

"AWAY ALOFT"



H.M.S. NEPTUNE (Flagship).

JUTLAND:
BATTLE FLEET ACTION
from the
Fore-top of H.M.S. Neptune

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An extract from
“The Fighting at Jutland”

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HMS Neptune

Narrative of a Midshipman Stationed in the Fore-top of H.M.S. "Neptune"

(19th Ship in the Battle Line, 6th Ship from the Rear)

My action station was in the control top, some 60 or 70 feet above the upper deck, access to which could be gained either by ascending an interminably long iron ladder running up the interior of the mast, or by climbing up outside the tripod by means of iron rungs rivetted on the struts. Experience of the difficulties of ascent had induced me some time ago to have made a blue jean bag, in whose capacious interior I always kept the thousand and one gadgets so essential for the proper and comfortable fighting of an action - ear protectors, binoculars, a stop watch, a pistol, a camera, a respirator, sundry scarves, woollen helmet, and so forth. It was armed with this weighty "battle-bag" that I clambered up the starboard strut of the foremast, past the steam siren (which sizzled ominously as one approached it ; it is an abominable experience to have a siren actually siren when you are near to it !), through a belt of hot acrid funnel smoke, and finally into the top through the "lubber's" hole.

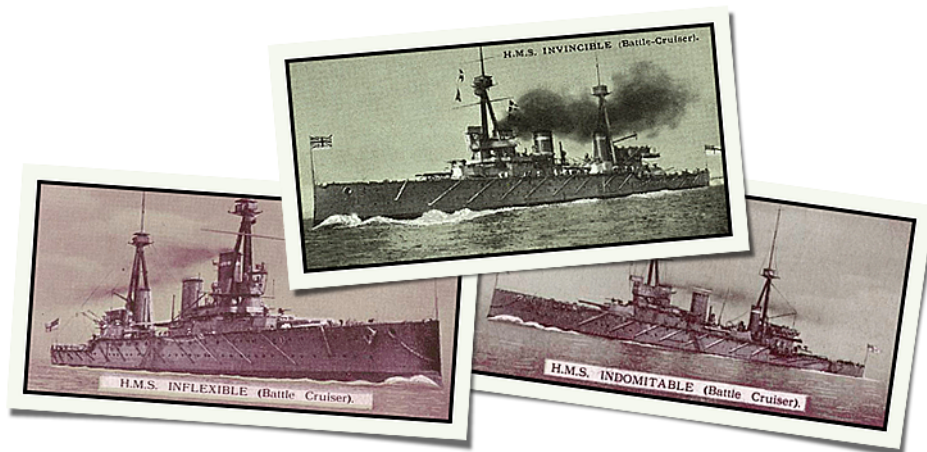


The fleet was steaming in six columns of four ships each, and with the attendant destroyers, stretched as far as the eye could see. The course was approximately south-east. The sea was fairly smooth, and the visibility about 17,000 yards. The arrival of the gunnery officer completed our crew, the manholes were shut down, and after the preliminary testing of communications had been done, the turrets were trained out on the beam, and we settled down to a long wait. If the powers that be knew that there was anything in the wind, I must say they kept it to themselves very well. The first inkling that I received that there might soon be something doing was when I noticed that some of the older ships of the 1st Battle Squadron were finding it difficult to keep up with their younger sisters in the other squadrons. Messages of encouragement and regret were passed to them, but still the fleet swept on. Shortly afterwards I noticed that several ships were flying, instead of the customary one ensign, three or four ensigns from various parts of the rigging, and, sure enough, the squeak of our halliard

blocks announced that we were following suit. I don't know who started it, but in about ten minutes the air seemed to be thick with white ensigns, large and small, silk and bunting, hoisted wherever halliards could be rove.

By about 5.30 p.m. we had still seen nothing of the enemy, although we had received, and eagerly read, messages from the battle cruiser force telling us that the Germans were out and were in close action with our battle cruisers and with the 5th B.S. Soon afterwards all hands were sent to tea, and I was left alone in the fore-top as look-out, but five minutes after the last man had left, the sound of gunfire, heavy gunfire, came from the south. A minute later five columns of smoke appeared on the starboard bow and the flashes of guns became visible. All hands came running back to their stations; meanwhile the situation developed with startling rapidity.

