An ‘intermediate’ blockade? British North Sea Strategy 1912-14

British naval strategy in the First World War era has become a topic of considerable historical debate in the last two decades. Whilst opinions have diverged on a range of important issues, scholars remain united in the belief that the Royal Navy entered the First World War intending to operate a strategy commonly referred to as the ‘distant blockade’.[[1]](#footnote--1) This approach was characterised by the concentration of Britain’s naval forces at the exits to the North Sea, with the intention of strangling German oceanic trade with the outside world. Such a strategy would enable the Royal Navy to exert significant pressure upon Germany, without exposing the valuable units of Britain’s Grand Fleet to the growing threat of German underwater weaponry inside the North Sea. It is generally accepted that the ‘distant blockade’ was adopted as the result of the increasing difficulties involved in enacting the Navy’s ‘traditional’ strategy; a ‘close’ blockade of the enemy coastline.[[2]](#footnote-0) We are told that, once the Admiralty had accepted the impracticality of the ‘close’ blockade in the face of modern underwater weaponry in early 1912, it was forced to retreat the squadrons previously allocated to operations off the German littoral by degrees further and further back into the North Sea. This apparently resulted in an abortive attempt to enforce what scholars now refer to as an ‘intermediate blockade’; a line of vessels stretched across the mid-North Sea, before the Admiralty finally settled upon the ‘distant’ blockade at the end of 1912.[[3]](#footnote-1) Britain’s naval leadership has thus been depicted as being hostage to the relentless pace of technological change, which it was intellectually and institutionally incapable of effectively translating into strategic solutions to what became known in the corridors of the Admiralty as the ‘North Sea problem’. Scholars have held up the ‘intermediate blockade’ in particular as a prime example of such shortcomings in naval administration in the years before the First World War.

However, a detailed re-examination of the surviving documentary material reveals the existing interpretations of British naval strategy between 1912 and 1914 to be open to serious question. This article will argue that historians have hitherto fundamentally misunderstood the development of Admiralty strategy between the abandonment of operations directly off the German coastline in April 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War. Rather than the abortive ‘intermediate blockade’ identified by earlier writers, the Admiralty in fact adopted a strategy of mid-North Sea patrols in mid-1912. This strategy was persisted with until early 1914 when, recognising the patrol’s vulnerability to being overwhelmed by superior German forces, the Admiralty elected to revert to earlier plans for major ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea with the entire Grand Fleet. After the outbreak of war, however, Admiral Sir John Rushworth Jellicoe, the newly promoted C-in-C of the Grand Fleet, successfully petitioned the Admiralty to revert to the earlier system of patrols it had adhered to between 1912 and 1914. A version of the mid-North Sea patrols was thus re-introduced in late 1914, obliging the Navy to continue grappling with the strategic dilemma it had faced between 1912 and 1914 for the remainder of the First World War. Knowledge of the true course of Admiralty strategic thought in this period will underline the vital importance of the immediate pre-war period to our understanding of British naval strategy during the First World War. Furthermore, accurately understanding the strategic situation with which the naval leadership grappled after 1912 will highlight the fluidity and dynamism of the Admiralty’s planning process. It will also reveal the dangers implicit in the recent trend amongst scholars of eschewing attempts to explain how the Royal Navy actually intended to fight the German Fleet before and during the First World War.

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The shortcomings of the existing analysis of British naval strategy in the immediate pre-war period are primarily the product of the failure of scholars accurately to comprehend the development of British blockade policy before 1914. Historians have correctly identified the abandonment of a close observation of the German coastline in early 1912 as an important point in the development of Admiralty thinking in the pre-war period. However, the true significance of this event upon the formation of British naval strategy, both before and throughout the First World War, has been vastly underrated. Rather than focusing upon the seismic shift in British strategy dictated by the sacrifice of attempts to observe German egress into the North Sea, historians have instead concentrated their attention upon the supposed inadequacy of the strategy with which the Admiralty attempted to replace the ‘close’ blockade. This has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring what was arguably the defining strategic problem that faced the Admiralty from 1912 until the end of the First World War; that of how to reliably detect German movements in the North Sea, from two generations of scholars. As a result, until now, scholars have systematically failed to reconcile the direction of travel of Admiralty strategic planning before the outbreak of war in 1914 with the Navy’s wartime experience. In order to remedy this lacuna, a brief examination of how the existing literature has treated the Admiralty’s strategic planning process in the immediate pre-war period is required.

The principal features of the narrative of pre-war Admiralty planning were established by the pioneering work of the American scholar Arthur J. Marder in the 1960s. Marder’s work inaugurated what has proven to be an enduring interpretive framework, which almost all subsequent scholars have viewed the surviving documents through. He painted a picture of a gradual withdrawal of British naval forces from the German coastline, into the mid-North Sea and then finally to the English Channel and North of Scotland.[[4]](#footnote-2) This approach served to reconcile the voluminous early plans for war against Germany produced under the leadership of Sir John Fisher between 1904 and 1910 with the reality of the Navy’s wartime experience.[[5]](#footnote-3) Basing his analysis upon the extensive number of planning documents drawn up by the Fisher regime preserved in the Admiralty Papers, Marder correctly identified that, before 1911, the Admiralty had projected a ‘close’ blockade of the German coastline. Such an operation would involve the deployment of large numbers of British destroyers off the German North Sea coastline in order to suppress enemy torpedo boats and flotilla craft. This would allow the British Fleet to approach the enemy coast with relative impunity, in order to support the inshore destroyer flotillas and to engage the enemy fleet, should it put to sea. However, after 1911 Marder considered that such a strategy had become ‘too risky’ due to the development of increasingly effective torpedoes, submarines and mines. By this point, he claimed, ‘no admiral would have undertaken to keep a squadron cruising constantly in the [Heligoland] Bight’.[[6]](#footnote-4) On this basis, Marder therefore suggested that, ‘in the middle of 1912’, the Admiralty adopted plans to mount what he described as an ‘observational blockade’ of the Heligoland Bight. This involved ‘stretching a *line* of cruisers and destroyers’ across the North Sea, from the Norwegian coastline to the latitude of Newcastle and then south, running in parallel with the east coast of the United Kingdom.[[7]](#footnote-5) Notwithstanding his inaccurate use of the term ‘observational blockade’, which contemporary planners understood to refer to the use of flotilla craft to watch an enemy fleet in port, Marder clearly stated his belief that the Admiralty intended to replace the ‘close’ blockade of the German coastline with a *line* of vessels, strung across the North Sea. He did not hesitate in stating his opinion that the plans had ‘serious weaknesses’ and that watching such a line, which would extend to over three hundred miles in length, would have been ‘impractical’. However, he concluded his analysis of pre-war Admiralty planning by noting that ‘fortune intervened on behalf of the Navy’ and, on the eve of war, the plans were abandoned, ‘distant blockade’ being adopted as the Navy’s primary North Sea strategy in the last set of pre-war plans, which were issued in July 1914.[[8]](#footnote-6) This interpretation appeared effectively to bridge the earlier plans for a ‘close’ blockade with the reality of the Navy’s experience during the War and continues to define the work of current scholars.

Indeed, subsequent writers have largely upheld Marder’s interpretation, albeit with modifications to his chronology. Whilst he disputes the legitimacy of the planning conducted under Fisher before 1910, the revisionist historian Nicholas A. Lambert concurs with Marder that by mid-1912 the newly formed Admiralty War Staff intended to deploy a *line* of warships across the North Sea to detect enemy movements. Using a phrase coined by Churchill, Lambert refers to this strategy as the ‘intermediate blockade’ and agrees with Marder’s analysis that the scheme was a complete failure, noting his belief that ‘even at the time the weaknesses of the plan were transparent’.[[9]](#footnote-7) As final proof of the Admiralty’s intellectual bankruptcy in adopting such an unworkable scheme, Lambert suggests that it was left to the civilian First Lord of the Admiralty and renown ‘amateur strategist’ Winston Churchill to identify the plan’s limitations and to intervene to prevent their acceptance without prior experiment.[[10]](#footnote-8) We are told that the resulting dismal failure of the ‘intermediate blockade’ during the summer manoeuvres of 1912 led to the plan’s abandonment before the end of the year.[[11]](#footnote-9) This apparently left the Admiralty searching for an alternative North Sea strategy, a quest Lambert believes resulted in eighteen months of strategic flux, during which a ‘strictly defensive commercial blockade’ appears to have been the naval leaderships’ default position, despite the reservations of several senior figures.[[12]](#footnote-10) Tantalizingly, we are then told that a new consensus, built around ambitious plans to control the North Sea through an extensive use of mines, torpedo craft, submarines and aircraft, was emerging by the time war broke out in August 1914.[[13]](#footnote-11) This theory, which has recently be subject to significant qualification,[[14]](#footnote-12) is part of Lambert’s wider attempts to demonstrate that the Admiralty considered deploying British armoured vessels into the North Sea as highly dangerous and that enlightened planners attempted to avoid such operations at all costs after around 1904.[[15]](#footnote-13) Nevertheless, relying upon Lambert’s analysis, even the best current interpretations of pre-First World War British naval strategy now agree that an ‘intermediate blockade’ was the short-lived precursor to the Admiralty adopting its ‘distant blockade’ in November 1912.[[16]](#footnote-14) Scholars now agree, therefore, that the ‘distant blockade’ was adopted in late 1912, some eighteen months *earlier*than Marder originally argued, and that its acceptance was the direct result of the failure of the so-called ‘intermediate blockade’ during the 1912 naval manoeuvres.

