

‘Had we used the Navy’s bare fist instead of its gloved hand...’ - The Absence of Coastal Assault Vessels in the Royal Navy by 1914¹

HOWARD J. FULLER

University of Wolverhampton

Email: H.Fuller@wlv.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper will briefly chart how and why the Royal Navy chose not to develop coastal assault vessels—namely heavy-gunned, light-draught monitors specially designed to absorb damage from modern mines or torpedoes—until well after the First World War began. Churchill and Fisher envisaged these particular men-of-war as the floating equivalent of tanks, both ‘intended to restore to the stronger power an effective means of the offensive’. Only when they were finally launched and deployed in sufficient numbers could serious plans for projecting power directly against the German coastline be safely considered. So where were the monitors before the war?

As I went away, [Churchill] stopped me, saying he wished to talk about some matters. Said, “Now we have our war. The next thing is to decide how we are going to carry it on.” What a statement!

— Arthur J. Marder (ed.), *Portrait of an Admiral: Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), entry dated 4 August, 1914

A vital yet relatively unnoticed connecting factor between two sprawling, ‘total war’ historical conflicts, the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the First World War

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(1914-1918), has been the 'issue' of modern coastal offence and defence, and in particular the stand-out presence of monitor warships. In both cases, monitors were meant to be unique, war-winning vessels—able to go where other men-of-war couldn't, brushing off or avoiding enemy coastal defences, and delivering irresistible firepower with unheard-of precision. The Northern states invested heavily in these state-the-art vessels primarily for coast defence—against Confederate ironclads, for example. But the First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, Winston Churchill, and Admiral Sir John ('Jackie') Fisher, the First Sea Lord, saw them as ideal for coastal assault—for shore bombardment—carrying in some cases a pair of 15-inch calibre guns in a heavily-armoured turret, yet mounted on a minimalised hull which drew only 10½-feet of water (whereas the new super-dreadnought *Queen Elizabeth*, by contrast, floated eight of the same guns in 33-feet of water at a minimum.) By hugging the shore as close as possible, accuracy against enemy batteries was maximised, while shallows offered greater protection from various deep-water threats, from U-boats to battleships. To answer the deadly threat of enemy torpedoes and mines, Admiralty designers fitted these littoral craft with extra internal watertight compartments along with exaggerated 'blisters' or 'bulges' along their outer hulls which might absorb the impact of underwater explosions. In many respects they were the toughest ships of the First World War.

Expectations were high, perhaps too high given the circumstances. Would an unexpected surge of war-time technology and shipbuilding be enough to overcome the strategic inertia of the Western Front by suddenly allowing for major strikes from the sea? Churchill certainly seems to have thought so, and he did his best to convince anyone who would listen. 'I hope you will not be discouraged by the recall of the *Queen Elizabeth*', he wrote to Admiral John de Robeck in the midst of the Gallipoli Campaign. While it was increasingly unsafe for the Admiral's flagship due to enemy mines and submarines, two large monitors were on their way to replace her which 'will go anywhere and you will be able to use them with freedom', he assured him. 'They are the last word in bombarding vessels'.² By June 1915 Churchill had been squeezed out of office yet still clung to Prime Minister Asquith's new coalition government as the obscure Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Here he confided to his younger brother 'Jack' how the big monitors 'are another source of hope for me'. Their ultimate success would be his ultimate success. Since their constructors were confident of their ability to withstand torpedoes it might just be the one

² CHAR 13/65/214, from the Churchill Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge, Churchill to de Robeck, 12 May 1915. Within hours of this telegram the older pre-dreadnought battleship HMS *Goliath* was daringly attacked at anchor off Cape Helles (the Gallipoli beachhead) by a lone Turkish destroyer, and sunk with a loss of more than 80% of her crew.

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innovation which could transform the war at sea (not just specialised armoured units for coastal assault, but capital ships in the line of battle and even oceangoing merchant vessels virtually immune from U-boat attacks.) ‘One cannot be quite certain *till you try!*’³ At Churchill’s insistence the Royal Navy was now fully committed. After another year of war, with casualties piling up on both land and sea faster than anyone thought possible, Churchill was back in Parliament from a sort of self-imposed exile serving on the Western Front—promising Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that the navy’s monitors, like the army’s new tanks, would undoubtedly ‘restore to the stronger power an effective means of the offensive’.⁴ Implicit here was the notion that the war would be lost on the defensive, relying solely upon a maritime blockade to slowly eat away the Central Powers from within, while the British Grand Fleet served to deter the German High Seas Fleet; glaring at one another from their respective bases on opposite sides of the North Sea.

Rather, the new British monitors were to ultimately spearhead an invasion of the Baltic, in combination with a new wave of ‘light-draft’, super-fast battlecruisers. HMS *Furious* was herself to be armed with a pair of stupendous 18-inch calibre, 149-ton guns, the largest ever mounted in the long history of the British navy, and capable of firing a 3,320-pound (or 1½-ton) projectile 28,900 yards. As Fisher described it, the guns of his monster flotilla ‘with their enormous shells were built to make it impossible for the Germans to prevent the Russians from landing on the Pomeranian coast’, with British naval shells ‘bursting on reaching the ground far out of human sight, but yet with exact accuracy as to where they should fall, causing in their explosion craters somewhat like that of Vesuvius or Mount Etna; and consequently

³ 19 June 1915, Winston to John Churchill, in Martin Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill, Companion Volume III, Part 2, May 1915 - December 1916* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 1042. FISR 7-4, for torpedo-proof ships see for example, B. Hopkinson (Board of Invention and Research), *Report on the Protection of Ships against Torpedo Attack*, from the Papers of 1st Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, 21 October 1915, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge; and MS72/030, DEY/19, Eustice T. D’Eyncourt (Director of Naval Construction) to Lloyd George, 14 June 1917, the D’Eyncourt Papers, National Maritime Museum (Greenwich), Caird Library. The Admiralty ultimately rejected the proposal for merchant vessels to be provided with more watertight bulkheads; see for example, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter ‘TNA’), ADM I-8507-280, ‘Unsinkable Ships—Proceedings of an International Conference held at the Admiralty in August 1917 to discuss and consider designs for unsinkable ships’.

⁴ 1 October 1916, Churchill to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, from Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. III, Pt. 2, *op. cit.*, p. 1572.

you can easily imagine the German Army fleeing for its life from Pomerania to Berlin'.⁵

This was, to be sure, an awe-inspiring vision, but as with Churchill's unrelenting optimism it has to be tempered with the recollection of the naval repulse at the Dardanelles or the disastrous Gallipoli campaign which followed, and even going much further back than previous analyses have allowed. After all, the original 'Monitor' was an American invention, first used by the Union Navy during the American Civil War half a century earlier.⁶ Designed by the brilliant Swedish immigrant John Ericsson, the famous USS *Monitor* (1862) as a 'sub-aquatic system of warfare' had its origins further back still, in the Crimean War (1853-1856). In that conflict, Great Britain and France as 'maritime states' joined their forces against Imperial Russia, which Prince Albert adroitly described as a 'a vast and ponderous mass, upon which blows on the few spots where they can be planted will make no deep impression'.⁷ The Allies' strategic dilemma was compounded by both the political desire and strong public pressure to root out the main Russian battlefleet, holed up in the naval fortress-base of Cronstadt in the Gulf of Finland, guarding the seaward approaches to St. Petersburg. By quickly annihilating the growing threat of Russian seapower in either the Baltic or the Black Sea, the Ottoman Empire would be protected from Russian dismemberment, Russian expansionism north and south would be checked, and the Mediterranean would remain a predominantly Anglo-French sphere of influence. But by the 1850s Cronstadt was the most heavily-defended port in the world, with a network of modern granite forts—armed with shell-firing guns—which funnelled wooden steamships through multiple cross-fires at close range. Soon, additional shore batteries were established to protect newly-laid minefields in the channel approaches from any attempts at demolition.⁸

⁵ From Oscar Parkes, *British Battleships: A History of Design, Construction and Armament* (London: Seeley Service & Co., Limited, 1970), p. 618. There was nothing to say that the '90 miles' from the Pomeranian coast direct to Berlin would not have become a nightmare for advancing Russian and/or British troops; at least one major river line flowing into the Oder blocked the advance; a potential German 'Miracle of the Marne'?

⁶ See for example, Richard H. Thompson, 'The Rise and Fall of the Monitor 1862-1973', *Mariner's Mirror*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1974), pp. 293-310.

⁷ 24 January 1854, Prince Albert to Baron von Stockmar, in Kurt Jagow (ed.), *Letters of the Prince Consort 1831-1861* (London: John Murray, 1938), p. 207.

⁸ For various British reports on Russian 'infernal machines' see Sir Charles Napier Papers, British National Archives (Kew), PRO 30-16, 5; TNA, ADM 1-5674, 4 February 1856; TNA, ADM 1-5677, Foreign Office to Admiralty, 23 February 1856 (information clandestinely supplied via the Swedish Minister at St. Petersburg,

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To fix this problem, Ericsson submitted to French Emperor Napoleon III in 1854 a plan for a light-draft, iron-hulled, mastless, fully steam-powered, screw-propelled, partially-submerged and iron-armoured craft—armed with two large, ship-killing weapons mounted in a heavily plated, steam-rotated iron turret. ‘An impregnable and partially submerged instrument for destroying ships of war has been one of the hobbies of my life’, he later recounted.⁹ A squadron of them might steam through the Russian gauntlet of fire, sink all of the wooden ships-of-the-line found sheltering in the harbour with singular knock-out blows rather than broadsides, then steam back out safely enough. Of course, this plan said nothing about dealing with mines or other obstructions—or pounding forts into submission—and the design of the vessel itself was so completely radical to anything seen in a professional navy before that it’s perhaps little surprise the French rejected the proposal (one of many received during the war).¹⁰ Instead the Emperor pushed ahead with shallow-draft, fully-armoured broadside-batteries whose main function was to attack the Russian forts at close range; stone against iron, not iron against wood.¹¹

General Nordin). Desperate for any solution to the problem of naval mines and obstructions, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston wished First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Charles Wood to explore shipbuilder John Scott Russell’s radical proposal for a ‘submarine vessel, or locomotive Diving Bell’; 17 December 1855, Halifax Papers (Hickleton), Borthwick Institute of Archives, York University, A4-63. For Russian descriptions of minefields around Cronstadt and around the Gulf of Finland (including those developed by Alfred Nobel for the Russian government) see RGAVMF, fond 224, op. 1, Letters of Konstantin Nikolaevich, St. Petersburg National Archives; delo 289.

⁹ William Conant Church, *The Life of John Ericsson*, 2 volumes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), vol. 1, p. 240.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241. The French letter of refusal noted ‘the Emperor thinks that the result to be obtained would not be proportionate to the expenses or to the small number of guns which could be brought into use’. Other plans for attacking Cronstadt and Sevastopol during the Crimean War included the use of gas attacks, submarines and 36-inch calibre wrought-iron mortars weighing 42 tons.

¹¹ For the role played by the three French ironclad batteries against the Russian forts at Kinburn (17 October 1855) see for example TNA, ADM 1-5654, report of Rear-Admiral Edmund Lyons to the Board of Admiralty, 23 October 1855; and David K. Brown, *Before the Ironclad: Development of Ship Design, Propulsion and Armament in the Royal Navy, 1815-1860* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1990), p. 158.

Six years later, during the American Civil War, and Ericsson's design had intrigued the U.S. Navy, desperate for a way to counter the Confederate ironclad being converted from the wreck of the steam-frigate USS *Merrimack*. When asked to actually name his contracted warship, then nearing completion in January 1862, Ericsson stated 'The impregnable and aggressive character of this structure will admonish the leaders of the Southern Rebellion that the batteries on the banks of their rivers will no longer present barriers to the entrance of the Union forces. The iron-clad intruder will thus prove a severe monitor to those leaders'. Here was the original mission again: steaming inexorably into fortified areas and destroying enemy naval threats. But now he added another role which his 'Monitor' might fulfil like no other man-of-war could; promising that it was not just as a 'severe monitor' to 'the leaders of the Southern Rebellion' but to 'Downing Street' and the 'Lords of the Admiralty'.¹² This reflected the Anglo-American tensions during the conflict, and U.S. fears that the Northern States were vulnerable to attack by the latest ocean-going broadside-ironclads (like HMS *Warrior* and her sisters) from Britain or France. The *Monitor* and her sisters were specifically designed to counter such threats, by sacrificing ocean-going qualities (namely sails, as well as huge hulls and high-freeboard) in favour of light-draft, armour concentration along the low-freeboard 'raft', and heavily-armoured, steam-rotated gun turrets housing 'monster' muzzle-loaders which no other vessels could float with safety much less operate by hand.¹³ Ericsson had successfully pitched them as the one thing which could enforce the blockade of the Confederacy. He also stressed they were the Union's only means of coping with possible European intervention by sea.

