

Greatest armada the world had seen

The surrender of the German fleet in 1918 led to a spectacular naval encounter, writes Magnus Linklater

For watchers on the shore, it was a sight they would never forget. As dawn broke over the Firth of Forth on November 21, 1918 two immense fleets of warships were heading in from the North Sea, one celebrating victory, the other conceding defeat.

Code-named Operation ZZ, the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet marked not just the end of the war at sea, it was the greatest gathering of naval ships the world had ever seen.

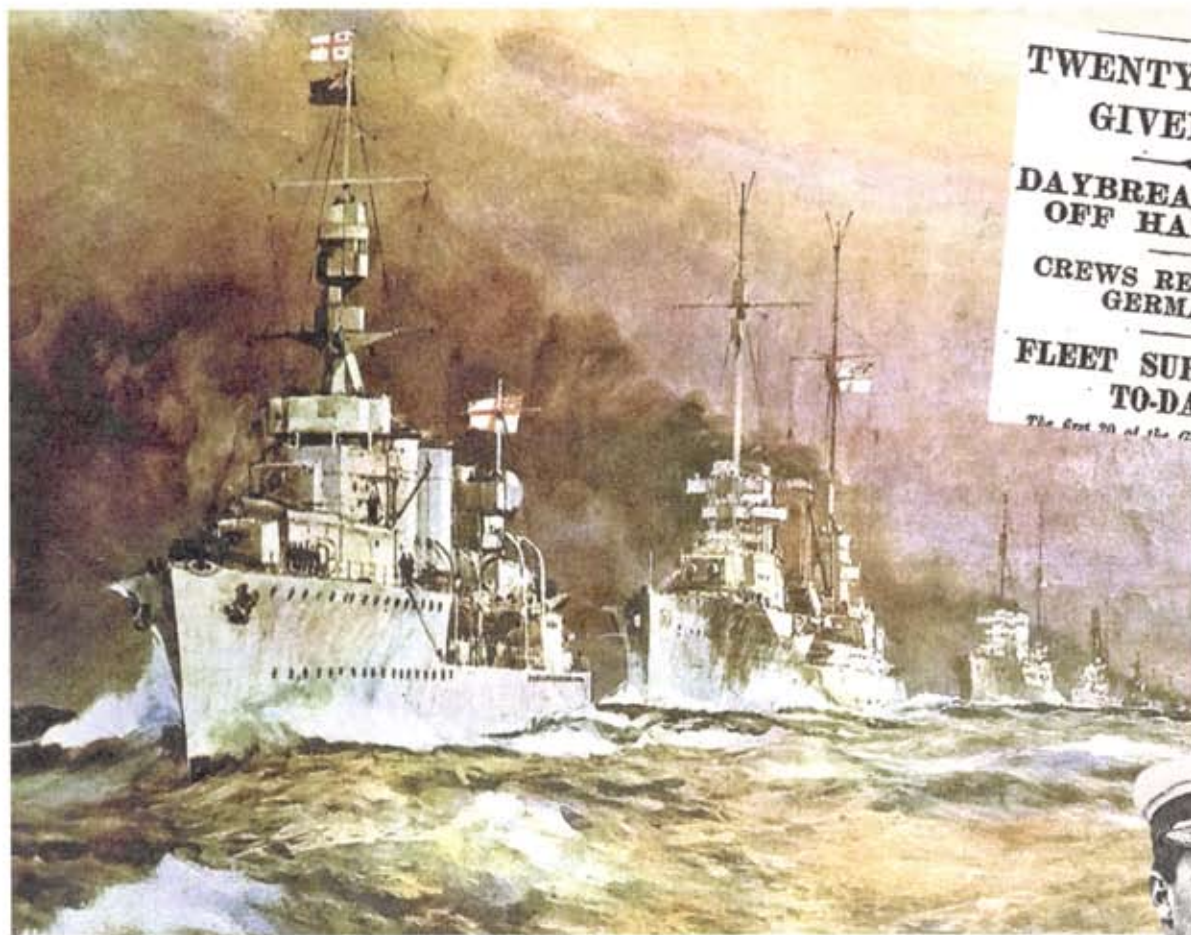
The defeat of Germany had forced it to agree that its naval force, the second biggest after the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet, would be handed over to the allies, and to make sure that it delivered on its promise, Britain and its allies deployed their full naval might: 370 vessels, the most powerful armada ever assembled.

