

= Scuttling of the German fleet in Scapa Flow =

The scuttling of the German fleet took place at the Royal Navy 's base at Scapa Flow , in Scotland , after the end of the First World War . The High Seas Fleet was interned there under the terms of the Armistice whilst negotiations took place over the fate of the ships . Fearing that all of the ships would be seized and divided amongst the allied powers , the German commander , Admiral Ludwig von Reuter , decided to scuttle the fleet .

The scuttling was carried out on 21 June 1919 . Intervening British guard ships were able to beach a number of the ships , but 52 of the 74 interned vessels sank . Many of the wrecks were salvaged over the next two decades and were towed away for scrapping . Those that remain are popular diving sites .

= = Background = =

The signing of the Armistice on 11 November 1918 , at Compiègne , France , effectively ended the First World War . The Allied powers agreed that Germany 's U @-@ boat fleet should be surrendered without the possibility of return , but were unable to agree upon a course of action regarding the German surface fleet . The Americans suggested that the ships be interned in a neutral port until a final decision was reached , but the two countries that were approached ? Norway and Spain ? both refused . Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss suggested that the fleet be interned at Scapa Flow with a skeleton crew of German sailors , and guarded in the interim by the Grand Fleet .

The terms were transmitted to Germany on 12 November 1918 , instructing them to make the High Seas Fleet ready to sail by 18 November , or the Allies would occupy Heligoland .

On the night of 15 November , Rear @-@ Admiral Hugo Meurer , the representative of Admiral Franz von Hipper , met Admiral David Beatty aboard Beatty 's flagship , HMS Queen Elizabeth . Beatty presented Meurer with the terms , which were expanded at a second meeting the following day . The U @-@ boats were to surrender to Rear @-@ Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt at Harwich , under the supervision of the Harwich Force . The surface fleet was to sail to the Firth of Forth and surrender to Beatty . They would then be led to Scapa Flow and interned , pending the outcome of the peace negotiations . Meurer asked for an extension to the deadline , aware that the sailors were still in a mutinous mood (which earlier led to the Wilhelmshaven mutiny) , and that the officers might have difficulty in getting them to obey orders . Meurer eventually signed the terms after midnight .

= = Surrender of the fleet = =

The first craft to be surrendered were the U @-@ boats , which began to arrive at Harwich on 20 November 1918 ; 176 were eventually handed over . Hipper refused to lead his fleet to the surrender , delegating the task to Rear @-@ Admiral Ludwig von Reuter . The German fleet was met by the light cruiser Cardiff on the morning of 21 November , and led to the rendezvous with over 370 ships of the Grand Fleet and other allied navies . There were 70 German ships in total ; the battleship König and the light cruiser Dresden had engine trouble and had to be left behind . The destroyer V30 struck a mine while crossing , and sank .

The German ships were escorted into the Firth of Forth , where they anchored . Beatty signalled them :

The German flag will be hauled down at sunset today and will not be hoisted again without permission .

This order was broken twice on 31 May as there was anniversary of Battle of Jutland and on the day of scuttling of the German fleet . The fleet was then moved between 25 and 27 November to Scapa Flow ; the destroyers to Gutter Sound and the battleships and cruisers to the north and west of the island of Cava . Eventually a total of 74 ships were interned there , König and Dresden having arrived on 6 December accompanied by the destroyer V129 , which replaced the sunken V30 . The

last ship to arrive was the battleship Baden on 9 January 1919 . Initially the interned ships were guarded by the Battle Cruiser Force (later reduced to the Battle Cruiser Squadron) , commanded in succession by Vice @-@ Admiral Pakenham , Rear @-@ Admiral Oliver and Rear @-@ Admiral Keyes . On 1 May 1919 Vice @-@ Admiral Leveson and the Second Battle Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet took over guard duties , and were succeeded on 18 May by Vice @-@ Admiral Sir Sydney Fremantle and the First Battle Squadron .

= = In captivity = =

The naval historian Arthur Marder described the state of affairs in the German ships during the internment as " one of complete demoralization " . He identified four reasons that exacerbated the situation : lack of discipline , standard of food , lack of recreation and slow postal service . The cumulative result of these problems created " indescribable filth in some of the ships " . On 29 November the Second @-@ in @-@ Command of the Grand Fleet , Admiral Sir Charles Madden , wrote to his brother @-@ in @-@ law and former superior Lord Jellicoe that , " All proposed orders are considered and counter @-@ signed by the men 's committee before they are executed and then they are carried out as convenient " . When visiting an interned ship the German officers were reported to have been " dumb with shame " . Food was sent from Germany twice a month but was monotonous and not of good quality . Catching fish and seagulls provided a dietary supplement and some recreation . A large amount of brandy was also sent over . Recreation for the men was limited to their ships , as the British refused to allow any of the interned sailors to go ashore or visit any other German ships . British officers and men were only allowed to visit on official business . Outgoing post to Germany was censored from the beginning , and later incoming post also . German seamen were granted 300 cigarettes a month or 75 cigars . There were German doctors in the interned fleet but no dentists , and the British refused to provide dental care .