What he did *not* claim was that they would be good for duking it out with forts. 'I cannot share in your confidence relative to the capture of Charleston', Ericsson wrote to the Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Navy in April 1863. 'I am so much in the habit of estimating force and resistance that I cannot feel sanguine of success. If you do succeed, it will not be a mechanical consequence of your 'marvellous' vessels, but because you are marvellously fortunate. The most I dare hope is that the contest will end without the loss of that prestige which your Iron Clads have conferred on the

¹² 20 January 1862, Ericsson to Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Navy, Gustavus Vasa Fox, quoted from John Ericsson, *Contributions to the Centennial Exhibition* (New York: Nation Press, 1876), pp. 465-6.

¹³ See Howard J. Fuller, "'This country now occupies the vantage ground": Union Monitors vs. the British Navy', in Harold Holzer and Tim Mulligan (eds.), *The Battle of Hampton Roads: New Perspectives on the USS Monitor and CSS Virginia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 125-139.

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Nation abroad... A single shot will sink a Ship while a hundred rounds cannot silence a fort'.¹⁴

Yet given all of the hype, expense and expectation going into 'Yankee monitors' by 1863 U.S. Navy war planners tended to dismiss these warnings. Ericsson's professional reputation was one thing, but only those at the top of the naval chain of command were aware of the growing political and pressure to crush the Confederate States quickly, and by any means possible. By 1863 this had included the emancipation of slaves in states in rebellion. Surely the North's immense superiority in maritime, industrial, financial and technological resources could be harnessed and focused into devastating coastal strikes, led by Ericsson's 'floating fighting machines' as he now called them. On 7 April, 1863 the Union deployed a squadron of improved monitors mounting gigantic 25-ton, 15-inch calibre (muzzle-loaded) smoothbores against the multiple array of forts and batteries which guarded the main shipping channel into Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. After enduring an incredible two-hour barrage from close range the Federal fleet was compelled to withdraw.¹⁵ This humiliating defeat should not have come as much of a surprise,

¹⁴ 10 April 1863, Ericsson to Fox, John Ericsson Papers, American-Swedish Historical Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Six months before, and with new and improved monitors mounting larger ordnance still under construction, Ericsson had also warned that 'that the number of 15 inch guns rather than the number of vessels will decide your success against the Stone forts'; 30 September 1862, Ericsson to Fox, John Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.).

¹⁵ For the Union naval repulse at Charleston (7 April 1863) see for example, Rear-Admiral C. R. P. Rodgers, 'Du Pont's Attack at Charleston', in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (eds.), *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (Edison: Castle Books, 1956, reprint of 1884-88 original series), vol. 4, pp. 32-46; E. Milby Burton, *The Siege of Charleston, 1861-1865* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970); Kevin J. Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Rowena Reed, *Combined Operations in the Civil War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), especially pp. 263-294; and Robert Erwin Johnson, 'Ships Against Forts: Charleston, 7 April 1863', *The American Neptune*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 123-35. See also 'Order of battle and plan of attack upon Charleston, South Carolina', in *Report of the Secretary of the Navy in Relation to Armored Vessels* (Washington: Government Printing Office: 1864), pp. 60-1. The Union ironclad squadron consisted of seven Passaic-class monitors, the lightly-armoured, fixed tower USS *Keokuk*, and the broadside-ironclad USS *New Ironsides*. At less than 1,000 yards they absorbed 520 hits from heavy

however, since no professional navy in the mid-Victorian era had a standing doctrine of how to cope with modern combined coast defences; forts and shore batteries armed with the latest rifled, shell-firing guns but also harbour and river obstructions protected by mines (or 'torpedoes') which were protected in turn by the forts. A central question posed by this article is, did anyone have one in place even throughout the Edwardian era? As one Prussian mercenary-engineer in service of the Confederacy wrote after the Civil War, 'artillery-fire alone will never again prevent a steam-fleet from forcing a passage, the channel of which has not been obstructed', but 'in connection with other obstructions, the torpedo [mine] renders it impossible for any fleet to force a passage under the fire of properly constructed shore-batteries'.¹⁶

While monitor warships during the American Civil War did perform very well against enemy ironclads, using them against forts was a mixed affair, inasmuch as one needed, in addition to monitors blasting away at short ranges, a large bombarding fleet going at it from a safer distance—and a good division or so of troops making an assault at the same time. That is, modern combined defences required modern combined operations to even think about overcoming. The U.S. Navy's only broadside-ironclad, USS *New Ironsides*, therefore operated throughout the war at a high premium, and this highlighted a strategic dichotomy in early ironclad warship design between 'turret and broadside', and vessels for coastal offence (vs. forts) and those for coastal defence (vs. ships). As expressed by George Belknap, former executive officer of the *New Ironsides* and then commander of the monitor USS *Canonicus*, 'Both classes of vessels were incomparable in their own way, and both classes should have been equally tested; and while perhaps the enemy dreaded the approach of the 'Ironsides' more than the united efforts of half a dozen monitors, the latter, with their 15-inch guns, would probably have made short work of the frigate'.¹⁷

seacoast guns including 10-inch Columbiads. *Keokuk* was riddled, sinking the next day, but none of the monitors' armour was penetrated by gunfire and their damages were mostly repaired within days; see *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* ('ORN') 30 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1894-1922), Series I, vol. 14, pp. 10-24.

¹⁶ Victor Ernst Karl Rudolf von Scheliha, *A Treatise on Coast-Defence* (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1868), p. 48 & p. 295; also p. 157. Von Scheliha was made Lieutenant-Colonel and Chief Engineer of the Department of the Gulf of Mexico, Confederate States Army, and writing from Berlin, dedicated his volume to Prince Adalbert of Prussia.

¹⁷ George E. Belknap, 'Reminiscent of the 'New Ironsides' off Charleston', *United Service Magazine*, no. 1, January 1879, pp. 63-82.

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When the double-turreted USS *Miantonomoh* safely crossed the Atlantic in 1866 and dropped anchor at Portsmouth, the Lords of the Admiralty were finally persuaded to invest in a few monitors, adding a ‘breastwork’ to at least bring the guns more safely away from the waterline.¹⁸ Before then, Britain’s initial reaction to Ericsson’s ‘Monitor’ had been one of disdain, then alarm, then disdain again.¹⁹ There was simply no question that the Royal Navy was going to substitute what the U.S. Navy was beginning to call a ‘Brown Water’ force for a proper ‘Blue Water’ naval power with a global maritime empire to protect. At home, Parliament had already committed itself to a large and expensive series of coastal defence forts insisted upon by ‘Old Pam’—Prime Minister Lord Palmerston—in 1860. This was in response to the popular ‘Panic’ over a possible French invasion, facilitated by steam-powered troopships as well as ironclad batteries, but also to the recent fate of Sevastopol (and the strength of Cronstadt) during the Crimean War.²⁰ Embarrassment meanwhile characterised Palmerston’s last government as it seemed unwilling to follow through with vague threats of war over Prussia and Austria’s invasion of Denmark during the Schleswig-Holstein conflict (1864). ‘We should be laughed at if we stood by’ wrote Palmerston to the Duke of Somerset, First Lord of the Admiralty. The Channel Squadron ‘ought to have orders to prevent any Invasion of, or attack upon Jutland and Copenhagen’. Not ‘sending the Fleet’, Earl Russell, the Foreign Secretary similarly warned, ‘would make the Germans indulge more than ever in their sneer at

¹⁸ Designed by Chief Constructor of the Royal Navy Edward Reed, there were two double-turreted Cerberus-class monitors commissioned for overseas colonial defence, *Cerberus* (launched 1868, sent to Melbourne) and *Magdala* (1870, sent to Bombay); the smaller *Abyssinia* (1870, sent to Bombay); the fixed-turret *Hotspur* (1870); the single turreted *Glatton* (1871) and *Rupert* (1872); and the four double-turreted Cyclops-class monitors, all launched in 1871, *Cyclops*, *Gorgon*, *Hecate* and *Hydra*: ten light-draught monitors total (although *Rupert* drew over 22-feet), only seven available for service in European waters. By contrast the Union Navy during the Civil War laid down fifty-five monitors (coastal, ‘ultra-light’ and seagoing) with another five for river service only.

¹⁹ See for example, Howard J. Fuller, “‘The whole character of maritime life’: British Reactions to the U.S.S. *Monitor* and the American Ironclad Experience’, *The Mariner’s Mirror*, vol. 88, no. 3. (August 2002), pp. 285-300.

²⁰ The leading work on ‘Palmerston’s Follies’ remains Michael Stephen Partridge, *Military Planning for the Defence of the United Kingdom, 1814-1870* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); more recently see Timothy Crick, *Ramparts of Empire: The Fortifications of Sir William Jervois, Royal Engineer, 1821-1897* (Exeter: The Exeter Press Ltd., 2012).

our pacific bluster, and the harmless roar of the British Lion'.²¹ But unless France—with her army—was willing to join Britain then all talk of using force was meaningless, Somerset observed (and the French foreign minister had already stated France was 'not prepared'). Furthermore, he explained, the Royal Navy's battlefleet of deep-draught broadside-ironclads were 'not suited to purposes of [close] blockade, if such a measure should be resorted to, than lighter wooden vessels'. Since the banks of the Elbe would be in possession of Germany 'the only possible operation here would be a blockade' of Cuxhaven by ironclads supporting gunboats. But because the 'south bank of the Eider' would also be commanded by shore batteries, direct coastal assault was 'impossible for small wooden ships, and the depth of water would not admit our iron-clad ships'.²² The popular British satire periodical *Punch* attempted to downplay the significance of the sacrifice of Denmark for the 'greater peace of Europe', as Russell later rationalised it, with a 2 July, 1864 cartoon of 'Jack on the Crisis'. Here a jolly jack tar of the Royal Navy gestures with a mate to a rustic-looking German, without a navy to fight on the open high seas, colonies to gobble up or trade to ruin: 'Blow it, Bill! We can't be expected to *fight* a lot o' lubberly swabs like him. We'll kick 'em, if that'll do'. But the German is gazing away in another direction, puffing his pipe in contemplation and, can we perhaps suggest, equally dismissive?²³

Despite the obvious need for a new generation of light-draft armoured vessels to take the place of vulnerable wooden gunboats, the Royal Navy's early monitors of the late 1860s had been relegated as third-class naval units even before they were laid down, routinely left for last in yearly naval estimates as floating batteries to supplement Britain's national and imperial chain of harbour fortifications. Admiral Sir Sydney Robert Fremantle described his early service aboard one of these 'small old freak-battleships', HMS *Hotspur*, launched in 1870; 'one of several coastguard ships (usually known as "gobbies") stationed at ports round the coast of the United Kingdom'. More often commanded by officers pushing retirement, these awkward, uncomfortable vessels rarely put to sea.²⁴ Yet they carried the heaviest guns available

²¹ D/RA/A/2A/40, Palmerston to Somerset, 20 February 1864; Russell to Somerset, 11 June 1864, Somerset Papers Collection, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire Record Office; D/RA/A/2A/53, Letters from Viscount Palmerston, 1864, Letters from Lord John Russell, 1864.

²² PRO 30-22, 27; TNA, PRO 30-22, 26, 26 January 1864, Somerset minute; 10 and 15 January 1864, Somerset to Russell, National Archives (Kew), Russell Papers.

²³ TNA, PRO 30-22, 97, Russell to Lord Lyons, 6 February 1864; 2 July 1864, 'Jack on the Crisis', *Punch, or the London Charivari*.

²⁴ Robert Fremantle, *My Naval Career 1880-1928* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1948), p. 57.

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in Britain, protected by the thickest armour possible—making them very formidable ship-killers, despite their slow speed. ‘They might be said to resemble full-armed knights riding on donkeys,’ a notable British naval authority later pronounced, ‘easy to avoid but bad to close with’.²⁵ As harbour *defence* vessels they answered a growing strategic need throughout the mid-Victorian era to feel more secure against potential threats where the British fleet might not be able to intervene in time; so the few that were built were sent off to places like Australia and India, as local guard-dogs (not coincidentally the Australian monitor was named *Cerberus*). A letter from Foreign Secretary Earl Granville to First Lord of the Admiralty George Goschen, dated January 10th, 1872, was typical, calling for a monitor at Hong Kong, if only because ‘our interests are so enormous, and they may so easily be put into jeopardy either by the Chinese themselves, by the French, or by our merchants and missionaries’(!) Gladstone’s penny-pinching cabinet, he added, ‘would never consent to expensive fortifications there’.²⁶

For coastal *assault* the recent practical experience in memory was the ‘experiment’ with slow-firing turret ships during the Civil War. In a fierce public debate at the Royal United Service Institution in 1867, the Controller of the Royal Navy, Vice-Admiral Robert Spencer Robinson, briefly suggested that shallow-draft turret ironclads on the pattern of the Union monitors might be useful for attacking fortifications inasmuch as the Federals employed them as cumbersome floating ‘siege artillery’ on ‘inland waters’. But the British *Nautical Magazine* was quick to pick up on this point later; ‘that if admittedly so valuable for the important services of attack and defence in the Channel, we should possess as yet but two specimens of it adapted to such services, since the [Laird Rams] *Scorpion* and *Wyvern*, disclaimed by [Captain Cowper] Coles, are scouted also by Admiral Robinson’.²⁷ In other words, the Controller did not sanction an entire flotilla of monitors during his tenure (1861-1871) because fighting turrets against forts was not the navy’s priority. The only issue of the day was what form *ocean-going* ironclads would take as capital ships, ‘turret vs. broadside’.