Watching from the deck of the British flagship, the dreadnought HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, *The Times* correspondent was stunned by the sight. "The annals of naval warfare hold no parallel to the memorable event which it has been my privilege to witness today," he wrote. "It was the passing of a whole fleet, and it marked the final and ignoble abandonment of a vainglorious challenge to the naval supremacy of Britain."

On the previous day, King George V, along with the Queen and the Prince of Wales, had inspected the fleet, sailing its entire length on the destroyer HMS *Oak*, flying the royal standard and cheered by every ship they passed.

At 1.30 am on November 21, the light cruiser HMS *Cardiff* and a destroyer escort steamed out of the Firth of Forth to meet the German surface ships (the submarines had been sent to Harwich) and guide them to a pre-arranged rendezvous, east of the Isle of May.

The rest of the fleet left harbour a



A painting of the fleets after the surrender. How *The Times* reported the story and the Royal Navy's Admiral Beatty

little later and formed into two long columns, six miles apart. Manned by 90,000 men of the British, American and French navies, every ship flew battle ensigns as though they were prepared for conflict, with crews at action stations and guns loaded.

Contact was made at about 7.30 am, with nine German battleships, five battlecruisers, seven light cruisers and 49 destroyers — the most modern ships of the German High Seas Fleet.

The allied columns steamed to the end of the German line, then reversed course by 180 degrees and took station

on either side of their former enemies, which they escorted back into the Forth.

By 1.30pm the German ships were anchored under guard east of Inchkeith, while the rest of the British and allied fleet returned to its anchorage above and below the Forth Bridge.

Andrew Kerr, an Edinburgh lawyer whose grandfather had been fascinated by the workings of the Grand Fleet, and had collected photographs and documents of the period, has studied the arrangements for the day.

The anchorage plan for the German

ships was drawn by hand by Admiral David Beatty's navigating officer and copies were taken by boat to the senior officers of the fleet. The plan, recently rediscovered, shows how the German ships anchored east of Inchkeith,

boxed in by British battleships and cruisers, with the destroyer lines extending eastwards into Aberlady Bay. Briefly, the Firth of Forth contained the largest and most powerful armada in history.

"It was passed by boat to every ship, so they each knew their position," Mr Kerr said. "So there it was, this extraordinary assembly of warships, right off our coast."

TWENTY U BOATS GIVEN UP.
DAYBREAK SCENE OFF HARWICH.
CREWS RETURN TO GERMANY.
FLEET SURRENDER TO-DAY.

The first 20 of the German submarines.

Admiral Beatty had sent a signal to the German admiral: "The German Flag is to be hauled down at 15:57 [sunset] today, Thursday, and is not to be hoisted again without permission."

To his own fleet, his message ran: "It is my intention to hold a service of thanksgiving at 6pm today for the victory which Almighty God has vouchsafed to His Majesty's arms, and every ship is recommended to do the same."

Over the next few days the German fleet was escorted north to Scapa Flow. On June 21, 1919, in a well-kept conspiracy, the fleet was scuttled to prevent it falling permanently into British hands.

As Admiral Beatty later wrote: "The surrender of the German fleet has secured the freedom of the seas for such a pass thereon upon their lawful occasions, and is a testimony to the value of sea power, which the people of the British Empire will forget at their peril."

Beatty would doubtless be shocked at the extent to which that power has declined. Today, despite two immense aircraft carriers built in Rosyth, the Royal Navy has fewer than 90 ships.

