Nelson’s Ghost:
Technology and Tradition in the Royal Navy

by

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Introduction

By the First World War, the emphasis on the moral dimension of war at sea had seduced the Royal Navy into a belief in its own propaganda -- that the Royal Navy could not fail in its task and that the English people were innately more skillful on waves than any foe. That British seamen were no longer qualitatively superior after the professionalisation of their own and competing navies appears to have been poorly understood. As late as 1914, a reform-minded publication, the Naval Review, maintained that “ships are controlled, fleets are handled, and engagements won by force of personality,” and went on to quote, approvingly, a version of the Napoleonic statement "the moral is to the physical as three to one."¹ Like the French strategy of Offense a l’Outrance (“offense to the uttermost”), the British were relying on élan and the historical traditions of Nelson rather than sound planning or adequate training in the event of a war. Opined one Admiral, “[w]e were the most appalling amateurs who ever tried to conduct a war.”² That hard reality would cost thousands of lives, crush the careers of thoughtful and diligent officers, and require decades of slow institutional change to overcome.

This thesis will examine the circumstances of the escape of the German battle cruiser Goeben from British Naval forces at the beginning of the First World War. Goeben subsequently arrived in Istanbul and helped to convince the Ottoman Empire to enter the War as an ally of the Central Powers. Winston Churchill later commented that Goeben carried with her "more slaughter, more misery and more ruin than has ever

before been borne within the compass of a ship.\textsuperscript{3} The officer frequently held responsible for Goeben’s escape, Rear Admiral Ernest C.T. Troubridge, commanding the First Cruiser Squadron, had made the right tactical decision, when he chose not to engage the Goeben. However, he was aware of the risks, political and personal, in failing to comply with the prevailing tactical orthodoxy, in which a failure to take the offensive was considered a defeat.

The Preface will provide a brief summary regarding the origins of British maritime superiority and the emergence of the Nelsonian tradition of close-action. Chapter 1 will discuss the circumstances of Goeben’s journey across the Mediterranean in early August 1914, as well as address the massive technological changes that had profoundly altered the Royal Navy in the preceding decades, invalidating many of the tactical precepts which were still held sacred. Chapter 2 will concentrate on the Court of Enquiry which recommended that Admiral Troubridge face court-martial, as well as analyze the fractures and feuds that split the upper echelons of the Royal Navy. It will also examine the difficulties in introducing organizational and logistical change within the Royal Navy, to address the changes introduced by the technological advancements discussed in the first chapter. Chapter 3 will, through the lens of Troubridge’s court-martial, discuss the emergence of a new class of junior officers, familiar with new technology, possessing practical experience, newly blooded here in the carnage of the First World War, who were far more supportive of initiative among the officer corps and of the new strategic and tactical thinking that had to take hold if the Royal Navy was to survive the conflict. Finally, Chapter 4 will address the results of the Troubridge court-

martial, and the message that the trial itself and reaction inside the Admiralty would send to serving officers across the world engaged in a life-or-death struggle for their country.

This thesis emerged by pure happenstance. The history of the Royal Navy had long been an interest, but primarily through the fictionalized adventures of C.S. Forrester’s Horatio Hornblower and Patrick O’Brian’s Aubrey-Maturin series. The blossoming of my interest in the Royal Navy’s role in the First World War began after picking up a copy of Robert Massie’s *Castles of Steel*. His account of the *Goeben* affair is lengthy and even-handed, and convinced me that there was more to the story of the Troubridge court-martial than was obvious. As I read more, I discovered that the even-handedness of Massie’s account was the exception, rather than the rule, and that historians as a general rule have treated Troubridge badly, and his flag captain, Fawcett Wray, worse. In a historical work published in 2005, under the auspices of the Imperial War Museum, Troubridge’s decision to break off and not seek action against the *Goeben* is described as “ignominious” and the result of technical arguments “contrived” by his flag captain (and gunnery expert), Fawcett Wray, who the author describes, in an unexpected ad hominem attack, as “an exemplar of the precept ‘the definition of an expert is a drip under pressure.’”

Even Arthur Marder, one of the eminent scholars of the Royal Navy of the period, comments that “the responsibilities for the escape of the *Goeben* must be shared by Troubridge and the Admiralty equally…the ‘ifs’ will explain, but they can not excuse.” He is, perhaps, correct, but it seemed to me that a fuller explanation of those “ifs” might to be undertaken. First, it was necessary to shed some light on the circumstances that had

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twisted the Royal Navy into the shape it was in 1914: organizationally crippled, riven with internal conflicts, unable and unwilling to adapt tactics and strategy to match the new technology that had burst into the naval profession in the preceding two decades. Next, to understand the political motivations that led to the court-martial of an able officer who, in spite of his proven ability and the endorsement of his conduct by a board of his peers, would have his career effectively ended by the incident. Finally, I hoped to explore how these decisions affected the course of the First World War at sea. Although the court-martial of Admiral Troubridge may be a minor historical event, it serves effectively as a microcosm of the struggles by the Royal Navy to deal with the changing face of naval warfare, as well as reflecting, in a broader context, the way in which institutions, (military or otherwise) adapts (or fails to adapt) to technological change.
Preface: Trafalgar and Nelson’s Navy

To understand the dynamics that existed within the Royal Navy on the eve of the First World War, it is necessary to understand the emergence of the Royal Navy as Britain’s invincible military instrument during the Napoleonic Wars, and the deification of Admiral Nelson both in popular culture and within the Navy itself. The moment that mythos was forged was undoubtedly the Battle of Trafalgar, fought on October 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1805. A massive engagement between the blockading squadrons of the British Royal Navy and the combined fleets of Napoleonic France and Spain, Trafalgar is rightly regarded as one of the most decisive naval battles in the history of the world. Twenty-seven British ships of the line fought 15 French and 17 Spanish warships, destroying one, and capturing 21, without the loss of a single British vessel. Even more remarkable than the outcome of the battle, though, was how utterly predictable it was.

Why was such a smashing success the reasonable expectation shared by the commanders on both sides? Britain had been at war with France for 28 of the preceding 50 years, in both its Royalist and Revolutionary incarnations. No British fleet had ever been defeated by Revolutionary France. The last victorious French fleet action had been the Battle of the Virginia Capes in 1781. Major British victories against the French, Spanish, and other European powers, such as the Glorious First of June (7 French ships of the line lost), the Battle of Cape St. Vincent (4 Spanish ships of the line captured), The Nile (3 French ships of the line lost, 9 captured), and Copenhagen (3 Danish ships lost, 12 captured) had established British maritime superiority, but Trafalgar would transform it into legend. But it was not only in fleet actions that the Royal Navy proved irresistible. From 1793 to 1895, “the British lost 17 frigates to the French (9 of which were
subsequently recaptured) while in the same period, the French lost 229 frigates to the British.”\textsuperscript{6} How can one explain such an extraordinary performance, decades at war unmarred by defeat?

One possibility is that the leadership of the Royal Navy was qualitatively superior to that of its adversaries. The towering naval figure of the period was Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, 1\textsuperscript{st} Viscount Nelson. Certainly, Nelson was a deeply experienced officer. By age 39, he had “been in four actions with the fleets of the enemy, in six engagements with batteries, in ten actions in boats employed in cutting out of harbors, in destroying vessels, and in the taking of towns… assisted in the capture of seven sail of the line, six frigates, four corvettes, 11 privateers of different sizes, and taken and destroyed nearly 50 sail of merchantmen.”\textsuperscript{7} He reported that he had been in action against the enemy 120 times by 1797, all this before his three greatest victories, the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar.

While Nelson’s service was remarkable, it was also representative of the experience of British naval officers of the period. Presented with a Navy List and given the opportunity to choose his subordinate officers by Lord Barham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Nelson is supposed to have said: “Choose them yourself, the same spirit animates the whole Navy, you cannot go wrong.”\textsuperscript{8} Nelson and his contemporaries had been fighting almost continuously for decades and were well-schooled in the limits of their crews and equipment. The ships they captained changed little decade to decade: indeed, the construction of HMS Victory, still a powerful vessel in 1805, was begun

\textsuperscript{7} Toll, \textit{Six Frigates}, pp. 5-6
before Nelson’s first birthday. The leadership of the French Navy had been dominated by aristocrats before the Revolution, and was thus crippled by purges of much of its officer corps. Few French officers could hope to amass experience equivalent to Nelson’s, given the probability that an encounter with the British would end in death or capture. Admiral Pierre-Charles Villeneuve, who commanded the Combined Fleet at Trafalgar, was described by Napoleon as “not have[ing] the character necessary to command a frigate. This is a man without resolution and without moral courage.” Ultimately, commanders of the Royal Navy had confidence born of their victories, but their confidence alone cannot account for their success.

There were no dramatic technological differences between the British and the opponents (captured French ships were generally welcomed into the Royal Navy, since they were frequently of more recent construction and less worn by the constant press of blockade duty). Both were equipped with similar weapons, the “long guns” below decks, immense iron cannon capable of propelling a 24-pound iron ball hundreds of yards, through air, a wooden hull, and sailors’ flesh. To fire one of these 2-ton behemoths, a crew of ten to twelve men performed an intricate series of steps:

The bore hole was sponged out with a swab; gunpowder, bound in a cloth cartridge, rammed down the muzzle; a wad was rammed in on top of the powder; then the cannon ball and another wad were rammed down on top of that. The cloth of the cartridge was pierced and some priming powder poured in the touch hole; the gun crew ran the monstrous weapon out though its port by heaving on the gun tackle; the captain of the gun adjusted his aim, and gave the order to fire. A match was touched to the primer. The gun roared, recoiled, and the process began again.

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Aim was frequently only a secondary concern. At Trafalgar, buckets of water were being constantly poured over the sides of the Victory, Nelson’s flagship, to ensure that the gouts of fire from its own guns, which were almost in physical contact with the hulls of French and Spanish ships, didn’t set the ship on fire. Far more important than accuracy was the rate of fire, and here the British had a decisive advantage. The British heavily practiced gunnery drills, and no other navy could come close to matching their performance: British vessels almost invariably produced volumes of fire at least 3:2 (three shots for every two enemy shots), and often, particularly as attrition ground their enemies down, the Royal Navy would achieve ratios of fire of 2:1, even 3:1.\textsuperscript{12}

Significant superiority was also attained in the handling of ships under sail. The British merchant marine, by far the largest in the world, provided the Royal Navy with a supply of manpower, trained in the ways of the sea, that no other power could match. Most French ships, particularly after the Revolution, were crewed by drafts of landsmen, and, being confined to harbor by the British blockade, had limited opportunities to train in ship-handling. Conversely, British captains, holding their stations off French ports for months at a time, had ample time and occasion to ensure that their crews were trained to a peak of efficiency. However, when confronted with ships of similar technological sophistication and equally trained and motivated crews, such as in the case of the War of 1812 and the frigates of the fledgling American Navy, the Royal Navy suffered a number of embarrassing losses in single-ship duels.

Nelson’s strategy at Trafalgar was brutal and effective. Confident in his ships, his captains, and his crews, he had no compunction about placing the ships of his fleet into dangerous positions and counting on their superiority of training and leadership to win

\textsuperscript{12} Toll, \textit{Six Frigates}, p. 7.
through. Rather than form his fleet in the traditional “line-ahead” formation, where the
two fleets sailed in parallel and systematically demolished each other (and had the
freedom to break off the engagement if it seemed to be going badly), Nelson formed his
fleet into two columns and smashed through the center of the combined enemy fleet.
Combat signaling was, by and large, not possible, and as a result, throughout the
engagement, *Victory* flew Nelson’s trademark signal “Engage the Enemy More
Closely.”¹³ *Victory*, at the head of one column, was the first to break through and was
fiercely engaged by enemies on both sides. A sharpshooter aboard *Redoubtable* shot and
mortally wounded Nelson early in the battle at Trafalgar, but the “pell-mell” battle he had
sought was already well underway, and would end in annihilating victory, as he well
knew it would.

“The long calm lee of Trafalgar,” *Pax Britannica*, would endure for the remainder
of the century.¹⁴ Generations of officers came of age, served their country loyally, and
retired without firing a shot in anger. Throughout much of the 19th Century, one of the
Royal Navy’s primary functions was the suppression of the slave trade, emphasizing
small, fast craft and tactics that put a premium on surprise and aggression. As the
decades passed, most of the Navy’s major decorations awarded were for leading shore-
parties in defense or in conquest of colonial possessions. A powerful sense of tradition
atrophied into institutional arrogance. As the pace of technological change increased on
the heels of the Industrial Revolution, the innovative strategies of Nelson, applicable to a
particular time and place, calcified into almost holy doctrine to be followed, regardless of
circumstances. The Royal Navy, at any declaration of hostilities, was to sweep the sea

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clean of any enemy foolish enough to be seen, impose a blockade, and end the war. It was against expectations such as these that, in August 1914, the British Government issued an ultimatum to Germany.
Chapter 1: August in the Mediterranean

I.

In the confused days of August 1914, the Mittelmeer Division, the Imperial German Navy’s presence in the Mediterranean (which consisted of the battlecruiser Goeben and the light cruiser Breslau), found itself dangerously exposed. Prewar planning had called for the Austro-Hungarian and Italian fleets to mass and expel the French Navy from the Mediterranean. Italy’s declaration of neutrality, however, combined with the apparent lethargy of the Austro-Hungarian naval commanders, left Goeben, and its commander Rear Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, as the most pressing threat to Allied shipping in the Mediterranean. This threat was particularly acute as the French war effort on land demanded the presence of the 80,000 soldiers of the XIX Corps, stationed in North Africa, who required transport across the Mediterranean narrows to the French battlefield.

The French fleet was therefore fully occupied for several early, critical days, with ensuring the safe passage of XIX Corps, leaving the Royal Navy to attempt to sweep the seas clean of German vessels. The orders dispatched directly from Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, to Admiral Archibald Berkeley Milne on July 30th were not the sort of clear mission statement desirable as a plan for naval war:

Your first task should be aid to the French in transportation of their African army corps by covering and if possible bringing to action individual fast German ships, particularly Goeben, which may interfere with that transportation. Except in combination with the French as part of a general battle, do not at this time be brought to action against superior forces. The speed of your squadrons is sufficient to enable you to choose your moment. You must husband your forces at the outset and we shall hope to later reinforce the Mediterranean.15

15 Winston Churchill, “War Orders” ADM 156/76, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London (Admiralty Archive 156/76 is a collection of documents relating to the preparations for, conduct, and results of Case 662, the court martial of Admiral Troubridge. It lacks internal pagination, so in lieu of explicit page
These orders were expanded upon on August 1st, when Churchill ordered that the “Goeben be shadowed by two battlecruisers” and the day after, that a “watch on the mouth of the Adriatic must be maintained, but Goeben is your objective.” Maintaining a watch on the Adriatic ran the risk of an engagement with the Austro-Hungarian fleet, which included two dreadnought battleships. This threat prompted Milne to deploy two of his three battlecruisers (Inflexible remained near Malta), four armored cruisers, a light cruiser, and eight destroyers, the bulk of the Mediterranean Squadron, to carry out this duty under his second in command, Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge. Milne also gave Troubridge specific instructions, in line with Churchill’s instruction to “husband your forces,” to avoid engagement with a “superior force.” It seemed very possible that Goeben would attempt to break through to the Adriatic to the safety of the Austro-Hungarian fleet base at Pola, giving this fleet disposition the possibility of accomplishing the tasks set before Milne -- combining a forward defense of the French transport operations and a watch on the Adriatic with the possibility of Goeben stumbling into a superior force. The sighting of Goeben and Breslau at Messina, a Sicilian port, convinced Churchill that Souchon was heading west, attempting to break out into the Atlantic to attack British commerce. His orders of August 3 compelled Milne to strip Troubridge of his two battlecruisers, HMS Indefatigable and HMS Indomitable, which were sent charging towards the Straits of Gibraltar.