However, a re-examination of the surviving documents is quick to reveal major shortcomings in the existing literature. The exact timing of the adoption of ‘distant blockade’ notwithstanding, scholars remain united in their belief that the Admiralty had adopted the strategy before the outbreak of war. However, war plans transmitted to the Fleet in July 1914 contain provision for a strategy that cannot reasonably be described by the term ‘distant blockade’. The section of the July 1914 plans reproduced in Marder’s own work explained that ‘the maritime domination of the North Sea, upon which our whole policy must be based, will be established as far as practicable *by occasional driving or sweeping movements carried out by the Grand Fleet*’.[[17]](#footnote-15) Marder offered no explanation for the origins or genesis of these sweeps, nor did he apparently consider that such a strategy clearly demonstrated the naval leadership’s unwillingness to rely solely upon a distant blockade to secure British interests in the event of war with Germany. The content of the July 1914 war plans also poses serious questions about revisionist interpretations of British naval strategic planning between the alleged experiments ‘intermediate blockade’ during 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War. As we have seen, Lambert suggests that the ‘line’ of ships projected under the ‘intermediate blockade’ plans was abandoned in late 1912. At this point he alleges that the ‘intermediate blockade’ was temporarily replaced with some form of cruiser patrols in the mid-North Sea, whilst the Admiralty finalized its fledgling plans to mount an extensive mining campaign against the German coastline.[[18]](#footnote-16) This interpretation is clearly incompatible with the substance of the July 1914 war plans quoted by Marder. Deploying the Grand Fleet in major ‘sweeps’ towards the German coastline would surely have been anathema to the Admiralty War Staff if, as Lambert claims, they hoped that their mining strategy would reduce the need to risk armoured warships in waters inhabited by German submarines, torpedo craft and mines.[[19]](#footnote-17) Readers will appreciate that the thrust of the revisionist argument thus appears to be almost diametrically opposed to the trends in Admiralty thought revealed in the July 1914 war plans. The notion that the July war plans replaced an earlier contingency, which involved stringing a ‘line’ of vessels across the North Sea, is equally problematic. No mention of such a strategy appears in the war orders issued to the Fleet during the first half of 1912, when the ‘intermediate blockade’ supposedly came into effect. Indeed, the orders then issued stated that each cruiser squadron and flotilla would be assigned ‘*an area*…over which they will patrol’; no mention was made of a *line* of vessels.[[20]](#footnote-18) The prevailing interpretation of pre-war Admiralty planning does not, therefore, accurately reflect the content of the war orders issued in either 1912 or 1914. More importantly, the existing scholarship has failed to appreciate the true extent to which the changes made to British North Sea strategy in early 1912 came to define the Navy’s strategic discourse until 1918. Since accurate comprehension of the Admiralty’s planning process during this period is dependant upon fully appreciating the significance contemporary naval planners attached to this dramatic shift in the strategic situation prevailing in the North Sea, its full implications require consideration.

In April 1912 the Admiralty had written to Vice-Admiral Sir George Callaghan, the C-in-C of the Home Fleets, informing him that ‘the Blockade by the British Fleet of the whole German Coast on the North Sea is to be considered as cancelled’.[[21]](#footnote-19) This order abrogated the key feature of all previous British naval war planning against Germany: the close observation of German exits to the North Sea. Whilst previous war plans had not all provided for a ‘close’ or ‘sealing’ blockade of German naval forces, all of the strategic plans issued by the Admiralty regarding a war against Germany since 1902 had contained provision for British vessels to watch the enemy fleet during daytime.[[22]](#footnote-20) This would provide the Commander in Chief of the British Fleet in the North Sea and, after the development of increasingly capable wireless telegraphy, the Admiralty, with warning should the enemy put to sea and thus allow time for the British Fleets to respond to German movements. The suppression of German torpedo craft during daylight hours would also enable the British Fleet to traverse the mid-North Sea without undue risk of being attacked by enemy torpedo craft, since the German flotilla would be confined to an area defined by the distance it could travel under the cover of darkness. This fact was keenly appreciated by the Admiralty, which had feared the danger of torpedo attack upon its armoured warships sine the 1890s. In 1908 the Director of Naval Intelligence, Captain Edmond Slade, had pointed out that a Fleet based upon the Firth of Forth would be safe from torpedo attack after war had broken out since ‘it is outside the extreme winter limit which destroyers from Germany can reach if they steam at 20 knots all night it can, therefore, never be attacked unless the destroyers spend some daylight hours at sea *en route*.’[[23]](#footnote-21) However, the abandonment of the blockade of the German coastline in April 1912 meant that, in the event of an Anglo-German war, German warships would be able to put to sea at any time without the Royal Navy knowing of their egress from port. In strategic terms, this lack of observational capability had highly significant implications for the Navy’s ability to command the North Sea during a war with Germany. The Admiralty was keenly aware of this fact. Writing after the 1912 naval manoeuvres, which had supposedly invalidated the ‘intermediate blockade’, Churchill, the First Lord, recorded his view that:

…a considerable element of chance and of risk that important hostile movements will not be reported and intercepted in the early stages is inseparable from all dispositions other than a close blockade.[[24]](#footnote-22)

Churchill continued to espouse similar opinions throughout the following year. Six months later, in March 1913, he explained to the Committee of Imperial Defence Sub-Committee on Overseas Attack that the Navy’s ability to guarantee against hostile landings on the east coast of the British Isles ‘depended upon where the blockading line was drawn’. To the First Lord’s mind ‘the gradual withdrawal of the blockading line from the enemy’s coast facilitated the escape of single ships’.[[25]](#footnote-23) If hostile movements could not be detected directly off the enemy coastline, the Admiralty was faced with two alternatives; to attempt to patrol the vast expanse of the North Sea, or to surrender any attempt to exert British control of the area. Abandoning all attempts to observe German movements would allow German warships to approach the English Channel and the exposed east coast of the United Kingdom unopposed, leaving the way clear for military raids or even the invasion of the British Isles. Furthermore, in the absence of a continuous British flotilla presence off the German coastline, German destroyers and minelayers could penetrate deep into the North Sea unopposed, increasing the risk of torpedo attack upon British squadrons based upon the weekly defended anchorages on the east coast. This created a strategic dilemma for the Admiralty. On the one had it was obliged to remove the British Fleets from the North Sea in order to mitigate the risk of torpedo attack. Doing so, however, would remove vital support from the cruiser and flotilla forces patrolling the North Sea and expose them to defeat in detail. The consideration of an extensive use of mines in the North Sea or of a submarine blockade of the German coastline, assigned such pivotal importance by revisionist historians,[[26]](#footnote-24) may have been appropriate solutions to the strategic situation created by the Navy’s inability effectively to observe enemy movements. However, neither of these schemes was anywhere near being ready for implementation at the outbreak of the First World War. The Navy simply did not have enough modern submarines, effective mines or minelayers to contemplate either strategy in 1914. Thus, the strategic conditions created by the abandonment of the continuous observation of German ports in April 1912 were to persist well into the First World War. Despite the success of the Admiralty’s signals intelligence unit, Room 40, the Navy battled with the limitations placed upon it by the Navy’s inability to guarantee knowledge of German movements throughout the conflict.[[27]](#footnote-25) As late as December 1917, Admiral Sir David Beatty, the Commander in Chief of the British Grand Fleet, recommended that improvements still needed to me made in the Navy’s ‘air reconnaissance, submarine patrols and constant mining of the Bight’ if the government wanted an absolute guarantee from the Admiralty that German raiding parties could not reach the east coast.[[28]](#footnote-26) Beatty’s concerns were confirmed within six months, when the High Seas Fleet made a sortie into the mid-North Sea in search of a Scandinavian convoy in April 1918 without the Admiralty receiving any prior warning.[[29]](#footnote-27) That the strategic conditions prevalent in the North Sea for much of the First World War bore a considerable resemblance to that which naval planners had grappled with between 1912 and 1914 underlines the generally underappreciated importance of the immediate pre-war period to our understanding of the Navy’s performance during the War. In order to present a new analysis of how the Admiralty’s planners sought to solve this dilemma it is necessary to return to early 1912, the point at which the naval leadership conceded the impracticality of attempts to mount a permanent watch of the German North Sea coastline.