Beatty's battle cruisers, for such the five columns of smoke proved to be, came into sight steaming at high speed to the north-east, and firing heavily towards the southward at an enemy which was out of our sight. Hood's squadron of *Invincible*, *Indomitable*, and *Inflexible* had gone on ahead to join Beatty. The leading ship of Beatty's squadron, *Lion* it was I suppose, seemed to be on fire forward, and the other ships all appeared to have received some damage. The noise rapidly became almost deafening. The *Lion* was leading her squadron across the front of the battle squadrons within 3 miles of the leading battleships, and accordingly the battle fleet reduced to 12 knots to allow them to cross and drive aside the German battle cruisers. The High Seas Fleet had not yet sighted the Grand Fleet, and were still steaming towards us.



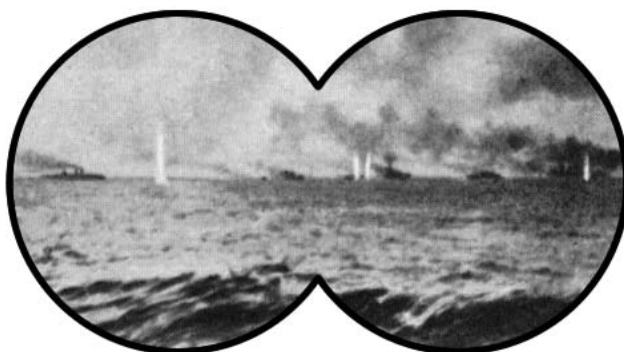
Shortly after 6 o'clock the flashes of the guns of the High Seas Fleet became visible, and the Grand Fleet commenced to deploy to port, turning to north-east and then to east-south-east, so bringing our starboard broadsides to bear on the enemy. The *Marlborough* was the battleship leading the starboard wing column of the fleet, and was, therefore, the nearest battleship to the enemy, and the first to open fire. The remainder of the fleet followed suit as soon as they had deployed. I shall not easily forget the dramatic atmosphere of the initial phase of the battle. The effect of the order "Load" was to create a sort of stupor, everything was happening so suddenly, it all seemed too good to be true. The opening salvo of the *Marlborough* brought an end to that unpleasant period of comparative inactivity, and thereafter our hands were full. My impressions of the following hour were naturally somewhat vague, there was so much to do, and so much to see. I remember the dreary monotone of the range-finder operator calling out the ranges, I remember the gunnery officer and the Captain discussing through the voice-pipe the advisability of withholding fire until the ammunition could be most effectively used. I remember training my Dumaresq¹ on to the target - a battle cruiser of the *Lutzow* class - and working out the "rate," which was probably much in error. I remember the ecstatic comments of the director layer in the tower below us when we had found the target and later saw that we were hitting, and I well remember the opening salvo from our guns, in earnest at last.

A few minutes after we opened fire, the *Defence* and *Warrior* appeared on our engaged side, steaming on an opposite course. The ships were practically continuously hidden by splashes, were being repeatedly hit by heavy shells, and must have been going through hell on

¹ An instrument for calculating the rate at which two ships are opening or closing each other.

earth. The *Defence*, which was leading, was just about abeam of the *Neptune* and barely a mile away, when she was hit heavily and blew up in one fearful cloud of smoke and debris. The fore-top fell with a sickening splash into the water and then the *Warrior*, herself damaged, listing to starboard and in places on fire, raced over the spot where the *Defence* had been only a moment before, through the smoke cloud of *Defence's* explosion.

The two fleets were now heavily engaged, but the enemy were rapidly becoming more indistinct in the gathering haze, which was so soon to end the action. Whether this failure of visibility was just North Sea cussedness, or whether it was due to the heavy and continual gunfire I cannot say, but if it had not been for the flashes of the enemy's guns we should have had difficulty in picking out any target.



It is a curious sensation being under heavy fire at a long range. The time of flight seems more like 30 minutes than the 30 or so seconds that it actually is. A great rippling gush of flame breaks out from the enemy's guns some miles away, and then follows a pause, during which one can reflect that somewhere in that great "no man's land" 2 or 3 tons of metal and explosive are hurtling towards one. The mountainous splashes which announce the arrival of each successive salvo rise simultaneously in bunches of four or five to an immense height. One or two salvos fell short of us early in the action, and the remainder, I suppose, must have gone over as I did not see them. The *Hercules*, four ships astern of us, had been straddled on deployment, a feat which had greatly impressed me with the capabilities of the German gunnery, but, with the exception of the *Colossus* which received a 12-inch shell in the fore-superstructure and sundry small stuff round about her fo'csle, no single battleship suffered any real damage from the German's gunfire. The enemy however clearly received some punishment as two battle cruisers, which were rather closer than were their other ships, were engaged by us and by most ships of the rear squadron at one time or another, and we saw at least two of our salvos hit, after which the two enemy battle cruisers dropped astern, to all appearances badly damaged. The warm, red glow of a "hit" is easily distinguishable from the flash of a salvo, and is extremely pleasant to look upon.