However, on the morning of August 4, Indefatigable and Indomitable happened upon Goeben, which was returning east after having bombarded the French North

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African port of Phillipeville (although bombarded is a strong word for the firing of 15 shells that inflicted no military damage). Captain Francis Kennedy of the *Indefatigable* turned to pursue the *Goeben*, and signaled Admiral Milne at Malta, who informed Churchill, though Milne’s message failed to mention *Goeben*’s direction, leaving Churchill to infer that *Goeben* was still proceeding east. Churchill issued orders that the British vessels should “Hold her [*Goeben*]. War Imminent.” Churchill expressly exceeded his authority by ordering the British ships to attack *Goeben* in the event it attacked a French transport, in light of the fact that the British ultimatum to the German government had not yet been sent and a state of peace still technically prevailed.\(^\text{18}\) Churchill was forced to issue a retraction until the ultimatum elapsed at midnight on August 4. By late evening on August 4, *Goeben* had increased speed and outrun her British pursuers mere hours before the war began.

Milne, now aware that *Goeben* -- despite a fouled hull from two years cruising the Mediterranean and defective boiler tubes -- could outrun his fastest ships, placed his two remaining battlecruisers to the west of Sicily to prevent the *Goeben* from moving towards the North African coast and French troop transports. *Indomitable* was unavailable for this duty, having returned to Bizerte to take on coal after the *Goeben* eluded her pursuit. *Goeben* herself was coaling safely at Messina, protected there for 24 hours by Italian neutrality. Souchon evaluated his options in Messina: either proceed to the Adriatic and the still technically neutral Austro-Hungarians (they had declared war on Serbia, not France or Britain), or to Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, with whom Germany had recently concluded a secret mutual-defense pact. He feinted toward the

Adriatic, but the light cruiser HMS *Gloucester*, posted outside Messina, gave dogged pursuit, radioing the course and speed of *Goeben* to Milne.

Souchon, unable to shake the *Gloucester*, was forced to make his turn toward his collier and the Aegean Sea while under observation. Rear Admiral Troubridge, still patrolling the mouth of the Aegean with his squadron of four cruisers, represented the only significant British force with a possibility of intercepting the *Goeben*. Troubridge, however, had Milne’s admonition “not to get seriously engaged with superior force,” ringing in his ears. This had been intended to apply to the Austrian Fleet, whose disposition was still unknown, but as early as the first of August, when Troubridge was dispatched from Malta, he had informed Milne that he viewed *Goeben* as a superior force compared to the 1st Cruiser Squadron in daylight.\(^{19}\)

Troubridge, aware that his was the only force that might delay Souchon, had placed his force south of Corfu at the mouth of the Adriatic, hoping to strike at *Goeben* in darkness, in comparatively confined waters where *Goeben*’s superior speed would not doom his Squadron. When *Goeben* turned toward the Aegean, Troubridge was faced with a decision he dreaded and had even predicted to Milne. Troubridge could increase to his maximum speed and attempt to intercept, but the earliest possible intercept would have been at dawn, in the open ocean, where *Goeben*’s advantages in range and speed would reassert themselves. Unable to contact Milne, on his own initiative, he ordered full speed ahead and set an intercept course.

Ernest Charles Thomas Troubridge was generally regarded as one of the finest junior admirals in the Service and his naval pedigree was impeccable. His great-grandfather had been a member of Nelson’s “band of brothers,” he had fought at Cape St.

\(^{19}\) Ernest Troubridge, “Statement to the Court Martial,” ADM 156/76, p. 9.
Vincent and the Nile, and he ultimately perished when his ship foundered in a cyclone off Madagascar. Troubridge was an intimate friend of the future King George V during his naval career, who had planned, on gaining a command, on making Troubridge his executive officer (though that role ultimately went to Hugh Evan-Thomas aboard HMS Melampus during Prince George’s brief stint as captain.) Troubridge was, however, no court dandy. He had served as a naval observer during the Russo-Japanese War, where he achieved a reputation with the Japanese “quite on par with Pakenham for cool courage under the most searching conditions.” In 1913, Troubridge had been “criticised for exposing himself too freely to gunfire” while observing operations in the Balkans in his capacity as Mediterranean Chief of Staff.

He had been Churchill’s private naval secretary in 1911 and he served as first Chief of Staff of the Naval War Staff in 1912 (though in the early days of its existence, that position lacked the cachet that would ultimately attend it, being distrusted by officers at sea.) Troubridge, bold and fully inculcated with the ethos of the Royal Navy, was expected to attack.

As the night ground on, and the cruisers moved closer to Goeben, Troubridge’s flag captain, Fawcett Wray, came to the Admiral’s cabin. The decision to engage had not yet been announced to the squadron, and Wray felt that if battle were imminent, the men should know of it. Troubridge responded that he intended to fight despite misgivings about the wisdom of the decision, admitting that he knew it was “wrong” but that he could not “have the name of the whole Mediterranean Squadron stink”. He then issued a

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21 H. Horniman “Private Papers,” 11479 PP/MCR/46, Imperial War Museum, London. This is quite a compliment, as the famed story of Pakenham, (who would succeed Beatty as commander of the Battle Cruiser Force in 1916), has him on Togo’s flagship at the Battle of Tsushima, strolling “up and down the after bridge, with a notebook and a telescope, until his tropical whites got spattered with blood from a Russian hit on a nearby gun battery, whereupon he went off to change into a fresh outfit, and then resumed his beat.” (Gordon, Rules of the Game, p. 28.)
signal to his ships indicating his desire to engage if Goeben’s bow could be crossed and a long-range action avoided. Three-quarters of an hour later, Wray returned to find his commander lying awake. Both were ill at ease with the planned engagement. Wray, a gunnery expert, concurred that at a range of 16,000 yards or greater, Goeben was a superior force to the cruisers, and that an engagement under those conditions would be “the suicide of your squadron.” Wray went to find the Defence’s navigator, who would confirm that an interception before daybreak was not possible, but as Wray left the cabin, Troubridge, clearly torn, said, “I cannot turn away now. Think of my pride.” Wray answered his admiral, a descendent of one of Nelson’s captains, born and bred of naval tradition, “has your pride got anything to do with this, sir? It is your country’s welfare which is at stake.” At four in the morning, Troubridge called off the intercept.

II.

An engagement with the Goeben would have not only represented the first naval action of the First World War, but also the Royal Navy’s first major action at sea since the end of the Napoleonic War (aside from the Battle of Navarino, where a combined British, French, and Russian Fleet defeated an Ottoman force in support of the Greek War of Independence). Perhaps even more consequentially, it would have represented the first action of an entirely new type of war at sea. The pace and scope of technological change in the decade and a half before the War was unprecedented in the annals of naval

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23 “Court Martial Question 457” ADM 156/76.
24 “Court Martial Question 457” ADM 156/76.
warfare. To understand Troubridge’s dilemma, some brief discussion of the way in which the naval profession had been dramatically altered must be undertaken.

An engagement between Goeben and the 1st Cruiser Squadron would have been the first occasion in which battlecruisers and armored cruisers fought one another. The battlecruiser was a fairly new concept, even by the whirlwind technological standards of the time. Designed at Admiral Fisher’s specific insistence, and first commissioned as the Invincible-class in 1908, they were exemplars of Fisher’s dictum that “speed equals protection.” Any ship they could not outfight, they could outrun. Battlecruisers were the natural predators of armored cruisers, possessing heavier guns and higher speed. The obsolescence of the armored cruiser-type was immediately recognized by all the Great Power navies. Armored cruisers utilized during the First World War would perform dismally. The German East Asiatic Squadron, with two armored cruisers, would be sunk by British battlecruisers at the Falklands. Three British armored cruisers were destroyed at the Battle of Jutland, including Troubridge’s former flagship, which blew up catastrophically after only seven hits.

The primary ship-killer was no longer a hundred cannons spewing solid shot at a spar’s length, but instead a smaller number of large-caliber guns firing high explosive shells at ever-increasing ranges. In the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, a hit would be scored on the Russian flagship at the then absurd range of 10,000 yards (approximately 6 miles).

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27 No ship better represents that obsolescence than the German SMS *Blücher*, completed only as a result of false information leaked by the British, that the Invincible-class would consist of additional armored cruisers, rather than an entirely new type. *Blücher’s* loss, sunk at Dogger Bank after its slow speed almost permitted the German battlecruiser Scouting Force to be overwhelmed by the British 1st and 2nd Battlecruiser Squadrons, is a grim epitaph for the armored cruiser.
28 Massie, *Castles of Steel*, p. 615.
By the First World War, shots exchanged at 20,000 yards were commonplace. In order to aim at such a range, optical rangefinders had to be constructed to precise specifications and fitted perfectly to battleships, but the British optics industry was significantly inferior to the great German optical firms such as Zeiss, leaving the Royal Navy at a significant disadvantage in this area when the War broke out.

Technology had also revolutionized fire control in the Royal Navy. The advent of director firing, by which gun-laying was accomplished from a single command center and all the guns firing at the push of a button, had not been a smooth process. Proposed by Sir Percy Scott at the beginning of the Churchill administration in 1911, director firing had a number of distinct advantages. Individual gunlayers in the turrets had a comparatively poor vantage point to observe the fall of their shells, and would, in combat conditions, likely be blinded by the smoke of the guns and the sea spray of high-speed maneuvering, to say nothing of hindrance from the concussion of their own guns and enemy fire. In a competitive trial between HMS Thunder, the testbed for the director firing system ( outfitted over the Sea Lords’ strong objections though their views were overridden by Churchill), and HMS Orion, the best gunnery ship in the Fleet, Thunder scored six times as many hits (13 direct, 2 ricochets, and 10 possibles against 2 hits, 1 ricochet, and 1 possible) at 9,000 yards and 12 knots speed. Despite the obvious success of director firing, “a very large number of officers remained skeptical and the great majority of ships were not fitted with it” for years.

The year 1905 would also see a revolution in naval armaments, as the Royal Navy commissioned HMS Dreadnought. Dreadnought was revolutionary in her armament. It

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30 Massie, *Dreadnought*, p. 788.
31 Massie, *Dreadnought*, p. 788.
had been standard for British battleships to be equipped with three major calibers of weapon, which was not a serious problem in close-range encounters. But as firing ranges expanded, it became impossible to differentiate the splash of the different shells and adjust the various guns accordingly. *Dreadnought* was the first all “big-gun” battleship, and lent its name to subsequent ships of the type. The idea of the *Dreadnought* had actually been proposed by Vittorio Cuniberti, an Italian naval designer, and competing designs were nearing launch in both the United States and Japan. The revolution in armament, however, effectively reduced all pre-Dreadnought navies to obsolescence. Faced with this opportunity, the German Navy began an aggressive program of Dreadnought construction, viewing this as an occurrence that might allow them to achieve numerical parity with the Royal Navy. The Dreadnought Revolution also sparked an intense building program for the Royal Navy, but ultimately these vessels remained new hardware, the limits of which had never been tested. The amount of gunnery practice was sharply limited, as it was detrimental to the paintwork of the ship, which captains generally paid for out of their own pocket to ensure their vessel presented a proper appearance. Standard gunnery exercises in peacetime involved firing on a stationary target from 2,000 yards while the ship was stationary in calm seas, hardly a fitting preparation for war. It was, however, superior to the annual fleet exercises, in which there “were no gunnery duels, no high-speed melees or massed night torpedo attacks. Manoeuvres developed along the stately lines of a court masque.”

Occurring simultaneously was a revolution in metallurgy that altered the way in which ships were protected. Previously, armor had been composed of wrought iron, a

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33 Ireland, *Jane’s Battleships of the 20th Century*, p. 150.
34 Ireland, *War at Sea*, p. 19
hard, but fundamentally brittle alloy that could shatter if struck squarely. It was also exceptionally heavy, and, to reduce weight, most ships had an armored belt protecting the hull and a few other “protected zones”. In combat between pre-dreadnaughts, this protection would have been acceptable, as the short-range fire would have a low-angle trajectory. As the ranges grew and grew in the early part of the 20
th Century, the navies of the world were introduced to a new danger: plunging fire. To achieve long-range fire, elevated guns would fire a higher-angle shot, which would, in all likelihood, impact its target almost vertically. This danger required that the decks of ships be armored more and more heavily, increasing the vessel’s weight significantly. Permitting this, however, was a constant stream of improvements to armor technology, including the discovery of nickel-steel alloys from the American Harvey process, and by 1900, the German firm Krupp’s Cemented Steel process, which reduced weight while increasing the effectiveness of the armor.35 As the range and striking power of guns increased, so did the abilities of newer warships to survive damage. But, it must be commented, that tests did not exist to determine the resistance of an entire ship to damage. Individual pieces of armor might be tested, but no yardstick had been created, in the pre-War years, to assess the effectiveness of differing caliber guns against armor of varying ages and effectiveness.

At the same time that capital ships were taking on renewed importance, there were two connected developments that might have spelt the end of major surface combat. The locomotive torpedo, developed by Englishman Robert Whitehead in 1866, could cripple or sink a battleship with a single hit below the waterline, but required, initially,

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that the launcher be less than 1,000 yards away from the target.\textsuperscript{36} For this purpose, torpedo-boats were created, high-speed, lightly armored craft, which could swarm a larger ship and sink it. To counter this threat, torpedo-boat “destroyers” were built to accompany the battle-fleets, and some secondary armaments were reintroduced on battleships for defense against torpedo boats. These countermeasures, combined with the technical shortcomings of the torpedo, had initially reduced the threat significantly. But the invention of the first practical submarine by John Holland, a fervent Irish nationalist whose creation he hoped would bring down the vaunted Royal Navy, offered the possibility of placing a torpedo in range of a battleship, or any ship, undetected. The submarine would become something of a nightmare for the Royal Navy, the specter of which haunted the Grand Fleet’s commanders every time they put to sea.

