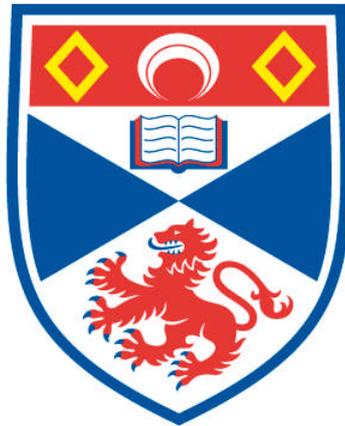


**A NAVAL TRAVESTY: THE DISMISSAL OF ADMIRAL
SIR JOHN JELICOE, 1917**

J. Allan C. Macfarlane

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
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J Allan C Macfarlane

A Naval Travesty: The Dismissal of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, 1917

PhD Dissertation

Submitted January 2014

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I was admitted as a research student in September 2008 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in September 2008; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2008 and 2014.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements		Page 5
Abstract		page 6
Abbreviations		page 8
Chapter I	Introduction	page 9
Chapter II	A Difficult Inheritance	page 37
Chapter III	The Convoy Controversy	page 65
Chapter IV	Justified or Unjustified Cause	page 96
Chapter V	Conspiracies	page 126
Chapter VI	The Dismissal and its Aftermath	page 171
Chapter VII	For Better or for Worse	page 206
Chapter VIII	Conclusions	page 247
Bibliography		page 263

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation relates to the dismissal of Admiral Jellicoe, First Sea Lord from November 1916 to December 1917, by Sir Eric Geddes, First Lord of the Admiralty, at the behest of the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. The dismissal was peremptory and effected without rational explanation, despite Jellicoe having largely fulfilled his primary mission of combating the German U-boat threat to British merchant shipping. The outcome of the war may well have been affected if the level of shipping losses sustained through U-boat attack in April 1917 had continued unabated.

The central argument of the dissertation is that the dismissal was unjustified. As an adjunct, it argues that the received view of certain historians that Jellicoe was not successful as First Sea Lord is unwarranted and originates from severe post war criticism of Jellicoe by those with a vested interest in justifying the dismissal, notably Lloyd George.

Supporting these arguments, the following assertions are made. Firstly, given the legacy Jellicoe inherited when joining the Admiralty, through the strategies adopted, organisational changes made and initiatives undertaken in anti-submarine weapons development, the progress made in countering the U-boat threat was notable. Secondly, the universal criticism directed at the Admiralty over the perceived delay in introducing a general convoy system for merchant shipping is not sustainable having regard to primary source documentation. Thirdly, incidents that occurred during the latter part of 1917, and suggested as being factors which contributed to the dismissal, can be discounted. Fourthly, Lloyd George conspired to involve General Haig, Commander of the British Forces in France, and the press baron, Lord Northcliffe, in

his efforts to mitigate any potential controversy that might result from Jellicoe's removal from office. Finally, the arguments made by a number of commentators that the Admiralty performed better under Jellicoe's successor, Admiral Wemyss, is misconceived.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout:

BL	British Library, London
CA	Churchill Archives, Cambridge
NA	National Archives, London
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
PA	Parliamentary Archives, London
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast

Chapter I

Introduction

Background

It has been said of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe that ‘he was the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon.’¹ That remark proffers no exaggeration. When Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, its standing army was about one tenth of the size of Germany’s army. It has been described by one historian as an ‘antique fire engine: spotless, shining and in perfect working order, but not good at putting out big fires’.² In economic terms Germany’s industrial output had outstripped Britain’s since before the turn of the century. More significantly, in the context of this dissertation, Britain imported almost two thirds of its food and, usually, did not maintain a stock of more than four to six weeks supply of raw materials for its manufacturing industries.³ Maintenance of Britain’s naval supremacy was therefore imperative to its survival. Not only had the Royal Navy to protect Britain’s vital ocean trade routes, it had to deter any attempted invasion, blockade Germany’s sea trade, and, as the British Government had decided to provide military support to France and Belgium, prevent enemy interference with the

¹ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, (London, 1927), III, 112.