HMS *Birmingham* with a large salvo falling close to her



The British Grand Fleet battle line

Our fleet was stretched out in one long, single line, and presented a marvellously impressive spectacle as salvo after salvo rolled out along the line, adding to the fearful din which the enemy's shells and various other battle factors were already making. At 6.20 we were firing at 12,000 yards with common and lyddite shells. About this time the *Invincible*, which was leading the whole line, was struck by a salvo, turned nearly 180 degrees to starboard in her death agony, and lay burning and helpless. Her back was broken and her fore part was twisted round and upside down, giving her, when shortly afterwards we passed her 150 yards distant on our disengaged side, the appearance of having a swan bow. At the time we couldn't identify what ship it was. (6.32 p.m.).



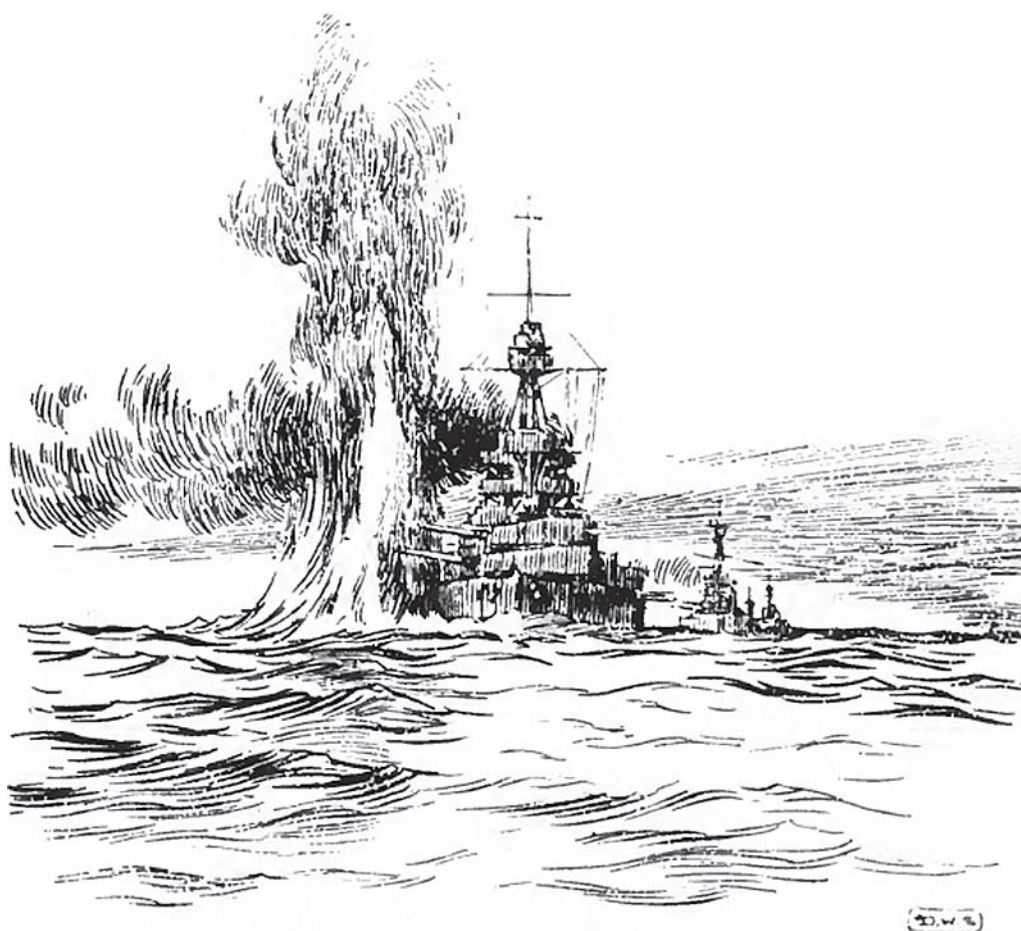
Actual photograph of *Invincible* exploding

