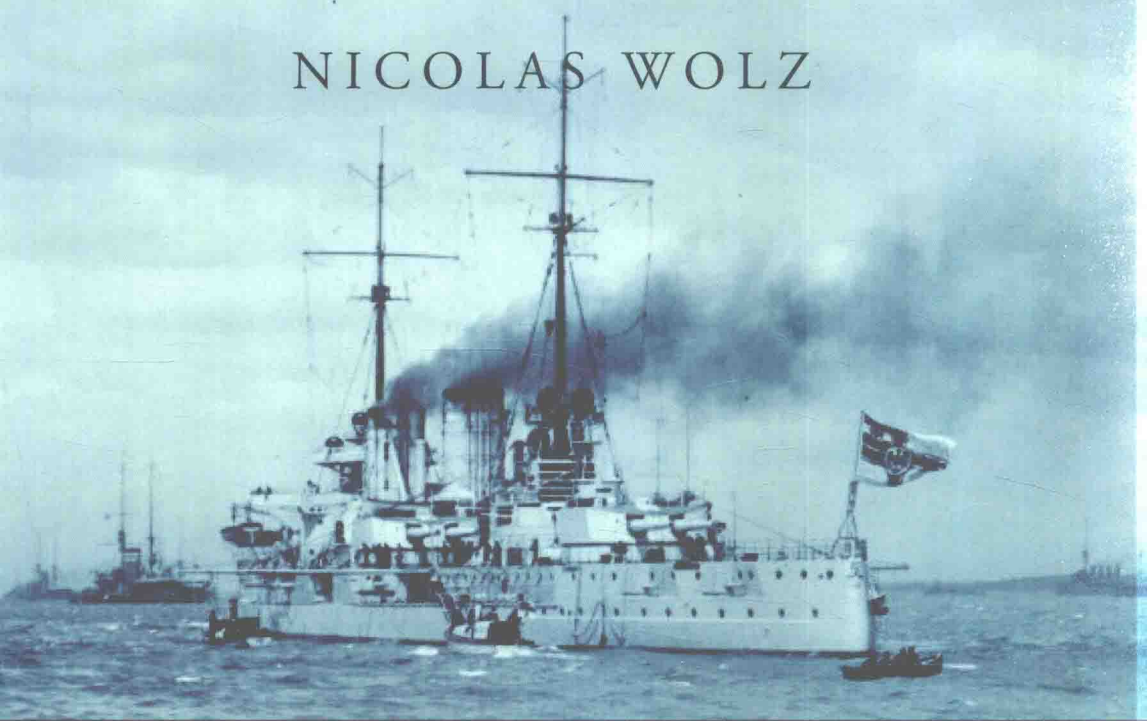
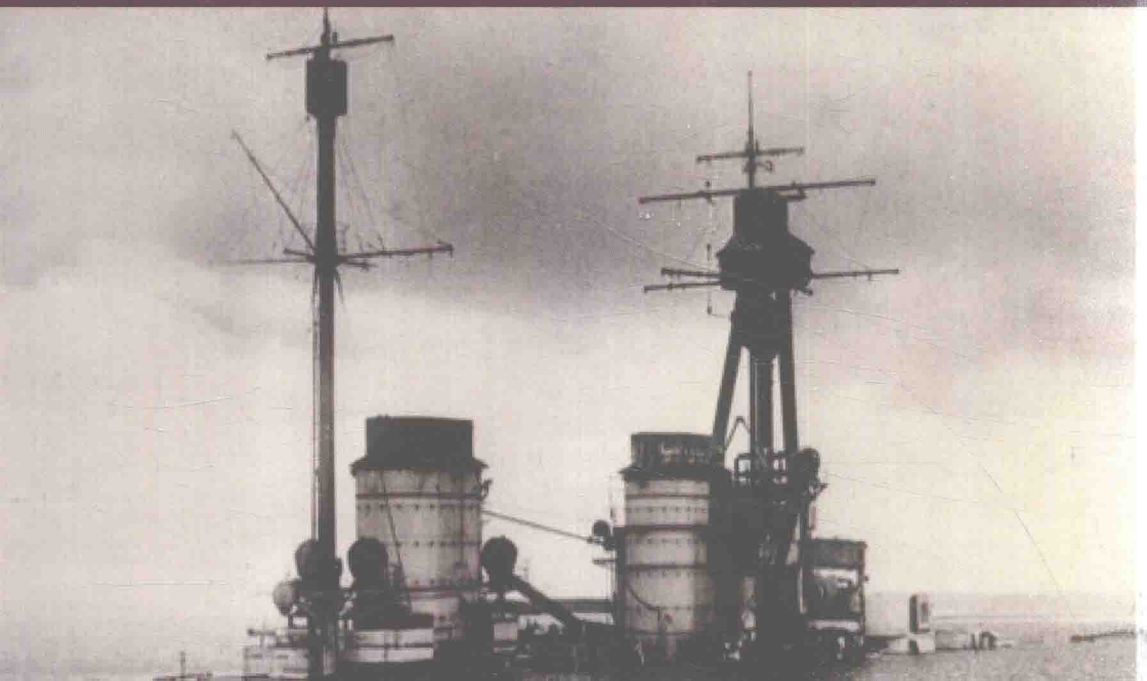