This didn’t prevent the occasional grand ‘review’ of volunteer British defences by land and sea, designed to thrill tax-paying Victorian spectators rather than as serious

²⁵ George A. Ballard (edited by G. A. Osborn and N. A. M. Rodger), *The Black Battlefleet: A Study of the Capital Ship in Transition* (London: Nautical Publishing Co., Lymington & the Society for Nautical Research, Greenwich, 1980), pp. 218-19.

²⁶ TNA, PRO 30-29, 54, Granville to Goschen, 10 January 1872, Granville Papers.

²⁷ 1 May 1867, Cowper Coles, ‘The Turret versus the Broadside System’, extended discussion, *Journal of the Royal United service Institution*, vol. XI (1868), pp. 471-2.

wargame exercises in the postmodern sense. An 1869 issue of the *Illustrated London News* therefore depicted the *Royal Sovereign* and *Scorpion*—controversial ‘turret ships of the future’—staging a ‘bombardment’ of the forts at Dover in an epic two-page spread. But the image did not show the 24-foot draught of the *Royal Sovereign*, obliging her to keep a greater distance. The sea that day was choppy, meaning the two vessels rolled to the point where any real accuracy would be problematic in the extreme—while the forts apparently are not shown firing back. No mines, obstructions or defending coastal vessels such as fast rams are present; it’s a straight fight between attacking ships and forts.²⁸ What’s also missing is the fact that these were two of the only four turret vessels in commission in the Royal Navy at the time. *Royal Sovereign* was a conversion from a wooden line-of-battle ship and *Scorpion* was actually one of the two ‘Laird Rams’ contracted for service in the Confederate States Navy during the American Civil War, and purchased by Palmerston’s government in 1864 to avoid antagonising Anglo-American relations further. Both vessels were armed with slow-firing, 9-inch 12-ton rifled muzzle-loaded Armstrong guns—intended to penetrate the armour of enemy ironclads, not attempt to silence forts. Significantly, when Chief Constructor of the Royal Navy Sir Edward Reed published his monumental treatise on *Our Iron-Clad Ships* in 1869 he made no mention of his breastwork monitors in a coastal attack role. Indeed, he reckoned, ‘if we have made a mistake with reference to the introduction into the British Navy of turret-ships, and especially of monitors, that mistake has consisted in adopting them too rapidly, rather than too slowly’.²⁹

The crunch came the following year when the dangerously unstable sail-and-turret HMS *Captain*—the pride of the ‘fleet of the future’—capsized off Cape Finisterre (6 September, 1870), taking down most of the crew and *Captain*’s designer and turret-ship advocate Cowper Coles. Although Robinson and his department denied responsibility for the privately-built vessel’s design it was hard for the public as well as the government to accept this explanation as adequate (one of those lost was a son of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Hugh Childers). Worse still was that this peace-time disaster took place in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), a major conflict on Britain’s doorstep which left many Britons feeling acutely exposed. Public and professional sentiment rapidly turned against turret ships. An exhaustive Parliamentary inquiry followed which eventually drove Robinson out of office in February 1871. But by then events in France drew attention to a startling reality: despite having a battlefleet navy second only to Great Britain’s, the French

²⁸ 10 April 1869, ‘The Volunteer Review at Dover: View of Dover from the Sea—The Naval Squadron Attacking the Forts’, *Illustrated London News*.

²⁹ E. J. Reed, *Our Iron-Clad Ships; Their Qualities, Performances, and Cost, with Chapters on Turret Ships, Iron-Clad Rams, &c.* (London: John Murray, 1869), p. 254.

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were unable to inflict any damage upon Prussia by sea. There was no coastal assault flotilla of light-draft ironclads standing by, any more than there was in Britain.³⁰ The *Times* subsequently condemned the Royal Navy for a chronic lack of preparation. In a heated debate in the House of Commons a few weeks later the new First Lord of the Admiralty, George Goschen, likewise noted the French fleet's expedition to the North Sea during the recent war was 'unable to accomplish anything' while in the Opposition pundits like Conservative Rear-Admiral Sir John Dalrymple-Hay critiqued the *Cyclops* class as likely to wind up like the *Captain* 'if they venture out of harbour into the Atlantic'.³¹

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the hostile climate, Robinson testified before the Parliamentary committee on 10 March, 1871 how his breastwork-monitors might indeed be used offensively, 'for those occasions on which the country might think it necessary to send out a great expedition to land an attacking force in shallow water, where vessels of great draught of water could no arrive and take their part in an action'. But the chair of the committee, Lord Dufferin, pressed the witness about the actual pre-planned abilities of the British monitors, 'if we wished to make an attack upon some forts'. When Robinson evasively replied it would be 'merely wasting your time' to speculate, Dufferin noted:

But is it not questions of this kind which it is our especial object to anticipate. We have to prepare in time of peace for contingencies which will occur in time of war. It is impossible to foresee what maybe the conditions of any particular attack which may be made, and, therefore, we are bound to furnish ourselves beforehand with the capability of meeting unforeseen

³⁰ As noted by British Vice-admiral and naval historian Philip Colomb, it was 'well understood by the French Government in 1870 as ever it had been in former days, that the navy alone was practically powerless to make territorial attacks, and that whether ships were steam "battleships" or sailing "line-of-battle ships" they did not in themselves represent the proper force for conducting territorial attacks', *Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practice Historically Treated* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., Limited, 1899, 3rd ed.), p. 427.

³¹ 7 March 1871, *The Times*; 27 March 1871, *Hansard*, vol. 205, cc. 689-734. 'The inaction of the French fleet is a strange feature in the history of the war,' wondered the contemporary *Cassell's History of the War Between France and Germany, 1870-1871*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell & Company, Limited 1873). 'Considering the immense naval superiority of France over Prussia, something, one would think, ought to have been performed at sea to redress the disasters of the French on land,' I: 23.

contingencies. That was the great mistake which France seems to have made, and may others have made, and perhaps ourselves, in not having provided the necessary means of attack for any contingency which might happen?

Robinson's response was the Admiralty 'had provided such means of attack as the country has thought proper to allow money for...and if we have got too small a navy that is the business of the Government of the day...' In any case, deep water ports were accessible to the main British ironclad fleet—if not kept out by torpedoes [mines]'. For attacking forts approachable through shallow water, the former Controller admitted that no armoured vessel currently existed; 'and I do not know that that is a particular want either'.³² Hence, there wasn't much of a tradition in either the Victorian or Edwardian navies to construct a large coastal defence—let alone 'assault'—flotilla of ironclad monitors, or any other purpose-built craft which might 'spearhead' invasions. It was hard enough, year by excruciating, tax-paying year, just to get the naval budgets approved by Parliament without too much fuss from the Opposition³³—to upgrade and sustain a main battlefleet of deep-draught, Blue-Water-roving capital ships, with squadrons in the Channel, the Mediterranean, the Far East, the Caribbean and so on. Cruisers then took second-place, to show the flag and to protect trade across the Empire. It was much easier to invest in local defences at home and imperial bases, forts and coastal defence monitors (or 'batteries'), and let a potential aggressor try to overcome them from long distances which necessarily limited the defensive and offensive capabilities (and costs) of attacking warships.

This was not just 'defence on the cheap' but *deterrence* at work in the days of Palmerston and Russell, Gladstone and Disraeli, and Salisbury. Responding to public criticism that the Royal Navy's edge was slipping in 1884, First Naval Lord Admiral Sir Cooper Key wrote to Admiral Sir Geoffrey Phipps Hornby, 'I should have no fear

³² *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to Examine The Designs Upon Which Ships of War Have Recently Been Constructed, with Analysis of Evidence* (Parliamentary Paper, London, 1872), 'Minutes of Evidence, Vice-Admiral Sir Robert Spencer Robinson', 590, 643-51 (pp. 53-7).

³³ As Robinson noted in an article in 1880, there was always 'a triumphant reference to any item [in the Navy Estimates] on which a diminution can be shown', Robert Spencer Robinson, 'England as a Naval Power', *The Nineteenth Century*, no. 37 (March 1880), pp. 389-405. Given that the main thrust of this piece was to attack what he felt were unwise economies in the Royal Navy in recent years, Robinson was careful to list the four Cyclops-class monitors as 'designed for the protection of ports and roadsteads, but not for sea-going purposes'.

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whatever with France and Russia now, so far as our Navy is concerned'. The ratio of first-class (blue-water) ironclads was more than 2:1 over France alone. Yet he had 'always deprecated asking for a very large lump sum for shipbuilding purposes—it will only induce other Nations to make another start'.³⁴ At the Admiralty's Foreign Intelligence Committee, Captain William Henry Hall's report of 1884 wanted at least 85 torpedo boats to help blockade just the major French ports. 'Cherbourg could be, and Lorient might be, successfully bombarded by an armour-clad squadron', he wrote, 'but Brest and Toulon could successfully resist such an attack, and the position of Rochefort renders it impossible by hostile vessels'. But what made Cherbourg vulnerable, he noted, was the absence of modern ordnance in the various fortifications. Couldn't these be upgraded with heavier guns fairly quickly? Would 'six ironclads' really silence the existing (10-inch) guns and destroy the dockyard 'in one day'? Both the experiences of the bombardment of Alexandria two years before and the First World War a generation later cast doubt on this assertion. 'Having the essential facts of the last engagement between ships and earthworks at hand,' surmised a printed report on *British Naval and Military Operations in Egypt, 1882*, by Lt.-Commander Caspar F. Goodrich of the U.S. Navy, 'it is impossible not to draw one broad inference—that vessels are not yet and never will be able to fight on even terms with forts'.³⁵ At any rate, by December 1893 the naval members of the Board of Admiralty declared in a memo that France and Russia 'as regards their great naval ports may be said to be absolutely safe from attack by any fleet which this country could bring against them'. This meant an even larger fleet was required, battleships as well as cruisers, 'with no adequate provision against the attacks from the organized torpedo-boat system of France' to even protect commerce in the English Channel. The War Office confirmed this assessment a year later, reporting 'the military ports are so well defended that they are considered in France to be unassailable by seawards, while the chief commercial ports have in most cases sufficient guns to keep all but the heavily armoured ships at a respectful distance'. In particular, shore batteries 'of recent construction are almost invisible from seawards; nothing would be more difficult than for ships to engage them with success'.³⁶

³⁴ From Parkes, *British Battleships*, *op. cit.*, 328.

³⁵ Lieutenant-Commander Caspar F. Goodrich, *Report of the British Naval and Military Operations in Egypt, 1882*, War Series III, 'Information from Abroad', Office of Naval Intelligence, Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department, 1883 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), p. 74; original *emphasis*.

³⁶ TNA, ADM 231-5, *Remarks on a Naval Campaign*, by Captain W. H. Hall, R.N., 24 September 1884, p. 19; TNA, ADM 116-878, 'Construction of Warships 1893-1899'—*Programme of New Construction*, 'Sir Frederick Richards and other Naval Members of Board, December 18 1893', pp. 20-1; TNA, WO 33-54, Captain Charles

In terms of the 'peace needs of the navy', national and imperial *defence* always overrode a manifestly aggressive British navy capable of inflicting harm without fear of injury as far as foreign powers were concerned. Deterrence based on defence, carefully shared in a 'Balance of Power' international order, was therefore also more about *détente*. 'No one will complain that we have too many first-class ships, but we have no in-shore Squadron worthy of the name', bemoaned Liberal MP and naval advocate Thomas Brassey in March 1878. 'We are conspicuously deficient in ships adapted for attacks on forts and batteries'. Citing a recent paper by Royal Navy Captain Cyprian Bridge at the Royal Engineer Institute, Brassey told an indifferent House of Commons that even in terms of ammunition it was doubtful the country had enough for a massive, sustained naval bombardment of a first-class enemy fortification. As a fairly recent example, Union warships at the Siege of Fort Fisher (late December 1864 to early January 1865) had expended over 50,000 shells over the course of three days. Bridge's essay was itself almost apologetic to his audience of British coastal defence-engineers. 'Looking back and reviewing the whole question, it is not easy to avoid the conviction that to attack a great fortress we should require a vast force', he noted. 'Heavy ironclads would have to be numbered by dozens, and gun-boats and mortar-boats by fifties'. Just as Britain found herself unprepared for major littoral operations at the beginning of the Crimean War, it would be 'the same again if we do not recognise the fact that our preparations should be such as to give us some promise of successful performance'.³⁷ This must have given Bridge's listeners some grounds for satisfaction, for it was unlikely any other navy in the world was any more prepared for coastal offence as opposed to defence. And this, according to Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir William Harcourt in 1894, was as it should be; for 'the great mass of the people of this country do believe...the greatest of all British interests is peace' and that 'the Navy of this country, and indeed the Navies of all countries, is principally and before all things not an aggressive but a defensive force'. Nations with aggressive forces were land powers not sea powers. Militarism was about 'constantly contemplating, anticipating, and preparing for war', while modern navies in his estimation had 'ceased to be in a great degree, and have lost in a great degree, their aggressive power as compared with what they possessed in former days'.³⁸

à Court, *Report on the French Coast defence Organization, illustrated by the Manoeuvres on the Channel Coast of France, July, 1894*, pp. 8-9.

