THE WAR AT SEA
1914 - 1918

The war at sea was what made the First World War a truly global conflict. Whilst most of the fighting on land took place in Europe and around the Mediterranean, naval battles took place as far away as the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Throughout the war, the Royal Navy and the Imperial German Navy faced each other across the North Sea. With a stalemate on the Western Front, both sides sought to deliver a knockout blow to their opponents at sea.
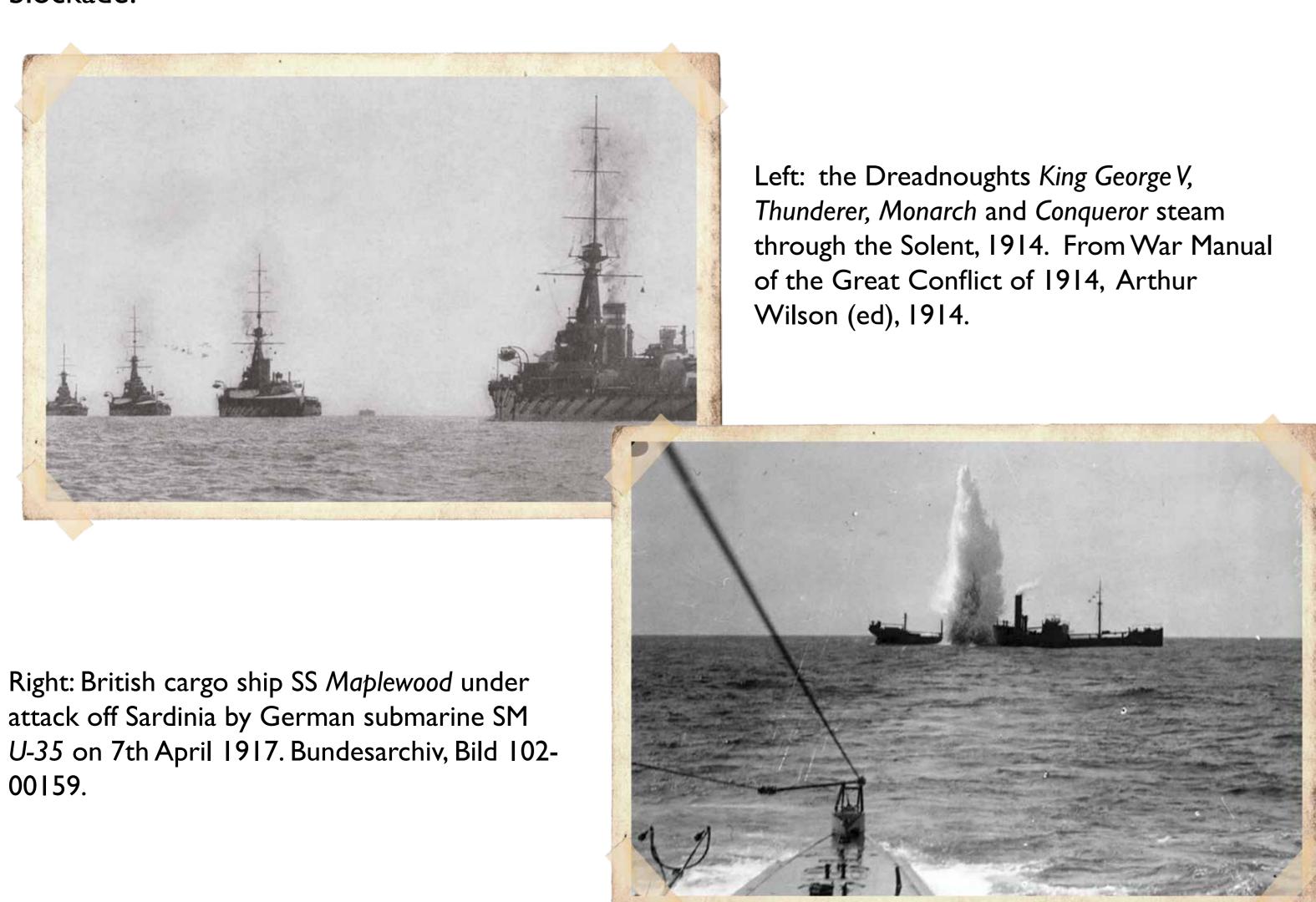
Preparing for War

The Royal Navy was well prepared for the First World War. During a lengthy arms race in the preceding decades, Britain had built the largest fleet in the world.