As the escape of \textit{Goeben} demonstrated, the changes in the method of communication between ships at sea and shore also had dramatic repercussions on naval decision-making. The lack of clarity in Churchill’s orders, which should not even have been issued (as the operations of the Royal Navy at sea were properly in the purview of the First Sea Lord, rather than the First Lord of the Admiralty) hampered the search more than helped it. This was not always the case; perhaps the most impressive use of this newfound reach was in the aftermath of the Battle of Coronel later in 1914; within the space of a few hours, orders were issued to seal every escape route of the East Asiatic Squadron across the entire length of the South Atlantic, from the Falklands to the Panama Canal.\textsuperscript{37} Wireless telegraphy had made the possibility of strategic decisions on a global

\textsuperscript{36} Ireland, \textit{War at Sea}, p. 69.  
\textsuperscript{37} Massie, \textit{Castles of Steel}, p. 244.
scale a reality, but its shortcomings had left a significant source of error in the British and German navies: flags.

To send a wireless message, a captain or admiral first had to dictate the message, have it sent to the radio room; there it would need to be translated into Morse Code, encrypted (the omnidirectional nature of radio waves meant that if the message was broadcasted *en clair*, the opposing side would be able to read the message as rapidly as its intended recipients), sent, and then the entire process repeated in reverse for a response. A well-trained group of radiomen could have a message to its recipient in fifteen minutes, but in combat situations, opportunities would arise and pass by in far less time. Thus, the navies of the period still relied on flag hoists for combat signaling, much as they had in Nelson’s day. However, the normal station-keeping distance between ships at sea had increased dramatically, and visual signaling could be obscured frequently by the large volumes of smoke belched out by the ships’ monstrous, generally coal-fired, boilers. Flag hoists were by nature limited in the meanings they could rapidly convey, and errors in signaling would cost the Royal Navy dearly during the War.\(^{38}\)

Also featuring prominently into the pursuit of the *Goeben* was the pressing question of fuel. Nearly every ship in the Royal Navy (the exceptions being a few light ships and the still-commissioning *Queen Elizabeth*-class of superdreadnoughts) was still fueled by coal. The amount of bunkerage onboard limited the combatants’ range of action significantly. High-speed chases or combat maneuvering burned coal at a far-faster rate

\(^{38}\) For instance, on January 24, 1915, at Dogger Bank, Admiral Sir David Beatty, commanding the British Battlecruiser force from HMS *Lion*, ordered his ships to engage their opposite numbers in the fleeing German column. But with five ships to the enemy’s four, the captain of HMS *Tiger* misinterpreted the orders and fired on the wrong ship (ineffectively, since his gunners were mistaking *Lion*’s shell splashes for their own) permitting SMS *Moltke* to fire unhindered by enemy action and cripple the *Lion*. (Massie, *Castles of Steel*, p. 392)
than normal cruising, and both stoking the furnaces to support high speeds and the simple process of coaling, which meant stopping and hauling bags of coal from one ship or a shore installation into the bunkers, were exhausting as well as dangerous. *Goeben*, in the process of eluding her pursuers, lost four men to scalding deaths when boiler tubes burst below decks.\(^{39}\) The difficulties in keeping a fleet concentrated, given differing amounts of coal on board and coal burned, meant, for instance, that Troubridge did not have five of his destroyers, which had stopped to coal, with him at the decisive moment (and the three that remained were critically short of coal).\(^{40}\) Nelson had merely to worry about the wind, but the state of one’s coal bunkers and the unknowable state of the enemy’s were constantly on the mind of admirals of the period.

Also worthy of discussion, beyond the massive scope of the technological changes that swept through the navies of the world, was the speed with which they had done so. Some of the Royal Navy’s more senior officers had first gone to sea under sail, on the “wooden walls” not terribly different from Nelson’s ships. First Sea Lord Jackie Fisher had had his entry to the Royal Navy sponsored by the last of Nelson’s captains (Fisher, it must be noted, was hardly a reactionary; indeed, his excess passion for new ideas and abrasive temperament resulted in an anti-Fisher, and therefore anti-Reform, faction within the Navy). Even comparatively junior officers found themselves preparing for a war with a navy fundamentally different from the one for which they had trained.

The inconstant but rapid pace of change, combined with a certain institutional arrogance, tended to create within the upper echelons of the officer corps resistance to alteration in practices, particularly when the status quo was hereditary dominance over the seas. This

\(^{39}\) Massie, *Castles of Steel* p. 44.
\(^{40}\) “Court Marital Finding” ADM 156/76, p.2.
led to some absurd anachronisms, such as the reintroduction of the ram bow on battleships (even *Dreadnaught*, despite her ground-breaking armament, was fitted with one).

Given these massive technological changes, one may ask whether Troubridge and Wray made the correct decision in assessing the *Goeben* as the superior force to his command. The *Goeben*’s 11-inch guns had a significantly longer range than Troubridge’s 9.2-inch guns, although Troubridge had a heavier throw weight (the combined weight of shell per broadside) given his four ships to Souchon’s one. Utilizing that advantage, however, would have necessitated that Troubridge’s cruisers be able to reach range to fire on *Goeben* effectively. His cruisers, although fairly new, were still obsolete by the standards of the time, and the maximum speed of his force, assuming he wished to keep his ships concentrated, was only 19 knots, the speed of his slowest ship. *Goeben* was designed for a speed of 27 knots, and had proven that she was capable of at least 24 knots when she eluded the *Indefatigable* and *Indomitable* two days previously. Wray was correct that there was simply no way for the 1st Cruiser Squadron to bring *Goeben* to action if she declined to be caught, and could remain out of range of the cruisers’ guns while smashing them with the long-range, plunging fire that would prove immensely effective against the same class of vessels at Jutland. Even had Troubridge been able to close the range sufficiently, the fire of his 9.2-inch shells would have been unlikely to seriously injure *Goeben*. *Goeben*’s sister ship, *Seydlitz*, withstood 25 higher caliber hits (between 12- and 15-inch) at Jutland without sinking. Though this was, of course, not known to Troubridge in August, 1914, he was well aware of the ruggedness of German construction. This endurance reflected the differing design philosophies of the
Royal and Imperial German Navies. British ships tended to be built with heavier guns (British battlecruisers were armed with 12 or 13.5-inch guns, while most of their German contemporaries remained equipped with 11-inch guns) but the German ships were significantly better armored. But even when the roles were reversed, when lightly armored British battlecruisers were pursuing German armored cruisers, at the Battle of the Falklands (8 December 1914), for example, the occasional hit permitted when the range closed failed to do any significant damage on the British battlecruisers.

The most probable outcome of Troubridge pressing in to attack would be the *Goeben* steering around and outrunning the First Cruiser Squadron. In a hostile sea, with limited supplies, and the location of the British battle cruisers unknown, Souchon might well have avoided action. Souchon, though, was an aggressive officer, exemplified by his prior conduct on the French North African coast and his later performance as an Admiral of the Ottoman Empire. If Souchon had elected to engage, the best Troubridge could have hoped for would have been forcing *Goeben* to fire most of her ammunition in destroying Troubridge’s cruisers (if *Breslau* were to have moved to engage *Gloucester* and Troubridge’s destroyers returned as scheduled, it is possible that *Breslau* could have been sunk). Troubridge might have delayed the *Goeben* to permit the British battlecruisers, which Milne had sent from west of Messina toward the Adriatic once *Gloucester* reported *Goeben*’s course, to catch her. In any event, however, they would have failed to do so, since an Admiralty message delivered to Milne later on the day the battle would have taken place informed him that war had been declared by Austria-Hungary on Great Britain, prompting him to recall the battlecruisers, lest the Austro-
Hungarian fleet sortie. As the last of a string of Admiralty missteps in this encounter, the telegram was not even accurate, as war would not be declared for a further six days.  

Troubridge, aided by his flag captain, had seen the realities of the situation. The good of the country was better served by permitting Goeben to escape to the Aegean than engaging in a battle of choice with defeat as its likely outcome in the opening days of the War. He dispatched a telegram to Milne, later that day, in which he offered his rationale for not pressing on:

> With visibility at the time, I could have gotten sighted from 20-25 miles away and could never have gotten nearer unless Goeben wished to bring me to action which she could have done under circumstances most advantageous to her… I had hoped to engage her at 3.30 in the morning in dim light, but… In view of the immense importance of victory or defeat at such an early stage in the war, I would consider it a great imprudence to place a squadron in such a position to be picked off at leisure and sunk while unable to effectively reply.  

After calling off the intercept, Wray said to a teary-eyed Troubridge “Admiral that’s the bravest thing you’ve done in your life.” However sound his reasoning, Troubridge recognized that the tradition of Nelson and the tradition of his great-grandfather, as interpreted through the modern Royal Navy, called for *offense à l’outrance*, and that he had in Nelsonian terms, failed to do what “England expects.” Technology had eroded the feasibility of that tradition. Many of the sea battles of the First World War would be a contest between the doctrinaire spirit of close action and battles of annihilation, and the emerging understanding that risking all in search of glory was not an effective war-fighting technique. The commingling of public relations into the affairs of the Royal Navy ensured that battles fought had strategic repercussions for the entire Empire, and that some battles, for the “country’s welfare,” were better left unfought.

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41 “Admiralty Telegrams 371 and 372” ADM 186/605 p. 207.
Chapter 2: Institutional Intransigence

I.

On September 22, 1914, a Court of Enquiry met at the Navigation School in Portsmouth. A day of testimony and deliberation was followed by a letter, dispatched in the names of Admiral Sir Hedworth Meux, G.C.B, K.C.V.O., and Admiral Sir George Callaghan, G.C.V.O., K.C.B., recommending that Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge face court-martial. Perhaps the most stunning part of the letter was Section 2, which read: “We do not intend to discuss the disposition of the Mediterranean Fleet previous to the night of 6th and 7th of August but confine ourselves entirely to the question as to whether Rear-admiral Troubridge, with his cruiser squadron, should or should not have endeavoured to engage the ‘Goeben.’”43 No questions as to the disposition of the Mediterranean Squadron, or the advantage to be gained in delaying the Goeben had been considered. The technical arguments regarding range and striking power were cast aside in favor of measuring a ship’s fighting potential by, like Lord Nelson, the weight of her broadside. The only discussion of the technical merits of Troubridge’s defense is contained in Section 5, which reads simply “On the other hand, the ‘Goeben’ undoubtedly had much greater speed and thicker armour,” and appears to have had no impact on the decision. Faced with an impending court-martial, already convicted in the eyes of his superiors, Rear Admiral Troubridge must have wondered at the chain of events that had led the Royal Navy to such blindness.

With hindsight, it is possible to attempt to posit some initial elements of causality. In the preceding twenty years, the Royal Navy had undergone a technological revolution,

as described in the preceding chapter. A similar revolution, however, had not been forthcoming in training or tactical and strategic thought. Doctrinally outdated, technically incoherent, riven by internal feuds, the Royal Navy remained the strongest power afloat far more as a result of inertia than planning. This chapter will forego the courtroom theatrics of the Court of Enquiry in favor of providing an understanding not only how the Court of Enquiry chose to send Admiral Troubridge to court-martial, but how its decision was, in many ways, a foregone conclusion.

The preamble to the Troubridge court-martial begins, perhaps, on a beautiful afternoon on June 22, 1893, off the Syrian (now Lebanese) coast, as the British Mediterranean Squadron of eleven ironclad warships, eight battleships and three cruisers, steamed in perfect order as they conducted maneuvers in preparation for anchoring for the night. As the fleet followed a prearranged tactical evolution. Vice-Admiral George Tryon’s flagship, HMS *Victoria*, signaled, "Second division alter course in succession 16 points to starboard preserving the order of the fleet…First division alter course in succession 16 points to port preserving the order of the fleet." It was a strange signal, since, in combination with earlier alterations to speed and distance, it would place HMS *Camperdown* on a collision course with the *Victoria*. Rear-Admiral Albert Markham, aboard *Camperdown*, seemed on the verge of querying his superior, when semaphore from *Victoria* flashed a message which equated to “What are you waiting for?” *Camperdown* duly turned, and despite a last second attempt to reverse the engines of both ships, rammed the *Victoria*, which capsized in 13 minutes, taking 358 British sailors and officers to the bottom with her, including Admiral Tryon.44 This event would likely be little more than a footnote in the history of the Royal Navy except that one of the best

proponents for systemic reform in the Victorian Navy, Admiral Tryon, died that afternoon in the Mediterranean, and the unfulfilled promise of reform would have wider-ranging impacts on the conduct of the Great War at sea as well as the court-martial of Rear Admiral Troubridge.

Ironically, Tryon had been an opponent of the slavish devotion exhibited by many of the officers of the Royal Navy to the centralized direction permitted by the use of Admiral Home Popham’s signal book *Telegraphic Signals of Marine Vocabulary* adopted by the Navy in 1803.\(^{45}\) Prior to its adoption, an admiral’s ability to communicate battle plans to his captains was limited to the congregation of the fleet’s senior officers aboard the flagship, requiring large numbers of boat transfers, which could be hazardous even under benign circumstances. It was Popham’s Signal Book that permitted Nelson to send his famed “England expects every Man to do his Duty” signal before Trafalgar (his originally intended signal, *Nelson confides every man will do his Duty* had to be filtered through the available words in the Signal Book, which had only 3,000 entries).\(^{46}\)

By 1892, the steam-powered warship allowed far more precise station-keeping than had been achievable by ships reliant on the wind, as well as permitted accurate judging of distance between ships, as the “Distance-off” tables, developed in 1854, required a generally steady platform. The creation of “classes” of vessels, with generally similar and predictable handling characteristics further assisted the creation of “Steam-tactics.” A real tactical breakthrough occurred in 1874, when Captain Phillip Colomb produced the *Manual of Fleet Evolutions*, which institutionalized “equal-speed” maneuvering. Earlier, a new formation being ordered by the flagship gave every member


of the fleet freedom to achieve its new station by changes in both course and speed, which created the endemic fear of collision. This fear was ended for the most part by the predictable “kinematic laws of equal-speed” maneuvering and easily determinable distance and speed.

Colomb’s *Manual*, however, applied by Sir Geoffrey Phipps Hornby as Commander-in Chief of the Mediterranean, created a system by which the movement of every ship in the Fleet, even, hypothetically during combat, was controlled from the flagship, and woe to any officer who failed to execute an order. However, in practical effect, the flags were frequently obscured by funnel smoke or were not visible for a host of other reasons, ranging from human error to the simple reality that the vagaries of the wind could easily obscure signals. The realities of combat, where shrapnel could cut down halyards or signal personnel, were completely suppressed. Colomb’s *Manual* goes so far as to state that “[t]o work a fleet at speed, in the closest order, is now admitted as the chief aim of the naval tactician.” The principles of the *Manual* were spliced into a revision of the *General Signal Book*, over the objections of a significant number of officers, including ironically Admiral Phipps Hornby, who, with an eye accurately trained on the future, commented “it is certain that in wartime we shall not have the super-abundant staffs of trained signal-men that we luxuriate in during peace.”

