender of all Germany’s submarines and the internment of 74 of the latest ships from the High Seas Fleet in a neutral port.

“No neutral power was willing to have such a destructive force in their waters, so the conditions were altered to require the internment of



the ships in British waters under the supervision of the Royal Navy.”

The surrender was preceded by Germany’s Admiral Hugo Meurer agreeing to the arrangements when he sailed up the Forth to meet Royal Navy commander-in-chief Admiral Sir David Beatty aboard the battleship HMS Queen Elizabeth four days after the Armistice.

The U-boat fleet sailed to Harwich, with nearly 200 surrendering at the Essex port.

Williamson said ships from the German surface fleet assembled 50 miles east of the Isle of May. They were led into the Forth by a Royal Navy light cruiser and destroyers

where they were met by more than 200 ships of the British Grand Fleet and Allies, which escorted them up the estuary to anchor off Cockenzie.

He said Beatty sent a signal to the German Admiral Ludwig von Reuter stating: “The German flag is to be hauled down at 1557 (sunset) today and is not to be hoisted again without permission.”

Williamson observed: “The proceedings were reported in jubilant language by the newspapers, however Beatty regarded the whole matter as an act of administration, hardly worth describing. He would rather have had a sea battle.”