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After the Admiralty had informed Callaghan, the C-in-C Home Fleets, of its intention to abandon the blockade of the German coastline in April 1912, Their Lordships transmitted a new series of war orders to the Fleet. Historians have identified these orders as containing provision for deploying a ‘line’ of vessels across the North Sea in an ‘intermediate blockade’.[[30]](#footnote-28) However, as has already been alluded to, this interpretation is far from clear. It is important to appreciate that the document sent to Callaghan at this point was a set of war *orders*, drafted by the newly formed Admiralty War Staff. They were thus distinct from the far more voluminous war *plans* the Admiralty had drafted under the leadership of Admiral Sir John Fisher before 1910. War *orders* were a general outline of the Admiralty’s strategic intentions and left the responsibility for working out the detail of how to accomplish the objectives they set out to the Flag Officers concerned. They rarely, if ever, specified the exact dispositions of ships and squadrons. A re-examination of the April 1912 orders confirms that no mention at all was made of a line of cruisers being strung across the North Sea:

While no efforts will be made to obstruct the egress of the enemy’s fleets from his own ports, their movements will be watched by our cruisers and flotillas, and every opportunity of engaging will be taken *within the areas* [i.e. not along a line] hereinafter defined…

As soon as possible after the warning telegram or the outbreak of hostilities, or even before should their Lordships so decide, the watch of the exits from the Baltic and from the Heligoland Bight will be made effective.

Five Cruiser Squadrons and four Flotillas will be stationed from Stavanger to the Hook of Holland, to each of which squadron and flotilla *an area* will be assigned over which they will patrol…

Forty miles to the westward of them there will be stationed a line of ‘look-outs’. This line will consist of steam trawlers or other small vessels fitted with wireless telegraphy…

The 1st Cruiser Squadron [containing the Navy’s newest battle cruisers] will be stationed at a distance of about 90 miles to the westward of the patrolling cruisers in readiness to support them if required or to fall back on the Battle Fleets as necessary.[[31]](#footnote-29)

Thus, the only ‘line’ of vessels provided for in the April war orders was a cordon of unarmed merchant vessels whose primary function was to relay wireless communications. The April 1912 Home Fleet war orders simply did not specify the exact nature of the system of observation the Admiralty intended to employ: they merely stated that individual squadrons would be given ‘an area’ to ‘patrol’. The freedom they afforded to Callaghan to employ the 1st Cruiser Squadron ‘about 90 miles’ westward of the cruiser patrols was a case in point. Marder’s contention that the Admiralty had adopted a strategy based upon a ‘line’ of vessels strung across the North Sea by ‘mid 1912’ is thus clearly open to serious question. Lambert’s suggestion that Churchill intervened to prevent the orders from being issued before they had been subject to practical experiment is equally problematic.[[32]](#footnote-30)

After issuing the new war orders to the Fleet in April, the Admiralty set about framing a scheme of manoeuvres to test the strategy of mid-North Sea observation. Churchill, anxious as ever to be involved, took an active part in criticizing the draft schemes he received from the War Staff. Whilst on holiday in Naples, where he met with Fisher to discuss naval matters, he telegraphed the Admiralty on May 24th to say that the current manoeuvre scheme was ‘unsuitable’.[[33]](#footnote-31) This telegram has been seen as evidence that Churchill intervened to prevent the ‘intermediate blockade’ strategy supposedly outlined in the April 1912 war orders from becoming official before being subjected to practical tests.[[34]](#footnote-32) However, the substance of Churchill’s communication with the Admiralty renders such a claim unsustainable. In the remainder of his telegram of May 24th Churchill instructed the Admiralty to await a letter he had posted, which would explain his telegram in greater detail. Thankfully, a letter containing the First Lord’s views on the scheme of the manoeuvres, posted from Naples and dated the following day, May 25th, is preserved in Churchill’s papers and has also been reproduced in one of the many printed collections of his correspondence. It seems almost certain that this letter is the same one that the First Lord referred to in his telegram of May 24th. It demonstrates that the telegram Churchill sent the Admiralty had nothing to do with the suitability of the ‘intermediate blockade’. Rather, it merely shows that the First Lord was anxious to ensure that the manoeuvres conformed as closely as possible to conditions in the North Sea in the event of an Anglo-German war. Churchill informed the Admiralty that:

The following should be taken as a *guide* in recasting the scheme:

(1) The forces are too unequal to illustrate the situation – ‘Our average moment at this selected moment.’ The 7th and 4th battle squadrons are to change sides, and Red is further to be re-inforced by 2 battle-cruisers, the 4th and 9th flotillas, and the 8th submarine section…

(3) The objectives of the Red Fleet are, subject to what follows, correctly stated, but the ideas of convoying 50 transports is absurd and bears no relation to actual conditions…[[35]](#footnote-33)

Nowhere in this document did the First Lord mention his views on the unsuitability of the dispositions of the mid-North Sea patrols. Exactly why he omitted any mention of the strategic dispositions of the Blue fleet is naturally difficult to discern. It is, however, possible to provide compelling evidence that Churchill made no mention of the ‘intermediate blockade’ because, as far as he was concerned, it did not yet exist.

It is certainly true that a ‘line’ of vessels stretched across the North Sea was employed during the summer manoeuvres several months later, however it is important to appreciate that, even on this occasion, such an approach did not originate at the Admiralty. Writing after the exercises, Captain George Ballard who, as the Director of the Operations Division, was the officer most directly responsible for the detail of the Admiralty’s war plans, explained the manner in which:

the usual disposition of observing cruisers in all the Manoeuvres of recent years has been in single line at wide intervals…the same practice was followed *by the Cruiser Flag Officers* in the Manoeuvres of 1912. Each was responsible for watching a line of about 180 miles in length, and each *elected* to spread his whole available force along the line as the best arrangement to carry out his orders.[[36]](#footnote-34)

The ‘line’ of vessels, commonly understood as the ‘intermediate blockade’, was thus never enshrined in war orders, nor was it developed specifically by the Admiralty. Rather it was the solution the Flag Officers of the cruiser squadrons allotted to observational patrols adopted for the purposes of the 1912 manoeuvres. Given Ballard’s testimony that the Admiralty did not issue orders for a ‘line’ of vessels to be deployed across the North Sea, it seems highly likely that Churchill did not comment on the suitability of the ‘intermediate blockade’ in May 1912 because, as far as he was concerned, no such plans existed.

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Historians have correctly identified the fact that the strategy adopted by the defending Blue force performed poorly during the 1912 summer manoeuvres. On July 18th, Callaghan, who somewhat unconventionally for the incumbent C-in-C commanded the hostile Red force, succeeded in decoying the defending Blue battle fleet away to the north and in landing 28,000 men at Filey on the Yorkshire coastline.[[37]](#footnote-35) The landing operations were undisturbed by defending flotilla or submarine forces, which were too far away to reach the sight in time after the presence of the red force had been reported.[[38]](#footnote-36) However, since the Admiralty had never instructed the Flag Officers involved to form a stationary line of observation, this failure was largely incidental to the course of Admiralty war planning.[[39]](#footnote-37) This much was confirmed when the Admiralty War Staff produced a paper on the manoeuvres in which Ballard, the D.O.D., explained that the Navy had no option but to persist with a strategy based around patrolling the mid-North Sea. Ballard’s memorandum contains a masterly summation of the strategic situation facing the Admiralty as a result of the abandonment of the continuous observation of German exists and is worthy of consideration at length:

If circumstances permit of the necessary dispositions being made, the situation of a hostile Fleet which has left its ports to attack British territory or trade may be ascertained at one or more of the following stages of its proceedings:

1. Immediately on sailing;
2. At some point on its passage;
3. At the point where it delivers its attack.

To effect the desired object at (a), a close and perpetual watch by day and night on the hostile exits is necessary. This was the strategy of the old wars, but under modern conditions it involved an exceptional degree of risk to the ships employed…[German] submarines, torpedo craft, and mines are a constant menace to the blockaders, and his cruisers can emerge and drive off the destroyers on the blockade at any time unless the latter are closely supported by an armoured squadron which itself may be driven off by submarines or the blockaded battle fleet…