German destroyers were now (about 6.40 p.m.?) observed ahead of the German battle cruiser *Lutzow*, and soon afterwards they turned towards us to attack. Our secondary armament opened fire and scored a hit or two, but their attack was successfully made and a number of torpedoes were fired, which gave us a few anxious minutes. One torpedo crossed the line immediately under *Neptune's* stern, and directly afterwards two other parallel tracks were spotted which seemed to be coming straight for us. The ship was turned under full helm and our stern put towards the track of the torpedoes, but we only avoided being hit by inches.¹

¹ The full account of this "dodging" has been separated from the narrative and will be found in Chapter VIII "German Destroyer Attacks", page 133 of *The Fighting at Jutland*.

About this time several other battleships besides the *Neptune* were hauling out of the line dodging torpedoes, with the result that the line became considerably lengthened, and was irregular in places where ships were trying to regain their station. We had dropped astern, and for some seven minutes the *St. Vincent* was directly between us and the enemy, and we were unable to fire.

Just after we had successfully dodged the torpedoes, we heard, or more exactly perhaps felt, a dull concussion and saw the *Marlborough* haul out of the line to port listing heavily. She had been hit by a torpedo, but a few minutes later she regained her position in the line with only a slight list, and we saw her firing again strongly.



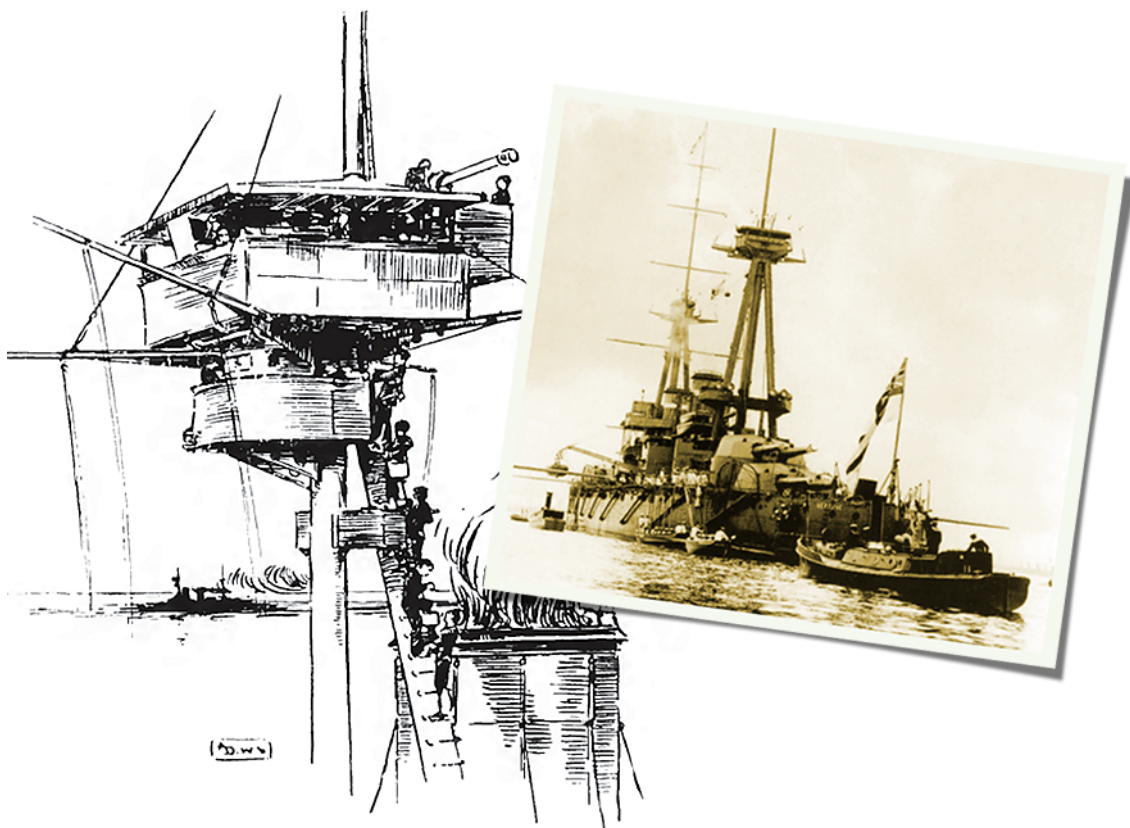
The torpedoing of HMS *Marlborough*, drawn by an officer present at the battle.