George Tryon had been a captain serving on the revision committee and a foe of Colomb’s work being integrated into the *General Signal Book*. By 1891, he was Vice-Admiral in command of the Mediterranean Squadron, and he intended to try something

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different. Tryon believed that the Royal Navy had been excessively focusing on a
sailor’s “primary” education -- the elementary requirements of a naval officer, such as
shiphandling, fleetwork, and signaling, at the expense of the “secondary” education --
those skills that separate an officer prepared for war from the captain of an ocean liner.
The tactical education of how war at sea was fought had disappeared from the Royal
Navy, and the primacy of hidebound centralized “steamship tactics” meant, to George
Tryon, that it might never be recovered.

His attempt to correct his failing emerged, ironically, from the Signal Book itself.
Under the letter grouping “TA” which read in the 1889 edition: “Observe very attentively
the Admiral’s motions as he will probably alter course, make or shorten sail, increase or
decrease speed, etc. with or without signals, as may be most convenient.”\(^{49}\)
Previously, complicated maneuvers could require literally dozens of flags, each of which had to be
correctly interpreted, and reproduced by repeater ships (to ensure the entire fleet had been
able to see the message), then acknowledged by all ships before execution. It was time
consuming even in the placid, unharried waters of the peacetime Mediterranean. With
TA, Tryon reduced the possible signals to 8 single flags. Within a week of its adoption,
the 1\(^{st}\) Division was put through a “series of 13 turns and formation changes…[which]
would have required the timely display of 202 flags – 35 by the flagship…under TA it
was done with the flagship using just 10 flags (counting the original two-flag TA
warning).”\(^{50}\) For more than a year, TA was used without incident and with increasing

\(^{49}\) General Signal Book, 1889. The reference to “make or shorten sail” reflects how out of touch theory was
with practice. By 1889, the Royal Navy was almost entirely steam driven.

\(^{50}\) Gordon, The Rules of the Game, p. 201.
anchoring off the Syrian coast, following a prearranged evolution rather than maneuvering under TA, a moment of mental absence by Tryon and lack of good sense by his juniors sank the *Victoria*.

Collision had been the fate predicted by Tryon’s numerous opponents. That the collision that had killed him had been totally unrelated to TA was an irrelevancy. The new Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Michael Culme-Seymour, presided over the court-martials of the *Camperdown*’s captain and Admiral Markham, acquitted them, and left TA to be forgotten as the Squadron returned, as much as possible, to business as usual, forgetting the inconvenient Admiral Tryon and the crippling lack of good sense that had sunk the *Victoria*.

II.

Interconnected with the split between proponents of “TA” and fleet centralization was the split between Jackie Fisher and Lord Charles Beresford. Arising from pedestrian disputes during their tenure as Commander-in-Chief and Second-in-Command, respectively, of the Mediterranean Squadron from 1900 to 1902, this animus would eventually force much of the officer corps to choose sides between them. Fisher was dynamic, committed to innovation, but also from humble origins, and eccentric. (He was known to walk around the Admiralty as First Sea Lord wearing signs saying “I have nothing to do” or “Give me something to sign.”)\textsuperscript{51} Beresford, second son of a noble family, interspersed his naval career with stints in Parliament. His style of command, on display as Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean from 1905 to 1907, was described by David Beatty, then a captain, as little more than “rigid training and discouragement of

A master of what Tryon termed “primary education” he and his disciples had little patience for initiative, disobedient juniors, or erosions of their authority. While Fisher was not a direct proponent of TA or a student of Tryon, in some ways he stepped into the gap left by Tryon’s death, though he placed advancing technology at the center of reform, rather than a deeper understanding of the Naval Officer’s profession -- the “secondary” education -- and was despised by many of the same enemies, including Beresford (or “Charlie B.” as he was known in the Service).

Lord Charles was a patron of many officers who shared his ideological stripe, helping to advance their careers after his retirement from the Navy to a permanent place in Parliament, hoping to outmaneuver Fisher’s protégés. Beresford was a formidable presence in naval politics. In 1910, he wielded sufficient clout to launch an inquiry into Fisher’s conduct as First Sea Lord. While an inquest found no improper conduct, that an inquest was launched at all was embarrassing enough for the government that Fisher was encouraged to retire early, ahead of the next general election. This ultimately led to Beresford protégés taking significant roles in the navy.

The composition of the Mediterranean Squadron, the material with which Admirals Milne and Troubridge had to work, was another critical factor in the outcome of the Goeben chase (and, by extension, the Court of Enquiry’s deliberations). It was also the direct result of the work of the Naval War Staff (of which Rear Admiral Troubridge had been, at one point, the Chief of Staff) the creation of which was, in some respects, an accident of the Agadir crisis of 1911. A revolt against the Sultan of Morocco, a hypothetically independent state but in fact a country dominated by France (a position upheld internationally by the 1906 Algeciras Conference) prompted the deployment of

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French relief forces with the proclaimed objective of protecting European lives and property. A less welcome development was the arrival of SMS *Panther*, a German gunboat in the port city of Agadir. Concern that Germany intended to seize Agadir and construct an Atlantic naval base to counter the British position at Gibraltar abounded in French and British military circles, and the specter of war hovered over Europe as “German excuses for sending [the *Panther*] to Agadir [were] not taken seriously.” On August 23, 1911, Prime Minister Asquith convened a secret meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence and demanded the presentation of war plans from the Army and Navy in the event of war with Germany.

The Army presentation was a *tour de force*. Accurately predicting the German Schlieffen Plan to sweep through Belgium and avoid the Franco-German border defenses, General Sir Henry Wilson announced to the Committee that railway timetables to ensure the arrival of Expeditionary Force of six infantry and one cavalry divisions at the front in an orderly and predictable fashion were ready, terrain maps were awaiting the troops, and the commander-designate, Sir John French, merely awaited the instruction of the government to deploy the BEF to the Continent.

The Admiralty presentation failed to inspire the same measure of confidence. The presentation by Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson (no relation to Sir Henry) was “rambling and opaque,” quite probably by design. The creation of a Naval War Staff, to parallel the Army General Staff had been proposed several times, but had always been resisted (in the most recent case by Wilson and First Sea Lord Jackie Fisher) as constraining the prerogatives of the First Sea Lord to exercise “absolute control over the administration,

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training, and deployment of the Fleet. They believed that war plans should be prepared
and held in secret by the First Sea Lord and Commanders-in-Chief, and, for fear of
leakage, not divulged to the Army or politicians.” Wilson proposed a close blockade of
the German fleet by light forces (destroyers and light cruisers), while the bulk of the
British fleet waited just beyond to smash the German High Seas Fleet when it emerged.
This would require every ship in the Royal Navy’s inventory, and thus Wilson announced
to the Army delegation that quite possibly no escorts could be provided for the troopships
bearing the BEF to France. He even made an alternative proposal for the employment of
the BEF. Rather than waste it as a small addendum to the French line, Wilson endorsed
the proposal of his predecessor, Jackie Fisher, for the British Army to become “a
projectile fired by the Navy,” ideally against the German Baltic coastline, 90 miles from
Berlin.\(^{56}\) The requirements of seizing the heavily fortified islands in the Heligoland Bight,
to say nothing of the method of supplying the Expeditionary Force at such distance
through waters potentially harried by mines and submarines, appears not to have entered
the Admiral’s thinking.

The Navy appeared to have no interest in coordinating with the joint war plans of
the French and British General Staffs, and perhaps even little grasp of reality. It was
apparent to Asquith, based on this meeting, that new thinking was required at the
Admiralty. Viscount Haldane of the War Office offered his serviced to replace Reginald
McKenna as First Lord of the Admiralty, but given the fever pitch to which the inter-
service rivalry had arrived, Asquith chose to look for someone with less prominent Army
connections. He settled on the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill.

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\(^{55}\) Massie, *Dreadnought*, p. 745.

\(^{56}\) Bernard Ireland, *War at Sea*, p. 189.
Churchill had been a supporter of the creation of a Naval War Staff, and rapidly created a new Board of Admiralty, replacing Wilson with Sir Francis Bridgeman as First Sea Lord. Bridgeman proved a disappointment, however, and owing to a combination of ill health and Churchill’s request, was succeeded in 1912 by the Second Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg. The Naval Staff that was created was divided into three sections: Intelligence, Operations, and Mobilization. By the end of the war, it had expanded to eight divisions, “the Naval Intelligence Division, Training and Staff Duties Division, Plans Division, Operations Division, Local Defense Division, Trade Division, Gunnery Division, Torpedo Division…and under the superintendence of the Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff…the Tactical Section [and] the Air Section.”

That the original structure was far smaller than it would ultimately become was probably for the best, since the Admiralty discovered that it lacked a sufficient number of qualified officers to staff all three sections, and had no choice but to, in 1912, establish the Staff College in Portsmouth to train officers for these positions.58

Among the War Staff’s early proposals were to remove the six pre-dreadnought vessels of the Mediterranean Fleet, which were overmatched by the dreadnoughts commissioning in hypothetically allied Italy and Austria-Hungary, and effectively cede control of the Mediterranean to the French, which would withdraw their battleships from the Atlantic and Channel coasts and ensure the security of the Mediterranean while the British sealed the North Sea to German egress.59 Rather than fully evacuate the Mediterranean, it was agreed that a British force of the new battle cruisers would be assigned there, with the speed to outrun what they could not outfight, while the French

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59 Massie, Dreadnought, p. 823.
would bear the brunt of any fleet action. It was against this backdrop of reduced resources and uncertain command structure (in the event of war, joint command in the Mediterranean was to be held by a French admiral, and coordination, as seen earlier, was poor at best) that Admiral Troubridge pursued the *Goeben* in August of 1914. The wartime success of the Naval War Staff was variable and weak staff work, poor communications procedures, and a general shortage of trained personnel would, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, not only contribute to the escape of the *Goeben*, but would continue for much of the war.

III.

When Churchill took over the Admiralty, he requested that Fisher advise him unofficially, which Fisher had done during the tumultuous transition. In 1912, however, Lord Charles Beresford, MP, now retired, demanded posts for three of his favored officers. Sir Reginald Custace was to preside over an enquiry into the training of cadets and midshipmen at HMS *Dartmouth* and *Britannia* (both shore installation), Sir Archibald Berkeley-Milne was to take over as commander in chief of the Mediterranean fleet, and Sir Hedworth Meux was to become commander in chief Portsmouth (the senior of the Royal Navy’s home ports, and traditionally a gateway to position at the Admiralty). For unknown reasons, presumably political, Churchill acquiesced, and Fisher promptly exploded. “I fear this must be my last communication with you on any matter at all,” he wrote to Churchill, “I am sorry for it, but I consider you have betrayed the Navy in these three appointments…I am going to transfer my body and money to the
United States…Adieu.”60 Fisher ultimately did no such thing, and the entire incident was swiftly forgotten, but the appointments remained nonetheless, and would play a significant role in shaping the Court of Enquiry’s verdict.

Both Meux and Callaghan, the heads of the court of enquiry, belonged to an older generation of officers, distinctly less comfortable with the changes, both technological and institutional, that had been running rampant through their Navy. Meux, as a good Beresfordian, could be trusted to ensure that the reputation of Admiral Milne was undamaged by the fact that “the fleet Flag ship…had been playing off Malta… [and] had not forced an action.”61 Callaghan is more of an historical enigma, rising to command Home Fleet despite extensive portions of his career spent on half-pay.62 (He went on half-pay eight times. By comparison, Admiral Jellicoe was on half-pay only once, while recovering for three months from dysentery.)63 Committed to neither Beresford nor Fisher, Callaghan was also judged too inflexible to command Home Fleet in action. His term as Commander-in-Chief hypothetically extended until December 1914, but he was superseded by Jellicoe on direct orders from the First Sea Lord (over Jellicoe’s objections). His career had included three assignments to HMS Excellent, the Royal Navy’s shore gunnery training establishment, the last beginning in 1881, taking both the short course and full gunnery officer course, as well as taking the torpedo course at HMS Vernon, learning the art of gunnery before the introduction of any of the technological fire control methods that permitted, in essence, anything other than a close-range, zero-

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62 To be put on Half-Pay meant that the Admiralty beached the officer, finding no active employment afloat. It was often used as a sign that an officer had incurred the wrath of the Lords of the Admiralty.
63 “John Rushworth Jellicoe” ADM 120/96, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.
angle shot. (Little surprise, then, the emphasis in the decision of weight of broadside rather than range or caliber of shell).64

As Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, Callaghan had commanded the “Blue Squadron” during the 1913 Fleet Maneouvres, and his After Action Report on them seems a study in contradictions. Blue Squadron suffered significant losses (including 1st Cruiser Squadron, under Rear Admiral Troubridge) when patrolling cruisers strayed into HMS Queen Mary’s engagement zone. This incident, to Callaghan, illustrated the “helplessness of ‘cruisers’ if opposed to a modern battle squadron or to battle-cruisers.” elaborating that “we cannot afford to adopt a cruiser policy at the outbreak of the war which might have to be changed constantly to make up for losses for which no compensating advantage is gained.”65 However, having been bested twice in two years by the Red (Aggressor) Squadron, under John Jellicoe, he appeared ready to abandon the predominantly defensive posture of Home Fleet. Unable, it appeared, to prevent enemy raids on the East Coast, Callaghan suggested that the Navy be absolved of its responsibility to defend the British Isles, and instead focus on dislocating German trade and colonial possessions, as well as be “ready at a moment notice for offensive operations against her fleet.” The idea that “the primary object of the British fleet is to defend the country from attack by the enemy’s troops… cannot but be prejudicial to spirit of initiative.”66 Callaghan was both rational in his analysis of the realities of the power of battle cruisers over armored cruisers, and seduced by a desire for “initiative” and “offensive operations.” His decision to send Troubridge to court-martial indicates the

64 “George Callaghan” ADM 120/96, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.
ascendancy of a doctrine of battle over rationality, of the religion of close-action over the feasible.

Admiral Troubridge closed his Court of Enquiry with a simple statement.

If, after giving an officer orders that he must avoid action with a superior force for some ulterior political reason, at the moment of which I know nothing, and he judges it is a superior force, such an order can never be given if he is not supported. It would be impossible to say to an officer; You must risk your honour, and if you do it, we will let you down, we will see that you lose it. 67

What Troubridge was saying was that initiative must go both ways. With an officer’s responsibility to engage the enemy in a favorable situation, or with even a reasonable probability of success, must come the freedom to rationally examine the situation and turn away from pointless sacrifice of a ship and her company, or “initiative” is scarcely more than a technique of honorable suicide. Admiral Troubridge was bound by orders not to engage a superior force (or at the very least certainly believed himself to be), and consequently risked his honor to carry out that order, using all his accumulated “secondary” education to conclude that no feasible plan of action existed, and withdrawing. The example which the Admiralty hoped to make of Troubridge would be understood throughout the service to mean that the tactical judgments of officers at sea, no matter how rational or fact-based, did not enjoy the unquestioning support of the Admiralty. That senior officers of His Majesty’s Navy were sufficiently blinded by partisanship, or by an inability to see past a blaze of Nelsonian glory to the realities imposed by technological innovation, would redound across the world, to the detriment of the Service.