If, on the other hand, no steps are taken to ascertain the enemy’s movements until he has reached his point of attack, as at (c), his intentions can only be frustrated by ensuring that wherever he may arrive a force superior to his own will engage him, within at most a few hours, or he will succeed in effecting his purpose. If long stretches of coast and lines of outer commercial blockade have to be protected against the enemy’s fleets in this way – as would be necessary in the case of a defence of our position against Germany – such a plan would involved the maintenance of separate battle fleets at many points such as the Thames, the Humber, the Forth, Cromarty and Scapa Flow, besides cruisers and destroyers. This system of defence is, in fact, the most expensive of all…

There remains only the third alternative, viz. to ensure if possible that the enemy shall be sighted on his passage so as to give time to bring the main defending fleet in contact with him before he reaches his objective or at any rate soon after…*It is not considered that the general results of the Manoeuvres afford any justification to alter the views expressed on this point*.[[40]](#footnote-38)

In this memorandum Ballard set out the broader aspects of the strategic situation the Admiralty was grappling with in mid-1912. The naval leadership was obliged to attempt to affect some form of mid-North Sea observation, because it had no acceptable alternative. The War Staff was well aware that such an approach was far from ideal and that the Navy had insufficient cruisers to enact it. Ballard labelled it ‘a problem of some difficulty’, but considered that patrolling the North Sea was less problematic than abandoning any attempt at observing enemy movements. As a remedy to this situation the War Staff were actively considering ways to reduce the current reliance upon cruiser patrols; in the same paper the D.O.D. intimated that the current war orders covered what would hopefully be a temporary gap in observational capability and forwarded two proposals intended to re-establish a watch on German exits. The first, which built on the success of the ‘D’ class submarines in the 1910 and 1912 manoeuvres, involved a close investment of the German North Sea coastline with the most modern British submarines:

…an effective watch is virtually impossible unless by a very large force of submarines able to keep the sea for at least ten days in any weather…No plan of close blockade on a large scale is considered worthy of attention, therefore, *until* suitable submarines have been built in sufficient numbers for the purpose…[[41]](#footnote-39)

The second contingency the D.O.D. suggested, which has been widely discussed by other scholars, was to make a widespread use of mines in the North Sea to narrow the area that the British would be required to patrol.[[42]](#footnote-40) The plans for both the submarine blockade and the extensive mining of German exits have been examined in detail elsewhere and do not require to be repeated here.[[43]](#footnote-41) However, it is significant to note that neither strategy was close to being ready for implementation in late 1912. Furthermore, the plans for a submarine blockade were for a relatively limited observational operation, not for a ‘sealing in’ type blockade of the German Fleet. Submarines would be unable to detect enemy movements at night or in heavy weather, thus limiting their observational capabilities.[[44]](#footnote-42) Neither contingency therefore offered the Admiralty the chance to reduce the current emphasis upon North Sea patrols in the immediate future. That the Admiralty accepted this fact was confirmed by the dramatic expansion of the Navy’s light cruiser procurement program during 1912. Eight vessels had already been ordered under the 1912/13 estimates and during the autumn of 1912 a further eight were included in the program for the following year.[[45]](#footnote-43) This strongly suggests that, contrary to popular historical belief, the naval leadership intended to persevere with plans to patrol the North Sea after the 1912 manoeuvres. This was confirmed before the end of the year.

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In November 1912 the Admiralty issued the Home Fleet with a new series of draft war plans and an updated set of orders, modified to reflect the findings of the summer manoeuvres. In them, the C-in-C was instructed to ‘cut off all German shipping from oceanic trade and to secure the British coastline from any serious military enterprise’.[[46]](#footnote-44) However, contrary to the claims of revisionist historians, the plans confirmed that, until more reliable options could be relied upon, the Admiralty remained committed to a mid-North Sea system of observation.[[47]](#footnote-45) As had been the case under the April 1912 war orders, Callaghan’s new instructions detailed the Battle Cruiser Squadron (formerly the 1st Cruiser Squadron), along with the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th Cruiser Squadrons and the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Destroyer Flotillas, for observational duties in the North Sea: ‘the Cruiser Squadrons of the Grand Fleet will, by the initial disposition, *be employed as an observational force to sweep and patrol the North Sea*’.[[48]](#footnote-46) Thus, whilst the terms ‘cordon’ and ‘arc’ were removed, the plans closely resembled the substance of the earlier April war orders. This much was revealed repeatedly throughout the following twelve months.

In early March 1913 Callaghan wrote to the Admiralty informing Their Lordships that he had ‘arrived at some conclusions which are very disturbing’ regarding certain aspects of the current war plans and that he had produced a paper explaining his concerns.[[49]](#footnote-47) The attached report noted that ‘it is my opinion that the want of Battle Cruisers to support *the Patrolling Squadrons on observation duties in the North Sea* would be a very serious matter in war.’[[50]](#footnote-48) Callaghan went on to explain that ‘it is very evident that a couple of Battle Cruisers can completely break up a patrol (or observation line) composed of even our best Armoured Cruisers’.[[51]](#footnote-49) The C-in-C continued to state that if battle cruisers were detached from his force for trade protection duties the forces on observational duties in the North Sea would be ‘without support’ and that for the same reason, a previous suggestion he had made for detaching battle cruisers to the Channel in ‘certain eventualities’ should be considered cancelled. He concluded that battle cruisers ‘cannot be spared for any purpose other than supporting the Patrols as long as the Battle Fleet is kept out of the North Sea’.[[52]](#footnote-50) As a result of the vulnerability of the cruiser forces on observational duties, the C-in-C proposed that ‘as soon as war is declared, the Battle Fleets, or at least one squadron, should enter the North Sea’ to support the forces on observational duties.[[53]](#footnote-51) Callaghan’s paper encapsulated the main strategic dilemma facing the Admiralty by 1913: that of how to preserve the Fleet from torpedo attack at anchor whilst providing sufficient local support to the Navy’s patrols in the North Sea. Crucially, it also confirmed that the Admiralty remained committed to their previous strategy of mid-North Sea patrols in March 1913.

As we have seen, the 1st Cruiser Squadron, consisting of the Navy’s battle cruisers, had played a key role supporting the forces patrolling the mid-North Sea in both the April and November 1912 war orders. Callaghan’s concern at the lack of battle cruisers to fulfil this important function is further evidence of the continuity of Admiralty thinking from April 1912 well into the following year. This was corroborated by the new C-in-C of the Battle Cruiser Squadron (as the 1st Cruiser Squadron had been re-designated), Rear Admiral David Beatty. Beatty had assumed command of the Squadron due to Churchill’s patronage in somewhat controversial circumstances in March 1913. Upon hoisting his flag, he produced a paper detailing his views on the ‘Functions of a Battle-Cruiser Squadron’. In this document, Beatty listed the first two such functions as being:

1. Supporting a rapid reconnaissance by very fast light cruisers on the enemy coast, at a high speed and sweeping a large area of hostile craft which sweep or reconnaissance could only be interrupted by a strong force of enemy battleships.
2. Supporting a blockading force of a patrol of armoured cruisers.

Beatty devoted the majority of his paper to discussing the best position from which his force could support a patrolling force of armoured cruisers.[[54]](#footnote-52) Plans to patrol the mid-North Sea, such as those the Admiralty had contemplated since April 1912, were thus clearly still in effect in mid-1913. Just how closely these plans were related to earlier orders was revealed during the summer.

Callaghan’s complaints regarding the paucity of battle cruisers to support the mid-North Sea patrols met with little sympathy at the Admiralty. No doubt with a growing sense of frustration, two months later the C-in-C re-enforced his concerns regarding the vulnerability of the cruiser and flotilla patrols. In doing so he confirmed that cruiser squadrons were currently allotted to patrol areas of the mid-North Sea, in almost exactly the same locations as had been projected under the April 1912 war orders. The C-in-C submitted that:

…I propose to modify the plan as now arranged for the early stages of hostilities by moving the Cruiser Observation Squadrons from 60 to 100 miles further to the Northward, and employing on this duty the 2nd and 3rd Cruiser Squadrons with the 5th and 6th Squadrons also when available…

As regards the Southern Observation Cruiser Squadron (5th or 7th), the position now assigned to it between the Haaks Light and Smith’s Knoll Light Vessels may be satisfactory in clear weather, but as a general rule the Squadron should be further to the southward…[[55]](#footnote-53)

More detail of the existing dispositions was provided by the reaction Callaghan’s submission received at the Admiralty. Upon reading Callaghan’s paper, Ballard pointed out that the changes the C-in-C proposed would result in an increasingly large gap developing between the southern and northern cruiser forces. This would have the affect of leaving ‘the east coast from the Scottish border to Suffolk – 240 miles – uncovered by a single armoured ship’. The D.O.D. spelled out the potential implications of such a ‘gap’:

