

1918, VICTORY AT SEA

*Who strangled all our Enemies by Blockade?
Who drove the High Seas Fleet to Mutiny?
Who beat the U-boats?
Who carried and protected our Soldiers and Food?
Who saved us from Invasion?*

THE NAVY. God Bless Them!

Sir Eric Geddes, First Lord of the Admiralty,
11 November 1918

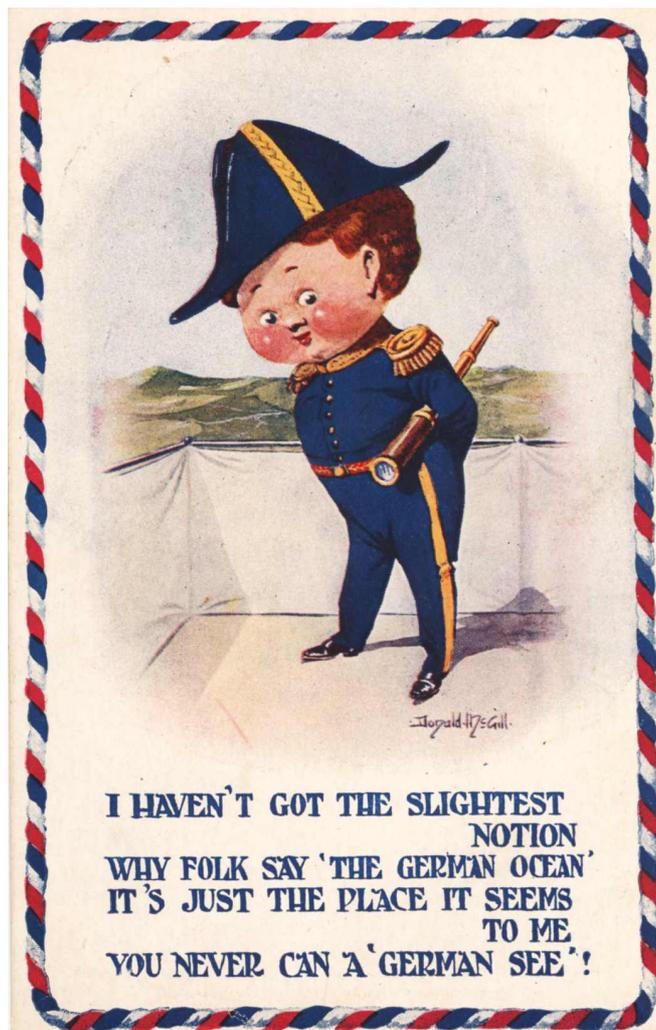
Much of the media and academic commentary on Australian Defence Force (ADF) capabilities displays a regrettable tendency to try and match like with like at the unit level, usually making little reference to the activities of enabling or contributing forces. Hence, comments are made that 'navies exist to fight navies' or, when analysing the potential of the new Joint Strike Fighter, dogfighting comparisons are made directly with Russian fighter designs. The problem with this type of approach is that in a modern joint force few if any elements are designed to deploy and operate alone. Indeed, the need for Australia to maintain a balanced defence force has as much to do with mutual support as it does the ADF's ability to operate across the operational spectrum. More seriously, by ignoring the contribution made by diverse force elements it is easy to overlook the combination of factors which may bring about ultimate success in an operation or campaign.

Commemorations surrounding the 90th anniversary of the World War I Armistice illustrate the problem. For obvious reasons the focus of much of the commentary in Australia has always been on the victory on the Western Front. Here the struggle was at its most brutal and personal, with the successful Allied land offensives in the final months a welcome relief after the stalemate of preceding years. The sacrifice of those who fought and died in the trenches is clearly worth remembering, yet it is essential to keep in mind that this aspect was only part of a wider picture.

The war at sea is one aspect that often receives little recognition, yet its significance to the outcome was by no means secondary. To put it simply, the war could not have been won if the Allied countries had not been supplied with adequate quantities of food for their people and raw material for their industries. Neither could their armies have been sustained in the field without adequate munitions, logistic supplies and regular reinforcements. As ever all this cargo had to be moved by sea, and thus the maintenance of adequate shipping tonnage remained of prime concern throughout the war. Indeed, both sides saw the war's economic dimension as decisive. The German Naval Staff advised the Kaiser in 1916: 'Our war aim, apart from destroying the English Fleet as the principal means by which Britain controls its Empire, is to reduce its total economy in the quickest possible time, bringing Great Britain to sue for unconditional peace'.¹

Fortunately, 1918 was not a year of naval crisis for the Allies. The challenge posed by Germany's unrestricted U-Boat campaign had been finally met during 1917 by the progressive introduction of convoy and by the deployment

of increasing numbers of escort vessels and aircraft. For Britain's wartime prime minister, David Lloyd George, this marked the real decision point of the conflict.² Not only did the failure of the U-boats ensure survival at home and the continuance of the war effort, but it also precipitated the German Army's ultimately fatal offensives of Spring 1918.



A World War I postcard attests to German unwillingness to challenge the Royal Navy's supremacy in the North Sea (German Ocean)

Meanwhile, the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet (which included HMA Ships *Australia*, *Sydney* and *Melbourne*) continued their prolonged face off across the North Sea. Relative inactivity should not be equated with marginalisation. Each fleet understood the threat they posed to the other. But whereas the German commander recognised that he could not risk battle except under the most favourable circumstances, his British counterpart was well aware that he was 'the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon'.³ The Grand Fleet therefore pursued a successful policy of containment, ready to pounce should the Germans appear in the North Sea, but unwilling to risk situations where a local

preponderance of strength could rapidly be nullified or even reversed. Far less explicit, the Grand Fleet's unseen authority also backed the enforcement of Britain's most important strategic weapon, the maritime blockade.