² Gerard de Groot, *Blighty, British Society in the Great War*, (London, 1996), 14.

³ Arthur Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*, (London, 1961), 1, 358. (References to this work in footnotes are hereafter abbreviated to *FDSF*).

movement of troops and supplies across the English Channel. Moreover, if the *raison d'être* of the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet was to be wholly fulfilled, it would have to seek out and annihilate the powerful German High Seas Fleet.

After two years of war, Jellicoe, as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, had, with one exception, met those objectives. Germany had not invaded Britain; the blockade of German sea trade was beginning to have an adverse impact on its economy and its population; and the cross Channel traffic was secure. The exception was that the Navy had not annihilated the High Seas Fleet. That Fleet had barely ventured from its home port during those two years. The only time that the main body of capital ships of both fleets fought was at the Battle of Jutland in May 1916 and, whilst it is arguable that the High Seas Fleet scored a tactical victory in the battle in as much as more British than German ships were sunk, strategically, the victory was clearly British. Under the onslaught of the British guns, the High Seas Fleet under Admiral Scheer turned away from the Grand Fleet and returned to harbour. It would rarely venture forth again during the course of the war and never with the intention of confronting the entire Grand Fleet.

Ultimately, Germany's submarine fleet represented a greater threat to Britain's maritime superiority. Although during the first two years of the war the U-boat had affected the strategic and tactical criteria under which the Grand Fleet operated and caused some damage to Britain's merchant shipping, it had not had a major impact on Britain's war effort. However, as explained further in Chapters II and III below, in February 1917 that situation was to change significantly when Germany embarked on a full, unrestricted submarine campaign of attacking British, Allied and neutral merchant shipping sailing in the waters around Britain. The effect was dramatic. For a short period Britain's ocean trade was seriously threatened and,

had the submarine campaign continued unabated through the course of 1917, it could well have affected the outcome of the war. Thus, whilst Britain retained control of the surface of the oceans, complete control of the sea was threatened by Germany's ability to attack at will from below the surface.

In October 1916, Jellicoe had persuaded Herbert Asquith, then Prime Minister, and Arthur Balfour, then First Lord of the Admiralty, that strategically, the U-boat represented the greatest threat to Britain's naval supremacy. He also recognised that the Admiralty had been ambivalent to the U-boat threat and that over the preceding two years of the war, had done little towards countering it. As a consequence, Jellicoe, acknowledged as being the senior naval commander most capable of dealing with this threat, relinquished command of the Grand Fleet and moved to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord.

However, his tenure was short lived. After just twelve months in office, and despite the U-boat threat having been contained, Jellicoe was peremptorily dismissed. On Christmas Eve 1917, at about 6 pm, he returned to his office at the Admiralty to find a letter from Sir Eric Geddes, then First Lord of the Admiralty, which stated:

After very careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that a change is desirable in the post of First Sea Lord ... I have consulted the Prime Minister and with his concurrence I am asking to see the King to make this recommendation to him ... I have thought that you would prefer me to convey this decision to you in writing, but should you wish to see me, I shall of course be at your disposal at any time. My regret at having to convey this decision to you is the greater in view of the very cordial personal relations which have existed between us throughout.⁴

⁴ Letter Geddes to Jellicoe, 24 December 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

The 'change' came without prior notice, discussion, or explanation as to why it was being made. Jellicoe's response to Geddes' letter was also terse:

I have received your letter. You do not assign a reason for your action, but I assume that it is due to a want of confidence in me. Under these conditions you will realise that it is difficult for me to continue my work, as action taken by me may commit my successor and may be contrary to your own views. I shall therefore be glad to be relieved as soon as possible.⁵

Thus it was, in the words of one of Jellicoe's biographers:

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, who had served in the Royal Navy, man and boy for forty five years, was acknowledged as one of the foremost naval experts of his day and who commanded the respect, admiration and affection of all ranks and ratings in the Navy, was dismissed from his office on Christmas Eve by an ex-railway manager who had been in the Admiralty since the previous summer - barely half a dog watch, as the Service saying had it.⁶

The dismissal caused a furore within the Navy. A number of politicians were also aghast. The naval members of the Board of the Admiralty were on the verge of mutiny. If they had resigned *en masse* as threatened, it would, in all probability, have brought down the coalition government formed in December 1916 under David Lloyd George's premiership, at a critical point in the war.