A light cruiser squadron and two flotillas would then be the only force in this area beyond the coast. This force might suffice to intercept ordinary raids, but if the enemy discovered its weakness and sent an armoured escort with the transports an invading expedition could force its way to the coast of Norfolk, Lincoln or York without encountering any serious opposition, and if he made for the vicinity of the Humber at least 8 hours would elapse before a single British armoured ship could reach the spot and interfere with the landing. The small local patrol of submarines would be the only deterrent to such an attempt in the daytime.[[56]](#footnote-54)

Taken in combination with Callaghan’s submission, Ballard’s statements confirm the existing areas of the North Sea the Admiralty intended to patrol. The southern force of cruisers would range between Norfolk and the Dutch coast, just north of Amsterdam. The much larger northern force would patrol along the length of the east coast and then across the mid-North Sea. Readers will appreciate that these dispositions conformed almost exactly to the areas that the Admiralty had intended to patrol under the April 1912 war orders. Whilst Callaghan clearly did not approve of the plans due to the vulnerability of the patrolling forces to enemy battle cruisers, a clear line of continuity from April 1912 to mid-1913 emerges. The Admiralty never attempted to instigate an ‘intermediate blockade’, but, in the absence of other available means of observing German movements in the North Sea, the naval leadership did remain attached to a strategy of mid-North Sea patrols. However, it appears that the C-in-C’s insistence that the patrols would be too vulnerable to German battle cruisers began to gain an increasing degree of traction at the Admiralty by the end of 1913.

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Testing the reliability of the mid-North Sea patrols again formed a key part of the 1913 manoeuvres. On this occasion Callaghan, now the Admiral of the defending Blue force, adopted dispositions closely mimicking the Admiralty’s war plans. Admiral May, again selected as the Chief Umpire, recorded that the C-in-C established two lines running across the North Sea from the British coastline to Norwegian waters and that ‘the portion of the North Sea between these lines was divided into four *areas* and the Cruiser Squadrons were allotted to the *areas*’. Readers will appreciate that this disposition replicated that outlined under the April and November 1912 war orders almost exactly. To the south of the areas allotted to the cruiser squadrons, a further area was assigned to light cruiser and destroyer patrols.[[57]](#footnote-55) During the exercises Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, who commanded the hostile Red fleet, succeeded in conducting major amphibious raids on a number of east coast towns, evading or overwhelming the patrolling forces on several occasions.[[58]](#footnote-56) However, the poor performance of the patrolling forces of the defending Blue fleet did not necessarily invalidate the principles behind the patrols. Rather, as May subsequently pointed out, it highlighted that the forces currently allotted to conduct scouting duties were ‘too weak for the purpose of observation’.[[59]](#footnote-57) Callaghan had maintained his Fleet far to the North in order to ensure no enemy raiders could proceed into the Atlantic north about and had thus been unable to support the patrols sufficiently, despite the presence of the Battle Cruiser Squadron in the rear of the cruiser forces. Thus, as the C-in-C had argued for the previous six months, for the patrols to be effective they would require close support from a significant number of battle cruisers or from the Fleet itself. The failure of the observational patrols induced the Admiralty to halt the first phase of the exercises early and to proceed with an alternative approach they had developed for the second period of the exercises. This approach, which seemingly owed much to Callaghan’s views on the need to support the cruiser patrols and to Churchill’s own preference for a more proactive strategy, was a revival of earlier plans for ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea in overwhelming force with all available British craft. This strategy, which had first been forwarded by the former C-in-C Channel Fleet and First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson in 1907,[[60]](#footnote-58) involved a major southern movement of the entire British Fleet, accompanied by all of its cruisers and destroyers.[[61]](#footnote-59) Such a strategy would sacrifice attempts at a continuous observation of the North Sea in favour of establishing a periodic temporary superiority. Whilst the alteration of other conditions made the second stanza of the manoeuvres somewhat difficult to compare with the first, it appears that plans for major ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea gained an increasing degree of support from influential elements within the Admiralty during the autumn.

In the immediate aftermath of the exercises the Admiralty War Staff remained committed to the patrols of the North Sea. In a paper prepared in reaction to Callaghan’s comments on the exercises, the War Staff stated that they supported a large increase in the number of light cruisers and cruisers in the North Sea. They also noted their belief that increasingly capable overseas submarines might soon supplement such a strategy:

*Until* big submarines are available in sufficient numbers to enable us to revert to the old policy of close observation of the enemy’s ports, the duties and responsibilities of cruisers of all classes in the North Sea must be very onerous *on account of the extensive area requiring to be watched*.[[62]](#footnote-60)

The War Staff’s preference thus appears to have been to develop the Navy’s capability to observe German movements through the employment of submarines off the enemy coastline, rather than for major ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea with the Grand Fleet. It is important to appreciate the distinction between the War Staff’s hope that the use of submarines to affect the *observation* of enemy ports might soon be possible and more ambitious plans for a submarine blockade of the German coastline, that were also discussed in vague terms that this point. The watching operations contemplated by the Admiralty were significantly more limited than a full-scale *blockade* of the German coastline.[[63]](#footnote-61) The War Staff considered that ‘even if developed in the matter of speed, habitability, radius of action, better look-out conveniences when on the surface and by wireless telegraphy’ submarines would be ‘unlikely to do more than take the place of an approximately equal number of destroyers or lightly armed vessels *for look-out purposes*’.[[64]](#footnote-62) Thus, whilst submarine ‘look-outs’ might reduce the onus upon the Navy’s cruiser squadrons to detect enemy movements, patrols would still form a vital part of the Admiralty’s North Sea strategy since the best that could be hoped from the submarine patrols would be notice of the enemy having put to sea.

Aware that North Sea patrols would remain vital for the immediate future, the War Staff made no major changes to Callaghan’s war orders in the wake of the manoeuvres.[[65]](#footnote-63) That North Sea patrols remained central to existing British North Sea strategy was confirmed again early the following year. In March 1914 Beatty submitted a report to Callaghan regarding the work he had conducted during his first full year in command of the Battle Cruiser Squadron. As he had stated the previous April, Beatty remained convinced that the primary strategic function of his squadron was ‘to provide a fast and powerful force for supporting the operations of advanced cruisers or armoured cruisers, whether employed for *Patrolling, Watching, Searching or making a Reconnaissance*…’ However, acknowledging the difficulties encountered in satisfactorily fulfilling such a role thus far, Beatty was forced to admit that further experimentation with the best dispositions of his squadron for this role was required.[[66]](#footnote-64) Upon receiving his subordinate’s submission, Callaghan duly forwarded it to the Admiralty. In doing so he suggested that, in order to solve the problem of ensuring the patrols would receive close support from armoured warships, the battle cruisers should be distributed into mixed squadrons with a number of light cruisers. Readers will appreciate that the C-in-C therefore hoped to reform the Navy’s existing force structure in order to form squadrons capable of performing independent scouting and observational missions in the North Sea: mid-North Sea patrols clearly remained high on the naval leadership’s agenda. Callaghan’s submission stated that whilst ‘I do not recommend the association of light cruisers and cruisers in the same squadron’;

In my opinion it is much more likely that light cruisers will be employed either with the battlecruisers, or in separate squadrons, and I consider their peace organisation should be designed with these objects.[[67]](#footnote-65)

The C-in-C’s proposal to form mixed cruiser squadrons aligned with ideas Churchill had previously expressed upon the suitability of employing light cruisers and battle cruisers in combination. In April the previous the year the First Lord had considered that ‘the natural support of the light cruiser against the enemy’s battle cruiser is our own battle cruiser’ and stated his view that ‘when the Arethusas [the designation for the Navy’s newest class of light cruiser] are ready, it will be desirable to exercise them in groups, there being 1 battle cruisers to every 4 light cruisers. It cannot be doubted that his formation will be a very convenient one’.[[68]](#footnote-66) Thus, on the basis of Churchill’s support and the fact that the ‘C-in-C Home Fleet favours combining Arethusas with Battle Cruisers’, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Prince Louis of Battenberg, had plans for such a potential organisation prepared in April 1914.[[69]](#footnote-67) The draft scheme reveals that the Admiralty contemplated the formation of four separate Battle Cruiser Squadrons, each consisting of two battle cruisers and four light cruisers.[[70]](#footnote-68) These squadrons were clearly ideally adapted for scouting purposes and their high speed and gun power would dramatically reduce the danger of the lighter craft being overwhelmed by German battle cruisers. Despite protests from the Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, who considered that the battle cruisers might be too distant from the Grand Fleet during a fleet action if they were divided up in this manner, it seems that Battenberg, Callaghan and Churchill were agreed that the plans should be tested with a view to implementing them during 1915.[[71]](#footnote-69) Proposals dating from July 1914 confirm that in March the following year the four battle cruisers currently in the Battle Cruiser Squadron would be divided into two separate divisions, each consisting of two battle cruisers and four light cruisers. These proposals were timed to coincide with Beatty’s two-year commission as commander of the B.C.S. being up. At the end of 1915, the re-organisation was to be completed when the Navy’s four other battle cruisers were scheduled to return to home waters from their current deployment in the Mediterranean. This would coincide with the delivery of eight further light cruisers from the 1912/13 program, allowing four mixed squadrons, each consisting of two battle cruisers and four light cruisers to be formed.[[72]](#footnote-70) The re-structuring of the Navy’s cruiser squadrons to strengthen the forces assigned to observational duties in the North Sea is clear evidence that, as had been the case since April 1912, the Admiralty remained firmly attached to enacting scouting operations in the mid-North Sea. How Their Lordships’ intended to conduct these patrols in the period before which the new cruiser organisation was adopted in 1915 was revealed three months later.