NICOLAS WOLZ



# *From Imperial Splendor to Internment*

*The German Navy in the First World War*



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Translated by Geoffrey Brooks



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*From* Imperial Splendor  
*to* Internment

## Foreword

ONCE A YEAR, SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS, the few remaining survivors of the pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* assemble at the graveside of their former commander, Kapitän zur See Hans Langsdorff, in the German cemetery at Buenos Aires. Together they reminisce about what happened more than seventy years previously, on 17 December 1939, when Langsdorff gave his men the order to scuttle the ship, seriously damaged in the battle of the River Plate fought against three enemy cruisers. The commander did not wish to engage a superior enemy force believed to be waiting outside the port of Montevideo, which would have resulted in the sinking of his ship and certain death for a large part of the thousand officers and men serving aboard her. Because this decision to give up without a fight breached the naval code of honour, which expected an 'heroic death', two days later Langsdorff shot himself dead in a hotel room in Buenos Aires.

After the scuttling of the ship, the officers and crew took refuge in Argentina, and in the months subsequently some of the ship's officers managed to make their way home to Germany. One of these men was Korvettenkapitän Paul Ascher, no 1 gunnery officer. In May 1941 Ascher, who had meanwhile been appointed admiral staff officer to the fleet staff, sailed aboard the battleship *Bismarck* on Operation *Rheinübung*. What had been planned as a commerce-raiding sortie against British merchant shipping ended in disaster. Overwhelmed by a superior British force, the *Bismarck* went down on 27 May 1941 with more than 2200 of her ship's company. Her commandant, Kapitän zur See Ernst Lindemann, refused throughout to strike his flag and thus end the cruel slaughter. Only 115 German sailors lived to tell the tale. Paul Ascher was not amongst them.

The sinking of the *Bismarck* and the scuttling of the *Admiral Graf Spee* are perhaps the two most prominent chapters occurring in the volumes of German naval history and tactical command of the Second World War. The conditions for these two events were created, however, by an earlier war. Langsdorff and Lindemann both began their naval

careers in the Imperial German Navy and their future decisions – the capitulation of one as much as the refusal to capitulate of the other – were the result of experiences which they had undergone as naval officers in the Great War.

However, this was not at all self-evident. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Germany was a terrestrial power lacking a naval capacity of any note. It was not until the desire arose for a role of equal status in the circle of world and colonial powers that Kaiser Wilhelm II's passion for warships, and Alfred von Tirpitz's skill at organisation, resulted within a few years in the building of a fleet of powerful battleships intended to bring their major rival, Great Britain, to heel. But this was a miscalculation. Instead of becoming a willing treaty partner, the British became Germany's bitter enemy when war broke out in August 1914.

Another hope was also to remain unfulfilled: instead of giving the German fleet the opportunity, by means of a great naval battle, to demonstrate to the German nation the reason why this great fleet had been built, the Royal Navy adopted a strategy of restraint and limited its activities to a distant blockade of the North Sea. This was something against which the Imperial Navy was relatively powerless, and so it waited, planned, trained and exercised, now and again made a foray into enemy coastal waters, and continued to hope that one day the yearned-for test of strength would at last arrive: proof not only of its unconditional loyalty to the Supreme Commander Wilhelm II, but also of a fearless will to act. Hitler found both these qualities useful later when he called upon his ships to 'fight to the last shell' – the *Bismarck* was by no means the only vessel to comply.

Between 1939 and 1945 the Kriegsmarine feared nothing more than a repeat of its inglorious First World War role on the sidelines. Yet Langsdorff's refusal to permit his men to die a pointless death – the only such case of this kind in the surface fleets in either of the world wars – cannot be understood without knowing the First World War background. On 8 December 1914, Vizeadmiral Maximilian Graf von Spee found himself in a similar fatal trap to that of Langsdorff, and handled it in a manner diametrically opposed. The admiral, whose name Langsdorff's ship was later to bear, accepted battle against a superior British force, even though he knew that he had no prospect of success. In doing so, to a certain extent Spee founded the German naval tradition of 'going down with battle flags flying', which Langsdorff rejected

twenty-five years later but then found that he had no honourable option but to shoot himself.