³⁷ 11 March 1878, 'Motion for a Select Committee', *Hansard*, vol. 238, cc1088-1101; 'On the Naval Attack of a Fortress', *Professional Papers of the Corps of Royal Engineers, Royal Engineer Institute Occasional Papers*, vol. 1, 1877, pp. 190-209. Bridge later went on to become Director of Naval Intelligence at the Admiralty (1889-1894).

³⁸ 20 March 1894, *Hansard*, vol. 22, cc. 738-9.

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It is difficult to determine when either Churchill or Fisher was originally inspired by monitors—and perhaps how they might have misread the history. One letter from Churchill to his American mother Jennie, dated 15 November, 1887 (when Winston was but thirteen), asked for ‘General Grant’s History of the American War (*Illustrated*)’ for his birthday. By the time he was twenty-four he informed her of his intention of making a living through writing, including ‘a short & dramatic History of the American Civil War’.³⁹ Not without irony the first heavy British monitors were named—very unusually in Royal Navy practice—after Civil War figures such as ‘Admiral Farragut’ or ‘Robert E. Lee’. Perhaps this was indeed a conscious nod that these vessels were meant to pick up where the Yanks had left off. A leading authority on British monitors, Ian Buxton, suggests it was ‘in recognition’ of both the original *Monitor* and the fact that these four emergency war-time monitors, contracted for in November 1914 and mounting a pair of 14-inch guns each, received their armament from American firm Bethlehem Steel, who had originally built the guns and their turrets for the Greek navy (part of a dreadnought battleship it had contracted for in Germany before the outbreak of war.) However, far from being flattered the U.S. Government thought new British warships named after historic American naval and military figures was pushing the limits of friendly international neutrality too far. So ‘General Grant’ became *Havelock*, ‘Stonewall Jackson’ became *Roberts*, Lee became *Raglan* and Farragut became *Abercrombie*—all proper British 19th-century generals and field marshals.⁴⁰

Fisher doesn’t seem to show much interest at all in such purpose-built coastal men-of-war before 1914. His famous 1904 memo-treatise on ‘*Naval Necessities*’, for example, notes instead that ‘To a country like ours a few special vessels for special waters are always a necessity, but for serious first-class war the only classes of vessels of use, and the only ones that should be provided with crews are: battleships...armoured cruisers...torpedo vessels...[and] submarine boats’. In 1906 he affirmed again that ‘no preponderance in ships of inferior fighting quality can make up for a deficiency in ‘capital ships’...at all events to a nation which must be supreme

³⁹ CHAR 28/14/28, 15 November 1887, Churchill Papers; Churchill to Lady Randolph, 25 April 1898, in Randolph S. Churchill, *Youth: Winston S. Churchill 1874-1900* (London: Mandarin, 1991 version), p. 383. Churchill’s history of the American Civil War, finally written when he was in his early eighties, featured in *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956-58); volume 4, Book XI.

⁴⁰ See Ian Buxton, *Big Gun Monitors: Design, Construction and Operations 1914-1945* (Barnsley, Seaforth Publishing, 2012 ed.), pp. 12-21.

at sea, an adequate force of modern battleships is essential'.⁴¹ That same year Fisher had likewise 'agreed with Sir John French' that a study penned by Charles Ottley (the Director of Naval Intelligence and future secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence) was correct, that the forcing of the Dardanelles was, 'in the first place, a military operation', and that Turkish defences bolstered by German arms and advisors made a strictly naval attempt impossible.⁴² So when the detailed yet highly speculative set of *War Plans* of 1907 considered at length the idea of attacking the German islands of Borkum or Sylt, it did so only as a suggestion of how to lure the German battlefleet away from its protected bases out into the open where it might be destroyed in a Trafalgar-type decisive battle.⁴³ There was still no discussion of torpedo-proof monitors, purpose-built (and long-range) minelayers or sweepers, or how increasingly advanced German U-boats might upset the 'Close Blockade' equation. The 'War Orders for the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet', set down by Fisher's secretary Captain Thomas Crease in 1909, likewise specified that in order for British destroyers to establish a full-time watch on the German High Seas

⁴¹ P. K. Kemp (ed.), *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, 2 vols. (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne and Co. Ltd., for the Navy Records Society, 1960), vol. 1: p. 43; vol. 2, p. 258.

⁴² 27 July 1906, Fisher to the Earl of Tweedmouth, in Arthur J. Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, 3 vols., (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959), vol. 2, p. 84. Fisher had commanded the sail-and-turret ironclad HMS *Inflexible* during the British bombardment of Alexandria (11-13 July, 1882). *Inflexible* required 11 minutes to reload her mammoth 81-ton guns and fire each time. Damage to the Egyptian forts was largely negligible; as with many such engagements of the period, Royal Marines did the real work. For the British after-action reports see TNA, ADM 116-208, especially report of HMS *Penelope* to Admiral Sir F. Beauchamp P. Seymour, 8 August 1882; Fisher to Seymour, 7 August 1882. Lord Salisbury as Prime Minister similarly thought in 1895 that if Russia was 'able to man the Dardanelles forts with her own men I take it that the place is impregnable'. First Lord of the Admiralty George Goschen replied that 'everybody who knows nothing of the defences, the geography and the torpedoes of the Dardanelles is of that opinion [that the Straits can easily be forced]'. I know scores of naval officers quite outside the Admiralty circle including Commanders-in-Chief who would be responsible for the operation, who quite disbelieve in it being an easy operation, though of course it can be done', from Thomas J. Spinner, Jr., *George Joachim Goschen: The Transformation of a Victorian Liberal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 198-9.

⁴³ TNA, ADM 1-8997, in 1933 Captain George A. Ballard responded to criticisms of these plans which he formulated over four months with three assisting officers in 1907.

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Fleet, across the North Sea, as well as to expect British submarines to conduct offensive operations on the German North Sea coast, that 'advanced bases should be formed'—but as it could not 'be relied upon that attempts to seize and hold any German harbour suitable to the purpose would meet with success' some form of 'floating base' must be tried, and this at the C-in-C's discretion only. Upon war-time mobilisation, 'All Torpedo Boats, other than ex-Coastal Destroyers, will remain at the Home Ports for local defence'. No force was to enter the Baltic 'without distinct orders to do so'.⁴⁴

Perhaps it was in reference to these largely defensive arrangements that Fisher in March 1909 complained to Reginald McKenna, the First Lord of the Admiralty, of the charge by Charles Beresford and other critics that the Admiralty had 'No War Plans'; for there were 'hundreds & hundreds of pages of print diagnosing every German Symptom of War and stating the appropriate treatment'.⁴⁵ Yet this implied mastering a threat, not laying one down, and by 1912 the need for a new class of British submarine capable of operating longer distances for great periods than those currently in service was considered paramount if a close blockade of German coasts was to be considered feasible, according to Captain George A. Ballard, Director of Operation Division. A 'policy of extensive mine laying' had likewise not received due attention, he reported, and 'at present we have only 7 Mine-layers'.⁴⁶

It wasn't just that 'strategy determined the types of ships to be built' (another Fisher aphorism from another 'Naval Necessity') but whether coastal assault as opposed to coastal defence was considered as strategically as well as politically viable as coastal defence. One case in point concerned Heligoland. At numerous points before and

⁴⁴ National Museum of the Royal Navy (Portsmouth), MS 253/84/3, 'War Plan G.U.—War Orders for the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet', 1909, Crease Papers, 'Mobilisation—Coast Defence Flotillas'.

⁴⁵ MCKN 6-2, Fisher to McKenna, 31 March 1909, McKenna Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge

⁴⁶ TNA, ADM 116-866B, Ballard memo, 16 September 1912; see also TNA, ADM 1-8376-111, Ballard's memo, 'Responsibility for Removal and Destruction of Enemy Mines in positions where Sweeping Vessels do not exist'; and Kemp (ed.), *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher, op. cit.*; with the 1905 committee recommending that no 'steps should be taken to provide vessels for laying mines. Suitable ships belonging to private companies should be earmarked for this service, in such numbers as to ensure a sufficient quantity being always available in home ports...In this way the unnecessary expense of the upkeep of such vessels, which would be lying idle in time of peace, would be obviated', vol. 2, pp. 84-90.

after the outbreak of world war, Fisher demurred how this strategic island over forty miles off the coast of Germany was given up by Lord Salisbury to the Germans so easily in 1890; in exchange for Zanzibar and a controlling interest in East Africa. But that Prime Minister was probably informed that holding this key strategic island—so far from the British mainland yet so close to the headquarters of the Imperial German Navy—was a hopeless proposition. Certainly by 1913, within a year of the outbreak of the First World War, a minute by Churchill as First Lord declared it was difficult 'to find any sea front of great natural defensive strength than the German North Sea Coast'. Heligoland was 'an impregnable fortress and an advanced torpedo and airship station', while the islands of Borkum and Sylt were both 'heavily defended by batteries, mine fields, and strong garrisons, and both can be commanded by fire from the mainland'.⁴⁷ Light-draft, heavily-armed and well-protected monitors *might* have successfully navigated many of these natural and man-made obstructions, especially if working in close conjunction with long-range destroyers and purpose-built minesweepers—all supported by cruisers, battlecruisers and battleships as need be. Instead, as a recent study by Jan Rüter asserts, Heligoland became 'a symbol of British frustration' during the First World War—much as Cronstadt had become during the Crimean War, and for very similar reasons.⁴⁸ At any rate, since occupation of the island by treaty in 1814, twenty-four consecutive British governments and their associated Boards of Admiralty had obviously chosen *not* to it as a base for 'forward ops' against Germany, capable of launching deadly pre-emptive strikes at any given moment. This awkward strategic dilemma of British sea power repeated itself during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), when Britain seriously considered the possibility of becoming entangled with either combatant, and military/naval professionals and the public alike scrutinised, once again, the ability to withstand an invasion of the British Isles (i.e., not its ability to somehow counter-strike the Continent).⁴⁹ As historian George Drower has observed, within a generation Heligoland and especially the East Frisian Islands off the coast of Saxony served as the inspiration for Erskine Childers' alarmist 1903 'espionage' novel *The*

⁴⁷ CHAR 13/6A-B, 1913 (undated), Churchill Papers.

⁴⁸ Jan Rüter, *Heligoland: Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 140.

⁴⁹ See for example, Richard Millman, *British Foreign Policy and the Coming of the Franco-Prussian War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), who noted 'The apparent transformation of British policy in the five years before the war of 1870 was not only a manifestation of withdrawal but an estimate of means, an estimate seen as clearly by Disraeli as by Gladstone', p. 224. Millman, however, then stressed 'the nature and degree of English interference were limited by the size of her army' and ignored the ability—or apparent inability—of the Royal Navy to likewise affect events on the continent.

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Riddle of the Sands; where the German North Sea islands serve as convenient bases for secretly massing the Kaiser's armada of troop barges for the invasion of Britain's east coast.⁵⁰ The book was an immediate best-seller, part of a growing public appetite for invasion literature already sensationalised, for example, by H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, published six years before, and emphasising the mortal threat posed by radical new technologies which might suddenly exploit British (or indeed 'mankind's') complacency.⁵¹

Some historians have stressed instead a 'Copenhagen Complex'; one that haunted the Germans and spurred the likes of Fisher.⁵² This is in reference to the surprise attack by British Admiral James Gambier's forces upon the capital of Denmark in 1807—in order to destroy the neutral Danish fleet before it might be given over to Napoleon Bonaparte. Here siege batteries, mortar vessels and some 300 Congreve Rockets rained down upon the city for three hellish nights—resulting in thousands of civilian casualties—before the defenders finally struck to end the slaughter.⁵³ (Gambier was accordingly made a peer; and newcomer Lord Palmerston defended the attack in the House of Commons as in accordance with 'that law of self-preservation which is a fundamental principle of the law of nations'.⁵⁴) But whether or not serious German naval and military *professionals* thought such an attack was possible in the face of modern combined defences, the more *public* fear of a 'pre-emptive first-strike' certainly allowed Tirpitz to push ahead with his own controversial battleship-building programmes.⁵⁵ 'We absolutely must have that,'

⁵⁰ George Drower, *Heligoland: The True Story of German Bight and the Island that Britain Forgot* (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), pp. 128-52.

⁵¹ For the role of technology see the analysis by David Morgan-Owen, 'A Revolution in Naval Affairs? Technology, Strategy and British naval Policy in the 'Fisher Era'', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 7, pp. 944-965; also Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), particularly pp. 56-68.

⁵² See for example, Jonathan Steinberg, 'The Copenhagen Complex', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1966), pp. 23-46; also Shawn Grimes, 'The Baltic and Admiralty War Planning, 1906-1907', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 74 (April 2010), pp. 407-37.

⁵³ See Thomas Munch-Peterson, *Defying Napoleon: How Britain Bombarded Copenhagen and Seized the Danish Fleet in 1807* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007), p. 200.

⁵⁴ 3 February 1808, *Hansard*, vol. 10, cc. 253-311.

