

Jutland : Death at Sea

Were lives wasted when the Indefatigable sank?

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Introduction

On 31 May 1916 the largest naval battle of the First World War took place off the coast of Jutland in Denmark. Over 6,000 British sailors lost their lives.

These high losses were partly due to the unexpected sinking of three large battleships which were designed to take heavy hits without sinking. At the time the sailors who died were heralded as gallant comrades who died gloriously in battle. However, some historians believe that most of these sailors died because people made careless mistakes.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. First, find out the following information from the service record of a sailor involved in the battle.
 - a) What is the sailor's full name?
 - b) What was his date and place of birth?
 - c) What job did the sailor do before joining the Navy?
 - d) When did he join the Navy?
 - e) How old was he when he joined up?
 - f) How many ships did he serve on?
 - g) What ship did he die on and when?
 - h) Does the service record give any information on why HMS Indefatigable sank?

Look at Source 2

2. This is a telegram reporting on the sinking of the Indefatigable.
 - a) How according to the telegram was the Indefatigable sunk?
 - b) Was the Indefatigable the only ship to be sunk by this means?
 - c) What is the ship's Magazine? (Hint: It is not a publication!)

Look at Source 3

3. This is a public statement made by the Navy on the loss of the Indefatigable.
 - a) Is any reason for the 'severe losses' given in this statement?
 - b) What does the Navy think of the men who died?
 - c) Is there any sign of the Navy being concerned at the reasons for the losses of these ships?

Look at Source 4

4. This is a private Navy report on the loss of the Indefatigable.
 - a) What ‘deduction’ was made about why the Indefatigable exploded?
 - b) Charges are explosives. What was wrong with the way the charges were carried to the guns?
 - c) What other factor contributed to the explosion?
 - d) Was the death of Joseph John Ackrill and countless others on the Indefatigable:
 - glorious?
 - an unnecessary loss?Explain your answer.
 - e) Write a newspaper report based on one of the following headlines.
 - The sinking of the Indefatigable: A glorious and noble sacrifice for the defence of King and country.
 - Indefatigable goes down! Lives wasted due to mistakes made on board ship?

Background

Before 1916 there had been no major sea battles between the world’s largest naval powers, Germany and Britain. The British Grand Fleet kept to the safety of Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands while the Germany High Seas Fleet stayed anchored in their own ports. In January 1916, the Germans had a new Naval Commander, Admiral Von Scheer, and he was eager for action. Von Scheer planned to lure the British Fleet into battle and trap them. The British found out what he was planning and prepared to meet the German fleet.

Just before 6pm on 31 May, the great fleets of Britain and Germany, totalling some 250 ships, came into contact off the coast of Jutland. Fierce fighting went on all evening with high explosive shells ripping into thick armour plating. Sailors burned to death or were drowned in the icy-cold sea. As darkness came Von Scheer headed back to port and the British fleet concerned about enemy submarines and minefields refused to give chase.

Both sides claimed victory. The Germans said they sank more ships but the British claimed Von Scheer had given up first and fled the scene of the battle. However, when losses were counted Britain seemed to have lost more. Britain lost 14 battleships to Germany’s 11. While Germany lost 2,551 men, Britain lost 6,077.

The German High Seas Fleet stayed at home for the rest of the war. They chose to rely on U-boats (submarines). German U-boats caused great problems for the British as they sunk an enormous amount of shipping. The British eventually defeated the menace of the U-boats by employing a convoy system where anti-submarine ships protected other ships in a group..

Teachers Notes

This lesson can be used for:

- Looking at how evidence over time can change leading to new conclusions. The first reaction to the sinking of the Indefatigable was one of heroic loss and then it became clear it was a mistake in the method of carrying up shells from the magazine.
- You could ask the students if they think the truth should have been told to the sailor's relatives or kept under wraps to avoid embarrassment and unnecessary anguish.
- Discuss the effect such a revelation would have on morale. This could then lead to a general discussion on the importance of morale in wartime.
- Students could further investigate the Battle of Jutland and perhaps debate who won the battle based upon the evidence. Were the losses more important than who left the scene of battle first? Was the subsequent avoidance of contact by the Germany navy an admission of defeat?

Sources

Illustration : MFQ 1/366/4

Source 1 - ADM 188/464

Source 2 - ADM 137/1642

Source 3 - ADM 137/301

Source 4 - ADM 1/8477/308

Schemes of Work

Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth-century conflicts affect so many people?

Key Stage 3, Unit 18.