By August 1914, the Royal Navy had 28 modern capital ships and 41 older Victorian-era battleships that, although obsolete, still represented an impressive maritime force. Facing this, the Imperial Germany Navy could only field 18 modern capital ships and 22 older battleships.

Early in the war, Britain established a distant blockade of Germany's ports. Britain controlled both shores of the Dover Straits and the strong presence of the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow prevented the German High Seas fleet from breaking out of the North Sea and into the Atlantic.

For two years, both sides attempted to force a battle on their own terms and deliver a crushing victory that could end the war. In 1916, both fleets met at Jutland, but although the High Seas Fleet inflicted heavy losses on the Royal Navy, they were unable to break the blockade.

Left: the Dreadnoughts *King George V, Thunderer, Monarch* and *Conqueror* steam through the Solent, 1914. From War Manual of the Great Conflict of 1914, Arthur Wilson (ed), 1914.

Right: British cargo ship SS *Maplewood* under attack off Sardinia by German submarine SM *U-35* on 7th April 1917. Bundesarchiv, Bild 102-00159.

Britain Under Siege

With their surface fleet trapped in the North Sea, Germany turned to a newer form of warship to create its own blockade of Britain. Throughout the war, their U-boats slipped past the Grand Fleet and through the Dover Strait to attack Britain's lifeline – the merchant fleet – in the Atlantic and English Channel.

The U-boats inflicted severe losses on Allied shipping and even came close to starving Britain out of the war in 1917. U-boats sank in the region of 6,000 ships during the First World War, far more than they managed to sink in the Second World War (between 3,000 - 4,000).

✴ Major Maritime Battles and Actions
✴ Major Land Battles and Actions

Timeline

1914
28 July: Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand
4 August: Britain declares war on Germany
23 August: Battle of Mons (first battle between Britain and Germany)
28 August: First Battle of Heligoland Bight (Britain establishes dominance in North Sea)
14 September: Trench warfare begins
17 September: *Fisgard II sinks under tow; first loss in study area.*
1 November: Battle of Coronel
2 November: Britain establishes naval blockade of Germany
8 December: Battle of the Falklands
16 December: German warships bombard Scarborough and Hartlepool

1915
1 January: *Loss of HMS Formidable*
19 January: First Zeppelin raid on Britain
24 January: Battle of Dogger Bank
4 February: Germany commences unrestricted submarine warfare
19 February: British and French fleets attack the Dardanelles (start of Gallipoli Campaign)
25 April: Allied forces land at Gallipoli
7 May: Sinking of *Lusitania*
1 September: Germany suspends unrestricted submarine warfare

1916
9 January: Gallipoli Campaign ends
1 March: Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare
24 April: Easter Rising in Ireland
10 May: Germany suspends unrestricted submarine warfare
31 May: Battle of Jutland commences
5 June: HMS *Hampshire* lost off Orkney; death of Lord Kitchener
1 July: Battle of the Somme begins
21 November: HMHS *Britannic* mined

1917
1 February: Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare
17 March: *Surface fleet action in Dover Strait*
6 April: USA declares war on Germany
20-21 April: Battle of Dover Strait
20 May: *SM UB-40 sinks Tycho and Porthkerry*
6 July: Lawrence of Arabia seizes Aqaba
26 July: HMS *Ariadne* mined
31 July: Battle of Passchendale begins
17 November: Second Battle of Heligoland Bight

1918
1 April: Royal Naval Air Service and Royal Flying Corps combine to form RAF
3 March: Russia surrenders to Germany
21 March: German spring offensive begins
8 August: Allied 100 days offensive begins
20 October: Germany suspends unrestricted submarine warfare.
29 October: German fleet mutinies.
11 November: Armistice
14 November: German U-boats interned
16 November: *De Fontaine strikes mine and sinks; the last vessel lost to enemy action in the study area*
21 November: German High Seas Fleet surrenders

Background image: Friedrich Schwinge, 1890s

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