67 “Court of Enquiry Transcript” ADM 156/76
SMS Goeben (GW)

The Escape of the Goeben
An artist’s rendering of the Battle of Jutland (note the short ranges presented)
Admiral Christopher Cradock (GW)  
Admiral Graf Von Spee (GW)  
HMS Monmouth, lost at Coronel (MF)
Chapter 3: Trials and Tribulations

The Admiralty was unimpressed by Troubridge’s explanations. In a minute to Winston Churchill, Prince Louis of Battenberg, First Sea Lord, commented that the “escape of the ‘Goeben’ must ever remain a shameful episode in this War. The flag officer who is responsible can not be entrusted with any further command afloat, and his continuance in such a command constitutes a danger to the state.”\(^{68}\) With Churchill’s acquiescence, Battenberg issued orders for Troubridge to haul down his flag and report to Portsmouth. The Court of Enquiry had produced the Admiralty’s desired result, and it was expected that the court-martial would do the same.

There had been debate within the highest echelons of the Admiralty on how best to draw up charges to secure the conviction of Admiral Troubridge. Jackie Fisher, not yet back at the Admiralty, but advising with his traditional vitriol and hatred of even those peripherally connected to Beresford, had commented that “had I been First Sea Lord, I should have shot the British Admirals.”\(^{69}\) In a letter to Prince Louis, the Judge Advocate of the Fleet explained that the evidence would not support a charge under Section 2 of the Naval Discipline Act, which required misconduct in action, but instead recommended charges be brought under Section 3, which required that “Every Officer subject to this Act who shall forbear to pursue the chase of any enemy…beaten and flying…” receive punishments ranging from death when the action occurred as a result of betrayal or cowardice, or in the case of a conviction for negligence, it was required that

\(^{68}\) Prince Louis of Battenberg, “Minute of the First Sea Lord dated 7-9-14” ADM 156/76, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.

the guilty party be “dismissed from His Majesty’s service, with disgrace” in addition to additional punishments at the discretion of the court-martial board. The charge, as ultimately drafted, read as follows:

For that he, Rear Admiral Ernest Charles Thomas Troubridge, Royal Navy, Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath, Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George, Member of the Royal Victorian Order, having command of His Majesty’s First Cruiser Squadron, then being a person subject to the Naval Discipline Act, did, on the seventh day of August 1914, from Negligence or through other default, forbear to pursue the chase of His Imperial German Majesty’s Ship ‘Goeben’ being an enemy then flying.

Under these charges the primary issue that the court-martial would have to resolve was whether or not the Goeben constituted a superior force. If it did, Troubridge merely obeyed his orders “not to get seriously engaged with a superior force,” invalidating the exhortations that “Goeben is your objective.”

Convened on the 5th of November, 1914, the court-martial of Admiral Troubridge was a modest affair. Given the militarily sensitive nature of case and much of the evidence involved, the majority of the testimony was given in closed session, rather than in open court. Furthermore, the traditional scope of a defendant’s powers of discovery were curtailed by the Admiralty, which denied Troubridge’s request for certain documents as “unnecessary to your defence.” But unlike the Court of Enquiry, Troubridge would have assistance from Leslie Scott, KC (King’s Counsel, a distinction given to less than 10% of barristers). Scott was a Member of Parliament from Liverpool, a member of the Conservative Party, and personal friend of Troubridge’s. His skill

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70 Sydney Fremantle, “Memorandum to the First Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76.
71 “Charge Sheet,” ADM 156/76.
72 “Letter to Rear Admiral Troubridge from the Secretary of the Admiralty” 156/76.
before the bar would eventually elevate him to the position of Solicitor-General and earn him a knighthood.

Ultimately, the professional and personal fate of Ernest Troubridge was in the hands of the nine men who made up his court-martial board. Established procedures, which were limited (as only two flag officers in the preceding fifty years had been tried by court-martial), dictated that the President of the Court be an Admiral, and no one serve on the Board who was below the rank of Captain. Given the exigencies of war, all of the officers had to be near to the venue, and serving on the Board could not significantly impact the performance of their duties. The court-martial was held aboard HMS Bulwark, a pre-dreadnought of the Fifth Battle Squadron, assigned to the Channel Fleet. Too slow and too poorly armed for service in the Grand Fleet, the Fifth Battle Squadron was employed thickening the mines and destroyer flotilla defenses guarding the entrance to the English Channel. Four ship captains of the 5th Battle Squadron, the Assistant Superintendent of the Plymouth Dockyard, the squadron’s two rear admirals, and the commander of the Channel Fleet made up the bulk of the Court with the Commander in Chief of Plymouth Station presiding.

The Commander-in-Chief Plymouth and President of the Court Admiral Sir George LeClere Egerton, was 62, approaching mandatory retirement age, but could look back on a career of accomplishment. He had explored the Arctic in Sir George Nares’ expedition of 1875. He had served as Second Sea Lord following Churchill’s arrival at the Admiralty. Perhaps his most important contribution, however, was to the field of torpedoes. As a Vice-Admiral, he had been made the Assistant Director of the Torpedo

73 Fremantle, “Memorandum to the First Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76
74 “Minutes of Proceedings of Court-Martial on HMS Bulwark,” ADM 156/76
Division and commander of HMS *Vernon*, the shore torpedo school, where he “raised the standard of scientific research” in the torpedo branch, which was responsible not just for torpedoes in the Royal Navy, but for all electrical equipment aboard ship. Originally this had merely grouped two low-priority duties into one specialty, but by the War’s outbreak, the Torpedo officer represented a critical factor in maintenance of fighting efficiency.\(^75\) Egerton had also commanded the “Red Fleet” torpedo craft during Annual Maneouvres, and was intimately aware of their limitations.

Also worth singling out is Vice-Admiral Cecil Burney. Burney would go on to be the Second in Command of the Grand Fleet under Admiral Jellicoe. Close personal friends, Burney would later follow Jellicoe to the Admiralty as Second Sea Lord. Generally regarded within the service as somewhat unimaginative and lacking in initiative, he had been Naval aide de camp to King Edward VII and had dealt with the crisis in Montenegro following the Second Balkan War, and, thus, was one of the few Royal Navy officers with combat experience in the years immediately prior to World War I.\(^76\) Jellicoe, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, understood the strategic ramifications that had attached to fleet actions, and unlike many flag officers, made a point of deeply understanding the changes wrought during his time afloat. Burney was certainly not Jellicoe’s equal, but almost certainly shared his views regarding the necessity of preserving lives and materiel.

The influence of the Torpedo School at *Vernon* seems to have played a key role in the deliberations of the court-martial Board. The Torpedo School had proven to be one of the few areas of innovation in the Royal Navy, and the officers of the court-martial

\(^76\) “Cecil Burney,” ADM 196/20, National Archives, Kew Gardens, London.
Board, in spite of their somewhat unglamorous station in the 5th Battle Squadron, represented the embrace of a new kind of thinking in the Royal Navy. Each officer below the rank of Vice-Admiral was a graduate of Vernon, and in at least the case of Captain Guy Lutley Sclater, had spent several years on staff there. Rear Admiral Bernard Currey had served on the Committee on Submarines, Rear Admiral Cecil Fiennes Thursby on the Committee to Consider the Workings of Turrets, and Captain Sclater on the Committee on Standardization of Electrical Plant. Rear Admiral Herbert Heath, Assistant Superintendent of the Plymouth Dockyard, had served as Naval Attaché to the British Embassy in Germany, and Captain Frank E.C. Ryan had been naval attaché in Washington.77

In the final accounting, the officers of the court-martial Board were probably representative of the war-fighting component of the Royal Navy’s Officer Corps. Trained primarily in gunnery and, especially, the new disciplines of torpedoes and electronics, they were not signalmen or non-line officers, but rather men holding active commands or with a prospect to hold such a command, who understood the technological changes that had shaken the Navy, studied them, and in some cases helped to create them. Two of the Board members, through their service as diplomatic attachés, would likely have had grounding in the public relations repercussions of a defeat so early in the War. Perhaps most importantly, they were relatively young. Unlike Admirals Callaghan and Meux, the captains on the Board had an average age of 47, leaving these men better positioned to understand the importance of technological change, and the need to adapt to it. They were not, like Admiral Meux, “an aristocrat and court favourite” for whom “the

service was apparently an interest rather than a profession,” but instead were officers committed not just to their country, but to their craft.\textsuperscript{78} One, Captain Sclater, would, within a month of the court-martial, be lost when the *Bulwark* was torpedoed by a German submarine.\textsuperscript{79}

The Prosecution’s star witness was Admiral Archibald Berkeley Milne, recalled to England even before Troubridge, thus leaving French Admiral Lapeyrère as the senior Allied naval officer in the Mediterranean. The extreme narrowness of the charges, limited only to the conduct of Admiral Troubridge and his forbearing to pursue the *Goeben*, a recommendation adopted from the decision of the Court of Enquiry, meant that the disposition of the Mediterranean Squadron by Admiral Milne could only be approached obliquely by Troubridge’s defense lawyer.

The Prosecutor, Rear Admiral Sydney Fremantle, launched his case by establishing the rudiments of the situation. His first witness, Troubridge’s Flag Captain, Fawcett Wray, was merely asked to establish the presence of Admiral Troubridge in the court, and to produce the log books of HMS *Defence* so that they could be entered into evidence.\textsuperscript{80}

The Prosecution’s second witness was similarly foundational. Commander G.M. Marston of the Navigation School at HMS *President* had prepared charts to indicate to the Court the respective positions of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Cruiser Squadron, the *Goeben* and *Breslau*,

\textsuperscript{79} “Guy Sclater,” ADM 196/20.
\textsuperscript{80} A comment from the Prosecution concerning discrepancies in the log books of *Defence* and *Inflexible* (Milne’s Flagship), that there seemed to have been erasures of important signals from the *Defence’s* wireless signal log, prompted some commotion, though ultimately nothing concerning erasures was ever entered into evidence by the Prosecution. The author, having visually inspected the *Defence’s* signal log, found no erasures of important signals, and the precise nature of the Prosecution’s issue is unclear and the entire aside appears quite odd.
the light cruisers *Gloucester* and *Dublin*, and their attached destroyers. According to his calculations, assuming neither the 1st Cruiser Squadron nor *Goeben* altered course or speed from Troubridge’s original intercept course, the British cruisers would have crossed *Goeben*’s bow at 6:25 am, more than an hour after the 4:52 am sunrise that day.

The heart of the prosecution’s case was contained in Admiral Milne’s testimony. From him, it was critical that they extract proof that the relevant orders for the 1st Cruiser Squadron had been to attack the *Goeben* and that the instructions to avoid action with a superior force were either voided or otherwise inapplicable in the circumstance.

Fremantle, serving as Prosecutor, focused his questions primarily on establishing chronology, and the expectation held by Milne that Troubridge would attack. Milne further argued that the *Goeben* did not represent a superior force compared to the First Cruiser Squadron. He asserted that the range of the *Defence*’s 9.2-inch guns was 14,500 yards, and the *Goeben*’s 11-inch guns a mere 500 yards further. Somewhat inexplicably, he also asserted that that 500 yard gap was too narrow to allow the *Goeben* to ‘station-keep’ out of the armored cruisers’ range, and claimed *Goeben* would inevitably drift back in range of the First Cruiser Squadron’s guns. The last question represents the heart of the prosecution’s case, and the core of Admiral Milne’s testimony:

**Q:** Will you state to the Court your personal opinion as to whether the “*Goeben*” was a superior force to the First Cruiser Squadron in the meaning of the Admiralty orders repeated in your sailing orders to the Rear Admiral?

**A:** I think the First Cruiser Squadron could have engaged the “*Goeben*.” It is difficult to give an opinion as to the meaning of the Admiralty telegram. The objective was to be the “*Goeben*” – that was made twice. On the other hand the Admiralty order was regarding the husbanding of strength. I think that, myself, the Admiral should have continued on and sighted the “*Goeben*.” I had no doubt that he would do so… Further, the Admiral having signaled that he was going to
cut the “Goeben” off at 6 o’clock misled me into the belief that he was going to do so.81

That even the Commander-in-Chief had no more than a notion as to the meaning of the Admiralty’s orders can not but have been a sobering moment for the court-martial Board. But, obviously, Admiral Milne had thought himself understood by Rear Admiral Troubridge, that Goeben was his objective, and that his failure to even sight the Goeben represented, in Milne and the prosecution’s interpretation, a willful defiance of those orders.

Leslie Scott’s cross-examination of Admiral Milne was a masterful display of giving someone enough rope with which to hang himself. To counter Milne’s assertion that a skillful deployment of Troubridge’s armored cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers could have surrounded the Goeben and prevented an escape, Scott provided Milne with a chart and instruments to devise a deployment. The Prosecution took exception to this theatric, and ultimately the President ruled that Admiral Milne would not be forced to go through with it, but his initial ineffectual attempts to do so were not lost on the court. Rear Admiral Troubridge, in his unpublished Rough Account of the “Goeben” and “Breslau,” describes a similar scene, stating that “after a painful ten minutes, he [Admiral Milne] was obliged to give it up… [T]he Prosecutor told me that he and the Navigating Staff sat up till two in the morning endeavouring to solve this insoluble problem when his commander from the Admiralty [presumably Commander Marston]
observed that ‘if Admiral Troubridge could not tactically dispose his squadron he was sure they could not.’”

No specific alternative deployment was ever brought forth.

Milne made a number of questionable assertions throughout his cross-examination. Asked whether “the battle-cruisers are necessarily, by reason of their guns and speed, more adequate for dealing with the “Goeben” than Armoured Cruisers – ship for ship?” Milne replied, “It depends upon numbers. Six ships must be better than four.” For the multitude of technical reasons previously spelled out, and doubtless known to the court-martial Board, this must have been a troubling answer. He stated, in response to a question concerning the determination of “superior force” that the only elements involved are “gunpower, weather, and speed.” No mention was made of comparative armor, the age of the ships involved (quite relevant given the diminished accuracy of older guns) and, his precise meaning of “gunpower”, based on his reference in an earlier question to the comparative weight of shell as marking the Goeben and First Cruiser Squadron as equal, seemed to show an extremely limited understanding of the weapons of the ships under his command.

Perhaps one of the most important points that Scott made, however, is separate from crippling Admiral Milne’s position as an expert in naval affairs. As he pressed Milne on the issue of what the First Cruiser Squadron could hope to accomplish against the Goeben, “whether it was prudent or not to go into the neighborhood of the ‘Goeben’…depends…whether, as compensation to the obvious risk involved to our ships,


83 “Court Martial Question 151,” ADM 156/76.
there was any reasonable possibility of doing any damage to the ‘Goeben.’” Milne disagreed, citing the two signals to Troubridge that the Goeben was his “objective” and “primary concern,” permitting Scott to comment that both those signals had arrived while the battle cruisers Indomitable and Invincible were under his command. Was it not reasonable, therefore, to assume that the Goeben was the objective of the battle cruisers, and the frequently mentioned monitoring of the mouth of the Adriatic and avoiding action with a superior force, the assignment of the First Cruiser Squadron?