I remember several small events which happened about now, but I cannot give the exact time of them. We fired a few rounds at a German light cruiser which was lying disabled between the lines, a target for a number of our battleships that were unable to see the enemy big ships clearly. She was in a sorry condition, minus her foremast and one funnel, blazing fore and aft and apparently almost sinking. She must have been no more than a floating shambles, and we only fired two salvos at her. They said afterwards that she was probably the *Rostock*.¹

We passed a disabled destroyer on our starboard bow, very close to us, but she was one of ours - the *Acasta*. She was badly holed forward and aft and was much down by the bows, but the crew were clustered aft cheering us and the other ships as we passed, and then she disappeared astern rolling heavily in the wash of the battle fleet but with her ensign still flying, apparently not "done for" yet.

¹ *Rostock* was sunk during the night. Probably was the *Wiesbaden*.

The visibility now was fast going from bad to worse. A few fires in the enemy ships and an occasional burst of firing pointed out what was presumably the German Fleet, now to the westward of us ; but I suppose that about this time it was decided that it was impossible to continue the big ship action in the twilight and dark and, as we were between the enemy and Germany, that we should wait until the next morning. The Grand Fleet must have been practically invisible to the German ships for some little time now, for as we worked round to the eastward of them they were silhouetted against the light of the sunset whilst our background was a mass of dark cloud.



The fore-top of HMS *Neptune*

At 11.0 p.m. I got down from the top for a spell. There was an awful litter of stuff everywhere between decks, chiefly made by the shock of our broadsides dislodging loosely stowed gear. I found the gunnery lieutenant gazing into his cabin, speechless, for the electric radiator had been overwhelmed by the tin bath landing on it from above, all the drawers had shaken out, and his clothes were in a melee on the floor with much other odd matter. Moreover, the fire brigade party, zealous to guard against the chance of the cabin catching fire, had played their hose into the midst, thoughtfully filling the bath at the same time.

We had a comic supper in the gun-room, everybody talking at once and trying to eat at the same time. The inevitable gramophone was recovered from a temporary stowage which it had found on the deck, and well-worn tunes were once more played. About ten minutes to midnight a messenger came in, looking as dirty and weird as a traveller from the infernal regions, to report that all hands would go to action stations again at 2 a.m. Till then we tried to sleep, but thoughts of that torpedo almost hitting us, of the *Acasta*, of the *Marlborough*, of the shapeless hump of the *Invincible*, and all the other incidents of the action, made any sleep difficult. And there was always the question paramount in our thoughts, "When should we renew the action ? Would it be at any moment now during the night, at point blank range in the darkness, or at daylight tomorrow ?"

At 2 a.m. we were all back at our action stations, the same lot of us in the top as yesterday, but we met no enemy ships, only a Zeppelin airship. Soon after noon, June 1st, the ship's company were dispersed from action stations, and I descended with my "battle-bag,"

having been seventeen hours in the top. I was obsessed with a sudden desire for sleep, and lots of it, but on arrival in the gun-room I found that the same idea had apparently occurred to the others, for all the settees and chairs were full of sleepers, unshaved, unkempt, and unwashed. So I took a place on the deck.

When we got back to Scapa we had a long coaling, then had to get in ammunition, and also there was some oil fuel to see about. The papers next morning said nothing about any naval activity, and we were not allowed to mention anything of it in our letters, but three days later we received the papers of the 3rd June, and were horrified to read the Admiralty statement of our losses and the incomplete list of the German losses. When we heard that our seamen going to hospital had been jeered at and "boo'ed" by some shore folk, it was almost too much but to talk about that is perhaps not within my province.

“What Better Way To Discover What Happened At Jutland Than From Someone Who Was Actually There?”

This account was taken from *The Fighting at Jutland* which includes rare photographs, diagrams, sketches and 45 eyewitness accounts of the Battle of Jutland – from the initial sighting of the German High Seas Fleet to the next morning when charred and crippled warships limped back into harbor.

The Fighting at Jutland is just one of the superb components of The Ultimate Battle of Jutland Resource Pack, which includes exclusive graphics, maps, hundreds of photographs, rare documents, pictorial newspapers and much more.

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