Source 1 : WWI Navy Service Record for John Ackrill 1916 (ADM 188/464)

288891		288891								
Name in full } <i>John Joseph Ackrill</i>			Date of Birth <i>24 January 1886</i>							
			Place of Birth <i>Dublin</i>							
			Occupation <i>Shipwright</i>							
Date and Period of C. S. Regagements.		Age	Height, Ft. in.	Hair	Eyes	Complexion	Wounds, Scars, Marks, etc.			
<i>14 June 1898 - 13 yrs</i> <i>6 January 1907 - 10 comp</i> <i>106</i>		<i>38</i>	<i>5'5 1/2</i> <i>5'6 1/2</i>	<i>Brn</i>	<i>Blu</i>	<i>Fresh</i>	<i>Two dots on R. fore arm</i>			
Ship, No. served in.	List and No.	Rating	Sub-ratings			Badges	Period of Service		Character	If Exchanged, Where and for what Cause
			Rating	From	To		From	To		
<i>Vind II</i>	<i>15 1159</i>	<i>St. 2c</i>	<i>DM</i>	<i>103 00</i>	<i>103 00</i>	<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>13 May 09</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Psyche</i>	<i>15 12</i>	<i>"</i>	<i>Sail</i>	<i>30 1 00</i>	<i>12 1/2</i>	<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind</i>	<i>15 76</i>	<i>"</i>	<i>DM</i>	<i>5 00</i>	<i>5 00</i>	<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Langham II</i>	<i>15 148</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind III</i>	<i>15 210</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Medea</i>	<i>15 246</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind IV</i>	<i>15 1007</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Magnificent</i>	<i>15 191</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind V</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>St. 2c</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Blake</i>	<i>12 16</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>London</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>India</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Armenia</i>	<i>15 7</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind VI</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Leighton</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Vind VII</i>	<i>15 105</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>India</i>	<i>15 114</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	
<i>Indefatigable</i>	<i>15 132</i>	<i>"</i>				<i>103 00</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>10 June 08</i>	<i>1011 98</i>	

N. P. *30441* D. D. First MAY 1916.
1915 KILLED IN ACTION.

Source 1 : Transcript of WWI Navy Service Record for John Ackrill 1916 (ADM 188/464)

Source 2 : Navy Telegram Reporting the Loss of the Indefatigable 1916 (ADM 137/1642)

TELEGRAM.		No. 995
From C. in C. Grand Fleet	DATE 2.6.16	
To Admiralty	Recd. 11.52 p.m. 2.15 a.m. 3.6.16	
W		
995 Your 465 and my 994.		
At 3.50 p.m. on 31st. May V.A.C. Battle Cruiser Fleet reported himself engaged with enemy Battle Cruisers steering about E.S.E. enemy to the Northward.		
INDEFATIGABLE was sunk 10 minutes after commencement of action by shell exploding in Magazine. QUEEN MARY half an hour later probably same cause.		
Subsequent to this 5th.B.Sq. which had been in the rear got into action and shortly afterwards enemy's Battle Fleet which had been reported as in sight by 2nd.Lt.Cr.Sq. appeared and V.A. B.C.Fleet turned round followed by 5th.B.Sq. I had sent 3rd.B.C.Sq. which was 20 miles ahead of me, to support B.C.Fleet on learning of the enemy being in sight, the Battle Fleet being at this time over 30 miles to the North steering for the the scene of action at 20 knots. 3rd.B.C.Sq. apparently joined B.C.F. about 5.0 p.m. and INVINCIBLE was blown up either by shell in magazine or mine or torpedo.		
At 5.44 p.m. Cruisers and Lt.Cruisers ahead of Battle Fleet were seen to be altering courses to port Battle Fleet's course then being S.E. by South. The weather was very misty, visibility being about six miles to the westward and less to the eastward.		

Source 2 : Transcript of Navy Telegram Reporting the Loss of the Indefatigable 1916 (ADM 137/1642)

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Glossary

VAC : Vice Admiral Commanding
ESE : East, South East
B Sq : Battleship Squadron
Lt Cr Sq : Light Cruiser Squadron
BC : Battle Cruiser
VA : Vice Admiral
BC Sq : Battle Cruiser Squadron
BCF : Battle Cruiser Formation
Lt : Light
SE : South East

Source 3 : A Public Statement Made by the Navy on the Loss of the Indefatigable 1916 (ADM 137/301)

In such a conflict as raged continuously for five hours it was inevitable that we should suffer severe losses. It was necessary to maintain touch with greatly superior forces in fluctuating visibility, often very low. We lost "INVINCIBLE", "INDEFATIGABLE" and "QUEEN MARY", from which ships there were few survivors. The casualties in other ships were heavy, and I wish to express my deepest regret at the loss of so many gallant comrades, officers and men. They died gloriously.

Exceptional skill was displayed by the Medical Officers of the Fleet. They performed operations and tended the wounded under conditions of extreme difficulty. In some cases their staff was seriously depleted by casualties, and the inevitable lack of such essentials as adequate light, hot water, &c., in ships damaged by shell fire, tried their skill, resource and physical endurance to the utmost.

