

THE BRITISH FLEET IN THE GREAT WAR

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The British Fleet in the Great War by Archibald Hurd

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ARCHIBALD HURD

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INTRODUCTION

IN March, 1914, it was announced in the House of Commons that in place of the annual manœuvres, making a spectacular appeal to the popular imagination, it had been determined to carry out a test mobilization of the Reserves in order to place a large proportion of the older ships of the Navy—the Third Fleet—on a war footing. The decision proved fortunate. On Wednesday, July 15th and succeeding days, the First, Second and Third Fleets, as they were styled, assembled at Spithead, and on the following Monday the various squadrons and the flotillas of destroyers and submarines put to sea for exercises in the Channel, led as far as the Nab Lightship by the King in the Royal yacht *Victoria and Albert*. Four days later the First Fleet, consisting of fully commissioned ships, which was afterwards to be known as the Grand Fleet, steamed to its base at Portland, and the Second and Third Fleets went to their home ports, the latter to land reservists so that they might return to their homes. In the meantime dark clouds had been gathering on the European horizon. Mr. Winston Churchill was then First Lord of the Admiralty, and Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg (now the Marquis of Milford Haven) First Sea Lord. About midnight on Sunday, July 26th, notice was issued by the Admiralty that "Orders have been given to the First Fleet, which is concentrated at Port-

land, not to disperse for manœuvre leave for the present." It was added that "all vessels of the Second Fleet are remaining at their home ports in proximity to their balance crews." These were ships normally provided with nucleus crews of active service ratings, receiving their balance crews from the depots and training establishments of their home ports in any sudden emergency. On the morning of the 29th, the First Fleet, unknown to the nation, left Portland, under the command of Admiral Sir George Callaghan, for its war bases. Naval movements affecting the squadrons on foreign stations took place simultaneously, and the whole active portion of the British Navy, consisting of men-of-war fully manned and complete with stores and ammunition, was in a state of readiness for war. Other measures at the ports and on the coast, for which arrangements had been made in preceding years, also came into operation.

The circumstances in which these precautionary measures were taken have been the subject of controversy. The facts are beyond dispute. Mr. Winston Churchill had planned to be away from London during the weekend, July 25-27, in order that he might be with his wife, who was ill at Cromer. On the Friday night the probability of this country becoming involved in a European war seemed remote. The First Sea Lord, by immemorial custom, was in supreme control of the naval administration at Whitehall in the absence of the Minister. This officer had thoroughly mastered the German system of warfare, in which everything depends upon rapid mobilization and getting in the first blow. On the Saturday political events began to move with increasing speed. The German Fleet was known to be at sea, cruising in

Norwegian waters. The First Sea Lord determined that no precautions should be neglected, and he acted accordingly in a fine spirit of patriotism and with the decision characteristic of the British naval service, taking on himself a heavy responsibility. He has since explained exactly what happened in a letter to Mr. Churchill :—

“ The news from abroad on the morning of July 26th was certainly, in my opinion, very disquieting, and when you called me up on the telephone from Cromer about lunch-time I was not at all surprised to hear you express the same view. You then asked me to take any steps which, in view of the foreign situation, might appear desirable. You reminded me, however, that I was in charge of the Admiralty, and should act without waiting to consult you. You also informed me you would return that night instead of next morning.

“ After making myself acquainted with all the telegrams which had reached the Foreign Office, and considering the different steps towards demobilization, which, in the ordinary course of events, would have commenced early next morning, I directed the Secretary, as a first step, to send an Admiralty Order by telegraph to the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleets at Portland to the effect that no ship was to leave that anchorage until further orders. For the time this was sufficient.

“ You fully approved of this when you returned, and we then, in perfect accord, decided upon the further orders as they became necessary, day by day.”

The German declaration of war against Russia and the invasion of Luxemburg as a preliminary to the over-running of Belgium moved the Admiralty on August 2nd to take the final step in placing the whole Navy on a war footing by calling out all the Reserves :

Notice is hereby given by their lordships that all Naval and Marine Pensioners under the age of fifty-five,

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and all men of the Naval Fleet Reserve and Royal Navy Reserve, are to proceed forthwith to the ship or establishment already notified them, or, failing any previous orders, they are to report themselves in person immediately, as shown below, viz: Naval and Marine Pensioners, including men of Class A, Royal Fleet Reserve, to their pensioner centre officer. Royal Fleet Reserve, Class B, to their registrar at their port of enrolment. Royal Fleet Reserve, Immediate Class, in accordance with instructions already issued. Royal Navy Reserve, all classes, to the nearest registrar of Naval Reserve (superintendent of a Mercantile Marine office). Men of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve are all to report themselves immediately to their officer instructor or volunteer mobilizing officer, irrespective of whether they have been previously appropriated or not. All men should, if possible, appear in uniform and bring with them their registration kit, certificate book or Service certificate, and in the case of pensioners their pension identity certificate. Men who through absence at sea, or for other unavoidable cause, are unable to join immediately, are to report themselves as soon as possible. Reasonable travelling expenses will be allowed. By command of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty.

So admirable was the organization affecting the personnel which the naval authorities had built up during peace that on the evening of August 3rd the Admiralty were able to announce:—

The mobilization of the British Navy was completed in all respects at 4 o'clock this morning. This is due to