⁵⁵ See Gary Weir, *Building the Kaiser's Navy: The Imperial Navy Office and German Industry in the von Tirpitz Era 1890-1919* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), pp. 58-9, 80-1; and Jonathan Steinberg, *Tirpitz and the Birth of the German Battle Fleet*:

protested a German admiral to Lord Selborne, First Lord of the Admiralty between 1900-1905, 'or all our coast with its rich towns like Hamburg, Bremen, Kiel, Danzig etc. would be always at the mercy of the big neighbours east and west, both naval powers—one [France] much stronger than Germany and the other [Russia] only lately less dangerous in consequence of the [Russo-Japanese] war'.⁵⁶ The latent threat posed by the world's greatest naval power was here left unspoken.

As for such thoughts in the Admiralty, Arthur Marder noted that 'Fisher's jingoism is supposed to be proved by his 'plans' for a preventive war'. Here he cites the memoirs of John Spender, editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, who reported a conversation with Fisher in 1904. The Admiral was boasting about a recent dinner with the King, who was merrily told 'We'll have a picnic at Kiel. We'll just go along and put two British ships one each side of a German; and then we'll say to the German, as the policeman says to the drunk, 'Come along quietly and there'll be no trouble, but if you don't, then there'll be trouble, and no mistake about it'. ' When asked what the King thought of that, 'Fisher looked at me quizzically for a moment, and then burst out laughing. 'The King said, 'My God, Fisher, you must be mad!' '⁵⁷

Yesterday's Deterrent (London: Macdonald, 1965), pp. 20-1. Steinberg argues Tirpitz's reliance upon 'Risk Theory' was dangerously 'self-confirming' by provoking a pre-emptive strike upon German naval power before it became a mortal threat to British naval supremacy; 'a vicious circle in German defence policy'.

⁵⁶ D. George Boyce (ed.), *The Crisis of British Power: The Imperial and Naval Papers of the Second Earl of Selborne, 1895-1910* (London: The Historians' Press, 1990), p. 195; see also John H. Maurer, 'The "Ever-Present Danger": Winston Churchill's Assessment of the German Naval Challenge before the First World War', in John H. Maurer (ed.), *Churchill and Strategic Dilemmas before the World Wars: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 7-50. Andrew Lambert theorises that Fisher cleverly manipulated the Germans into (unwisely) investing in 'coast defences, gun batteries and other local infrastructure upgrades between 1904 and 1914' which could have otherwise been invested in more German dreadnoughts and thus won Germany the arms race. Unfortunately, no evidence is offered, and it seems unlikely Britain would have given up its stated aim to win such a contest; 'The German North Sea Islands, the Kiel Canal and the Danish Narrows in Royal Navy thinking and Planning, 1905-1918, in Michael Epkenhams and Gerhard P. Groß (eds.), *The Danish Straits and German Naval Power 1905-1918* (Potsdam: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, 2010), pp. 35-62.

⁵⁷ Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919*, 5 vols. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013 version of 1961 original), vol. 1, pp. 112-13; Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought, op. cit.*, vol. 2, p.

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Marder added he was 'convinced that the idea was never advanced seriously by Fisher, even if he did lament, in his *Memories*, that 'we possessed neither a Pitt nor a Bismarck to give the order', for he realized that such action by a British government was impossible. It was never considered by the Board and it was never part of British naval policy in the Fisher administration'.⁵⁸

The editor of the *Fisher Papers*, Peter Kemp, was therefore particularly scathing, calling these coastal assault 'plans' and the pre-war exercises they had been built upon, 'almost juvenile' including 'the ease with which the German admirals were outwitted in these war games, and the inevitable annihilation which followed as the German fleet fell into the obvious traps set for it. They remind one a little of those games of childhood when the youngest member was cast willy nilly in the role of the dragon and the elders too turns to slay him in the garb of St. George'.⁵⁹ Churchill himself could only later recount that 'Shipbuilding had been the greatest passion of [Fisher's] life' and that thanks to the war 'all the yards of Britain [were] at his disposal and every Treasury barrier broken down'. Indeed, that first autumn of the First World War Fisher and Churchill ordered up no less than 7 new battleships and battlecruisers, 12 light cruisers, 65 destroyers and 107 sloops and other small vessels—all desperately needed for protection against submarines—62 subs of their own and some '37 monitors', 18 of which mounted battleship-sized heavy guns. To make the idea of a Baltic invasion a real possibility some 240 self-propelled landing craft, capable of deploying over 100,000 troops, were also contracted for.⁶⁰

20; and J. A. Spender, *Life, Journalism and Politics*, 2 vols. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1927), vol. 2, pp. 67-8.

⁵⁸ Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 113.

⁵⁹ Kemp (ed.), *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 317. Paul Haggie is also critical: 'In sum, the Ballard Committee's plans show clearly the lack of an agreed basis for strategic planning within the navy, and how little notice had been taken of the revolutionary developments in sea warfare that marked the latter half of the nineteenth century...Not only did opinions remain conflicting within the Admiralty; there was no coordination with any outside body, either the War Office, the CID [Committee of Imperial Defence] or the French', 'The Royal Navy and War Planning in the Fisher Era', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (July 1973), pp. 113-131.

⁶⁰ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918* (London: Penguin, 2007 version of 1931 original), pp. 22-3; also Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 494.

Hence the underlying question here is, why not build the monitors, *en masse*, ready-trained with a clear operational doctrine worked out in full, well *before* the outbreak of the First World War? Surely Churchill and Fisher knew that anything started in the autumn of 1914 up until the last orders of summer 1915 would not be ready for at least six months and probably at least a year? (the first 14-inch monitor was deployed to the Dardanelles in July 1915, to provide fire support to the troops dug in at Gallipoli, while the first 12-inch monitors were bombarding the Belgian coast near Zeebrugge a month later) There is a criticism too that not having these vessels ready a year earlier—perhaps for a great Baltic thrust against Germany's north flank—or perhaps even to help shore the left flank of the BEF during the 'Race for the Sea', protect Antwerp, or provide heavy naval fire support to Allied forces at First Ypres cost the lives of many men. Indeed, Sir John French telegraphed Kitchener on Boxing Day, 1914—as British troops trudged along the Belgian coast from Nieuport—for 'a surprise bombardment by monitors and big gun ships' if possible, 'as it would have a most beneficial moral and material effect'.⁶¹ Neither were they ready for Rear-Admiral John de Robeck when he first tried to force the Dardanelles with ships alone.

The significance of the nature of the Royal Navy's monitors during the First World War was therefore how they were *scrounged up*; pre-war plans and naval strategy had not decreed these vessels at all. 'A supply of modern heavy ordnance was the main prerequisite for building coast-offence vessels', notes Iain Buxton, and it was thanks to chance that the President of Bethlehem Steel (USA) offered to the Royal Navy in early November 1914 the four pairs of 14-inch turret guns he was building for the Greek battlecruiser *Salamis*. The American company was even willing to go so far as 'to supply the charges and the projectiles'. Admiralty specifications for the first heavy monitors noted the 'equipment of the vessel generally is to be of a much less extensive nature than is usual in H. M. Service', and detailed drawings from the contractors would not be required for prior approval 'in this case'.⁶² Parts for other

⁶¹ CHAR 13/27A/61, French to Kitchener, 26 December 1914, Churchill Papers.

⁶² Buxton, *Big Gun Monitors*, *op. cit.*, p. 11; DEY/32, Director of Naval Construction memo, 'Appropriation of the 14' gun turrets and shields building by the Bethlehem Steel Co. for a Greek Battleship Cruiser', 5 November 1914, D'Eyncourt Papers; DEY/32, DNC memo, 'Secret and Confidential'—'Monitors'—Statement of Requirements (Hull), November 1914, D'Eyncourt Papers. British naval architect David Brown noted the 'very simple design study' of the shallow 14-inch monitor hulls entailed blunt ends which increased drag, and which was 'revealed when the lines were sent to Edmund Froude at the Haslar tank but the first ship was laid down and it was too late to change,' *The Grand Fleet: Warship Design and Development 1906-1922* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2010), p. 146.

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monitors were to be cannibalised from older RN vessels built or new ones building; even 12-inch mortars were considered, as these could be 'got from U.S.A. in 6 months, & possibly some larger mortars'. The First Lord of the Admiralty's note to the Director of Naval Construction, Eustace Tennyson D'Eyncourt, of 11 December, 1914 was quite clear what was at stake:

We now need to make ships which can be built in 6 or 7 months at the outside, and which certainly can go close inshore and attack the German fleet in its harbours. These are special vessels built for a definite war operation and we must look to them in default of a general action for giving us the power of forcing a naval decision at latest in the autumn of 1915.

If enough heavy guns and their mountings proved too difficult to procure in time, Churchill and Fisher then suggested the alternative of vessels armed with four 18-inch howitzers 'in separate cupolas sunk low on their heavily-armoured turtle backs':

They should draw 8 ft at most & be propelled entirely by internal combustion engines, at a speed not exceeding 10 knots: no funnels; 3 or 4 alternative telescopic masts for fire observation; strong crinolines 20 ft away all round to make them secure from mine or Torpedo.⁶³

Although the First Sea Lord was 'desolated' there would be a 60° dead angle in the proposed 15-inch gun monitors, D'Eyncourt had already explained all-round fire was impossible; steam would also be needed for the pumps, steering engines, capstans, etc., in addition to the main engines. 'There is of course no time to experiment with this vessel'.⁶⁴

After the war it was left to Sir Julian Corbett's *Official History* to try to impose, *post facto*, a sense of chronological and strategic coherence:

⁶³ DEY/32, D'Eyncourt memo, D'Eyncourt Papers, 12 December 1914; DEY/32, Churchill to D'Eyncourt, 11 December 1914, D'Eyncourt Papers. See also CHAR 13/57/106, Fisher to Churchill, 15 April 1915, Churchill Papers.

⁶⁴ DEY/32, D'Eyncourt to Fisher, 20 January 1915, D'Eyncourt Papers; DEY/17, Fisher's note is dated 6 March 1915. DEY/40, after the war, D'Eyncourt stressed 'it was necessary...to take in many cases whatever machinery happened to be available and in consequence the machinery installations varied somewhat', undated memo, D'Eyncourt Papers.

Now that the outer seas had been cleared the paramount need was to obtain a closer hold on the North Sea, with a view to the possibility of ultimately pressing our offensive into the enemy's waters. Such operations would involve coastal attack and inshore work, and required a special class of vessel. The necessary programme had been inaugurated when Lord Fisher returned to the Admiralty, and was being pressed on with energy. The ships designed were mainly of the monitor type, made as far as possible unsinkable by mine or torpedo, and certain fast ships of battle cruiser size lightly protected, but with very heavy gun-power.

But the essential sticking point here followed, that 'until the programme was well forward nothing could be done, and in the meanwhile the enemy might be expected to use the opportunity for operating in the North Sea in a way which require the utmost activity and vigilance from our fleet'. Any potential naval attack upon Zeebrugge was therefore also forestalled 'until the heavy monitors which were under construction were ready'. While the Royal Navy waited, the Admiralty at Churchill's insistence pressed forward for a 'quick' attack upon the Dardanelles.⁶⁵ Had the monitors been ready even six months earlier the course of the war might have been radically altered, although one of the monitors' designers revealed to Admiral Sir Roger Keyes after 1918 that it took greater experience in constructing newer types of larger submarines first, otherwise 'he could never have produced our...monitors for use in the war'. As it was, Keyes participated in the Gallipoli campaign, once the initial Dardanelles naval effort had failed (18 March, 1915), with the Allied fleet 'anxiously awaiting for the arrival of the torpedo-proof monitors and cruisers', and the 'Allied Army, pending the arrival of the new divisions...improving its position in the southern area by a series of successful though costly offensives, under conditions of indescribable discomfort'.⁶⁶

* * *

Even after Churchill and Fisher ordered the construction of 'monitors' in the autumn of 1914, and at various points in the war thereafter, it was not clear that they knew

⁶⁵ Sir Julian S. Corbett, *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents: Naval Operations* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), 5 vols., vol. 2, pp. 3-4 & p. 108.

⁶⁶ Roger Keyes, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes* (London: Thornton Butterworth, Ltd., 1934), 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 37-8 & p. 367.

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exactly what to do with them.⁶⁷ Nine days before Rear-Admiral de Robeck took the plunge at the Dardanelles, the First Lord of the Admiralty wrote to Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commanding the Grand Fleet, that the first six heavy monitors would be ready at the beginning of May (they weren't) and sent to him for an all-out attack against the German North Sea island of Borkum. Some 12,000 troops ferried in oil ships 'converted into unsinkable transports' were to hold the island against the heavy expected German counterassault, along with a quickly-constructed British airbase with 60 planes. Churchill assured Jellicoe that within a week the island would be captured, British troops dug in, British subs patrolling the Bight in force and an effective minefield laid in time for the German High Seas Fleet—if it came out.⁶⁸

But the week before this, the First Sea Lord had warned Churchill that the success of the proposed Borkum operation '*depends on the efficiency of our arrangements for protection against submarines—an effective means of protection is not yet in sight*'.⁶⁹ (Two months earlier Jellicoe had likewise expressed grave doubts to Churchill; if nothing else, the line of supply would be stretched from the British Isles to the German coast, vulnerable to enemy subs and torpedo boats operating from *their own main base nearby*.)⁷⁰ Nevertheless, within a week of the Dardanelles repulse Churchill optimistically persisted with a fresh memo revealing the Borkum operation as only the first part of a large plan to then assault the dockyards at Wilhelmshaven and Cuxhaven with the monitors, followed by entry of the British battlecruisers into the Baltic (assuming the Danes were 'friendly' to this movement) and ultimately 'the landing of a British army of invasion, not less than 500,000 strong, at Emden...' Where this kind of force was going to come from, or how the French were going to react at this news, wasn't mentioned. But Churchill was certain that grand movements like these would surely persuade Denmark and Holland to join the Allies.⁷¹ This factor alone disturbed Asquith, who noted in his diary back in

⁶⁷ See for example, Sir Eustice H. W. Tennyson D'Eyncourt, *A Shipbuilder's Yarn: The Record of a Naval Constructor* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1948), pp. 72-3.