Milne’s testimony, intended to be the Prosecution’s centerpiece, instead became its undoing. Milne’s lack of knowledge on technical issues, his inability to offer an alternative method of attack, the disposition of the battle cruisers, unclear orders in a bewildering sequence, all conspired to demonstrate his inadequacy for the situation in August. A compelling alternative explanation for events was that Admiral Troubridge hastened to attack Goeben under the cover of night, when the problem of comparative range and visibility might be avoided; and that once it was clear an intercept was possible only after dawn, at which point Goeben’s superiority reasserted itself, he broke off to resume his station at the Adriatic. Any other action would have violated his orders. All that remained was to prove, on technical grounds, that during the day, the Goeben represented a superior force to the First Cruiser Squadron.

After a day and a half of questioning, the battered Milne was allowed to withdraw. The Prosecution turned to Wray, whose testimony, both in direct and cross examination, continued the demolition of the Prosecution’s case. Wray, for instance, revealed that the Goeben’s guns were capable of elevating to 30°, giving them, according to a letter produced for the defense by the leading light of British naval gunnery, Sir

84 “Court Martial Question 283,” ADM 156/76.
Percy Scott, a maximum range of 30,000 yards, rather than Milne’s supposed 16,000.\textsuperscript{85} This fact, known to Wray through visual observation of the \textit{Goeben} during peace, was generally available in a Naval Intelligence Division report, of which Admiral Milne had apparently never availed himself.\textsuperscript{86} In his energetic defense of his and his Admiral’s conduct, however, Wray perhaps chose his words poorly. He commented that until a ship was in range of another, all its power was latent. By extension, the \textit{Goeben} was thus “infinitely superior” to any number of \textit{Defences}.\textsuperscript{87} He further ventured to suppose that, shooting at 20,000 yards, a British 12-inch gun might achieve a 20\% hit ratio, comparable to what the \textit{Goeben} might achieve. This figure was doubtless too high (at Dogger Bank, British battlecruisers, known for being poor shots, achieved a hit percentage of between 1-2\%) and shocking to have emerged from the former Assistant to the Royal Navy’s Inspector of Target Practice. However, the case of the Austrian light cruiser \textit{Zenta}, which is mentioned on three occasions throughout the trial, demonstrated the impact that capital ship weaponry could have on lighter craft. A light cruiser, the \textit{Zenta} was caught by the French Fleet in the Adriatic, and was “sunk in two shots 16,000 by the French.”\textsuperscript{88} The fate of Troubridge’s flagship \textit{Defence}, at Jutland would provide another grim reminder (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4).

The Prosecution’s gunnery expert, Commander Wilfred French, could offer little against the weight of Wray’s testimony. If anything, he further undermined the Prosecution’s case. He commented that “The 9.2 Mark XI (mounted aboard \textit{Defence}) has always been known as an inaccurate gun…the Mark X (mounted on the other vessels of

\textsuperscript{85} “Court Martial Question 480” ADM 156/76.
\textsuperscript{86} “Court Martial Question 846” ADM 156/76.
\textsuperscript{87} “Court Martial Question 537” ADM 156/76.
\textsuperscript{88} “Court Martial Question 580” ADM 156/76.
He introduced the War College system of Offensive and Defensive Units, used for war games, which allotted *Goeben* 20 offensive units, 21 defensive, and the First Cruiser Squadron 21 and 53, respectively. When pressed on these figures’ derivation, French, the expert from The Admiralty Ordnance Office, was compelled to admit “I am rather more a Staff Man than a Gunnery Expert. I got them out of the Tables in the book.” With the conclusion of his testimony, the Prosecution rested.

The focus of the Defense was the statement made by Admiral Troubridge. He spoke of the unpopular withdrawals from action that Admiral Togo had made during the Russo-Japanese War, in the name of fulfilling his highest order, the preservation of his fleet. In spite of the anger it bred within the fleet, in spite even of plots to assassinate Togo, Troubridge observed that the “one thing, and one thing only sustained him [Togo]. After each abortive and indecisive combat, with precise and mechanical regularity, the superior authority that had given him the orders, publicly approved…of his conduct and upheld to utmost his reputation and honour.” Troubridge clearly felt, like Togo, the “Nelson of the Orient” that he was bound by orders and rationality to decline action. That his action met with opprobrium, rather than the unflinching support of his superiors, wounded him. He spoke of the disaster of *Cressy, Hogue*, and *Aboukir*, sunk, one after another by a single German submarine as they attempted to conduct rescue operations. The Admiralty’s inquiry had found the captains of the cruisers in error, and that, given the circumstances, they should have left the area and the survivors of the first cruiser hit

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89 “Court Martial Question 757” ADM 156/76.
90 “Court Martial Question 777” ADM 156/76.
91 Ernest Troubridge, “Statement to the Court,” ADM 156/76 pg. 4.
to their fate. “There is,” Troubridge stated “only one condition under which such great decisions can be demanded of us, and that the absolute certainty that whatever course an officer’s honest judgment dictates…the Admiralty, who ask of him to take so great a risk to his reputation, must in return take responsibility for the resulting action.”

He noted that his view on the subject of the superiority of battle cruisers, under certain conditions, even to multiple armoured cruisers, was well known. He had informed his Commander-in-Chief of his views, even lectured on them at Malta. Given his apparently contradictory orders, and only his initial strength being compatible with executing both the destruction of the Goeben and maintaining a watch on the Adriatic, stripping him of the battle cruisers seemed tantamount to stripping him of the mission for which only they were suited in general conditions. At the core of his testimony though, was his decision not to continue the pursuit past daybreak. “Gradually…it forced itself more and more upon my mind that though my decision might be natural, might be heroic, it was certainly wrong, and in the teeth of my orders.”

His oration apparently found receptive listeners on the Court. The relevant portion of the finding of the Board accepted entirely the Defense’s alternative explanation:

11. That in view of the instructions…not to get seriously engaged with a superior force, the Court are of the opinion that under the particular circumstances of weather, time, and position, the Accused was justified in considering the “Goeben” a superior force to the First Cruiser Squadron…

12. That, although it might have been possible to bring the “Goeben” to action…the Court considers that, in view of the Accused’s orders to keep a close watch on the Adriatic, he was justified in abandoning the chase at the time he did, as he had no news or prospects of any force being sent to his assistance.

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93 Ernest Troubridge, “Statement to the Court,” ADM 156/76 p. 5.
94 Ernest Troubridge, “Statement to the Court,” ADM 156/76 p. 18.
95 “Finding of the Court Martial,” ADM 159/110
On these grounds, the Court concluded the Prosecution’s case was not proved, and the Accused was returned his sword and fully and honorably acquitted by the brother officers most suited to understand the situation he faced, the men who fought and died and relearned how to fight a war at sea, rather than bureaucrats, court favorites, or careerists.

It is, however, a requirement that the Sea Lords certify the result of courts-martial. In a case such as this, overturning the verdict would have been an unfathomable breach of protocol, a flagrant demonstration of lack of confidence in the officers who had heard the case. Thus, the Troubridge court-martial verdict was allowed to stand. Each Sea Lord, though, was required to submit a memorandum on his opinion of the verdict, which were uniformly, venomously negative. The First Sea Lord, Jackie Fisher by this time, could not help but roundly criticize Milne, the Beresford protégé he’d long opposed, and his dispositions of the battle cruisers. But he maintained that, despite the First Cruiser Squadron being “liable by reason of ‘Goeben’s’ speed to be successfully engaged by the ‘Goeben’ without being able to reply effectively[,]…in view of the clear orders to attack the ‘Goeben’ he [Troubridge] was at fault in giving up the chase.”96 The Second Sea Lord commented that “the Court has been entirely led off track by a clever lawyer,” but still found time for professional assassination, noting that “Captain Wray should also remain unemployed, as it is decidedly dangerous to have an officer of his opinions in a responsible position.”97 The Third Sea Lord, took technical exception to some of Wray’s more questionable predictions, such as a 20% hit ratio of a 12-inch gun at 20-24,000 yards. Instead, “the whole question really rests on the amount of ammunition possessed

96 Sir John Fisher, “Minute of the First Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76
97 Sir Frederick Hamilton, “Minute of the Second Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76
by the ‘Goeben’”\textsuperscript{98} In such callous commentary, one can not help but see intellectual continuity with the generals on the Western Front. The Fourth Sea Lord was blunt in his assessment that the scapegoat had eluded sacrifice: “A great blunder has been committed. The officer thought to be responsible has been tried and ‘fully and honourably acquitted.’”\textsuperscript{99} However if the court-martial had been an unexpected setback, the Lords of the Admiralty were not without other tools to ensure that those officers who had embarrassed them would be suitably punished.

Rear Admiral Troubridge, would never serve at sea again. His next assignment, in January of 1915, was to head the British Naval Mission in Serbia. His outstanding performance organizing the winter evacuation of the Serbian Army and civilian refugees after the entry of Bulgaria into the war drew notice from Serbian Crown Prince Alexander, who requested that Troubridge serve as a personal military advisor.

Promoted, by virtue of seniority, to Vice-Admiral in 1916 and Admiral in 1919, Troubridge served on the provisional Inter-Allied Danube Commission (which provided governance for that multi-national waterway), before being removed from that position when the permanent Commission was founded and the British seats were assigned to staff from the Foreign Office, with no objection from the Admiralty. His predecessors having resigned, he was invited back to the Commission in 1920, and was retired by the Navy in 1921. He retired again in 1924, and died suddenly in Biarritz, France, in 1926.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{98} Frederick Tudor, “Minute of the Third Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76
\textsuperscript{99} Cecil Lambert, “Minute of the Fourth Sea Lord,” ADM 156/76
Milne was also never employed at sea again. He had been slated to become Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy Station in the Nore, but that position was given to George Callaghan in recompense for being superseded by John Jellicoe as Commander of Home Fleet. Once Fisher returned as First Sea Lord, the prospects of Milne finding an active command completely evaporated. He spent the war on half-pay, and retired at its conclusion. He clung, throughout his retirement, to the pronouncements he had demanded of the Admiralty clearing him. When the official *History of the Great War: Naval Operations* was produced by Sir Julian Corbett, Milne took exception to the implied censure of his fleet dispositions and produced a book of his own, *The Flight of the Goeben and Breslau*, which reproduced, in effect, his arguments at the court-martial.\(^{101}\)

Fawcett Wray endured a period of career stagnation after the court-martial. He was unable to secure another command until HMS *Talbot*, a second-rate armoured cruiser, which he commanded during the Gallipoli landings, winning the Distinguished Service Order. Ultimately, his close association with the case prompted him, in 1917, to issue a statutory declaration, objecting to his portrayal and quotations in portions of Admiral Troubridge’s report of August 26, 1914. “Although Courts of Inquiry are confidential, rumors did get about to the effect that I was a coward; and in spite of the fact that I have again been given command of one of His Majesty’s Ships, the demeanour of many officers in the Navy shows no alteration in my favor.”\(^ {102}\) It was a *cri de coeur*

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\(^{102}\) Fawcett Wray, “Statutory Declaration,” ADM 159/110
from a man cut off from his comrades and chosen profession. He retired in 1922, being “yellowed” to Rear Admiral the day of his retirement.103

Troubridge and Wray had made the hard choice, but the right choice. Given that the best case-scenario for First Cruiser Squadron, as predicted by the Naval Staff College, was slightly damaging the *Goeben* in exchange for multiple ships sunk and several thousand lives lost (to say nothing of the worst-case scenario), given the ambiguity in the orders, from Milne and from the Admiralty, and faced with the reality that no support was forthcoming, the court was clearly correct in vindicating Admiral Troubridge. The understanding Troubridge offers in his statement to the Court deserves to quoted at length:

> In this great War, new and hitherto unknown forces have been brought into service, air-craft, submarines, mines, bombs and explosives never before used, heavy artillery of a range and power hitherto unsuspected. All previous conceptions of relative superiority or inferiority have disappeared, and only now, after three months war are in process of readjustment on the subject. In many cases our ideas are only adjusted after painful experience. In other cases, a clear and foreseeing judgment obviate the necessity for an unnecessary and painful experience.

But the bureaucracy of the Royal Navy did not learn from the court’s decision. The Admiralty abided by its ruling but dismissed its reasoning. It had been made clear to serving officers that to pursue any tactical decision but that of annihilating action meant to risk one’s career. The critical lessons concerning the new place of Navy as part of the strategic whole, the proper tactics and decision-making process, were left behind in the courtroom to disappear with the torpedoed HMS *Bulwark.*

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103 To be “yellowed” means to be promoted to Rear Admiral without the distinction of Squadron, placing the officer in question permanently on the Retired List.
Chapter 4: Repercussions

I.

The Troubridge court-martial had not yet been concluded when its effects began to be felt. At war’s outbreak, the ships of the German East Asiatic Squadron, composed of two armored cruisers, the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, and three light cruisers, lay at anchor in the port of Tsingtao, a base extracted as a concession from the Chinese government for German participation in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. The Squadron was known for its discipline, skilled gunnery, and experienced and effective commander, Vice-Admiral Maximilian Graf von Spee. The entry of Britain into the war gave casus belli to its treaty partner, Japan. The Japanese Navy, with assistance from the British, had expanded dramatically in the preceding decade. Rapid industrialization had permitted the growth of local military shipbuilders and the Imperial Japanese Navy, which included three dreadnaught battleships as well as battlecruisers purchased from British naval yards, cemented the loss of the German Pacific Empire. Graf von Spee recognized that his ships were unable to fight the Japanese and abandoned Tsingtao swiftly. Dispatching one of his light cruisers to the Indian Ocean to initiate commerce raiding, he concentrated the remainder of his squadron and disappeared into the Pacific Ocean. The British forces in the Pacific -- The China Squadron, based at Hong Kong, and the Australia Squadron in Sydney -- were both preoccupied -- “locating Spee’s armored cruisers …was a third priority, behind convoying troops to Europe and picking ripe colonial plums.”