Command of the interned ships was exercised through Rear @-@ Admiral von Reuter , flying his flag in the battleship Friedrich der Grosse . He had a British drifter at his disposal for visiting ships and issuing written orders on urgent business , and his staff was occasionally allowed to visit other ships to arrange repatriation of officers and men . Von Reuter , whose health was poor , requested that his flag be transferred to the light cruiser Emden on 25 March after he was repeatedly prevented from sleeping by the stomping on his cabin roof by a group of revolutionary sailors called the " Red Guard " . Over seven months the number of men in his command was continually reduced from the 20 @,@ 000 men who had sailed the ships over in November . 4 @,@ 000 returned to Germany on 3 December , 6 @,@ 000 on 6 December and 5 @,@ 000 on 12 December , leaving 4 @,@ 815 , of whom approximately 100 were repatriated a month .

Negotiations over the fate of the ships were under way at the Paris Peace Conference . The French and Italians each wanted a quarter of the ships . The British wanted them destroyed , since they knew that any redistribution would be detrimental to the proportional advantage in numbers they had compared to other navies . Under Article XXXI of the Armistice the Germans were not permitted to destroy their ships . Both Admirals Beatty and Madden had approved plans to seize the German ships in case scuttling was attempted ; Admirals Keyes and Leveson recommended that the ships be seized anyway and the crews interned ashore at Nigg Island , but their suggestions were not taken up . Their concern was not without justification , for as early as January 1919 , von Reuter mentioned the possibility of scuttling the fleet to his chief of staff . Having learned of the possible terms of the Treaty of Versailles in May 1919 , he began to prepare detailed plans to scuttle his ships . Admiral Erich Raeder later wrote that von Reuter was informed that the fleet was to be scuttled at all costs . A further reduction of crews with the departure of two transports to Germany on 18 June 1919 meant that von Reuter was left with reliable men to carry out preparations . On that day he sent out orders , paragraph 11 of which stated : " It is my intention to sink the ships only if the enemy should attempt to obtain possession of them without the assent of our government . Should our government agree in the peace to terms to the surrender of the ships , then the ships will be handed over , to the lasting disgrace of those who have placed us in this position . " His orders were sent to the interned ships on 18 June .

In the meantime the signing of the Treaty of Versailles was scheduled for noon on 21 June 1919 . The First Battle Squadron prepared to board the German ships in force to check for signs that the fleet was preparing to scuttle . On 13 June Admiral Madden requested in person at the Admiralty a daily political appreciation from 17 June onwards so as to be prepared to take action , but as Madden related to Beatty shortly afterwards , " they had no reliable indication of the German attitude towards the peace terms " . Admiral Fremantle submitted to Madden on 16 June a scheme for seizing the German ships at midnight of 21 / 22 June , after the treaty was meant to be signed . Madden approved the plan on 19 June , but only after he was informed that the deadline for signing the treaty was extended to 19 : 00 on 23 June and he neglected to officially inform Fremantle . News of the extension was seen by Fremantle in a newspaper on the same day and he assumed it to be true . He had been under orders from Madden for some time to exercise his battleships against torpedo attacks , which required good weather in order to recover the torpedoes . The weather on the night of 20 June was favourable so Fremantle ordered the First Battle Squadron to sea at 09 : 00 the next morning , 21 June . The operation to seize the German ships was postponed until the night of his squadron 's return to Scapa Flow on 23 June , after the deadline to sign the treaty had expired . Fremantle later claimed that before he left Scapa he had unofficially informed von Reuter that the armistice was still in effect .

= = The fleet is scuttled = =

Around 10 : 00 a.m. on 21 June 1919 , von Reuter sent a flag signal ordering the fleet to stand by for the signal to scuttle . At about 11 : 20 the flag signal was sent : " To all Commanding Officers and the Leader of the Torpedo Boats . Paragraph Eleven of to @-@ day 's date . Acknowledge . Chief of the Interned Squadron . " The signal was repeated by semaphore and searchlights . Scuttling began immediately : seacocks and flood valves were opened and internal water pipes smashed . Portholes had already been loosened , watertight doors and condenser covers left open , and in some ships holes had been bored through bulkheads , all to facilitate the spread of water once scuttling began . One German ship commander recorded that prior to 21 June , seacocks had been set on a hair turning and heavily lubricated , while large hammers had been placed besides valves .

