

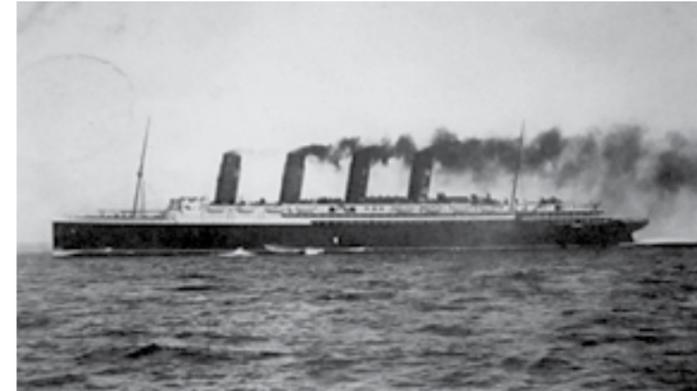
# THE WAR AT SEA



British "Dreadnoughts"

In 1900 Britannia really did "rule the waves." The British fleet was by far the largest in the world. When the German Emperor William II decided to build up German sea power this sparked a naval arms race with Great Britain. In 1906, the British launched the battleship **H.M.S. Dreadnought**, the most powerful ship afloat. The Germans promptly produced their own version, starting a race to see who could build the most "dreadnoughts", with the British in the lead in 1914. Britain also developed new naval bases to meet the challenge from Germany, at **Rosyth**, the **Cromarty Firth**, and **Scapa Flow** where the British Grand Fleet was based.

When war broke out, it was assumed in Britain that, as in the days of Nelson, the British fleet would triumph over the German High Seas Fleet in another Trafalgar. But as Churchill rightly remarked **Admiral Jellicoe**, the commander of the Grand Fleet, was the only man who could "lose the war in an afternoon". Jellicoe was cautious about committing his major ships to a risky action. The British Navy did win some successes. Weeks into the war, cruisers from Rosyth inflicted damage on a German fleet at the **Heligoland Bight** and again in 1915 at the **Dogger Bank**. However, the navy was criticised for failing to stop German raids during the winter of 1914-15 when they bombarded towns like **Whitby, Scarborough and Yarmouth**. When the big battle everyone expected finally came, it proved to be a disappointment. On 31st May 1916, the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet did meet at **Jutland**. However, it was late in the day and after a brief action the German battleships escaped into the gathering gloom. Jellicoe had failed to destroy the German fleet and the British actually suffered heavier losses than the Germans. But the German High Seas Fleet had "run away" and it rarely left port after this, leaving control of the North Sea to the Royal Navy.



The "Lusitania"

Instead, the Germans turned increasingly to a new type of warfare, using **unterseebooten** – **submarines** – to attack ships approaching British ports. As Britain depended heavily on foreign imports of food, oil, and other goods produced by her empire, this was a major threat. At first only Allied ships were attacked, but in 1915 the Germans declared a war zone around Great Britain, within which all ships, including neutrals, could be sunk. When the liner "**Lusitania**" was sunk on a passage from New York to Liverpool, with the loss of 1,198 passengers including some Americans, this caused outrage. Fearing that the Americans might join the war the Germans moderated their U-boat campaign. Meantime, both sides had laid mine fields, both to block enemy ports and to protect their own ports. Lord Kitchener was drowned when the ship he was on struck a mine.

In 1916 the Germans again increased their submarine attacks. They were suffering badly from the effects of the **British naval blockade** on their ports which meant they too were short of essential supplies. They took a calculated risk that they could defeat Britain before the Americans became so angry that they joined the war. In early 1917 the campaign of **unrestricted submarine warfare** was stepped up, and so many ships were sunk that Britain came close to being starved into surrender. At one point, only 6 weeks supply of food was left. In this crisis rationing was introduced. New ideas were introduced to fight the submarine menace – hydrophones to listen for their engines; depth charges to sink them; airships to spot them; and from June 1917 the use of convoys to protect merchant ships. By the end of the year losses had dropped dramatically. And of course, it was anger over Germany's U-boat war that finally brought the U.S.A. into the struggle.



Captured German U-boat