THE JUTLAND BATTLE

BY

TWO WHO TOOK PART IN IT
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A young officer who was on a British ship in the battle of Jutland gives his views and observations on that naval engagement in the following letters, which are published by permission of the Admiralty. He is the son of a distinguished man well known in America as well as England. Part of his letter to his mother, dated June 3rd, reads:

I have seen a real naval battle, and it was not in the least like what I had expected; and it was rather soul-shaking. I had always drawn a mental picture of the two fleets, in line ahead, pounding away at each other, with us (light cruisers) looking on, seeing all that was happening from van to rear, and everything obvious as a cricket match. I might have known from Heligoland that circumstances alter cases; but somehow I never thought of
a general action in a thick mist where you could not see half your own fleet, let alone the enemy's. But so it was; and vast forms loomed up out of the mist, firing like Billy-o at other ships that were perfectly invisible.

I saw the Invincible—my old Invincible—blow up like the Bulwark right alongside us, hardly a mile off; a great crimson rose of flame a hundred feet high and perhaps two hundred broad, that rose leisurely, contemptuously, with an awful majestic dignity, to a good four hundred feet; at its very top an immense baulk of ship's plating, and many lesser bits. Then the deep red faded out and there remained only a black pall below, merging in the general pall that the many ships' smoke at full speed was creating; and above, a new billowy cloud added to the others in the sky, and only to be distinguished by its greater height. Eighteen minutes later (we had altered course back in that direction during that time) and a gentle shower, like the first of a snow-fall, of papeterie, fell or rather came drifting down about us from her. The pall cleared from about her in a few minutes sufficiently to enable one to see her bows sticking up above the water at an angle, her red bottom above her grey side, her stern equally sticking up at an angle, red uppermost. There they stayed till we passed out of range of vision, the British fleet passing by on either side, going into action.

... The enemy signalled his final retirement, the day done, with a really lovely star-shell, which quite warmed my heart towards him—I who have always loved fireworks; and after all the furious deep red displays of pyrotechnics we had been treated to for over three hours, this gentle, cool, pure white, silent Star of Bethlehem, was quite like the Spirit of Peace coming to brood over us. That was actually the last we really saw of the enemy, for although some of the others got heavily engaged that night, and sank a first-class Hun, WE, at least, got no more work.

There is no more to tell. No one stopped firing when the Invincible blew up, as they did at the battle of the
Nile when L'Orient did the same; we moderns have got beyond all these courtesies. Nor did we notice the noise of the explosion, which seems to suggest that there were a good deal of other strange noises—as indeed was the case.

4th June, 1916.

The mail has just left with my letter to mother, but I will continue to yourself, and you will get it a day later. It is Sunday afternoon, and what can I do better than write to "My Papa," especially as I am feeling "writey" and purposely ate a light luncheon lest I might feel sleepy!

Well, I wrote you rather a glum note which I enclosed in C.'s letter; but on our return we were under orders to use only postcards...... I am no good at writing postcards.

To resume, it was a glum note, but remember that I was still under the influence of seeing two British battle cruisers blown up just like a child's squib, and that as far as we then knew, we had played a game with the enemy with ships as chips, and had forfeited six to his none. But since then more news has come to hand; tales of sunken battleships (we lost none, you know) and shattered battle cruisers; eye-witnesses' descriptions of sunk light cruisers that I had not even seen; a circumstantial account from our revered leader as to HER torpedoing of one of the enemy's finest battleships: and the effect of the blowing up of the Invincible and Queen Mary has worn off considerably. It is rather like what the schoolmaster said of the children who watched our fireworks and cried from tiredness: "They will remember the fireworks and forget the tiredness."