There was no noticeable effect until noon , when Friedrich der Grosse began to list heavily to starboard and all the ships hoisted the Imperial German Ensign at their mainmasts . The crews then began to abandon ship . The British naval forces left at Scapa Flow comprised three destroyers , one of which was under repair , seven trawlers and a number of drifters . Fremantle started receiving news of the scuttling at 12 : 20 and cancelled his squadron 's exercise at 12 : 35 , steaming at full speed back to Scapa Flow . He and a division of ships arrived at 14 : 30 in time to see only the large ships still afloat . He had radioed ahead to order all available craft to prevent the German ships sinking or beach them . The last German ship to sink was the battlecruiser Hindenburg at 17 : 00 , by which time fifteen capital ships were sunk , and only Baden survived . Four light cruisers and thirty @-@ two destroyers were sunk . Nine Germans were shot and killed and about sixteen wounded aboard their lifeboats rowing towards land .

During the afternoon , 1 @, @ 774 Germans were picked up and transported by battleships of the First Battle Squadron to Invergordon . Fremantle had sent out a general order declaring that the Germans were to be treated as prisoners @-@ of @-@ war for having broken the armistice and they were destined for the prisoner @-@ of @-@ war camps at Nigg . Von Reuter and a number of his officers were brought onto the quarterdeck of HMS Revenge , where Fremantle ? through an interpreter ? denounced their actions as dishonourable while von Reuter and his men looked on " with expressionless faces . " Admiral Fremantle subsequently remarked privately , " I could not resist feeling some sympathy for von Reuter , who had preserved his dignity when placed against his will in a highly unpleasant and invidious position . "

= = Reactions = =

The French were disappointed that the German fleet was gone , having hoped to acquire at least

some of the ships . The British Admiral Wemyss privately remarked :
German Admiral Reinhard Scheer declared :

= = Aftermath = =

Of the 74 German ships in Scapa Flow , 15 of the 16 capital ships , 5 of the 8 cruisers , and 32 of the 50 destroyers were sunk . The remainder either remained afloat , or were towed to shallower waters and beached . The beached ships were later dispersed to the allied navies , but most of the sunken ships were initially left at the bottom of Scapa Flow , the cost of salvaging them being deemed to be not worth the potential returns , owing to the glut of scrap metal left after the end of the war , with plenty of obsolete warships having been broken up . After complaints from locals that the wrecks were a hazard to navigation , a salvage company was formed in 1923 , which raised four of the sunken destroyers .

At about this time , the entrepreneur Ernest Cox became involved . He bought 26 destroyers from the Admiralty for £ 250 , as well as Seydlitz and Hindenburg . He began operations to refloat the destroyers using an old German dry dock he purchased and subsequently modified . He was able to lift 24 of his 26 destroyers over the next year and a half , after which he began work on the larger vessels . He developed a new salvage technique whereby divers patched the holes in the submerged hulls , and then pumped air into them so they would rise to the surface , where they could then be towed to the breakers . Using this technique , he refloated several of the ships . His methods were costly , however , and the final cost of raising Hindenburg ran to some £ 30 @, @ 000 . Industrial action and a coal strike in 1926 nearly brought operations to a halt , but Cox instead dug out the coal in the submerged Seydlitz , using it to power his machines until the end of the strike . Salvaging Seydlitz also proved difficult , as the ship sank again during the first attempt to raise her , wrecking most of the salvage equipment . Undaunted , Cox tried again , ordering that when she was next raised , news cameras would be there to capture him witnessing the moment . The plan nearly backfired when Seydlitz was accidentally refloated while Cox was holidaying in Switzerland . Cox told the workers to sink her again , then returned to Britain to be present as Seydlitz was duly refloated a second time . Cox 's company eventually raised 26 destroyers , two battlecruisers and five battleships .

Cox sold his remaining interests to the Alloa Shipbuilding Company , (later Metal Industries Group) and retired as the " man who bought a navy " . The latter company went on to raise a further five cruisers , battlecruisers , and battleships , before the outbreak of the Second World War brought operations to a halt . The remaining wrecks lie in deeper waters , in depths up to 47 metres (154 ft) , and there has been no economic incentive to attempt to raise them since . Minor salvage is still carried out to recover small pieces of steel . This low @-@ background steel is used in the manufacture of radiation @-@ sensitive devices , such as Geiger counters , as it is not contaminated with radioisotopes , having been produced prior to any chance of nuclear contamination .

The seven wrecks that remain are scheduled under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 . Divers are allowed to visit them but need a permit to do so .

While the rebuilding of the German Army in the 1930s was based upon the combined myths of " invincibility on the battlefield " and the " stab in the back " , the attitude and actions of the High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow became a symbol of defiance for the new recruits and officers of the Kriegsmarine .

The last living military witness to the scuttling of the fleet was Claude Choules , who died on 5 May 2011 aged 110 . Choules was the last known living combat veteran of the First World War . However a new eyewitness account of the scuttling and the subsequent angry meeting between von Reuter and Fremantle was published by the family of Hugh David in June 2015 .

= = List of the German ships and their fate = =