104 Robert Massie, Castles of Steel, p. 200.
The task was left to Rear-Admiral Christopher Cradock, in command of the newly created Royal Navy South American Station. At his disposal were two armored cruisers, the Good Hope and the Monmouth, a converted liner, the Otranto, and the light cruiser Glasgow. Good Hope and Monmouth both belonged to the Third Fleet, the Royal Navy’s reserve organization, and were crewed primarily with reservists. As to their warfighting potential, Good Hope was armed with only two 9.2-inch guns, and secondary armament unusable in heavy seas, which nonetheless left her in a better situation than Monmouth. Jackie Fisher once commented that “Sir William White designed the County class [of which Monmouth was an example] but forgot the guns.”105 Monmouth had fourteen 6-inch guns, the age of which left them with range comparable to those of a light cruiser. The Admiralty was initially concerned with the German light cruisers, Karlsruhe and Dresden, known to be in the South Atlantic. Accordingly, an Admiralty telegram arrived on September 14, expanding Cradock’s responsibilities dramatically:

Leave sufficient force to deal with Dresden and Karlsruhe… Concentrate a squadron strong enough to meet Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, making Falkland Islands your coaling base…Defence joining you from the Mediterranean… keep at least Canopus and one County-class cruiser with your flagship. As soon as you have a superior force, search the Magellan Straits with squadron, being ready to return north and cover the River Plate, or according to information, search as far north as Valparaiso.106

Cradock was required to keep all of his heavy ship concentrated, while still leaving sufficient force (at most, Glasgow and Otranto), to fight two German light cruisers, with his area of responsibility stretching from the River Plate on the Brazilian coast to Valparaiso in Chile. Cradock’s reinforcements, to carry out this broad task, were the battleship Canopus, and the armored cruiser Defence, former flagship of Rear-

Admiral Troubridge. *Canopus* had been commissioned in 1899, and carried four 12-inch guns. She had been scheduled for scrapping, but was brought back into service for the Spithead Review and remained there when the war broke out. *Canopus*’ maximum speed, according to her engineering officer, was 12 knots, a pitifully slow figure. Opinions of her battle-worthiness varied. Winston Churchill described *Canopus* as “a citadel around which all our cruisers in those waters could find absolute security.”\(^{107}\) Lieutenant Lloyd Hirst, the intelligence officer aboard the *Glasgow*, complained that “her antique 12-inch guns…had a maximum range of… 3000 yards less than those of the German heavy cruisers, and were difficult to load and lay in the heavy sea way prevalent in the South Pacific.”\(^{108}\) *Defence* on the other hand, had been built in response to the commissioning of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and her modern 9.2-inch guns made possible a successful engagement by the British Squadron.

Spee and the East Asiatic Squadron appeared in Samoa on that same day, however, and, failing to locate the transports of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, left on a northwesterly course, before turning east once out of sight of British observers. Despite the fact that he had appeared 2500 miles to the East of his last known position, this basic ruse convinced the Admiralty that he was returning, for no discernable reason, to the Far East. Based on this information, *Defence*, which had by then reached Malta from the Dardanelles en route to Cradock, was ordered to turn back. Cradock was not informed of this change. October brought a recognition of the problems with the Admiralty’s orders, and rather than rectifying their mistakes, the Admiralty expanded them, bringing into existence a second squadron for the protection of the South Atlantic


(including the once-again reassigned Defence, the ship on which Cradock had pinned his hopes of defeating Von Spee), while dispatching the majority of Cradock’s ships to take up station on the Chilean coast while Good Hope awaited the arrival of Canopus at Port Stanley in the Falklands.

The reality of Cradock’s situation was that under the umbrella of Canopus’ guns, his cruisers probably were safe. Despite the imbalance of force between Von Spee’s squadron and Cradock’s, the fact remained that Von Spee was thousands of miles from the nearest drydock and was unable to resupply his ammunition. An action with a British force based around Canopus had the possibility of a chance 12-inch shell inflicting significant damage on any of Von Spee’s ships. However, given Canopus’ speed of 12 knots, Von Spee’s squadron, which could steam in company at 20 knots, could easily maneuver past Cradock and Canopus and escape into the rich British trade lanes of the South Atlantic. The possibility of concentrating around Canopus was finally crushed when she finally arrived at Port Stanley on October 22, and reported that she could not leave port without performing maintenance on her aged engines. Unwilling to leave his detached vessels any longer, Cradock departed in Good Hope, leaving Canopus with orders to follow as soon as possible, escorting colliers. As he left Port Stanley, he left a sealed packet with the governor, Sir William Allardyce, containing a letter to his friend, Admiral Hedworth Meux, to whom he vowed “I will take care I do not suffer the same fate as poor Troubridge.”109 Cradock was fully cognizant of the disparity of forces and, according to Allardyce “thought his chances were small and that he had been let down by the Admiralty especially when his request for Defence had been denied.”110

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109 Massie, Castles of Steel, pg. 217
110 Massie, Castles of Steel, pg. 217
The Battle of Coronel scarcely merits the name. Cradock located his foe off the Chilean coast on Nov. 1, and drew into a line against the East Asiatic Squadron as the sun set around 7 pm. *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were crack gunnery ships, and, outlined against the setting sun, the large British cruisers trying to close were easy targets. *Scharnhorst*'s third salvo put *Good Hope*’s forward 9.2-inch gun turret out of action, destroying half the squadron’s heavy guns. Heavy seas kept most of the British 6-inch guns out of action, while doing little to hinder the German armament which were situated higher on those vessels. Within the hour, having suffered 35 hits, *Good Hope*’s amidships magazine detonated, destroying the ship entirely. *Monmouth* was beaten into a flaming wreck, before a squall temporarily broke contact between the belligerents. *Otranto*, useless against the regular German ships, had withdrawn at her best speed as soon as the action commenced. *Glasgow* engaged the German light cruisers until the destruction of *Good Hope* and disappearance of *Monmouth*. Hoping to render assistance, Captain Luce of the *Glasgow* located the stricken *Monmouth*, and determining that they could do nothing to help her, went south to warn the *Canopus*, still proceeding up the coast (the Germans had been jamming wireless transmissions since the battle’s start). Located later in the night by the light cruiser *Nurnberg*, the *Monmouth* refused to strike her colors. The German cruiser resumed firing, tearing into *Monmouth*’s unprotected stern until the ship, flags flying, capsized and disappeared under the waves.

*Scharnhorst* had been hit twice, and both shells had failed to explode. The four hits inflicted on *Gneisenau* failed to damage her materially, and German casualties totaled three slightly injured. The German light cruisers were totally undamaged. Two British cruisers had been sunk, and 1600 British officers and men were dead.
Cradock was, according to the captain of the *Glasgow*, “constitutionally incapable of refusing or ever postponing action, if there was the smallest chance of success.”\(^{111}\) His impetuosity is frequently advanced as the cause of the Coronel disaster, and that, if he had obeyed his orders to concentrate around *Canopus*, the disaster could have been avoided. This was the line adopted by the Admiralty, as criticism for placing Cradock’s inferior force in harm’s way was increasingly directed to their shoulders. Churchill announced that “I cannot accept that the Admiralty share any of the responsibility for what followed….it ought not to be necessary to tell an experienced Admiral to keep concentrated and not be brought to action in circumstances of great disadvantage by a superior force.”\(^{112}\)

An alternative explanation was advanced, given the need to beatify Cradock as a naval hero who died in the finest tradition of the Service. His defenders interpreted his rush to action as an attempt to damage or force Von Spee’s squadron to fire ammunition which it had no way to replace, to permit a future British force better success against the crack East Asiatic Squadron. Churchill’s successor as First Lord of the Admiralty, Arthur Balfour, at the dedication of the Cradock Memorial in Yorkshire, offered the most complete exculpation of blame of either Cradock or the Admiralty:

“The German admiral in the Pacific was far from any port where he could have refitted. If he therefore suffered damage, even though he inflicted far greater damage than he received, his power might utterly be destroyed. If Admiral Cradock judged his squadron, that he himself and those under him, were well sacrificed if they destroyed the power of this hostile fleet, then I say there is no man, sailor or civilian, but would say that such a judgment showed… only the highest courage….in the interests of his country. If I am right, there never was a nobler act.”\(^{113}\)

\(^{113}\) Massie, *Castles of Steel*, p. 241.
The self-service in these explanations is evident. A better understanding of Coronel can be found in the thoughts of Glasgow’s navigator, P.B. Portman, penned shortly after the action at Coronel, which bear out the thoughts in Cradock’s letter to Admiral Meux: “The Defence was refused him, and he was as good as told he was sulking at Stanley. What else was there for him to do but go and be sunk? He was a very brave man and they were practically calling him a coward. If we hadn’t attacked that night, we might never have seen them again, and then the Admiralty would have blamed him for not fighting.”114 Like Admiral Troubridge, he was aware that he was sailing to his death, and that his crews would pay the price. That his force was grossly inferior to his opponents was inconsequential. The institutions that had formed the bedrock of Christopher Cradock’s world, the beliefs drummed into him as a thirteen year-old boy midshipman, had provided that “tradition, courage, and honor, and discipline counted more than ships, boiler power or gun caliber.”115 He died trying to uphold that tradition, and to uphold his own personal pride, along with 1600 of his men.

Coronel represented the first naval defeat for England in a century. Of far more consequence from a military stand-point than the loss of two second-rate cruisers was the erosion of confidence in the Navy. Three British cruisers had been torpedoed, one after another, by the same U-boat while on patrol of the Dutch coast on September 20th, taking to the bottom another 1400 Royal Navy sailors, mostly reservists. The Royal Navy had taken only losses in the present war, and given the reputation and tradition to which the existing Royal Navy was heir, Coronel was treated as a defeat out of proportion to its significance. Sir Julian Corbett, the official Royal Naval Historian even went so far as to

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115 Massie, Castles of Steel, p. 218.
write that “every vulnerable point in the globe lay exposed to a telling blow from Admiral Spee.” While an exaggeration, the idea of an enemy fleet being permitted to roam the seas, in search of British interests to prey on, was obviously one of significance.

The Admiralty, spurred to action by the destruction of Cradock’s command, issued swift orders across the globe. By November 4th, the British East Coast Squadron at the River Plate under Admiral Stoddart was reinforced, as was the Japanese First South Seas Squadron by the inclusion of the battlecruiser *Australia*, which was placed to prevent Von Spee from escaping into the Pacific, with a further force being concentrated on the west coast of Africa to guard against Von Spee trying to reach the German colony at Cameroon. Finally, the Admiralty detached the battlecruisers *Invincible* and *Inflexible* from the Grand Fleet to hunt down and destroy Von Spee. A third battlecruiser, *Princess Royal*, was detached over the vehement objections of the Commander-in-Chief of Grand Fleet, Sir John Jellicoe, and the commander of the Battlecruiser Fleet, Sir David Beatty, to ensure that Von Spee did not attempt to transit the newly completed Panama Canal.

This is a remarkable contrast from the Admiralty policy that let Admiral Cradock sail to his death after months of pleading for a single modern cruiser.

The addition of the battlecruisers required that a more senior officer than Rear Admiral Stoddart take charge. The dysfunction at the Admiralty was revealed to a surprising degree by the choice of Vice-Admiral Frederick Doveton Sturdee, Chief of the Naval Staff for the new assignment: Commander in Chief, South Atlantic and Pacific. Upon being informed of Fisher’s proposed dispatch of the battlecruisers, Sturdee commented that he himself had proposed a similar move before Coronel. Fisher, who

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detested Sturdee immensely for siding with Fisher’s nemesis, Sir Charles Beresford, in one of the internecine struggles of the previous decade, viewed that comment as a challenge, and, going straight to Churchill, announced that he would not tolerate “that damned fool at the Admiralty one day longer.” Thus, Sturdee was ordered to raise his flag on the *Invincible* as soon as possible.

*Invincible* and *Inflexible* proceeded south, leaving Devonport on the 11th of November. Maintaining radio silence in a bid to keep their impending arrival from Von Spee, Sturdee rendezvoused with Stoddart’s cruiser squadron at Abrolhos Rocks on the 26th of November, and, after a day coaling, continued south to the Falklands. The morning of December 7th found the entire British force, the two battlecruisers, three cruisers (*Kent*, *Caernarvon*, and *Cornwall*) and the light cruiser *Glasgow* swinging at anchor in Port Stanley harbor, as the East Asiatic Squadron appeared on the horizon. Graf Von Spee, committed to breaking through to Germany, was in need of coal, and viewed the outpost of Port Stanley as most probable location it could be acquired in bulk. Unready for combat, the British Squadron was quite possibly saved by *Canopus*. Having grounded herself after return to Port Stanley, *Canopus* had been incorporated into the harbor defenses, and the firing of her heavy guns convinced the German squadron not to attempt to enter the harbor as Sturdee’s forces got up steam.

On leaving the harbor, the outcome of the battle of the Falklands was a foregone conclusion. The battlecruisers could outrun the German vessels if they attempted to flee,

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118 Originally, dockwork would have prevented them from sailing until the 13th. In being informed that the battlecruisers would be sailing on Friday the 13th, Jackie Fisher “in a fury, ordered that the ships would sail 11 November, taking with them dockyard workers if necessary.” Julian Thompson *The War at Sea, 1914-1918* pg. 113
prompting Spee to attack with his armored cruisers while ordering his lighter units to scatter. Sturdee intentionally kept the range between his battlecruisers and the German ships at approximately 14,000 yards, so that the German vessels were in range of his 12-inch guns while his vessels were outside the range of Spee’s 9.2-inch guns.\textsuperscript{119} Sturdee detached his cruisers to pursue the fleeing German light cruisers. Demonstrating the effectiveness of battle cruisers over armored cruisers, Sturdee, over the course of three hours, pounded \textit{Scharnhorst} (though it should have required far less time, British gunnery proved an embarrassment), until around 4 p.m., when she capsized with no survivors. Fire from \textit{Gneisenau}, also savaged by high caliber hits from the battle cruisers, grew sporadic, but her Captain Maerker, was unwilling to surrender. Closing to a mere 4000 yards, the British ships pounded \textit{Gneisenau} as her crew prepared to scuttle the ship. Explosives were detonated in the engineering compartments, and the order to abandon ship was given. 174 German sailors were picked out of the water, but damaged boats, rough seas, and fading light consigned the remainder of \textit{Gneisenau}’s company to die in the South Atlantic that evening.\textsuperscript{120}

The power of battle cruisers over armored cruisers was amply demonstrated (it was not coincidental that the United States Navy, long skeptical of the concept, ordered its first battlecruisers in the wake of the battle of the Falklands). The outcome of the Falklands clearly strengthened Troubridge’s argument that a battle cruiser constituted a superior force compared to armored cruisers. An opinion emerged, however, among the proponents of crushing, close-range battles of annihilation, that Sturdee’s carefully fought victory was hollow. Historian Arthur Pollen, writing in 1919, branded his strategy,

\textsuperscript{120} Massie, \textit{Castles of Steel}, p. 273.
contemptuously, as “defensive tactics.” In Pollen’s opinion, the true victor at the Falklands was HMS *Kent* which fought the *Nürnberg* after *Nürnberg* was detached from Spee to attempt escape. He applauds the *Kent* for following:

the Nelsonian tradition. He closed with his enemy at top speed, and got not only the full artillery value of his attack, by making hitting easier and therefore more certain, but won what is hardly less valuable, the vast moral advantage of giving his enemy no breathing time at all... the value of the *Kent-Nürnberg* example lies in this, that for all practical purposes exactly the same result was obtained, at the same cost, in one hour...in this action, as...by two battle-cruisers in five hours.121

One might have hoped that the disastrous battle of Coronel and the remarkably successful battle of the Falklands would have led to a new understanding in naval thinking, where the broader interests of the country and the lives of sailors and the safety of their ships would be seen to outweigh the stylistic demands of “the Nelsonian tradition,” but as the battle of Jutland and its aftermath will demonstrate, even within the Royal Navy, such an understanding was slow in emerging.