I remember lots of things. I remember a Hun light cruiser lying stopped right in the path of our battle fleet, steam pouring from her funnels, and flames spouting from her decks; shells still bursting on her, and the sunlight playing on her well-kept side. "He causeth the sun to shine on the just and on the unjust!" She was only able to avoid our battleships by the primitive and not wholly satisfactory
method of—sinking! I remember also a sight that will last as long in my memory as that of the sinking Mainz and the death of the Invincible. As those were the essence of shattered matter, so this was the essence of triumphant spirit. A little British destroyer, her midships rent by a great shell meant for a battle cruiser, exuding steam from every pore, able to go ahead but not to steer, coming down diagonally across our line (which was rather congested just there), unable to get out of anybody’s way; like to be rammed by any one of a dozen ships; her syren whimpering “Let me through! Make way!”; her crew fallen in aft, dressed in lifebelts, ready for her final plunge—and cheering wildly as it might have been an enthusiastic crowd when the King passes. Perfectly MAGNIFICENT! Thank God I am an Englishman! You will be glad to hear that she is now, after all, safe in port. The Invincible had just blown up—the Queen Mary ten minutes earlier; SHE had just been winged, and that was her reply—perfectly spontaneous cheering from her crew.

I remember, too, dashing out from where we had been to strafe the Hun destroyers. Somebody said “Submarine!” We looked again, and saw it was a destroyer bottom up. None of ours had been near there.

I remember dashing out again to strafe destroyers, and finding their whole line of battle instead. THAT was exciting; but, too, it was one of life’s cherished moments when we had returned “to the fold,” and a thumping great battleship made a signal; “Who is firing at you?” and we replied: “The enemy’s battle fleet.” Rien que ça!

There was also that Evening Starshell, descending like the Dove of Peace over the troubled waters, about which I wrote to mother. I would not have missed that for the world.

Now judge ye! The Huns say they “went north on an enterprise”; that they encountered the British fleet, and returned to port. What of their “enterprise”? Is that a victory? The Huns have repeatedly “come out to look for
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the British Navy and not found it." Well, this time they found it. What did they do with it? True, they made good their escape! Is that a victory? The Huns have had to remain in their harbours, save for furtive excursions from time to time; and they have to-day. Does victory bear such fruits? The Huns met us just off their own coast, on May 31st—June 1st, saw the British fleet searching for them just outside their minefields, and furious at missing them. It saw them in harbour, rubbing their hands—over what? Over a victory? No! but because they had escaped with their lives. We get an idea from all this as to what Germany and the Germans describe as "victories" in this war. Add to this that they lost no ships and we lost six. But we know that they did lose ships, of their best; that those that went back were much more battle-scarred than ours which came back. The "triumphant" Hun just chuckles because he has met us and has not been annihilated.

We, indeed, are not triumphant; we are very unhappy because we were not able to annihilate him as we had hoped to; but be quite sure that if we had got at him on a clear day; if we had sighted him at 4 a.m. instead of at 4 p.m. on that day, it would be a very small Hun now, counting, not the ships that he had lost but the few that remained to him. Do not think I am "talking big"; I know of what I speak. We only hope against hope that he will be encouraged by Wednesday to come out and give us battle. But seeing that he is run by intelligent men, who know exactly what their losses were, and whose only mistake was that they were, by inadvertence, caught at sea by us when they did not expect us—caught by us and not by the Wolff Burea—we very much fear that we may have seen the last of them for a long time to come.

It interests us to know that the morale of the Hun sailor is good. We don't talk about either our morale or our womenfolk's honour; these are things every Briton takes for granted; but if you are thinking at all about these things, you may well remember that little shattered destroyer, her head held high, her
guts hanging out, and cheering as she came. Also, you will perhaps be edified to hear that our greatest consolation for our deep sorrow that some of us should have been taken from our midst, is, "well anyhow those Harwich devils were not there; they missed this show." We have been chronically jealous of the Harwich brigade, who have had all the fun of the war; and now at long last we have come by our own. We are as cock-a-hoop as a girl who has been to a dance which her sister has missed. Do you think that such is the spirit of a man who feels sore? No! but I don't deny the disappointment.

We are fed up that those dear ships should have encountered accidents; but I for one would forty million times rather have that action over again, just as it was, than not at all. The pack is blooded at last, and is spoiling for a fight—even more, now that it knows what a real fight is like. Perhaps it is that we feel that we have not done ourselves full justice; it is a feeling that nobody who has ever played a great game in his life, or the speaker who has made a speech, I suppose, has escaped at some time or other; and it is usually due to untoward circumstances—this time to fog. Next time I am sure we shall have luck, and Victory too.