⁶⁸ CHAR 13/48/58-9, Churchill to Jellicoe, 9 March 1915, Churchill Papers.

⁶⁹ 3 March 1915, Fisher to Churchill, from Gilbert, *Companion vol III, Part I, op. cit.*, p. 622.

⁷⁰ CHAR 13/46/12-13, Jellicoe to Churchill, 15 January 1915, Churchill Papers.

⁷¹ CHAR 13/57/86-94, Memo 'Capture of Borkum', 24 March 1915, Churchill Papers. An Admiralty report of January 1915 had, at any rate, warned of at least 16 defensive works on the island ('widely distributed' and 'all small and excellently concealed'), including four 12-inch turret guns dug in with a probable range of 24,000 yards; TNA, ADM 186-568, *Germany: Coast Report. North Sea. Part II: The Coast, Ports and Coast Defences*, January 1915.

December 1914, when Churchill first presented his plan before the War Council, that 'apart from other difficulties, [it] implies either the accession of Denmark to the Allies or the violation of her neutrality'.⁷²

In any case, the Dardanelles repulse convinced Fisher that no more units could be spared for the Mediterranean, as a failure there 'would be nothing. A failure in the North Sea would be ruin'.⁷³ Three days later, on April 5th, he wrote it was unlikely the German High Seas Fleet could be lured out to fight any more than the Grand Fleet would risk a battle in the Heligoland Bight; a strategic stalemate in the North Sea as well. 'Under these circumstances' he followed, 'any such operations as Borkum or Sylt, or Cuxhaven, for which the Monitors are specially designed, primarily undertaken with a view to forcing the High Sea[s] Fleet out, must finally be abandoned now—and we had better do nothing at all to stir them up'.⁷⁴ To Lady Margaret Asquith he insisted he was 'always, as you know, against this mad expedition [the Dardanelles]'. Borkum ought to have been attacked instead, whereas Gallipoli 'will bleed us white'.⁷⁵ A parting, grand memo by Churchill on 30 May, 1915—even as Arthur Balfour took over his post as part of Asquith's government shakeup—could only hope his shiny new Monitor Fleet would 'be able to play an important part in default of all other means in the final phases of the Dardanelles operations' (which of course had at last sparked Fisher's resignation as First Sea Lord and the fall of Churchill himself.)⁷⁶

Consequently, the resort to these vessels was 'too little, too late' for the First World War.⁷⁷ So was any major application of coastal assault. To other interested

⁷² 29 December 1914, The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections 1852-1927* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1928), 2 vols, vol. 2, pp. 51-2.

⁷³ CHAR 13/57/97, Fisher to Churchill, 2 April 1915, Churchill Papers.

⁷⁴ FISR 5-27, 'Private and Personal', 5 April 1915, Fisher Papers.

⁷⁵ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds.), Margot Asquith's *Great War Diary 1914-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2014), pp. 110-11.

⁷⁶ 'The pride of place [Churchill] gave to his monitors and bulged ships in this history, is, perhaps, one of the most profound indications of the degree to which these vessels, and the bold offensive plans he conceived for them, influenced all his strategic thinking during his time as first lord and after', Graham T. Clews, *Churchill's Dilemma: The Real Story Behind the Origins of the 1915 Dardanelles Campaign* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), p. 310.

⁷⁷ 'If the monitors were supposed to be the aggressive arm of British sea power,' writes Jim Crossley, 'that arm was a miniscule one,' *Monitors of the Royal Navy: How the Fleet Brought the Great Guns to Bear—The Story of the Monitors in Two World Wars* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Maritime, 2013), pp. 147-50.

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parties in the Royal Navy, namely Jellicoe, the concern in May 1915 was that old Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur Wilson—who had Churchill's ear since the beginning of the war on schemes for capturing a forward base off the German North Sea coast—might now be asked to replace Fisher as First Sea Lord. Writing to McKenna, Churchill's predecessor in office, Jellicoe objected how he had already reported on the proposal to assault Heligoland as 'an impossible undertaking' along with other senior naval officers who thought Wilson's plans absurd and who even 'doubted Sir A's sanity'. 'The whole Admiralty war staff were in complete agreement with us,' he added, 'but he still hankers after it'.⁷⁸

Once the British monitors were finally deployed their limitations became more obvious. If damaged by torpedoes they were still knocked out of action even if they didn't sink, perhaps for months—and dockyard facilities, especially in the Mediterranean, were limited.⁷⁹ There were too few monitors to keep enough on station at any one time—and large concentrations of such weapons-platforms were required if German defensive batteries were to be suppressed let alone destroyed. Although the 12-inch Lord Clive-class monitor *General Wolfe* was refitted to carry one of the 18-inch guns of the *Furious* (once the decision was made by the Admiralty in 1917-18 to convert the battlecruiser to a much more useful aircraft carrier), the vessel could only carry sixty high-explosive rounds. And while 90-120 HE rounds was common for each of the smaller 12-inch guns, all such naval ordnance had a limited life span; Buxton suggests the 15-inch guns of HMS *Terror* needed replacing in the later summer of 1918 after firing 'about 300 rounds'. As noted by Admiral Reginald Bacon of the Dover Patrol, 'economy of guns' was therefore a 'distinct necessity', with 'the number of rounds fired [being] strictly limited, the total being spread out over several days'. This must then be coupled with his assertion that the 'mathematical chance of hitting a lock-gate at Zeebrugge from a bombarding distance,' for example, 'assuming accurate aiming, was once every sixty-seven rounds'. Since 'aiming from a ship at sea can never be assumed to be quite accurate,' he concluded, 'the chances of hitting from such a moving platform are considerably less than the mathematical calculation'.⁸⁰ As with the Union Navy's 1860s-versions,

⁷⁸ MCKN 3-22, Jellicoe to McKenna, 23 May 1915, McKenna Papers. For a recent defence of Wilson see David Gethin Morgan-Owen, 'Cooked up in the Dinner Hour? Sir Arthur Wilson's War Plan, Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, vol. CXXX, no. 545 (August 2015), pp. 865-906.

⁷⁹ Brown, *The Grand Fleet*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁸⁰ See Buxton, *Big Gun Monitors*, *op. cit.*, pp. 67, 74, 154; Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1919), vol. 1, p. 91, p. 98 & p. 76.

Britain's monitors during the First World War were also painfully slow. When scrutinising Bacon's plans for a monitor-led assault on the heavily fortified submarine bases at Zeebrugge and Ostend, Keyes 'could only picture a vulnerable, unhandy [12-inch] monitor, waddling into that fierce tideway [on the Mole] and hornet's nest of powerful batteries, at a speed of five or six knots at the most, possibly less, encumbered as she would be by the false bow and the great weight of the structure forward. At that speed, she would be within close range of all the batteries which commanded the approach for more than an hour'.⁸¹

Hostile operations against the Belgian coast became a cat-and-mouse game, each side trying to significantly damage the other usually through ever greater firing ranges and accuracy.⁸² Neither side can be said to have scored a decisive victory; the Germans were unable to seriously damage much less sink a heavy British monitor by gunfire, nor were the German shore batteries damaged to the point where they had to give ground—either failing to protect U-Boat bases or to give Allied ground campaigns any distinct advantage.⁸³ D'Eyncourt claimed after the war 'of all ships carrying heavy guns [monitors] were probably more often in action off the Belgian coast and elsewhere than any of our heavy-gun ships, and they no doubt gave the enemy in occupation of that coast a very anxious time'.⁸⁴ But neither 'giving anxiety' to the enemy nor 'boosting morale' to British troops on the shore was the *raison d'être* of these specialised vessels. In preparing the monitors for bombarding operations, Bacon reported to the Admiralty on 17 December, 1915 that he found 'no definite system of observation of fire or direction fire existed, beyond some vague papers by various Officers, which were nebulous in detail'. So he proceeded to develop one, largely through trial and error, on the spot. Radio in both directions was crucial, and

⁸¹ Keyes, *Naval Memoirs, op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 141; also p. 190.

⁸² TNA, ADM 186-568, a direct attack upon German dockyards like Wilhelmshaven was largely ruled out during the First World War. As a detailed Admiralty intelligence report of February 1915 observed, aside from the High Seas Fleet or minefields, any attacking force would have to contend with at least twelve fortified shore batteries along the west bank of the Jade—all 'very difficult indeed to distinguish, and the country is exceeding flat', February 1915, *Germany: Coast Report. North Sea—Part II: The Coast, Ports and Coast Defences*.

⁸³ In Ian Buxton's estimation, 'it was never realistic to expect to put the inland U-boat base at Bruges out of action by gunfire alone, although it was possible to render the forward base at Ostend of little use to the Germans by the last year of the war,' *Big Gun Monitors, op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁸⁴ Sir Philip Watts and Sir Eustace T. D'Eyncourt, *The Ships That Won the War 1914-1918* (1919); see the Caird Library for one of the few copies available ('B3667'), 'Naval Construction During the War', pp. 9-10.

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this was soon 'attained with the large seaplane'. But he also considered 'that at least a four months' instructional course is necessary before a monitor can be looked upon as efficient to perform the various duties that she may be called upon to carry out'.⁸⁵

Improved heavy monitors like HMS *Terror*, mounting 15-inch guns were eventually ready for trials by August 1916. These reported speeds finally in excess of 12 knots, with rudder improvements for movement astern so the guns could maintain fire 'whilst the vessel was retiring out of range'. But the *Terror*'s war-time career was typical of her sister-ships: it wasn't until the following year that she engaged enemy batteries, though she was nevertheless well within their range and soon 'straddled by salvoes'. German airplanes and torpedo-boats were also omnipresent, frequent threats. In October 1917 she ran aground, and was abandoned by her crew as she filled with water, becoming 'unmanageable in trough of sea' until tugs got her safely back to Dover for repairs. In February 1918 she returned to resume a long-range bombardment of Ostend, noting an engagement with the 11-inch guns of the infamous Tirpitz Battery on 10 May, by which time the German had been upgrading their Belgian coastal defences with 140 new heavy guns including six 15-inch guns for their Deutschland and Leugenboom ('Pommern') batteries. The desultory ship vs. forts duels continued until the end of the war later that autumn.⁸⁶

Jellicoe had meanwhile told the Associated Press that U-Boat bases like Zeebrugge were a difficult problem. 'No officer, even before this war, ever believed that it was the business of a capital ship to stand up against a land-fort', he declared, 'as land guns always have greater facilities for finding the range, than a gun mounted in a ship'. Shortly after this, on 17 July, 1917 (with losses to German U-boats reaching 500,000 tons per month), Corbett supplied a distressing memo to the Director of the Intelligence Division, confirming from the vantage point of historical study the impression that 'the use of a fleet by itself to bombard coast defences with the object of forcing the enemy fleet to sea or of destroying it inside the defences' has

⁸⁵ DEY/40, Vice-Admiral Reginald H. Bacon, printed *Admiralty Report by Vice-Admiral Dover Patrol on Bombarding Operation*, 17 December 1915, in D'Eyncourt Papers, iii-iv. Director (Dial) Sights had been fitted in the monitors in 1915; see TNA, ADM 186-19, 'Monitor Pamphlet'.