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After Callaghan had supplied the Admiralty with his comments on the draft orders he had been transmitted in December 1913 he received no finalised instructions for several months. Having still not received any indication of the Admiralty’s intentions by early-May, the C-in-C wrote to London respectfully submitting that they provide him with an updated series of orders.[[73]](#footnote-71) Battenberg duly issued instructions for the War Staff to have the news orders drawn up and transmitted to the Fleet. The comment the First Sea Lord passed to the Chief of Staff revealed the reasons behind the delay in providing Callaghan with a copy of the updated plans; the orders contained provision for the ‘sweeps’ tested during the second phase of the 1913 manoeuvres. Between December 1913 and May 1914 the Admiralty had, therefore, decided to adopt a major alteration to its previous strategy. Battenberg minuted that ‘it is essential that immediately on the outbreak of hostilities the combined force of battleships, battle & other cruisers & flotillas should make a forward movement towards the enemy’s coast’.[[74]](#footnote-72) The War Staff produced a series of orders stating that the command of the North Sea would be attained by ‘frequent movements carried out by the Grand Fleet’, during which it would traverse the mid-North Sea. When he saw the orders, which reflected the plans tested during the second phase of the 1913 manoeuvres, Jellicoe, the Second Sea Lord, was clearly aggrieved by their content. Contrary to the claims of revisionist historians, Jellicoe was strongly opposed to the ‘sweeps’ strategy.[[75]](#footnote-73) Indeed, on this occasion his protests were sufficiently vehement that he succeeded in having the draft copy of the scheme amended and in replacing the word ‘frequent’ with the more cautious term ‘occasional’.[[76]](#footnote-74) The significance of Jellicoe’s attempts to curtail the ‘sweeps’ strategy revealed in the plans will be revealed presently. Suffice it to say here that, despite the Second Sea Lord’s attempts to alter the plans, when they were issued in early July they informed Callaghan that:

As it is at present impracticable to maintain a perpetual close watch off the enemy’s ports the maritime domination of the North Sea, upon which our whole war policy must be based, will be established as far as practicable by occasional sweeping movements carried out by the Grand Fleet traversing in superior force the area between the 54th and 58th parallels…The movements should be sufficiently frequent and sufficiently advanced to impress upon the enemy that he cannot at any time venture far from his home ports without such serious risk of encountering an overwhelming force than no enterprise is likely to reach its destination.[[77]](#footnote-75)

Thus, as Marder correctly identified, plans to rely primarily upon cruiser and flotilla patrols in the mid-North Sea were suspended in July 1914, in favour of using the Fleet to support the Navy’s light forces in periodic ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea intended to deter hostile German sorties towards the British coastline. The decision to adopt such a strategy on the eve of War is a highly significant one for our understanding of the dynamics of Admiralty strategic planning. It confirms that the mid-North Sea patrols previously contemplated as the Navy’s eyes in the North Sea were abandoned only in early 1914, as Marder originally claimed. However, this was due to their vulnerability to being overwhelmed in detail by a superior German force with the Grand Fleet stationed away to the north, rather than to their inherent impracticality. Furthermore, the adoption of ‘sweeps’ of the North Sea in place of the patrols is conclusive proof that the Admiralty had *not* adopted a ‘strictly defensive commercial blockade’ as its primary strategy before the outbreak of the First World War. Such a strategy would leave the east coast vulnerable and surrender the strategic initiative to an extent that was anathema to the naval leadership. The fluidity of the Admiralty’s planning process during this two-year period runs in direct opposition to the general perception of a reactionary institution headed by a succession of inadequate First Sea Lords. Finally, Jellicoe’s clear opposition to the ‘sweeps’ is highly significant and has been overlooked by previous scholars. The man who was to be thrust into the command of the Grand Fleet at the outbreak of war clearly had deep reservations about the new strategy the Admiralty had inaugurated in July 1914. As we shall see, this had a hitherto unappreciated impact upon the handling of the Grand Fleet in the autumn and winter of 1914 and precipitated a return to the mid-North Sea patrols contemplated before 1914.

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Historians have long been aware that the level of German submarine and mining activity in the first months of the First World War had a major effect upon both the Admiralty and the new C-in-C Grand Fleet, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe.[[78]](#footnote-76) After assuming command in difficult circumstances in early August, Jellicoe was quick to re-iterate his opposition to the ‘sweeps’ the Admiralty had adopted as its primary North Sea strategy on the eve of war.[[79]](#footnote-77) Exploiting his newfound autonomy as senior officer afloat, he also worked actively to implement a strategy similar to that contemplated before the issue of the July 1914 war plans. This was evidenced in orders the C-in-C issued to the cruiser squadrons of the Grand Fleet during the month of August. Jellicoe assigned the armoured cruisers of the 2nd and 3rd Cruiser squadrons to ‘work the extended *area* V’, a region of the North Sea which extended from the Scottish coastline ‘to within ten miles of the Norwegian coast’. The First Light-Cruiser Squadron and the Battle Cruiser Squadron were to be employed ‘to the southward of *areas* V and VI’, in support of the armoured cruisers.[[80]](#footnote-78) These arrangements corresponded closely with the dispositions contemplated between 1912 and early 1914. The following month, Jellicoe moved to gain an official commitment to reduce the frequency and scope of sweeping movements with the Grand Fleet. At a conference of senior Flag Officers and Admiralty officials at Loch Ewe on the west coast of Scotland, the C-in-C outlined his view that ‘sweeps’ with the Grand Fleet were highly dangerous. As an alternative, Jellicoe proposed to ‘hold areas off our bases and off the British coast by cruiser squadrons for the prevention of minelaying, the protection of trade, and the observation of the western side of the North Sea generally’. This would establish an area off the British coastline that would be watched ‘permanently’. If reconnaissance operations towards the German coast were deemed necessary, he envisaged employing a fast squadron of battle cruisers and light cruisers for the purpose.[[81]](#footnote-79) Jellicoe appears to have considered the Admiralty’s pre-war intention to use battle cruisers and light cruisers for observational purposes as preferable to risking the Grand Fleet by regularly traversing the mid-North Sea. After continued pressure, Jellicoe’s proposals received the endorsement of the Admiralty at the start of following month. On October 8th Churchill wrote to the C-in-C informing him that:

I am in full agreement with your letter. *No change in principle is required in the naval policy to which we have steadily adhered since 1911*…*It is not necessary, as manoeuvre experience has suggested, to traverse the waters of the North Sea with the Battle Fleet with any degree of frequency*…[[82]](#footnote-80)

This letter confirms that, as the C-in-C had proposed, a limited version of the mid-North Sea patrols the Admiralty had contemplated before the war had been revived as the Navy’s primary North Sea strategy within two months of the outbreak of hostilities. Soon after the Admiralty accepted Jellicoe’s plea to abandon regular sweeping movements with the Grand Fleet, the naval leadership revived its previous plans to form a cruiser scouting force better adapted to scouting duties in the North Sea.