And for you at home, who feel badly about the lost men, remember that we are not quite like the Army, where almost every man nowadays is a simple volunteer, come out like old W. to do his bit and save the world. We are most of us here of very early malice prepense; and because long before the war we thought an adventurous life on "the rolling deep" would suit our style of beauty. We are real professionals—all'e samee gladiators—we rejoice at the opportunity given us to put in some good work at our own job, and to justify our existence; but we are NOT quite in the same category as the poor fellows who have jumped out of civic life and forsaken all to follow the bloody path of Duty. We are just pursuing our ordinary avocation; and if any girl is married to one of us—well, she married with her eyes open. WE were sacrificed years since on the
altar, not of Hymen but of Mars. The sacrifice is but consummated in the case of our dear fellows on my old Invincible.

It is a fine life while one is at it; not, indeed, this rotten poking about in port, and patrolling on winter seas; but the genuine thing is, and worth the price paid—certainly well worth the sporting gamble. If I am selected next time, why, dear Pa, you will be sorrier than I; for I at least shall have seen the goddess, and albeit she is fickle and her back is not altogether beautiful, I am prepared to chance her frown, if I chance to see her face and her smile. I am developing; I fear, into a fighting man! But there it is. No, there are no fireworks which equal these—expensive though they must be; and if I could but see a Boche battleship go up in a two-million-pounder holocaust, why, I would be almost prepared to pay cheerfully for such a show my hundred and fifty pounds of flesh and blood. Life is a gamble—this particular life the greatest gamble of all, which makes it so attractive. To you may come a front row seat and have nothing to pay for it, as with me this time. Only the piece was not of the very best this time, for the villain escaped; the great dramatist has blundered in the plot.

Gloomy but yesterday, I am to-day, it seems, full of beans. Love to you all.

P.S.—Here is the King's message to the Fleet. I think no letter from home ever gave me greater pleasure. My personal feeling for him now is one of actual love! Are we wounded? Well, perhaps we are: he has poured balm into our wounds.

FROM A CHILD OF 19 TO ANOTHER OF 17.

Sub-Lieut. and Navigator of H.M. T.B.D. 

......... to Mr......... Midshipman in Hospital after losing his leg in H.M.S.........

H.M.S.............

c/o G.P.O., LONDON.

MY DEAR OLD..........

I have been intending to write and tell
you all about the 31st, but couldn't find your address and could only remember the number.

I'm so awfully sorry you weren't in it. It was rather terrible but a wonderful experience, and I wouldn't have missed it for anything, but, by Jove! it is not a thing one wants to make a habit of.

I must say it's very different from what I expected. I expected to be excited but was not a bit; it's hard to express what we did feel like, but you know the sort of feeling one has when one goes in to bat at cricket and rather a lot depends upon you doing well and you're waiting for the first ball; well, it's very much the same as that—do you know what I mean? A sort of tense feeling waiting for the unknown to happen, and not quite knowing what to expect; one does not feel the slightest bit frightened, and the idea that there's a chance of you and your ship being scuppered does not really enter one's head—there are too many other things to think about.

This ship is just about the latest thing in destroyers and we all transferred, officers and ship's company, from the Beaver here.

We were attached to the Battle Cruisers and were with them throughout the action, so we were probably in the thick of it, as no doubt you saw in the papers that the battle cruisers stood the brunt of the action, and we were in action for about three hours before the battleships arrived upon the scene.

To start with, it was all at such long range that the destroyers were rather out of it, except there were plenty of 15" falling round us, and we just watched. It really seemed rather like a battle practice on a large scale, and we could see the flashes of the German guns on the horizon.

Then they ordered us to attack, so we bustled off at full bore. Being Navigator, also having control of all the guns, I was on the bridge all the time and remained there for twelve hours without leaving it at all.

When we got fairly close I sighted a
good looking Hun destroyer which I thought I'd like to strafe. You know, it's awful fun to know that you can blaze off at a real ship and do as much damage as you like. Well, I'd just got their range on the guns and we'd just fired one round when some more of our destroyers coming from the opposite direction got between us and the enemy and completely blanketed us, so we had to stop firing as the risk of hitting one of our own ships was too great—which was rather rot. Shortly afterwards they recalled us, so we bustled back again. How any destroyers got out of it is perfectly wonderful.