If the fate of Langsdorff and that of the *Bismarck* are much more familiar today than that of Graf Spee and the Imperial Navy, it is mainly because the Second World War is closer to us in time. Hitler, the Holocaust and almost 60 million dead block our retrospective view of that 'originating catastrophe' of the twentieth century, into which the states of Europe, in the words of the historian Christopher Clark, staggered 'like sleepwalkers'. The other reason is that the years 1914 to 1918 are basically remembered in the European collective mind for terrestrial and trench warfare. To this day we recall the First World War primarily from photographs of infantry trenches and deserts of barbed wire. These scenes represent countless hopeless assaults on enemy trenches which could not be taken, as much as for Verdun and the Somme, and for battles in which a hundred thousand horrific deaths was a price worth paying in order to win a couple of yards of muddy ploughed land.

On the other hand the few 'pure' naval engagements, principally the battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916, have tended to make less impression on the consciousness of later generations. Even in the enormous output of literature about the First World War ever since, the war at sea has a subordinate role, and in many accounts it is never mentioned at all. As the subject of study, the strategic and technical aspects stand principally in the foreground: the British concentrate almost exclusively on monographs about Jutland. Until now, there has not been an overall perspective of the Imperial Navy at war, dealing with the military and political aspects alongside the social, the psychological and the everyday.

The question of how the officers and men experienced 'their' war – and not only during the few hours in which their ships were in action, but also in the long months waiting for the next engagement – is an extremely dramatic one. On either side of the North Sea, the inconspicuous role of the fleets *during* the war stood in sharp contrast to the political, military and also social significance which had been ascribed to them *before* the war. Above all, the German fleet, which had been built with such high hopes, never fulfilled its expectations. Isolated by the distant British blockade, it lay practically useless at anchor in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, and its few operational sorties, no matter how heroic they might appear to their contemporaries, changed nothing. When the war came to its conclusion, the Imperial Navy had become

just one more flashpoint for revolution, demonstrating clearly just how the old order of the Kaiser Reich, best represented by the navy, had come through it. 'Seldom,' wrote the historian Michael Salewski, 'has an organisation of such proud eminence fallen so far'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the Royal Navy, victorious at the end, was also beset by difficulty. Great Britain had expected that the fleet, which had ruled the waves unchallenged since Nelson's victory over the French at Trafalgar in 1805, would give these German upstarts their just deserts at the earliest opportunity. Instead, all the fleet did was hold them in check at a safe distance – effective, but not at all what was expected of a glorious tradition. British sailors, like their German counterparts, had to be satisfied with doing their duty almost as if it were peacetime. Instead of using enemy warships for target practice it was a more than bitter experience to be just bystanders in a war which was supposed to end for the Royal Navy with a repeat of Trafalgar.

How did the naval men of both sides handle this passive role? What sense could they make of this war without a visible opponent? How did they judge their own contribution in comparison to what men of the army endured on the continental battlefields? How could the inactivity of the battleships be reconciled with the elitist view the officers took of themselves? What spawned the desire to fight without question? And when the time came, why were many more prepared to sacrifice their lives for a lost cause rather than simply give in? And finally, what kept a sailor going day in, day out, when his ship was always in harbour?

The answers to these questions can only be found to a limited extent in the official files, archives, service correspondence and memoranda. Much more revealing are the notes made by the participants themselves, their diaries and letters, written during the war. They provide an immediate impression of the prevailing circumstances and events of the time and give us a fascinating insight into the sailor's world of experience and thinking. We see what they saw, experienced, felt and thought: we can observe how they lived, interpreted and handled the war.

Until now such personal documents have been consulted only rarely for maritime historiography. Compared to the total of 13 million soldiers recruited into the German army between 1914 and 1918, the Imperial Navy, with its personnel strength of around 80,000 men, was a minor force. Accordingly, the number of potential letter writers and diarists in its ranks was not large. But just as in the Royal Navy they existed, and their notes are to be found spread across Germany and Great Britain in



archives and museums, in associations and unions, in naval comrades' societies and in private collections of memorabilia. I collected and evaluated them for the first time for my dissertation at Tübingen University.<sup>2</sup> Now they serve as the foundations for this book, aimed at a much broader readership and which neither seeks to bring in its wake the academic debate with all its ramifications, nor explore exhaustively the strategic and operational details of the naval policy of the time. Its primary aim is to provide the general reader with a personal experience of the past, by allowing those involved at the time to speak. I have therefore largely dispensed with footnotes where the quote is not verbatim.