⁸⁶ TNA, ADM 136-23, HMS *Terror* Logs; TNA, ADM 186-584, 5, *War Supplement to Belgium: Coast Report, Section I. Defences*, May 1918. TNA, ADM 137-3705, without an experienced aerial spotter in the cockpit, indirect long-range fire was all but useless, as noted by a court of inquiry held on board *Terror*'s sister-ship, HMS *Erebus* at Dunkirk, on 23 December 1917.

seldom, if ever, been attempted. Against an effective fleet and effective defences it has certainly never been undertaken with success'. If anything, British practice used the main fleet to 'cover such attacks by specially prepared vessels', although the only instance he cited was in 1809 at the Basque Roads and here 'the fixed defences were very weak'.⁸⁷ By October 1918, a committee was formed to assess the 'damage done on [the] Belgian Coast by bombardments carried out by Monitors'. Yet much of the damage discovered by occupying forces had been the work of demolitions set by retreating Germans, along with Allied air and land attacks. One local burgomaster informed his British visitors that three years earlier the Tirpitz Battery was completely engulfed in heavy naval fire—when it 'suddenly ceased, which, as he said, was a great pity, as they had the range absolutely and would soon have destroyed the whole Battery'. In the meantime, some '400 Belgians [were] killed and about 1,200 wounded from the effects of [Allied] bombardments and bombs from the air since the commencement of the War'.⁸⁸

All this futile gunfire and random death tended to enrage the British public. Outspoken celebrities such as Rudyard Kipling side-swiped the Admiralty in his booklet *The Fringes of the Fleet*, for 'had we used the Navy's bare fist instead of its gloved hand from the beginning,' he complained, 'we could in all likelihood have shortened the war'. This alluded to the 'gloved hand' of diplomacy—neutrality issues associated with the blockade. But the fact that Kipling's only son, John, had been killed the year before at the Battle of Loos (25 September – 14 October, 1915) makes his sense of frustration palpable.⁸⁹ Both Prime Minister Asquith and Labour cabinet member Arthur Henderson lost their eldest sons the following September at the Battle of Flers–Courselette; the Somme. Fisher, too, loudly proclaimed that the Admiralty (without his sole guidance) was relying upon a slow strangulation of Germany when his 'Baltic Plan' might still end the war within weeks. 'The present direction of the War at Sea', he wrote in April 1916 (from his relatively dismal vantage point chairing the new Board of Invention and Research), 'shows an utter lack of Audacity and Imagination, and clearly there is no Plan of War whatever'. But of course, by then few people were willing to take the old sailor seriously, particularly the army which had already committed itself in mud and blood on the Western Front and had carefully slipped out of Gallipoli the previous December. Now the deadly U-boat offensive against British shipping reemphasised the great

⁸⁷ FISR 5-31, 12 April 1917, in Fisher Papers; TNA, ADM I-8492-154, Corbett to Captain William Reginald Hall, 16 July 1917.

⁸⁸ TNA, ADM I-8557-126, 28 October 1918.

⁸⁹ From Rudyard Kipling, *Sea Warfare*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1916), pp. 89-90. See also David Gilmour, *The Long Recessional: The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Pimlico, 2003), pp. 116-17, 204-6, 264.

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opportunities Fisher thought had been missed and which ‘would have come off’, he insisted, ‘except for the Dardanelles which blasted the Plan’.⁹⁰ By June 1917, and with the American fleet on board, Fisher wrote to Prime Minister Lloyd George how it was ‘just exasperating that, with our really astounding Naval supremacy, the Admiralty Policy should be solely to ‘hold the ring!’ As he had said at the outbreak of the war, ‘so far as the British Navy is concerned the British Army might as well be in Timbuctoo! And yet never in History was ever the opportunity so great as in the present War for a great Amphibian operation in Northern waters and one so certainly to end the War!’ Here he blamed ‘Politics’, and the decision to send the BEF to France instead of to Antwerp.⁹¹

One influential person willing to openly disagree with the increasingly cantankerous Fisher (77 years old by 1918) was Maurice Hankey, Secretary to Lloyd George’s War Cabinet as well as the Imperial War Cabinet. On 21 February, 1918 he wrote the former First Sea Lord that committing the BEF to France was surely also about how ‘the moral effect of our force on the French nation [which] may have been out of proportion to its material effect’. Furthermore, he was now ‘very doubtful...whether the conditions could ever have been arrived at which would have enabled our forces to act against Berlin in the manner you contemplate’.⁹²

⁹⁰ FISR 5-30, ‘Memorandum on the Conduct of the War’, 12 April 1916, Fisher Papers. As Rhodri Williams concludes in *Defending the Empire: The Conservative Party and British Defence Policy 1899-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), Fisher as First Sea Lord with Churchill’s successor Balfour as First Lord might have been a ‘dream ticket’, but Fisher had already made it clear he was unwilling to work with anyone, while ‘his impetuous act of resignation had convinced Asquith that he was no longer fit for his post’, p. 233.

⁹¹ FISR 5-30, 1917 undated memo, Fisher Papers. For an interesting analysis of the British ‘continental’ strategy’s ascendancy over the traditional ‘maritime school’ by 1914 see Nicholas d’Ombrain, *War Machinery and High Policy: Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain 1902-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); also T. G. Otte, “‘The Method in which we were schooled by Experience’: British Strategy and a Continental Commitment before 1914”, in Keith Neilson and Greg Kennedy (eds.), *The British Way in Warfare: Power and the International System, 1856-1956* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 301-23.

⁹² HNKY 5-2B, Hankey to Fisher, 21 February 1918, Hankey Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge. Hankey later recounted that ‘As early as 1906 I had formed the opinion that the plan could not be accomplished unless carried out as a *coup de main* at the very outset of the war’, Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command: 1914-1918* (London: George Allen and Unwin

This, perhaps, is what it ultimately came down to: the mind-set behind the machine. Almost as soon as these concepts reached their zenith new and fatal threats became real. The *Times* of August 12th, 1916, for example, noted German seaplanes had conducted bombing attacks upon British monitors off the Flemish coast. 'It may be that before this war is done', the *Times* reflected a month later, when reporting the first use of *tanks* during the final Somme offensive, '[that] we, the Germans, and all the Allies alike shall be building other monsters, huger and each more horrific than the last, till there are land battles of whole fleets of dreadnoughts and terrestrial monitors. But what is obvious at the moment is that we have done it first. *This time the diabolical machine is ours—our own*'.⁹³ This is what the war had been doing to people: breaking down the traditional restraints, escalating not just the scale and intensity of violence but the *ingenuity* of it all—the ruthlessness born of rage, the rage born of frustration, and loss. Since when did respectable Edwardians now pride themselves on building 'diabolical monsters'? The *Times* quickly added of course that 'we have used nothing which is not entirely civilized and in accord with every convention that was ever signed'. But did the British public really need this to be announced; that while they considered ads for 'Fine Chinaware', 'Albion' motorcars and 'Plasmon Oats', on the same page, the country was churning out massive new killing machines with a clear conscience?

Fisher himself by the end of the war was locked away devising his newest expression of British supremacy: a 'submersible battleship'; a submarine armed with eight 20-inch calibre guns. As soon as he was out of office (in disgrace) in the spring of 1915, and worrying about how history would partially lay the blame for the Dardanelles and Gallipoli upon him as well as Churchill, he listed the main advantages of his new weapon concept, including:

- 'Excellent ships for bombarding open towns'.
- 'Immense endurance, should easily be capable of operating away from her base for a year'.
- 'No reason why aeroplanes should not be carried'.

Lastly:

Limited, 1961), 2 vols., I, pp. 241-2. He mistakenly noted that 'Men-of-war, save in exceptional cases such as monitors, are not built to engage land forts' (vol. I, pp. 30-1), inasmuch as the original monitors of the American Civil War, with their slow-firing ultra-heavy ordnance, were not built for this role.

⁹³ The *Times*, 12 August 1916 and 19 September 1916.

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‘As our next war will be either with America or Japan and her allies, this design of ship is ideal for establishing a close blockade of their coasts, the water around their coasts being too deep for mines, so that submarines would be the chief danger’.⁹⁴ This rather echoed the pre-war sentiments of Captain Archibald G. H. W. Moore, in command of Fisher’s pride and joy, HMS *Dreadnought*, who was fully prepared ‘to bombard coast towns’ since ‘the more you made the people of a country suffer’ the sooner a war would end.⁹⁵

This was also why there were no monitors before such a war—whether in the early 1860s or the early 1900s—why they were built in such haste and used quite haphazardly in both the American Civil War and the First World War. In the former conflict, they were built for coast defence then thrown into a coast assault role for which they proved ill-suited; in the latter, they were re-imagined for coast assault yet wound up largely in defensive stations, where they ‘guarded Calais against blocking and helped to defend the Downs against night raids by destroyers’, for example. They even ‘lined the entrance to the Thames to intercept Zeppelins’, thus serving somewhat ignominiously as stationary anti-aircraft batteries.⁹⁶ Likewise, in the early 1860s, monitors as ship-killers proved effective against larger opponents by maximising weight for mounting the heaviest naval ordnance possible, behind concentrated armour thicknesses up to fifteen-inches, in the case of the USS *Dictator* (launched in 1863). But on 20 January 1918, the 14-inch monitor HMS *Raglan*, along with the 9.2-inch monitor M28, was quickly overwhelmed at Imbros near the Dardanelles by former German battlecruiser *Goeben* (renamed *Yavuz Sultan Selim*), mounting ten 11-inch guns, and the light cruiser *Breslau*.⁹⁷ In 1866 it could still be

⁹⁴ FISR 5-42; 5-29, Fisher Papers.

⁹⁵ Arthur J. Marder (ed.) *Portrait of an Admiral: Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), entry dated 2 May 1909, pp. 49-50.

⁹⁶ Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 30-1. ‘Monitors, which are vessels of offence, built for that purpose,’ declared Captain Herbert Richmond of the Admiralty staff to Lloyd George in June 1917, ‘are employed defensively in the Humber, at Yarmouth & so on, where they are useless’. Instead, he wrote, they ought to have been used ‘assisting to destroy Zeebrugge, helping the Italians off Duino, or operating with troops & air craft off the Syrian coast,’ from Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, *op. cit.*, p. 255; see also Keyes, *Memoirs*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 160 & p. 162.

⁹⁷ TNA, ADM 1-8513, 32, for the Battle of Imbros (20 January 1918) see ‘Dardanelles—HMS *Raglan* and H.M. Monitor M28’; also Buxton, *Big Gun Monitors*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-40. After quickly knocking out *Raglan*’s director top, one shot penetrated the eight-inch barbette armour below her turret, igniting the charges of both guns before she could get off her third shot. Buxton notes that with *Breslau*

argued that given a set displacement and weight, a monitor offered much better protection and hitting power than any other weapons-platform including sail-and-turret ironclads like HMS *Monarch* (1868) or breastwork-monitors with their raised decks and superstructures.⁹⁸ But even as they are rightly seen by historians as the progenitures of the modern 'all big-gun battleship'⁹⁹, clearly in the First World War their original function if not semi-aquatic form had passed to the (fully-submerged), torpedo-firing submarine. So the Germans used them to massacre merchantmen as well as men-of-war, and Fisher relished the thought of his submersible battleships finally going where men-of-war couldn't, and threatening soft targets with mass destruction.

This was why Robinson in 1871 could only respond to the charge that he had not built enough of them, to be used offensively (and pre-emptively at that), by inferring it was simply not British policy to do so. When German battlecruisers lashed out against the British northeast coast, bombarding Scarborough, Hartlepool and Whitby on 16 December, 1914, Captain Herbert Richmond of the Admiralty naval staff fumed how 'this 'insulting the enemy's coasts' is really quite out of date, apart from any questions of The Hague Convention, which lay down that the bombardment of undefended towns is forbidden...' Nothing could be more stupid on the part of their enemy, especially since it would 'further strengthen American feelings against them, already very strong'.¹⁰⁰ In this sense it was far better to hold the moral high ground, patiently in defence, than risk desperate technological shortcuts, whether unrestricted U-boat warfare to starve Britain into submission, gas attacks, or monitor-led raids to send the Germans fleeing in terror from their own shores. As noted by Christopher M. Bell, initial objections to the proposed Dardanelles campaign outlined by Churchill included that of Admiral Henry Jackson, whose memo questioned what use even if the British fleet reached Constantinople? Shelling the enemy capital 'probably result in discriminatory massacres' and even militarily

having struck a mine shortly afterwards and *Goeben* damaged as well the battle was not a complete loss for the Royal Navy.

⁹⁸ See for example, 3 April 1866, Ericsson to British engineer John Bourne, Ericsson Papers, Philadelphia; and 1 May 1867, Fox to Ericsson, Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹⁹ The seagoing breastwork-monitor HMS *Devastation* 'spoil the monitor idea', observed K. C. Barnaby in *The Institution of Naval Architects 1860-1960: An Historical Survey of the Institution's Transactions and Activities over 100 Years* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Limited, 1960). 'Few ships have aroused more controversy, but they were the starting-point of an entirely new era in British warship design,' p. 60.

¹⁰⁰ Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, *op. cit.*, entry dated 16 December, 1914, vol. 1, p. 131.

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was not as effective as occupying it.¹⁰¹ 'Of course, had we been Germans,' noted Bacon after the war, in his chapter on 'Coastal Bombardments' in *The Dover Patrol*, 'the town of Ostend could have been reduced practically to pulp without a single shore gun being able to reply'.¹⁰² Although tucked away in a footnote, the historical significance of this statement needs redressing.

On the other hand, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Wester-Wemyss at the end of March 1915 grumbled that the Dardanelles 'needn't have been half so hard had there been any sort of preparation at home'; 'Amateur strategists and amateur warriors is what we are suffering from...' Indeed, the whole campaign had been conceived, he wrote, despite professional doubts and despite military assistance. 'Never was war waged in a more half-hearted manner'.¹⁰³ But the premeditated resort to 'close blockade', like coastal assault itself, carried a high price few were prepared to pay. As one British naval officer and analyst shrewdly observed:

There can be no reasonable doubt that an attempt to enforce a close blockade would have resulted in very heavy loss, and, if persisted in, the ruin of the Allied cause. Nor did Sir John Fisher, [Arthur Wilson's] predecessor, stand on firmer ground, for he also favoured a close blockade, and in a letter dated the 6th of June 1911, described the old shibboleth 'England's frontier is the coast-line of the enemy' as a great fundamental truth vital to British policy. His plan for landing an army on the German Baltic coast illustrates, even more clearly, the risks we ran in the sphere of naval strategy... Huge sums were wasted in building special ships, but they were cheap at the price provided the operation was never carried out.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 63.