In these circumstances, logic dictates that Jellicoe's political masters would have had grounds for the dismissal that were substantial and publicly justifiable. Jellicoe never was 'assigned a reason' for his dismissal, either privately or publicly. Neither Lloyd George nor Geddes provided justifiable reasons at the time, in subsequent Parliamentary debates, or later in correspondence or biographies. The fact

⁵ Letter, Jellicoe to Geddes, 24 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1807.

⁶ John Winton, *Jellicoe*, (London, 1981), 261.

that they did not do so does in itself suggest that the dismissal was unwarranted. Whilst a number of hypotheses have been put forward since, including by Jellicoe himself, no real explanation has yet emerged. It is the question as to whether or not Jellicoe's dismissal was justified that forms the central theme of this dissertation.

Jellicoe: the Person

From his birth in Southampton on 5 December 1859, John Rushworth Jellicoe was destined to be a sailor. By his own admission, from his earliest days he had never 'thought of any other career than that of the sea'.⁷ Given his heritage, that is not surprising. His father, John Henry Jellicoe, a sailor all his working life, ended his career as Commodore of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company. Jellicoe's three maternal uncles all served in the Royal Navy. His mother, Lucy Keele, was a direct descendent of Admiral Phillip Patton, who served with distinction under Boscawen, Hawke and Rodney and was Second Sea Lord at the time of the Battle of Trafalgar.⁸ Following that destiny, in 1872, Jellicoe joined the Royal Naval College, *HMS Britannia*, as a cadet.

From the beginning of his career, Jellicoe showed ambition. On receiving the news that he had gained admission to *Britannia*, he was moved to write on the cover of one of his books, 'This book is the property of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe.'⁹ Later, when serving as a Midshipman on *HMS Agincourt*, his response to a query by his mother about his 'feeling nervous' about a particular incident was, 'I am surprised at

⁷ Jellicoe, Autobiographical Notes, BL, Add. MSS 49038, 99. Page references in Jellicoe's Autobiographical Notes are to the folio references in the typed copy, not the holograph version, contained in this volume of his papers.

⁸ A. Temple Patterson, *Jellicoe, A Biography*, (London, 1969), 15.

⁹ Quoted, Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Life of John Rushworth, Earl Jellicoe*, (London, 1936), 8.

you asking such a question of Sir John Jellicoe KCB.’¹⁰ *Prima facie*, that ambition was largely realised. By his death in 1935, Jellicoe had attained the rank of Admiral of the Fleet, had been appointed a Grand Commander of the Order of the Bath and of the Royal Victorian Order, received the Order of Merit, held war time commands as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet and as First Sea Lord, served as Governor General of New Zealand, and had been elevated to the peerage, ultimately with the rank of earl. Moreover, on this death, he was awarded perhaps his greatest accolade by being buried in St Paul’s Cathedral, just a few yards away from the tomb of Britain’s greatest naval hero, Admiral Nelson.

Early in his career Jellicoe had been identified by the naval reformer, Admiral Sir John Fisher, as a sailor of exceptional ability and was one of an elite group of Fisher protégés known as the ‘fish pond’. He had served under Fisher in several senior posts at the Admiralty, notably as Controller of the Navy from 1908 to 1910 and, having been involved in the expansion of the British fleet and development of the revolutionary Dreadnought class of battleships through the first decade of the twentieth century, he had a thorough knowledge of the capability and strengths and weaknesses of the British ships. Jellicoe had also held numerous senior seagoing posts. He commanded the Atlantic Fleet in 1911 and in 1912 was second in command of the larger Home Fleet. His success in carrying out a simulated invasion on the Humber Estuary in the fleet manoeuvres of 1913 was such that the manoeuvres were curtailed by the Admiralty ‘for fear of giving useful information to the Germans’.¹¹

On a personal level, Jellicoe has also been lauded. He was clever, perhaps exceptionally so, relative to the average intelligence of naval officers of the time. He passed out of *Britannia* first in his term. The commander there, after meeting

¹⁰ Letter, Jellicoe to his Mother, 10 March 1878, BL, Add. MSS 71544.