II.

The Battle of Jutland was fought on May 31st, 1916. The German High Seas Fleet had intended to use Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper’s Scouting Group, composed of five modern battle cruisers, to lure Vice-Admiral David Beatty’s Battlecruiser Fleet into the main German fleet. A net of U-Boats had been dispatched to the approaches to the main British fleet base at Scapa Flow to prevent, or at least slow, intervention by Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet. British signal intelligence, which had succeeded in deciphering much of German wireless traffic, deduced from the signal, “31 G.G. 2490,” acquired on the 30th of

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May, that the High Seas Fleet was sailing the following day. An error in interpretation of the available information by an intelligence officer convinced the Admirals at sea that a battle cruiser raid was the most probable enemy action, and that the full High Seas Fleet might not deploy at all. The Admiralty deployed Beatty and Jellicoe to locate and destroy Hipper’s Scouting Group, unaware that Scheer’s High Seas Fleet had followed him out of port. The long-anticipated clash between the two dreadnaught armadas was imminent, as 28 British battleships, 9 battlecruisers, and 113 lighter craft, from armored cruisers to destroyers, sailed to meet 16 German battleships, 5 battlecruisers, and 72 lighter craft, somewhere in the North Sea.

The Battle of Jutland is commonly analyzed in four phases. First, in the Run to the South, Beatty located Hipper and gave chase. At his disposal were six battle cruisers, and, straining to reach the site of the action, the four Queen Elizabeth-class super-dreadnaughts of the 5th Battle Squadron. Hipper, with only five battle cruisers, fled south, hoping to draw Beatty into the waiting High Seas Fleet. Before the 5th Battle Squadron could engage, accurate German fire had damaged Lion, Beatty’s flagship, and destroyed Indefatigable, which suffered a catastrophic explosion. The arrival of Queen Elizabeths, with their combined thirty-two 15-inch guns, pressed the rear of the German line harder, but Queen Mary, another British battlecruiser, was nonetheless hit, and suffered a similar catastrophic explosion. Beatty, who drily observed to his flag captain, “There seem to be something wrong with our bloody ships today,” ordered a torpedo attack by his destroyers in an effort to reduce the incoming fire against his battle cruisers,

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122 Massie, Castles of Steel, p. 575.
but, as it was underway, found that he had run headlong into the vanguard of the High Seas Fleet.\textsuperscript{123}

The second phase, the Run to the North, began as Beatty ordered a 16-point (180 degree) turn. Errors in the flag signaling meant that the 5\textsuperscript{th} Battle Squadron maintained its course six minutes longer than necessary, and was subjected to the fire of the German fleets van, damaging an additional three of the ships. Now at the rear of the line proceeding north, the \textit{Queen Elizabeth} bore sustained fire from Hipper’s battle cruisers and the lead squadron of the High Seas Fleet. Their return fire crippled \textit{Von Der Tann}, and wounded two more German battle cruisers, and their solid construction kept them intact for the hour required to rendezvous with the Grand Fleet and draw the High Seas Fleet into action.\textsuperscript{124} Beatty then returned to engage Hipper.

The third phase, the fleet action, is of the most consequence, beginning at approximately 6.00pm. The fleet action offered each side the opportunity to fulfill its long cherished wish to sweep the other from the seas. Jellicoe, poorly informed by his subordinates, deployed on a port wing column, and moved the Grand Fleet from a sailing to a battle formation. German scouting light cruisers had by now arrived near the Grand Fleet, prompting the commander of 1\textsuperscript{st} Armored Cruiser Squadron, aboard \textit{HMS Defence}, to charge out of his position to engage them, no one having informed him of the High Seas Fleet’s proximity. A salvo of 12-inch shells from German dreadnaughts sank \textit{Defence} almost immediately, and \textit{Warrior} was only saved by chance. As the \textit{Queen Elizabeths} arrived to take their place in the formation, \textit{Warspite} received damage to her steering gear, which jammed the rudder, forcing the ship to complete two large circles.

\textsuperscript{123} Massie, \textit{Castles of Steel}, p. 598.
around the *Warrior* before helm control could be restored, drawing significant fire onto *Warspite*, while permitting *Warrior* to escape back to the Grand Fleet. The arrival of the 3rd Battle Cruiser Squadron to aid Beatty against Hipper was marred by the almost immediate destruction of its flagship, HMS *Invincible*, to yet another catastrophic magazine explosion. However, by this time, Grand Fleet had completed its deployment, and had crossed the High Seas Fleets “T.”125 The lead squadron of the High Seas Fleet was enveloped in a torrent of fire, at a time when Scheer had not even been aware the Grand Fleet was at sea. Scheer ordered a 180-degree turn, long practiced by the High Seas Fleet for precisely this situation, and disappeared into a deepening fog. Shortly after, a torpedo attack was launched on the Grand Fleet, one of which struck *Marlborough*, and though not significantly damaging her, renewed Jellicoe’s concerns about the active pursuit of a retiring enemy who might lay mines or launch torpedoes at his dreadnaughts.126

Scheer, hoping to surprise the Grand Fleet, or possibly assist the crippled *Wiesbaden*, one of the German light cruisers damaged earlier while scouting the Grand Fleet, made another 180 degree turn and returned to attack. To quote Robert Massie, “[n]o naval assault in the Great War was as useless as this second attack of Reinhard Scheer’s. Weather and visibility were against him…initially the Grand Fleets’ resumption of fire was sporadic, but …soon, the Grand Fleet broadsides merged into a single unbroken wave of endless thunder.”127 Ten minutes of this was enough, and Scheer

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125 “Crossing the T” is naval parlance for deploying one’s fleet so that all of your guns can fire broadside, but most of the enemy’s guns, steaming in a column, are masked. It is the most advantageous position a dreadnaught battlefleet could be in.
127 Massie, *Castles of Steel*, p. 626.
ordered another 16-point battle turn. To cover his second turn away, Scheer launched his battle cruisers on a “death ride,” at the British fleet. He was aware that the battle cruisers, already damaged, might not survive, but extricating his battleships was judged to be the more pressing concern. Scheer then launched a massive torpedo attack by destroyers to cover the withdrawal. Fourteen destroyers launched 31 torpedoes, and the Grand Fleet turned away from pursuing the battered High Seas Fleet to evade the torpedoes.

This was the most criticized decision of the battle, despite the soundness of the tactics. Jellicoe’s decision ultimately proved correct, as none of his dreadnaughts were damaged in this torpedo attack, but for 17 minutes, the Grand Fleet permitted the range to the High Seas Fleet to open, ensuring that darkness would fall without decisive action. Even Jellicoe’s more gentle critics remain condescending toward this decision. Julian Thompson, writing under the aegis of the Imperial War Museum, comments

Jellicoe has been much criticized for not pressing on and turning to ‘comb’ the torpedo tracks, a standard Second World War procedure… had he done so, he might have been able to continue to pursue the enemy and inflict a major defeat upon him. But this is possibly asking too much; commanders in the Second World War were able to profit from mistakes made in the First. No one in the First World War had experienced torpedo attacks by massed destroyers, and the mayhem of the first fleet action of the whole war was probably not the time to try a tactic that had never been practiced. Only a Nelson might have done so, and there were no Nelsons at Jutland on either side.

Such comments suggest that the appropriate course of action was to accept some risk to pursue Scheer. One can hear in such commentary echoes of Arthur Pollen’s contemptuous dismissal of “defensive tactics.” Similarly, Jellicoe also did not pursue the

128 The primary question in avoiding unguided torpedoes is one of speed. The torpedo, moving at 30 knots, for instance, has a limited amount of fuel, and it more likely to reach the target if the target is moving toward it at 20 knots, for a closing speed of 50 knots, than away at 20 knots, for a closing speed of 10 knots.

129 Thompson, War at Sea, 1914-1918, p. 313.
retreating High Seas Fleet in a pell-mell night action, as some of his critics argued he should have. He reformed his Fleet in hope of seeking action in the morning, deployed scouts to try to locate the High Seas Fleet, and waited. During the night, the High Seas Fleet had slipped behind Grand Fleet and away, and retreated to Wilhelmshaven. Jellicoe chose not to risk his Fleet, the entire margin of British naval supremacy, pursuing his foe. He failed to achieve another Trafalgar, but understood that, given the situation, a Trafalgar was not called for. The French naval plan, beginning with the massing of the French and Spanish fleets that led to Trafalgar, was a plan to invade England. The strategic necessity of destroying French naval power was paramount. But at Jutland, Jellicoe had little to gain from pursuing the weaker fleet, aside from a quest for glory. The High Seas Fleet would sortie twice more before the war ended, but never came close to defeating the stranglehold that the British North Sea Blockade had placed on the German war economy.

The Royal Navy had been swept up in the myth of Trafalgar for so long, it had forgotten, as an institution, why that battle had been fought. A Nelson would have understood, as Jellicoe did, his purpose at Jutland. On returning to port, Jellicoe’s first signal to the Admiralty was that, on four hour’s notice, the Grand Fleet was ready to sail. The lessons of the Goeben chase were on display in the North Sea, as a commander chose to forsake potential glory for the betterment of the war effort and the country, pride be damned. That Jellicoe, the man Jackie Fisher had chosen years before to be “Admirallissimo…when the Battle of Armageddon comes along” was shortly thereafter replaced by his aggressive subordinate, Admiral David Beatty, who long demonstrated

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130 Fisher (ed. Marder), Fear God and Dread Nought, p. 424.
the impetuous and prideful streak that sent Cradock to the bottom, illustrated that understanding within the Navy of its mission in the war was far from universal.
Conclusion

The *Goeben* incident had been largely forgotten, but a twist of fate returned the escape of the *Goeben* to the naval community’s attention, 25 years after the fact. In 1939, a British heavy cruiser and two light cruisers (HMS *Exeter*, *Ajax*, and *Achilles*) fought the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* in an action off the River Plate. The British cruisers, which had the advantage in speed, pressed the engagement against the *Graf Spee* in spite of mounting damage against *Ajax* and *Achilles*, and *Exeter*’s withdrawal with only one gun still functional. At the end of the day’s fighting, *Graf Spee* entered Montevideo harbor, on the River Plate, to repair her damage, but was limited to 72 hours in the port as a result of Uruguayan neutrality. The British had suffered twice as many casualties as the Germans, as well as heavy damage to *Exeter*, but the remaining British cruisers aggressively patrolled the port’s entrance while false intelligence announced the arrival of still-distant British reinforcements. Rather than consign his sailors to die pointlessly, the captain of the *Graf Spee* evacuated and scuttled his ship.131

In a letter to Commodore Henry Harwood, the commander of the British squadron, First Sea Lord Dudley commented that “even if all our ships had been sunk you would have done the right thing… Your action had a great affect in two ways. Firstly, it set a standard for this war, a matter of great importance. Secondly it has reversed the finding of the Troubridge court martial and shows how wrong it was.”132 Twenty-five years after the verdict was handed down, its lessons were still being ignored at the highest echelons of the Royal Navy. The analogizing of the *Goeben* affair and the River Plate action was widespread. Some writers, Winston Churchill among them, at

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least took the time to note that the difference in speed meant that the British ships, having surprised the *Graf Spee* with their presence, could close to almost point-blank range. Churchill appears to be laboring under a misapprehension, suggesting that “all except one of Admiral Troubridge’s squadron in 1914 were slower than the *Goeben,*” when in point of fact the fastest of Troubridge’s vessels had a design speed 5.5 knots below that of *Goeben.* An compelling logical argument that Harwood should have attacked, given the elusiveness demonstrated by *Graf Spee,* the availability of Allied reinforcements and the high probability that a damaged *Graf Spee* would be found and destroyed, as it had no safe ports between the South Atlantic and Germany. That Pound ignored the sound reasons for an aggressive course and instead reaffirms his commitment to an outmoded doctrine of battle. One has to imagine that, perhaps, if all of the British ships had been sunk, and a losing precedent had been set for the War, Pound might have been less enthusiastic proponent of Harwood’s plan of action.

It was Alfred Thayer Mahan, in *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire,* who described Nelson’s Navy as “those far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, [that] stood between it and the dominion of the World.” Mahan recognized what many both in and out of uniform would continue to confuse. Battles had not been at the center of the Royal Navy’s work in combating Napoleon, but rather the long, grey blockade of Europe. Trafalgar was fought in 1805, but Waterloo and Napoleon’s downfall did not occur for another decade. But the Nelsonian myth that permeated the Royal Navy led it, during the First World War, to condemn officers for doing their duty and send others to their deaths with little

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The inculcation of Nelsonian invincibility of the Royal Navy, in defiance of rationality, in defiance of reality, led to a belief that it was in battle alone that the men of the Navy proved their worth. But in a world remade by technology, shepherding men and material was increasingly critical. The linking of strategic and political considerations with even the smallest naval actions required a new method for assessing of risk and reward, which sadly required decades for the Royal Navy to develop.

The pace of technological change in the Royal Navy at the turn of the 19th Century was without precedent. While the ships that Admiral Monck had led to defeat in the Four Days Battle in 1666 were not terribly different from those Admiral Nelson flung into the French fleet at Trafalgar in 1805, between the launch of HMS *Warrior* in 1860, the World’s first ironclad warship, and the outbreak of the Great War in August, 1914, a permanent revolution was underway in the technological underpinnings of naval warfare. The inheritors of the Nelsonian tradition found themselves in the unenviable position of choosing between that tradition, exemplified by Nelson’s credo from Trafalgar -- “No captain can do very wrong who places his ship alongside that of an enemy,” or accepting that the changes in technology required a systemic reevaluation of the mission the Royal Navy in battle. There was no one to undertake this reassessment. The Naval War Staff received no more than grudging acceptance, while alternate training doctrines, like those advocated by Admiral Tryon, were consistently rejected or marginalized.

This revolution demanded new approaches to the tactical and strategic choices which faced the British Empire’s primary military instrument, and it was unclear how many casualties would be exacted in the cause of that effort as the Royal Navy wrestled
with these changes. Christopher Cradock and his doomed squadron, British battlecruisers lost at Jutland, the crews of Crecy, Hogue, and Aboukir all died as the Royal Navy groped towards reasonable policy. But doubtless, Ernest Troubridge, left ashore for the rest of his life, was also one of those casualties as well.

The case of Ernest Troubridge and the escape of the Goeben is about more than an historical curiosity, though. The pace of broad technological change has, if anything, increased over even the rapid advances that shook the core of the discipline of naval warfare in the early years of the 20th Century. While some of the lessons that the Goeben affair has to offer have been taken to heart in organizations (whether military or non-military) throughout the world, the underlying danger of sluggish and unresponsive hierarchies, where doctrinal obedience to historical certitudes has replaced independent thought, remains a danger today. Openness to change and to new ideas, as well as a willingness to reconsider how to approach developing realities remain as important today as they were in 1914.
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