

World War I at Sea (1914-1918)

The struggle at sea was chiefly between the British effort to strangle Germany by naval blockade, and the German attempt to cut off Britain's source of food and supply by submarine warfare. Vigilance by the British navy kept most of the German fleet bottled up in home ports, and at the same time British warships freed the seas of German commerce raiders. The rival fleets met only once, in the battle of Jutland off the coast of Denmark. The British suffered heavily in this encounter, but the decisive result was that the German battle fleet never again dared to leave its bases.

Deprived of the use of surface ships Germany increasingly resorted to submarine warfare to bring Britain to her knees. The German U-boat fleet preyed on enemy and often neutral ships, sank merchantmen on sight, and threatened the supply lines on which the survival of the Allies depended. Protests from the United States brought a reluctant promise in 1915 not to sink ships without warning, but this greatly reduced the effectiveness of the submarine as a weapon.

By the end of 1916 the British blockade was beginning to be felt severely in Germany. In January 1917 the Germans, convinced they could starve Britain in five months, prepared to risk the American entry into the war. They resumed unrestricted submarine warfare.

The policy was initially spectacularly effective. Allied shipping losses mounted, reaching a peak in April 1917 of 869,000 tons. However, the submarine campaign did not achieve the expected speedy victory. New anti-submarine devices, together with the Allied adoption of the convoy system, gradually overcame the submarine menace. On the other hand, by the middle of 1918, the effects of the British blockade were such that Germany could not continue the war for much longer.

When the war began in 1914 Canada had an embryonic naval service consisting of less than 350 men and two ships, HMCS *Rainbow* and HMCS *Niobe*. It was decided that Canada's war effort would be best concentrated on the army and, therefore, the protection of Canada's coasts and shipping in Canadian waters was handed over to the Royal Navy.

The share of the Royal Canadian Navy in defence though small was, nevertheless, important. The RCN assumed responsibility for such services as examining and directing shipping in Canadian ports; radio-telegraph services, vital to the Admiralty's intelligence system; operation of an auxiliary fleet which engaged in mine sweeping and patrolling operations. In 1916, when the threat of submarine warfare spread to North American waters, the Canadian government undertook, at the request of the British Admiralty, to build up a patrol force of 36 ships.

Source: <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/firstwar/canada/Canada17>