¹⁰² Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 85; TNA, ADM I-8557-126, such a no holds barred-attack, however, would not necessarily have *damaged the locks* any more than previous efforts. By contrast, British observers at Ostend after the war were surprised to learn the Germans were fairly benevolent occupiers, and 'the inhabitants, especially the children, seemed to be fat and well-fed', 28 October 1918 report.

¹⁰³ Admiral of the Fleet Lord Wester-Wemyss, *The Navy in the Dardanelles Campaign* (Uckfield: The Naval & Military Press Ltd., 2010), pp. 51, 264.

¹⁰⁴ Vice-Admiral Kenneth Gilbert Balmain Dewar, *The Navy from Within* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1939), pp. 144-5. In the autumn of 1914 the influential political

Nevertheless, not only did Churchill state the monitors' and tanks' usefulness had been 'largely thrown away' by the various commanders-in-chief, but the monitors in particular ('the original types of which were no doubt far from perfect') 'were not developed, and were never employed as a part of any great naval offensive...'¹⁰⁵ In terms of British government policy and Admiralty war planning, Fisher thus moaned to Hankey of both as a positive nuisance which crippled the nation: 'It's the 'personality' that takes the matter in hand with the powers of a Dictator! Do you imagine that those 612 vessels that were started in the Autumn of 1914 would ever have been either begun or completed in practically 12 months had a 'Committee' been in charge or without supreme personal direction'¹⁰⁶

* * *

And yet the Allies won the war. The British not only emerged triumphant but in character. 'You thought to win by trickery and by methods underhand. The teachings of sound strategy you could never understand,' went a war-time poem deriding German policies. 'We filled all the seas with commerce, our fleet held yours fast at bay. You might have waged a gallant war; but you chose the other way!'¹⁰⁷ Even so,

figure (2nd) Viscount Esher wrote in his journal that 'undoubtedly the country will benefit by having Fisher and Wilson back again in the Admiralty. More driving power was required, and they will supply it'; but following visits to the Admiralty with 'Jacky Fisher' and Arthur Balfour in early 1915 Esher's expectations had lowered, as 'every member...had a different plan; it is like a game of ninepins; one plan is knocked over, and, in falling, knocks over the next one, and so on until the board is clear; the result is a total want of initiative of any kind'; entries dated 4 November 1914 and 13 January 1915, from Viscount Esher Oliver (ed.), *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher*, 4 vols. (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1938), vol. 3, p. 194 & p. 203.

¹⁰⁵ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

¹⁰⁶ HNKY 5-2B, Fisher to Hankey, undated, possibly 1917, Hankey Papers. Hankey later condemned Fisher's 'exaggerated desire for power' as an underlying character flaw which persisted in the building of his Baltic flotilla—including monitors—even after British policy was committed to the BEF in France; Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets, Volume I 1877-1918*, 3 vols. (London: Collins, 1970), vol. 1, p. 153.

¹⁰⁷ Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 74. In Bacon's strategic analysis the Germans operating from Ostend and Zeebrugge could have rushed the Dover Patrol at any time with their superior numbers of destroyers, while despatching fast commerce raiders through the gauntlet to harry British trade throughout the empire, thereby drawing off and dividing British naval units from the North Sea. Yet

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the overriding danger before the war and throughout much of the previous century, wrote German-born British diplomat Sir Eyre Crowe, had always been the *jealousy* of Britain's seapower which led to coalitions against her: 'The danger can in practice only be averted on condition that the national policy of the insular and naval State is so directed as to harmonize with the general desires and ideals common to all mankind, and more particularly that it is closely identified with the primary and vital interests of a majority, or as many as possible, of the other nations'.¹⁰⁸ Small wonder then, that soon after the *Monitor* fought the *Merrimack* (the *CSS Virginia*) to a standstill, on 9 March, 1862, a score of smaller powers in Europe—but also including Russia—invested heavily in monitors as well; to ensure their coasts were not England's frontier, and at no loss to England herself.¹⁰⁹

he also acknowledged that anything more than a 'tip and run raid' was impossible against British reinforcements, while raiders risked being cut off from returning to their base. As long as Britain could replace lost naval units better than Germany the latter could not afford 'unstinted loss of war-ships, for the mastery of the sea'. Tirpitz, from his perspective, wrote that he was 'not strong enough' to secure for German naval forces in the Flemish ports 'sufficient accessions of force from home to make them as powerful as Admiral [Ludwig von] Schroder and I could have wished,' yet they were 'a sharp thorn in England's side right up to the autumn of 1918', Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), 2 vols., vol. 2, p. 80. Admiral Reinhard Scheer was specifically dismissive of the British monitors, which had 'not once succeeded in inflicting serious damage, though they had made many attempts', *Germany's High Sea Fleet in the World War* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1920), p. 339.

¹⁰⁸ Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), Appendix VII, 'Sir Eyre Crowe on Sea Power and Policy', p. 355; see also Keith Jeffrey, 'British Strategy and War Aims in the First World War', in Herausgegeben von Holger Afflerback (ed.), *The Purpose of the First World War* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015), pp. 45-60.

¹⁰⁹ See for example, 'The 'Monitor' Iron-Clads—Opinion of the Russian Admiral' [Lesoffsky], May 1864, translated from 'a semi-official periodical published at St. Petersburg'. U.S. Navy Department Library-archives, Washington Navy Yard, 'Civil War pamphlets', W14. 'The Monitors that are being constructed at the Petersburg yards undoubtedly are not in a condition to cope with Cherbourg, or to take Portsmouth ['for fight against fortresses they are nearly useless']; but they will perform their party of duty, and will be of such use as to prevent an unmolested bombardment of the fortifications of the port of Cronstadt, which are so important to Russia'. By 1873 thirteen light-draft monitors and turret ships armed with Russian-built, 9-inch breechloading rifled guns on the Krupp design (comparable to the hitting

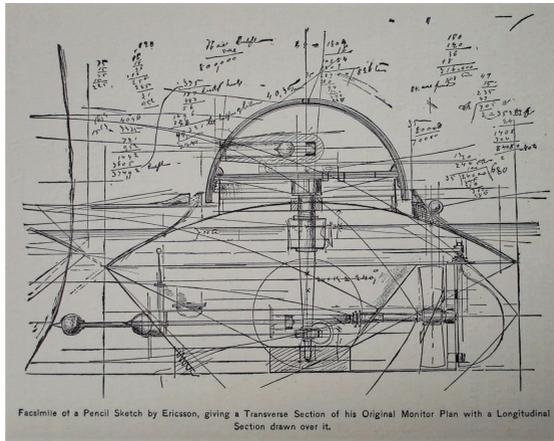
What caught the Admiralty by surprise in 1914 was that coast defence had been a deliberate strategic policy for decades—from Palmerston's forts to ironclad monitors—while coast assault had not. Take for instance, in closing, Churchill's cabinet memo of 7 July, 1917; bitter how easy it was for the experts 'to remain entrenched upon a negative policy, and receive every proposal with a fire of destructive criticism'. The 'old, recognised, true war policy of the Royal Navy', he argued, was settled on the 'fundamental principle of aggressive naval strategy'; of close blockade, and more. This meant capturing a German North Sea island, for which new squadrons of 'torpedo-proof' vessels, supported by full command of the air for accurate shore bombardment of dug-in enemy batteries, would be crucial. A division of troops, maybe two, was also required. Only then could enemy naval forces be 'beaten back into port'. To seal them in, 'dense minefields' would then have to be layered over all approaches, over and over. And yet his plan concluded with a political gamble: Denmark would then have to join the Allies. 'Until she comes in, it is unwise, if not impossible, to enter the Baltic'. (Presumably, Germany's northern flank could *then* be threatened directly, at last.) It was exhausting. Churchill seems to have completely forgotten the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli campaign. How long would such a combined force take to assemble? How much would it cost? How might the Germans augment their own defences in the meantime? These were questions the memo didn't address, in the context of a war seemingly—and self-fulfillingly—without end. But if Churchill's maligned 'expert opinion' decided once again 'that no means of a naval offensive exist or can be devised; that the war can only be won on land, and that the Allied navies, however great their superiority, can only "keep the ring" and hunt submarines with small craft', he challenged, then 'the proportion of Allied resources in men, money, and material which should be assigned to the upkeep of the battlefleets stands clearly in need of the strictest scrutiny.'¹¹⁰ This was unintentionally ironic, for it would bring the establishment of the Royal Navy back to where it had always been, to its so-called 'negative policy'—its sensibility. Perhaps the successful prosecution of the 'Great War' really was about making the enemy suffer, with the total remorselessness of a fully-mobilised machine; from coldly pre-prepared, pre-emptive strikes to brutal and indiscriminate violations of all kinds. Yet the essence of the antebellum 'Pax', epitomised by the Royal Navy's 'gobbies' scattered around the empire and in perennial deep-freeze at home, was in assuring rival powers that the British would be shocked to the core if it ever came to that.

power of Armstrong 12-ton guns, which could penetrate 9½-inches of iron armour at 1,000 yards) complimented Cronstadt's combined defences.

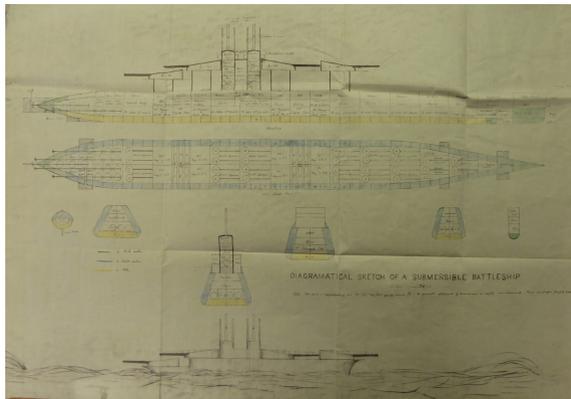
¹¹⁰ MCKN 7-1, *Naval War Policy, 1917*, 7 July 1917, McKenna Papers. Churchill was appointed Minister of Munitions as part of Lloyd George's government.

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Kipling's complaint was certainly understandable, but gentlemen do not fight with their bare fists.

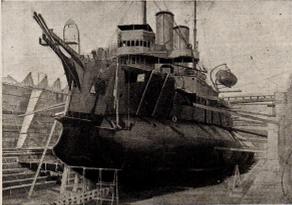


John Ericsson's early 'monitor' designs, developed during the Crimean War but fulfilled in the final design of the U.S.S *Monitor*, launched in early 1862, from William Conant Church, *The Life of John Ericsson*, two volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906)



Fisher's plans for a 'submarine battleship, circa 1917-18, to be armed with eight 20-inch guns, courtesy of the Churchill Archives Centre (abbreviation: CAC), The Papers of 1st Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, FISR 5/42.

FIGHTING THE MINE AND THE TORPEDO MORE TYPES OF THE MYSTERY SHIPS OF THE ROYAL NAVY



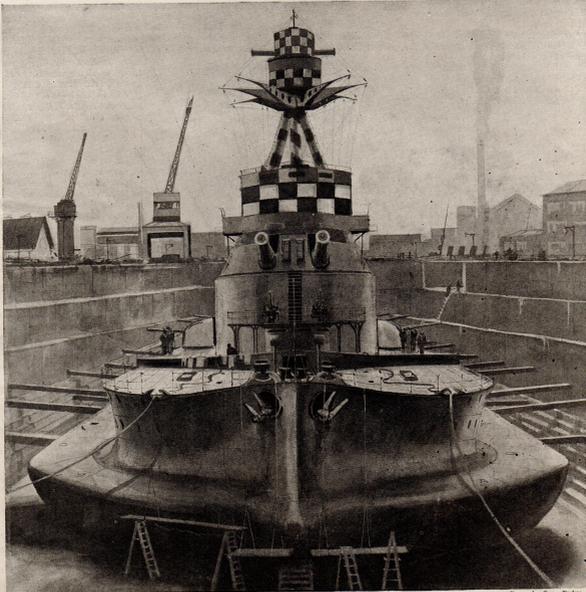
H.M.S. ENDYMION

This vessel, one of the Edgar class, was fitted with "blowers" (the highest part) and a corresponding gallery over the bows and was intended to force the (destructive) mine regarded as mine and torpedo proof.



H.M.S. LORD CLIVE

In this picture can be seen the central structure on the "blower" (conch), which was fitted to prevent German electrically propelled torpedo boats from riding up the side of the ship.



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H.M.S. MARSHAL SOULT IN THE DRY DOCK

The picture shows the "blowers" and the 1500-hp screw. The protective cone on each side of the conical top at the masthead, are part of the apparatus protecting the smoke screen by which the whereabouts of the vessel was hidden to the enemy.

Drawn by Oscar Reuter.

'Fighting the Mine and the Torpedo', The Graphic, 1 February, 1919—author's collection