Literally, there were hundreds of "progs" all round us from a 15" to a 4", and you know what a big splash a 15" bursting in the water does make; we got soaked through by the spray.

Just as we were getting back a whole salvo of big shells fell just in front of us and short of our big ships. The Skipper and I did rapid calculations as to how long it would take them to re-load, fire again, time of flight, &c., as we had to go right through the spot. We came to the conclusion that as they were short a bit they would probably go up a bit and didn't, but luckily they altered deflection and the next lot fell just astern of us. Anyhow, we managed to come out of that lot, without the ship or a soul on board being touched.

It's extraordinary the amount of knocking about the big ship can stand. One saw them hit, and they seemed to be one mass of flames and smoke and you think they're gone, but when the smoke clears away they are apparently none the worse and still firing away.

But to see a ship blow up is a terrible, but wonderful sight; an enormous volume of flame and smoke about 200 feet high and great heaps of metal, &c., blown sky-high and then, when the smoke clears away, not a sign of the ship.

We saw one rather extraordinary sight. Of course, you know the N.S. is very shallow. We came across a Hun cruiser absolutely on end. His stern on the bottom and his bow sticking up about 30
feet above the water, and a little further on a destroyer in precisely the same position.

I wouldn't be certain, but I rather think I saw your old ship crashing along and blazing away, but I expect you have heard from some of your pals.

But the night was far and away the worst time of all, and an awful strain. It was pitch dark and, of course, absolutely no lights; and the firing seems so much worse at night as you could see the flashes absolutely lighting up the sky, and it seemed to make much more noise, and you would see ships on fire and blowing up. Of course, we showed absolutely no lights.

One expected to be surprised any minute—and eventually we were. We suddenly found ourselves within 1,000 yards of two or three big Hun cruisers. They switched on their searchlights and started firing like nothing on earth. Then they put their searchlights on us, but for some extraordinary reason did not fire on us. As, of course, we were, going full speed, we'd lost them in a moment, but I must say that I, and I think everybody else, thought that was the end; but one does not feel afraid or panicky. I think I felt rather cooler than than at any other time. I asked lots of people afterwards what they felt like and they all said the same thing. It all happens in a few seconds, one hasn't got time to think, but never in all my life have I been so thankful to see daylight again—and I don't think I ever want to see another night like that—it's such an awful strain; one does not notice it at the time, but it's the reaction afterwards. I never noticed I was tired till I got back to harbour, and then we all turned in and absolutely slept like dogs. We were 72 hours with little or no sleep. The Skipper was perfectly wonderful—he never left the bridge for a minute for 24 hours and was either on the bridge or in the chart house the whole time we were out, and I've never seen anybody so cool and unruffled. He stood there sucking his pipe as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening.

One quite forgot all about time. I was relieved at 4 a.m., and on looking at my
watch found I had been up there nearly 12 hours, and then discovered I was rather hungry. The Skipper and I had some cheese and biscuits, ham sandwiches and water on the bridge, and then I went down and brewed some cocoa, and ship biscuits.

I had my camera on the bridge the whole time and took several photographs when there was a chance, but all at rather long range and the light was not good, so I doubt if they will be good—especially as the Skipper tried to take one when I wasn’t there, and not knowing anything about it took the front off instead of opening the back. Luckily it was at the last film so I hope it hasn’t spoilt the lot. If they do come out they should be rather interesting and I’ll send you prints. I also kept a rough sort of diary of the proceedings.

Well, I don’t know if there’s anything else to tell you.

Of course I want some leave frightfully badly, but don’t think there’s much chance of it at present, and ours isn’t due till September.

What do you think of our writing paper? Rather hot stuff, isn’t it? It was designed by the Skipper and myself; don’t criticise the motto—it probably isn’t correct Latin, but it’s supposed to mean “Beware of the Bird” (Cave Rostrum)!

I wonder how old Haslar is getting on. Pretty full and busy, I expect, and the bread and butter thin now, and probably reduced to three slices at tea—“War Economy!”

I’m trying to get my fiancée up here, but the trouble is she does not know anybody where she could stay, and it’s a deuce of a long way. She can’t very well come up and stay in a hotel by herself, so we’re hard at work trying to think out some plan.

Yours ever,