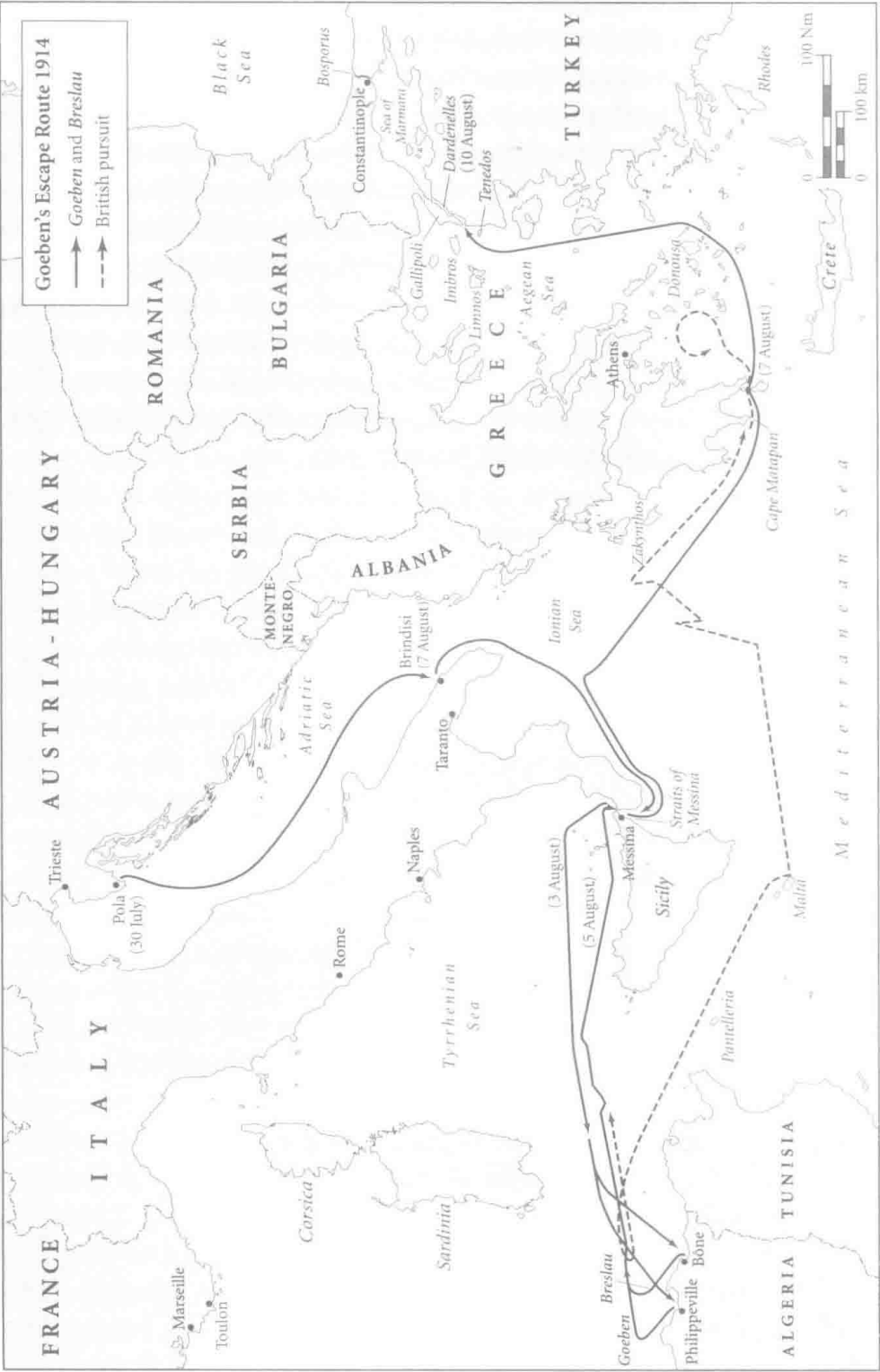
Naval ranks have been maintained in the original language with a key in the text. By far the majority of notes quoted are by officers. The view from the lower deck is depicted principally in the diary of German naval rating Richard Stumpf, published at the end of the 1920s. The extent and style of diaries and letters vary: some writers preferred to set down their experiences and thoughts in relatively terse, sober form while others put pen to paper on almost every one of the 1500 days of the war. Especially notable examples of such torrential outpourings are the diaries of Kapitänleutnant Bogislav von Selchow on the German side, and Sub Lieutenant Oswald Frewen on the British side. Both of them preserved notes not only of the war years, but practically their whole lives in richly decorated volumes complete with notes, sketches, photographs, newspaper cuttings and poems. The Frewen diaries, bound post-war in thick leather, fill a large part of the library in the Frewen country house, Sussex, where Oswald Frewen's great-nephew Jonathan guards this treasure.

