The Battle of Jutland

May - June 1916

The Battle of Jutland (31 May - 1 June 1916) was the largest naval battle of the First World War, involving over 250 ships from the British and German navies. It was fought in the North Sea near the coast of Denmark's Jutland Peninsula. Both sides claimed victory.

Background to the battle

As the First World War continued, the Germans became increasingly anxious to break the British blockade of Germany and enable their merchant shipping to operate normally. But the Germans felt their navy was not strong enough to take on the entire British fleet. They therefore planned to weaken the Royal Navy by ambushing the British Grand Fleet in the North Sea.

German Admiral Reinhard Scheer planned to lure out both Admiral Sir David Beatty's Battlecruiser Force and Admiral Sir John Jellicoe's Grand Fleet. Scheer hoped to destroy Beatty's force before Jellicoe's arrived, but the British were tipped off by their codebreakers and put both forces to sea early.

Admiral Sir David Beatty poses for journalists on board a ship.
Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

The battle

On the afternoon of 31 May, a small advance group of German ships led by Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper lured Beatty's force into the path of the main German fleet. After suffering losses, Beatty's force withdrew and connected with Jellicoe's larger fleet.
The forces clashed throughout the evening. Overall, fourteen British and eleven German ships were sunk, with great loss of life. Throughout the night, Jellicoe manoeuvred to cut the Germans off from their base, hoping to continue the battle the next morning, but under the cover of darkness Scheer managed to return to port. Over 6,000 British and 2,500 German sailors were killed in the battle.

Sailors point to a shell-hole in the side of HMS Chester after the Battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916. Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

Who won?

Both sides claimed victory. The British lost more ships and sailors, but Scheer's plan of destroying a substantial portion of the British fleet also failed. The battle confirmed British naval dominance and forced Germany to turn to unrestricted submarine warfare to try and destroy Allied merchant shipping.

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Who won? Map of The Battle of Jutland