With the entry of the United States in April 1917 the blockade, instituted in the first two days of the war, became as complete as it could be. Cut off from most sources of raw materials the Central Powers were placed at a progressively greater situation of disadvantage, while at the same time the Allied war effort was increasingly supplemented by American industry and agriculture.

The Germans had expected the blockade, but had greatly underestimated its effects. As 1918 wore on the domestic situation grew more acute. The blockade operated with varying effect against rich and poor, but from the latter part of 1917 the average urban citizen survived on a diet of only 1000 calories (approx. 4.19 kilojoules). The recommended daily intake for an adult male is something over 2200 calories (approx. 9.2 kilojoules) depending on activity levels. By Germany's own post-war reckoning, deaths attributable to the blockade numbered more than 760,000.⁴ By way of contrast this figure is more than twice the number of German civilians killed by the strategic bombing campaign during World War II and broadly comparable to the numbers killed during the parallel campaign conducted against Japan.⁵

In both Germany and Austria-Hungary there were major food riots in January 1918 with 250,000 workers affected in Berlin alone. Internal discord continued to spread gradually but surely, reaching its climax with the mutiny in the High Seas Fleet in October. There can be little argument that prolonged privation and growing hunger appreciably reduced the ability of the German people to endure wartime hardships, sapping their strength while magnifying every disaffection with their government. The resultant impact on the war's end was crucial.

During the early Armistice negotiations, commanders on both sides were confident that, if required, German forces in France and Belgium could hold out until at least the spring of 1919. Up to within a week of the Armistice there was no consensus in the Allied militaries that the German Army could not maintain the shorter line to which they were retiring.⁶ The ultimate result was already beyond doubt, but for the German leadership the greater the delay the greater their hopes for a negotiated peace. Yet as Clausewitz reminds us, waging war demands the support of a trinity of national forces: not only the Army, but also the people and the government.⁷ In November 1918 revolution was rife in Germany; the government was in turmoil and the nation a riderless horse. With the German people no longer willing to take part in the defence of their country, they could not long be protected.

In one of the more poignant scenes from the war's close, on the evening of 15 November, Rear Admiral Hugo Meurer, acting as plenipotentiary for the German Navy, faced Admiral Sir David Beatty, across the table in the fore cabin of the Grand Fleet's flagship, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Responding to Beatty's presentation of the Armistice conditions, Meurer retailed in 'dull, low, weary tones' the effect of the blockade on his fatherland:

It had brought Revolution in the North which had spread to the South then to East and finally to the

West ...Anarchy was rampant, the seed was sown. It remained for the harvest of human lives to be reaped Men, women, and children were dying of starvation and dropping down in the streets.... Children under six were non-existent ...Germany was destroyed utterly.⁸

A week later the German Fleet steamed out of its bases to be interned at Scapa Flow, and the Grand Fleet came out in two divisions to meet it. The Royal Australian Navy's flagship, *Australia*, had the honour of leading the port line at the head of her squadron. *Melbourne* and *Sydney* were also there taking their places among the light cruisers. The surrender of such a fleet without a battle was unprecedented, and many senior Germans, among them the Navy's Commander-in-Chief Admiral von Scheer, looked upon the event as further proof that Germany had been defeated first of all economically: 'It was England's privilege to extend the war to the economic sphere in an unheard-of manner. The fight for sea commerce was to lead to the strangling of the whole German people.'⁹



The battlecruiser HMAS Australia at the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in the Firth of Forth, 21 November 1918, by Arthur Burgess (AWM ART00192)

Perhaps because they usually operate over the horizon and out of sight, the activities of Australia's naval forces seem particularly prone to strategic ignorance. Yet, it has long been accepted that navies fight at sea only for the strategic effect they can secure ashore, where people live. They are primarily a means to gain strategic leverage.¹⁰ For those wishing to understand the role of maritime forces in the future ADF it is a feature worth remembering.

¹ Memorandum 6 January 1916, cited in E Rössler, *The U-boat*, Arms & Armour Press, London, 1981, p. 63.

² Cited in J Terraine, *The U-boat Wars, 1916-1945*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1989, p. 101

³ WS Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Vol I, Odhams, London, 1925, ch. 5.

⁴ AC Bell, *A History of the Blockade of Germany 1914-1918*, Historical Section, Committee of Imperial Defence, 1937, pp. 671, 672.

⁵ WWII civilian deaths attributable to bombing: Germany, 305,000; Japan, 806,000. See 'The Effects of Bombing on German Morale', *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, p. 7; and, *Summary Report* (Pacific War), p. 92.

⁶ See Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, pp. 835, 849.

⁷ M Howard, *Clausewitz*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 73.

⁸ WS Chalmers, *The Life and Letters of David Beatty Admiral of the Fleet*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1951, pp. 344-5

⁹ Admiral Scheer, *Germany's High Seas Fleet*, The Battery Press, Nashville, 2002 (Reprint of 1920 edition), p. 359.

¹⁰ C Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power*, New York, Free Press, 1992, p. 1.