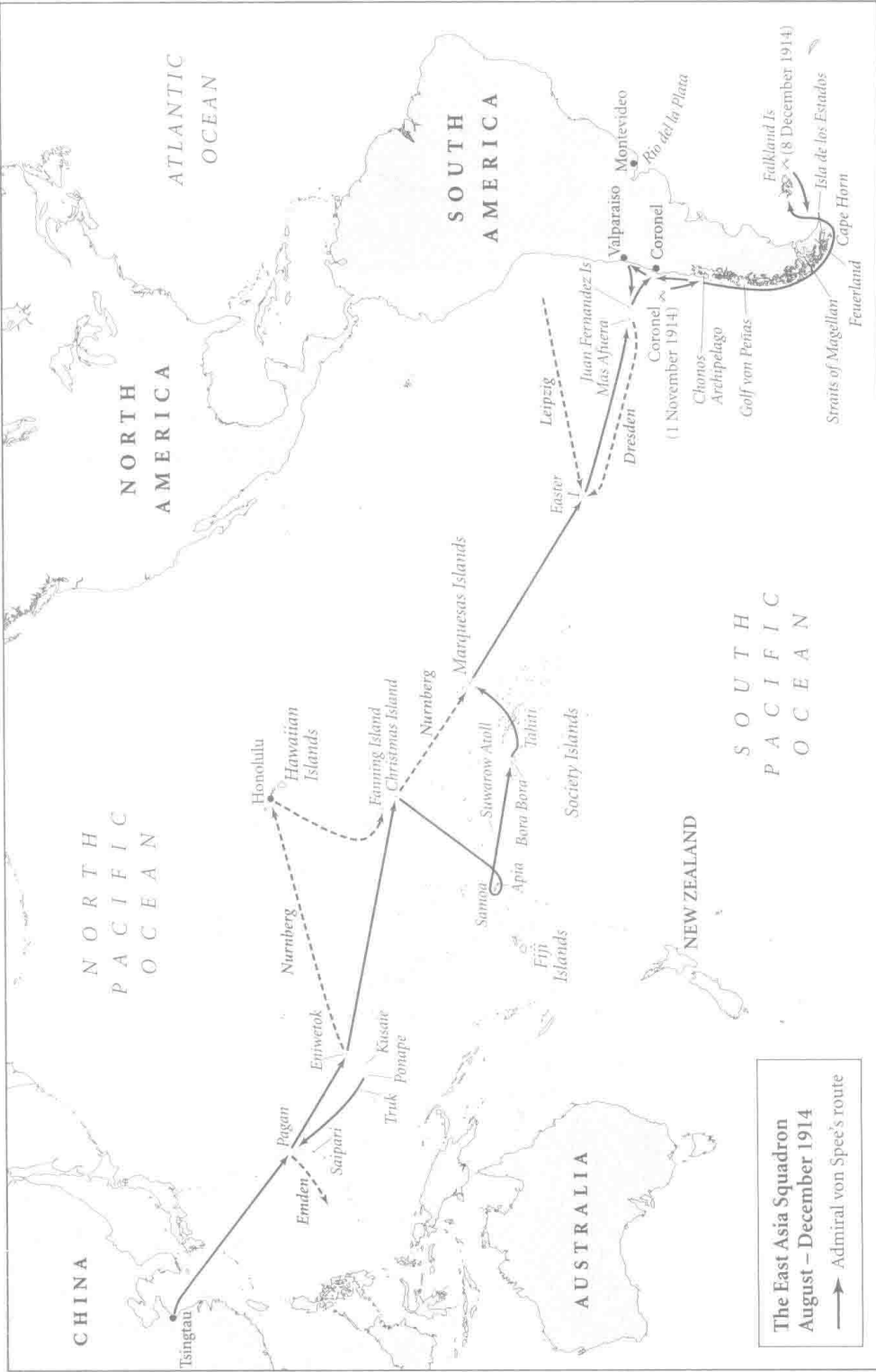
Outstanding amongst the letter writers is Konteradmiral Adolf von Trotha, who had around four hundred correspondents during the war. For our purposes, the most interesting are the letters to his wife in which he expressed himself openly, similar to the diary writers, and without reservations of a political or service nature.