As usual, the Engine Room Departments of all ships displayed the highest qualities of technical skill, discipline and endurance. High speed is a primary factor in the tactics of the squadrons under my command, and the Engine Room Departments never fail.

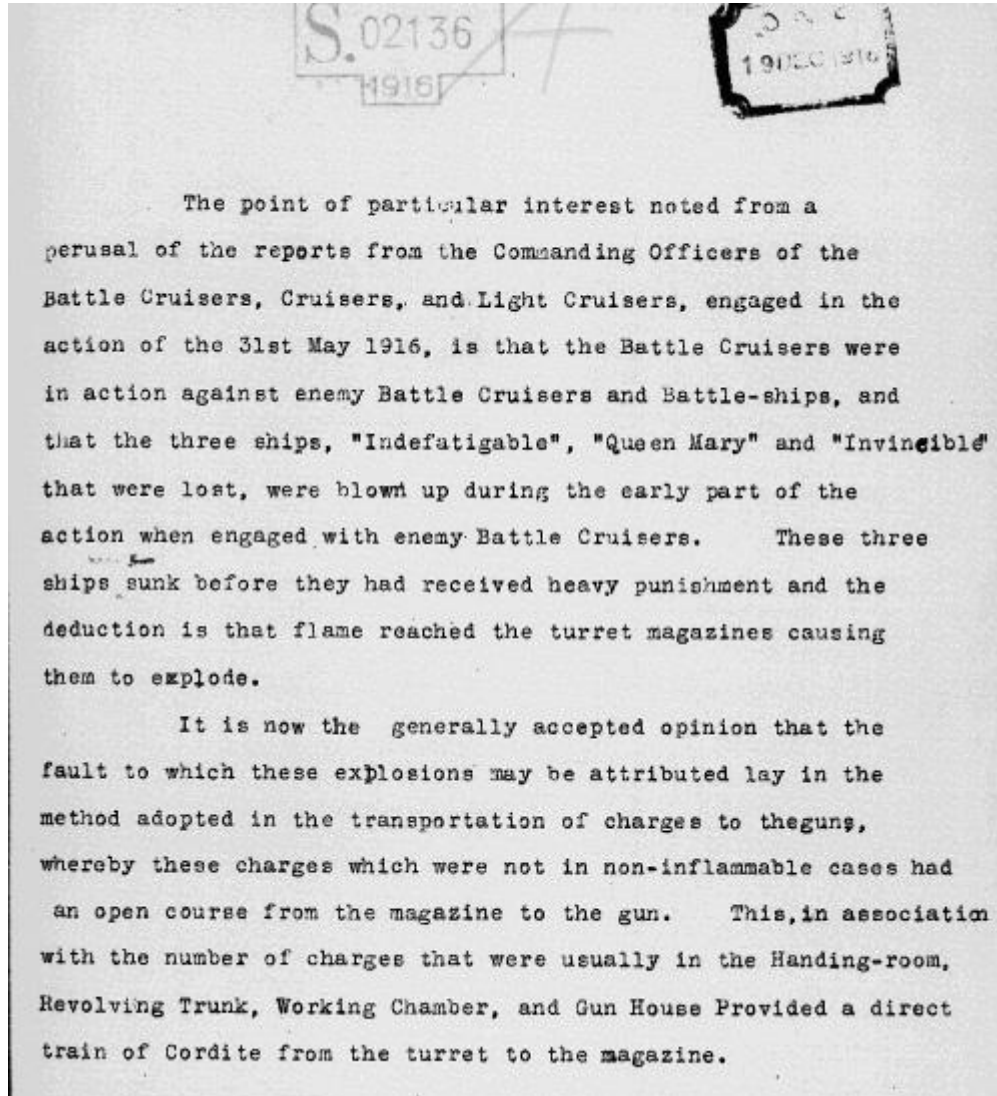
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Source 4 : Private Navy Report on the Loss of the Indefatigable 1916 (ADM 1/8477/308)



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The point of particular interest noted from a perusal of the reports from the Commanding Officers of the Battle Cruisers, and Light Cruisers, engaged in the action of the 31st May 1916, is that the Battle Cruisers were in action against enemy Battle Cruisers and Battle-ships, and that the three ships, "Indefatigable", "Queen Mary" and "Invincible" that were lost, were blown up during the early part of the action when engaged with enemy Battle Cruisers. These three ships sunk before they had received heavy punishment and the deduction is that flame reached the turret magazines causing them to explode.

It is now the generally accepted opinion that the fault to which these explosions may be attributed lay in the method adopted in the transportation of charges to the guns, whereby these charges which were not in non-inflammable cases had an open course from the magazine to the gun. This, in association with the number of charges that were usually in the Handling-room, Revolving Trunk, Working Chamber, and Gun House Provided a direct train of Cordite from the turret to the magazine.