During the first three months of the war Beatty’s Battle Cruiser Squadron had already proven its value as a supporting force for light cruiser and destroyer forces. At the Battle of Heligoland Bight on August 28th the five battle cruisers then present in home waters had proven decisive in an action between British destroyer flotillas and light cruisers and a strong concentration of German light cruisers off the enemy coastline.[[83]](#footnote-81) However, Beatty’s squadron was not as yet permanently associated with any of the light forces it had supported on that occasion. This dramatically increased the administrative, logistical and communications difficulties involved in ensuring that the battle cruisers, which generally operated from Cromarty on the Scottish coastline, were in a position to support the British light craft stationed at Harwich on the south east coast. Indeed, the deployment of Beatty’s squadron to support the operations on August 28th had been the product of Jellicoe’s foresight, rather than a coherent plan on the Admiralty’s behalf.[[84]](#footnote-82) This situation was to change rapidly after the Admiralty had informed Jellicoe of its support for his proposals to abandon ‘sweeps’ with the Grand Fleet on October 8th.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir John Fisher returned to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord on October 30th. Soon after he returned to the Admiralty, Fisher instigated plans to form the battle cruisers currently in home waters into an independent fleet, complete with its own light cruiser and destroyer squadrons. He also argued for the other vessels of the type, currently in the Pacific and Mediterranean, to be concentrated into the squadron. The force Fisher contemplated was to be styled as the ‘Battle Cruiser Fleet’. Plans issued in February 1915 reveal that Fisher hoped to group all nine of the Navy’s battle cruisers, including HMAS *Australia* of the fledgling Australian Navy, into the squadron. Twelve light cruisers, including four of the newest *Arethusa* class vessels, which had only recently entered commission, would join the battle cruisers. The light cruisers would be split into three squadrons of four ships each, with each squadron being attached to one of the three Battle Cruiser Squadrons.[[85]](#footnote-83) Readers will appreciate that the organisation of the B.C.F. thus bore considerable resemblance to the plans for mixed cruiser divisions the Admiralty had been forming in July 1914. By not forming mixed squadrons of battle and light cruisers the Admiralty mitigated Jellicoe’s previously expressed concerns that valuable battle cruisers might not be in a position to support the Grand Fleet during a fleet action, whilst still providing a powerful force for reconnaissance operations in the North Sea and for scouting for the main Fleet. Whilst this was not the only motivation behind Fisher’s formation of the B.C.F. it is clearly significant to note that within months of ‘sweeps’ being abandoned as the Admiralty’s primary North Sea strategy, the principle characteristics of earlier plans to re-enforce the Navy’s observational forces in the North Sea were returned to and implemented.

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Historians have hitherto misunderstood the development of British naval strategy in the period between the abandonment of plans for a ‘close’ blockade of the German coastline in April 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War. By focusing upon the failure of the defending force in the 1912 naval manoeuvres and its apparent implications for the course of Admiralty strategy, scholars have overlooked the continuity of naval planning between April 1912 and mid-1914. Furthermore, by confusing the naval leaderships’ longstanding plans to interdict German oceanic trade with the Admiralty’s plans for operations *within* the North Sea, historians have only partially grasped the course of Admiralty strategic planning on the eve of War. This has obscured the fact that the primary characteristics of the North Sea strategy the Admiralty had contemplated between 1912 and 1914 were revived within months of the outbreak of the First World War. Knowledge of the true nature and course of Admiralty planning in the pre-war period necessitates a significant reappraisal, both of the Navy’s strategic decision-making process and of the performance of the Admiralty War Staff after its formation in early 1912. The planning conducted by the Admiralty between 1912 and 1914 was significantly more nuanced and fluid than is commonly supposed. Furthermore, throughout this period the naval hierarchy consistently displayed its willingness and ability to develop technological, doctrinal and structural solutions to the strategic challenges it faced in the North Sea. This was evidenced by the multifaceted approach the Admiralty adopted to the ‘North Sea problem’ by the summer of 1914. Commonly cited as the primary example of the inadequacies of the nascent War Staff, the ‘intermediate blockade’ in fact appears to be an example of oversimplification on the part of historians, rather than a case of contemporary incompetence.

The Admiralty’s ongoing commitment to observing, patrolling and controlling the North Sea also poses serious questions of the prevailing revisionist analysis of British naval policy between 1912 and 1915. These scholars maintain that the threat posed to British capital ships by submarines, torpedoes and mines convinced enlightened planners that conventional naval operations in the North Sea were too risky seriously to be contemplated in the immediate pre-war period. After abortive attempts at an unworkable ‘intermediate blockade’, this allegedly led the Admiralty to adopt an extensive mining campaign against the German and Dutch coastline as its primary North Sea strategy in the event of war with Germany. Such an approach, it is argued, would have the dual benefit of restricting neutral trade with Germany, thus assisting the Admiralty’s plans to wage economic warfare against Germany, and obstructing the egress of German naval vessels into the North Sea. The evidence presented above reveals that this narrative is incomplete and, if viewed in isolation, misleading. The Admiralty remained committed to conducting extensive naval operations *within* the North Sea throughout the period 1912-14 and into the First World War. This much was confirmed by both the July 1914 war orders and the subsequent decision to revert to mid-North Sea patrols on the autumn of that year. Furthermore, the naval leadership clearly viewed these operations as the Navy’s *primary* North Sea strategy. In other words they were *not* conceived as an adjunct for an extensive mining campaign against the German and Dutch coastline. This was substantiated by the decision taken in October 1914 to revert to earlier plans for mid-North Sea patrols, rather than to embark upon an extensive mining campaign, despite political support for the latter strategy.[[86]](#footnote-84) Indeed, the War Staff’s expressed intention to persist with mid-North Sea patrols ‘*until*’such time as they could be supplemented by sufficient numbers of overseas submarines, combined with the decision to revert to patrols rather than mining during the autumn of 1914, confirms that Ballard’s alternative ‘mining’ strategy was never settled upon as official policy. Given that Lambert identifies ‘Germany’s ability to trade through contiguous neutral countries [in this case Holland]’ as an ‘important and possibly critical factor in determining the viability of economic warfare’,[[87]](#footnote-85) the non-adoption of Ballard’s mining plan, the measure most well adapted to halting this trade, must call into question many of his claims regarding the Admiralty’s plans to wage economic warfare against Germany. If, as he argues, the government had accepted exerting quick and decisive economic pressure on Germany as the basis of British *national* strategy, the Admiralty’s decision to focus its energies upon re-organising the Navy’s cruiser forces and expanding the overseas submarine force for observational purposes, rather than developing the minelaying capability required to close the entrances to Rotterdam and Antwerp, is inexplicable at best. The absence of definitive evidence to suggest that the Navy had adopted a ‘British Schlieffen Plan’[[88]](#footnote-86) economic warfare strategy before 1914[[89]](#footnote-87), combined with the fact that the Admiralty War Staff appear to have devoted considerably more time and energy to solving the ‘North Sea problem’ than to discussing means of collapsing the German economy between 1912 and 1914, all point to the fact that the Admiralty had not abandoned its traditional focus upon conventional naval operations before the outbreak of the First World War. Thus, as Marder and subsequent scholars have recognised, contemporary planners considered commercial pressure to be a ‘long war’ strategy.[[90]](#footnote-88) Aware that it would take a considerable amount of time to impact German economic life, Britain’s naval leadership focused its energies upon the more pressing matter of how the Royal Navy was to detect, locate and defeat the High Seas Fleet in the intervening period. Seeking a decisive battle with the German Fleet may not have been the fixation that early writers claimed, but the Admiralty was certainly intent on establishing and exercising the control of the North Sea both before and during the First World War.