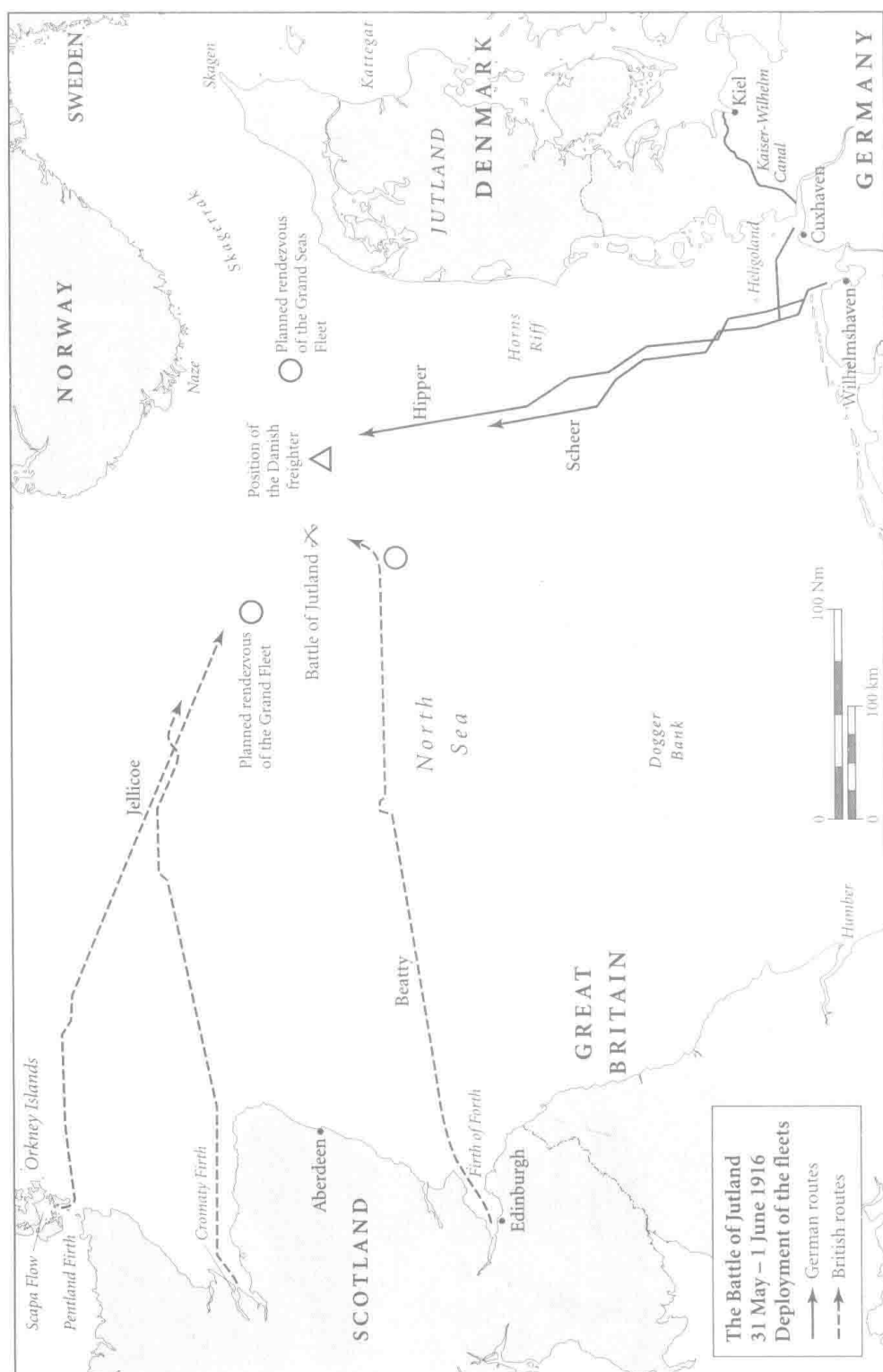
Trotha's literary trove is kept today at the Lower Saxony State Archive at Bückeburg. I would like to thank the workers there for their readiness to help and their active support, and also those at the BA/MA archive at Freiburg/Breisgau, the military-historical education centre of the Mürwik Naval Academy at Flensburg, the Association of Naval Officers at Bonn and the Scientific Institute for Navigation and Naval History at Hamburg. To the British side my gratitude goes to the archivists of the

Royal Naval Museum at Portsmouth, the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, the Imperial War Museum and the Public Records Office in London (now The National Archives at Kew), the Churchill Archives Centre at Cambridge and the Liddle Collection at Leeds University.

The German Federal Navy allowed me valuable insight into the everyday life of its modern naval forces, whether it be at the Mürwik Naval Academy, aboard a frigate, a minesweeper, a submarine, or the sail training ship *Gorch Fock*, on which I spent two weeks in the North Atlantic. I thank Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and its chief editor Dr Andrea Wörle for our exceptionally fruitful and pleasant co-operation. For their advice and support I am indebted to the historians Dieter Langewiesche (Tübingen), Michael Epkenhans (Potsdam), N A M Rodger (Oxford) and the late Michael Salewski (Kiel, d2010). The greatest thanks, however, I owe to my family without whom this book would probably never have been written.







## Prologue

ONE OF THE INCOMPARABLY beautiful days of that balmy summer of 1914 was Tuesday, 28 July. The sun shone down from a cloudless sky over the glittering blue Adriatic Sea. Exactly a month previously at Sarajevo, Serbian nationalists had gunned down the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, and plunged Europe into the most serious political crisis of the developing century. On that day news came that Austria–Hungary had declared war on Serbia.

The German battlecruiser SMS *Goeben* lay in the harbour at Pola amongst allied Austrian warships. She displaced 25,000 tons, her crew numbered around 1100 men and she was armed with ten 28cm (11 in) guns, making her one of the largest and most modern warships of the time. And also one of the fastest: twenty-four coal-fired boilers deep within the hull provided enough pressure to drive two powerful Parsons turbines and give the steel colossus a top speed of 28 knots. *Goeben* and the small cruiser *Breslau* made up the Mediterranean squadron. They were the only German warships in the entire Mediterranean.

The small but prestigious pair were commanded by Konteradmiral Wilhelm Souchon. Outwardly he was a rather inconspicuous man – in the opinion of a US diplomat he looked more like a parson than an admiral<sup>1</sup> – yet Souchon, born at Leipzig in 1864, had survived a number of ticklish situations in his naval career of over thirty years and was considered an extremely experienced and competent officer.

Following the assassination at Sarajevo, he had taken the *Goeben* to Pola in order to await further developments and meanwhile have his ship's engines overhauled. Now that the Austrians had gone on the offensive against Serbia and the tense atmosphere on the continent was continuing to build up, he had to make an important decision.

Souchon knew that here in the Adriatic he was sitting in a trap should war break out. Even with Austrian support, there was not the slightest prospect that *Goeben* and *Breslau* would be able to do anything against the oppressive superiority of the British and French fleets in this sea region. Maybe, with a bit of luck, he might sink a few troop transports bringing soldiers of the French colonial army to France from Algeria. He decided

therefore to leave the Adriatic with his two ships as quickly as possible, go round Sicily and lie in wait off the North African coast.

On 29 July 1914 *Goeben* weighed anchor, left Pola and headed first for Brindisi. From there she steamed to Sicily where *Breslau* was waiting. On the way Souchon learned from the naval staff in Berlin of the chain reaction of declarations of war and mobilisation orders which the Austrian notification to Serbia had unleashed. The treaties which the European powers had signed between themselves in bygone years and decades now divided the continent into allies and enemies. There had been a defensive treaty in existence between Germany and Austria–Hungary since 1879, the *Zweibund*, initially secret, but later admitted to. The German Reich now aligned unconditionally behind its *Zweibund* partner Austria–Hungary and declared war on Russia on 1 August 1914, because Russia had mobilised its army to protect Serbia.

The British and French sided with the Russians under the military treaty known as the ‘Triple Entente’, signed in 1907 to oppose the *Zweibund*, but still not all the hands had been dealt.

Italy, actually a treaty partner with Germany and Austria in the *Zweibund*, making it into the *Dreibund*, declared its neutrality on the day that *Goeben* reached Sicily and moored alongside the *Breslau* at Messina. On Sunday, 2 August 1914, the Italian authorities refused to coal the battle-cruiser. Souchon was only able to continue his voyage by requisitioning the coal stocks of German merchant vessels lying in the harbour. That evening he wrote to his wife: ‘I am in good heart and am glad to have beneath my feet the most powerful and fastest ship.’<sup>2</sup>

The next day, when the German formation left Sicily and steered for the coast of North Africa, he learned that Germany had declared war on France. He thought that his ships were on the right course, but within sight of his goal, Souchon received orders from Berlin: ‘*Goeben* and *Breslau* proceed immediately to Constantinople’. The reason: Germany and the Ottoman empire had just concluded a treaty to oppose Russia, although this treaty was only of a defensive nature. In order to induce the Turks to enter the war actively on the German side, Berlin needed a military presence in the Bosphorus. Souchon, who had other ideas, ignored the order and continued to his intended destination.