1. A.J. Marder, [*F]rom the [D]readnought to [S]capa [F]low, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, five volumes, 1961-70, Vol. I, pp. 368-73, R. Mackay, *[Fisher] of Kilverstone*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1973, p. 443, N.A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval [Revolution]*, Columbia, SC, 1999, pp. 266-7, 270-2, 284 and 286-7 and *Planning [Armageddon]: British Economic Warfare and the First World War*, Harvard, 2012, *passim*, S.T. Grimes, *Strategy and [War Planning] in the British Navy, 1887-1918*, Woodbridge, 2012, p. 179 and C.M. Bell, [*Churchill] and Sea Power*, Oxford, 2013, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Marder, *FDSF* I, pp. 370-3, Lambert, *Revolution*, p. 270-2 and throughout and *Armageddon*, Ch. 1-3 and Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 176-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Marder, *FDSF* I, p. 371, Mackay, *Fisher*, p. 443, Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 262-3, Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 179 and Bell, *Churchill*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Marder, *FDSF* I, pp. 370-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. A sample of these plans has been reproduced in P. Kemp ed., *The Papers of Admiral Sir John [Fisher]*, Vol. II, London, 1964. More voluminous copies and other related documents can be found in [T]he [N]ational [A]rchives: [P]ublic [R]ecord [O]ffice, ADM 116/1043B. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Marder, *FDSF* I, pp. 370-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. *Ibid*. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. *Ibid*, p. 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 262-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. *Ibid*, pp. 263-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. *Ibid*, pp. 266-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. *Ibid*, pp. 268-73 and 284-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. *Ibid*, pp. 289-91, ‘[Strategic Command] and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy’s ‘War Room’ System, 1905-1915’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2005, pp. 361-410, p. 397 and *Armageddon*, pp. 180-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Prof. C.M. Bell has challenged Lambert’s interpretation in a series of articles in the pages of this journal and Lambert’s reply, ‘On Standards: A reply to Christopher Bell’, *War in History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2012, pp. 217-40, places significant qualifications upon his earlier claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. N.A. Lambert, ‘Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904-1909’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 1995, pp. 636-660, *Revolution*, pp. 86-94, 116-26, 162-4, 174-6, 183-4, 195, 245, 250, 258-9, 272-3, ‘Transformation and Technology in the Fisher Era: the Impact of the Communications Revolution’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2004, pp. 272-97, ‘Strategic Command’, *Armageddon*, Ch. 2-4 and throughout and ‘False Prophet?: The Maritime Theory of Julian Corbett and Professional Military Education’, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 77, No. 3, July, 2013, pp. 1055-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 179 and Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. July 1914 War Plans, quoted in Marder, *FDSF* I, p. 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 267-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. *Ibid*, pp. 270-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3096, Admiralty, ‘Memorandum to Accompany War Orders’, April, 1912, pp. 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3096, Admiralty to Callaghan, April, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. For the best examination of these plans see Grimes, *War Planning*, Ch. 2-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/1043B II, Admiralty, ‘War Plan. Germany. W. 2.’, June, 1908, p. 3, inside Case 0073, ‘War Plans W.1 to W.4’, fo. 766. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3381, Churchill, ‘Notes on the Manoeuvres: Prepared for the Prime minister by the First Lord’, October 17th, 1912, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. TNA: PRO, CAB 16/28A, ‘Minutes of the 1st Meeting Held on March 18th, 1913’, in Report and Proceedings of Sub-Committee on Overseas Attack, April 15th, 1914, p. 34, fo. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 270-2 and 283-4 and *Armageddon*, pp. 180-1 and 297-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. For more information see P. Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence, 1914-18*, London, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. TNA: PRO, ADM 137/1971, Beatty, ‘Remarks of the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Fleet’, December 22nd, 1917, fo. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Marder, *FDSF* V, pp. 147-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Marder, *FDSF* I, p. 371 and Lambert, *Revolution*, p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3096, Admiralty, ‘Memorandum to Accompany War Orders’, pp. 3-5, April, 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. See Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 263-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/1169, Churchill telegram to the Admiralty, May 24th, 1912. For his meeting with Fisher see the series of letters and telegrams Churchill sent to the former First Sea Lord between May 15th and 18th 1912, reproduced in R.S. Churchill ed., *The Churchill [Documents], Vol. V: At the Admiralty, 1911-1914*, Hillsdale, Michigan, (1969), 2007 edition, p. 1553. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. Lambert, *Revolution*, p. 264, note 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. [C]hurchill [A]rchives [C]entre, Cambridge, CHAR 13/9/59, Churchill, Memorandum on the 1912 Manoeuvres, May 25th, 1912, reprinted in R.S. Churchill ed., *The Churchill Documents* V, pp. 1554-5. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/866B, Ballard, ‘Remarks on War Orders for an Observation Force in the North Sea in connection with the lessons of the 1912 Manoeuvres’, September 16th, 1912, p. 2a, fo. 288. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/1176B, May, ‘Naval Manoeuvres, 1912, Narrative of Events by Umpire-in-Chief’. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. [N]ational [M]aritime [M]useum, Greenwich, May Papers, MAY/10, May, ‘Naval Manoeuvres 1912, Remarks by Umpire in Chief’, August 5th, 1912, p. 19 (last page of unpaged numbered document). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. For the failure of the plans see Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 264-5 and Grimes, *War Planning*, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/866B, Ballard, ‘Remarks’, pp. 1-2, fos. 285-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
41. *Ibid*, pp. 1-1a, ff. 285-6. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
42. *Ibid*, pp. 2a-4a, ff. 288-92, P. Halvorsen, ‘The Royal Navy and Mine Warfare, 1868-1914’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vo. 27, No. 4, Dec., 2004, pp. 685-707, pp. 701-3, Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 270-2, *Armageddon*, pp. 180-1 and Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 185-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
43. For discussion of mining plans see note 36, for submarine blockade see Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 282-4 and C.M. Bell, ‘Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution Reconsidered: Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911-1914’, *War in History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2011, pp. 333-56, pp. 349-51 and *Churchill*, pp. 45-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
44. For the limitations in the Navy’s existing submarines see NMM, Tennyson D’Eyncourt Papers, DEY/31, War Staff, ‘War Staff Minute on Submarines’, July 18th, 1913, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
45. See N. Friedman, *British Cruisers: Two World Wars and After*, Barnsley, 2010, pp. 36-48 and 412-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
46. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3412, Admiralty, ‘Proposed War Plans’, November 25th, 1912, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
47. Lambert, *Revolution*, pp. 266-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
48. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3412, Admiralty, ‘Proposed War Plans’, p. 4, ADM 116/3412. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
49. Hartley Library, [U]niversity [o]f [S]outhampton, Battenberg Papers, MB1/T23/184, Callaghan to Battenberg, March 8th, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
50. UoS, MB1/T23/184, Callaghan, Untitled typescript report, March 8th, 1913. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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52. UoS, MB1/T23/184, Callaghan, Untitled typescript report. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
53. UoS, MB1/T23/184, Callaghan, Remarks, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
54. Beatty, ‘Functions of a Battle-Cruiser Squadron’, April 5th, 1913 in B. Ranft ed., *The Beatty Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty*, Vol. I, Aldershot, 1989, pp. 59-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
55. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, Callaghan to Admiralty, May 19th, 1913 p. 2, in docket, ‘War Plan, Alteration in Arrangements for Cruisers Employed on Observation Duties’. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
56. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, Admiralty to Callaghan, July 22nd, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
57. NMM, MAY/10, May, ‘Manoeuvres 1913, Report by Umpire-in-Chief’, inside docket of the same name, August, 1913, p. 5. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
58. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/1176C, May, ‘Naval Manoeuvres, 1913, Report by Umpire-in-Chief’, August, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
59. NMM, MAY/10, May, ‘Manoeuvres 1913’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
60. See Wilson, ‘Remarks on the War Plans’ in Kemp ed., *Fisher* II, pp. 457-9, Lambert, *Revolution*, p. 204 and 208, ‘Strategic Command’, p. 389 and 407 and *Armageddon*, p. 302, M. Clemmesen, ‘The War Room Managed North Sea Trap, 1907-1916’, p. 4, access at <http://www.clemmesen.org/articles/Paper_CIHM_2012.pdf> and Grimes, *War Planning*, pp. 99-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
61. CAC, CHAR 13/5/45, Churchill to Callaghan, July 29th, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
62. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/1214, War Staff, ‘Remarks on Comments by the Commander-in-Chief on the 1913 Maneouvres’, September 29th, 1913, p. 7. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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64. NMM, DEY/31, War Staff, ‘War Staff Minute on Submarines’, July 18th, 1913, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
65. TNA: PRO, ADM 137/818, Admiralty, ‘War Orders No. 1’, December 1913, fos. 45-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
66. TNA: PRO, ADM 1/8372/76, Beatty, ‘Memorandum’, March 3rd, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
67. TNA: PRO, ADM 1/8372/76, Callaghan to Admiralty, March 25th, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
68. TNA: PRO, ADM 1/8329, Churchill minute, April 3rd, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
69. See TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, Battenberg to Churchill, April 20th, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
70. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, ‘Summary of Cruisers 1916’. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
71. For Jellicoe’s protest see TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, Jellicoe to Churchill, (labelled JRJ on cruisers in pencil). For Churchill, Callaghan and Battenberg’s agreement see TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, Battenberg to Churchill, April 20th, 1914. For Churchill’s support also see TNA: PRO, ADM 1/8329, Churchill minute, April 3rd, 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
72. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3088, see diagram labelled ‘Scheme A’ and other papers in the docket ‘Constitution of Cruiser Squadrons’, dated July, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
73. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3096, Callaghan to Admiralty, May 4th, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
74. TNA: PRO, ADM 116/3096, Battenberg to Jackson, May 11th, 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
75. See Lambert, *Revolution*, p. 204, ‘Strategic Command’, p. 407 and *Armageddon*, p. 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
76. TNA: PRO, ADM 137/818, see draft copy of the War Plans, contained in docket ‘War Plans M0053/13’, fo. 101. The docket is labeled ‘with notes by 2nd Sea Lord’, see fo. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
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78. J.S. Corbett, *Naval Operations*, Three Volumes, London, 1920-3, Vol. I, pp. 5, 76-7, 161-5, 205-6 and 210, Marder, *FDSF* II, pp. 64-77 and J. Goldrick, *The King’s Ships Were at Sea: The War in the North Sea August 1914-February 1915*, Annapolis, MA, p. 119-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
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83. Marder, *FDSF* II, pp. 50-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
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88. Lambert, *Armageddon*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
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