At the Algerian coast, *Goeben* and *Breslau* bombarded the ports of Philippeville and Bône, from where the troop transports sailed for France. Even if the shelling did not inflict too much damage, Souchon was satisfied. He had fulfilled his first mission. He was unaware initially what damage

his guns had done; what mattered most to him was to have the chance to fire his guns, to announce: 'The Germans are here, and they are dangerous.' Now he could head back to Messina to re-coal for the 1200-mile (2000km) voyage to Constantinople. The two cruisers turned away and steered east.

They had not put many sea miles behind them when the silhouettes of two British warships suddenly appeared on the horizon. These were HMS *Indomitable* and HMS *Indefatigable*, two modern RN battlecruisers, of similar build to *Goeben*, but fitted with eight 12in (30.5cm) guns. If it came to a fight, the two German ships would be outgunned and have little chance against this far superior enemy force. All ready to fire, the two ships of each side glided past each other at a few thousand yards' distance. It was the morning of 4 August 1914, but Germany and Great Britain were not yet at war.

This encounter at sea was pure chance. After Souchon's two ships had left the Adriatic unnoticed, the British senior commander in the Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Archibald Berkeley Milne, and his deputy, Rear Admiral Ernest Troubridge, puzzled over what plan of action the Germans were likely to be following. Of the pact with Turkey they had no knowledge. Additionally, at the Mediterranean Fleet HQ in Malta they were constantly receiving from London reports and orders which were to some extent contradictory in nature. Since 1911, Winston Churchill had been First Lord of the Admiralty and was accordingly political commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy. He insisted that Milne and Troubridge must locate the two German ships at all costs. What was supposed to happen next remained open at first. *Indomitable* and *Indefatigable* had received the task of monitoring the Straits of Gibraltar should the German ships attempt to escape into the Atlantic, and now they had them broadside to broadside.

Scarcely had the British battlecruisers passed the German units than they turned and put themselves on Souchon's heels. Souchon could not be certain from one moment to the next whether war had been declared between Britain and Germany and feared that the British battlecruisers might open fire on him at any second. He gave orders to shake off the pursuers. Far below in the engine rooms of the *Goeben* and *Breslau* the stokers shovelled coal into the furnaces, literally to the point of exhaustion, to bring their ships up to maximum speed. Slowly the distance widened. The Germans were still within range of the British heavy guns, but the latter remained silent.

What Souchon did not know was that the Cabinet in London had just served on the German government an ultimatum which expired at



midnight. Until then, as Churchill signalled, no round must be fired. The British ultimatum required a guarantee that Belgian neutrality would be respected. The Germans could not and would not give this, for the entire strategy of the imperial general staff in the event of war with France – the notorious ‘Schlieffen Plan’, named after Generalfeldmarschall Alfred von Schlieffen – was based on going round the strong French fortifications in the north of the country and heading for Paris instead of crossing Luxembourg and Belgium.

As the hours passed, gradually the German ships were lost to the sight of the British, although for a while the light cruiser *Dublin*, which had arrived meanwhile, kept contact, losing it at dusk. Towards ten that evening the *Dublin* was ordered to abandon the chase. Two hours later the British ultimatum expired at the stroke of midnight on 4 August 1914: Great Britain and Germany were now officially at war.

Next morning Souchon’s two ships reached Medina unscathed, and the Italians allowed him to coal. The exhausted crews had little time to recover. According to the Hague Convention, the warships of belligerent nations were only allowed to remain for twenty-four hours in a neutral port, or be interned. Souchon took the view that now war had been declared, the British would not let him escape a second time. He intended to make a run for it, even if it might mean the loss of his ships. The naval staff gave him licence to act as he saw fit. He wrote later to his wife: ‘Disarm in neutral ports, thank God German naval officers would never do so, and one hopes they never will.’<sup>23</sup> Before *Goeben* and *Breslau* weighed anchor on the afternoon of 6 August, Souchon had drafted his will and had it taken ashore.

Upon leaving Italian territorial waters, bearing southeast with guns at readiness, the German ships picked up a tail, the light cruiser HMS *Gloucester*. Not until later did Souchon discover that a serious tactical error on the part of the British had saved him. Admiral Milne thought that Souchon would make another attempt to attack the French troop transports and stationed all his ships, bar the *Gloucester*, west of Sicily, far from Souchon’s actual route. When it finally dawned on the British that Souchon was pursuing some other objective, the distance between them was too great.

Only Rear Admiral Troubridge was in a position to intercept. Waiting south of Corfu with four old armoured cruisers, his purpose was to block Souchon’s return route into Pola. Each of his four cruisers was individually weaker than the *Goeben*, but together they had considerable firepower. In