¹¹ Jellicoe, Autobiographical Notes, BL, Add. MSS 49038, 249.

Jellicoe's mother, remarked to a friend, 'I wonder if Mrs Jellicoe realizes that her son John is one of the cleverest cadets we have ever had.'¹² That remark is supported by his having achieved firsts in his seamanship examinations, in his studies for lieutenant at the Greenwich Naval College and in gunnery.¹³ In the seagoing posts which he held, he was extremely effective, his Service Record being peppered with the words 'excellent' and 'exceptional'.¹⁴ Moreover, Jellicoe was personally courageous. More than once he had put his own life at risk in attempting rescues at sea.¹⁵ He was mentioned in despatches for his conduct under fire whilst serving in China during the Boxer rebellion of 1900.¹⁶

Further, by most accounts, in his rise to the pinnacle of the Service, there is little evidence that his character exhibited the traits of authoritarianism, vanity or indeed arrogance that often marks those who reach high command. To quote Jellicoe's first biographer, Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon:

Heredity had equipped Lord Jellicoe with a charming disposition and firmness of character; and between those two somewhat opposing tendencies, he developed a wonderfully balanced judgement ... The straightness of the course he steered was due to the fact that he never allowed personal inclination or advantage to weigh against right, nor cause him to neglect doing a kind act to others ... He had the gift of capturing affection and regard of all who serve under him.¹⁷

¹² Quoted, Winton, *Jellicoe*, 12.

¹³ Jellicoe, Service Record, NA, ADM 196/38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ In 1886, Jellicoe was awarded the Board of Trade medal for gallantry for rescuing the crew of a stricken ship off Gibraltar. *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jellicoe was also seriously wounded in the chest leading a charge against the Boxer occupied village of Peitsang on the bank of the Pei Ho River.

¹⁷ Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon, *From 1900 Onward*, (London, 1940), 334.

This is strong praise indeed, even if the source of the remarks cannot be considered to be entirely objective.¹⁸

Yet, for all this perceived success and the gift of the ability to command, Jellicoe's reputation, particularly as it relates to his war time commands, is not unblemished and was, and remains, the subject of much criticism, both from his contemporaries and later commentators. Indeed, one historian has gone as far as to suggest that 'there is almost an element of Greek Tragedy in the career of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Jellicoe.'¹⁹ Certainly, one element of the Aristotelian concept of tragedy exists in that Jellicoe, being one who was in a position of high power, suffered a severe reversal of fortune by being dismissed. Whether the other essential feature of that concept, i.e., that the cause of the misfortune resulted from the hero's own action or inaction rather than some external factor, is debatable. It will be argued in this dissertation that the misfortune was not of Jellicoe's making.

The criticism of Jellicoe relates principally to three aspects of his war time commands; his defensive approach to strategy whilst in command of the Grand Fleet; the tactics adopted during the Battle of Jutland; and his performance as First Sea Lord during 1917. Whilst the first two of these aspects may have coloured the views of certain sections of the press and Jellicoe's political masters as to his competence, it is his time at the Admiralty in 1917 that is primarily of relevance in the context of his dismissal. The received view amongst historians is that Jellicoe was not successful as First Sea Lord. Richard Hough, in *The Great War at Sea*, states, 'The choice of Jellicoe was not a successful one and before long the Prime Minister recognized he

¹⁸ Bacon was a life long friend and associate of Jellicoe and as discussed further in the Literature Review that follows, his biography and other writings on Jellicoe are biased in Jellicoe's favour.

¹⁹ A Temple Patterson (ed.), *The Jellicoe Papers* (London 1966), 1, 1.

had made a mistake.²⁰ N. A. M. Roger, in his book entitled *The Admiralty*, concludes that 'Jellicoe's prestige made the choice [as First Sea Lord] inevitable, but it must be doubted if it was wise.'²¹ Arthur Marder thought that Jellicoe had been 'less successful as First Sea Lord than as C.-in-C. Grand Fleet'.²²

However, these historians appear to have taken the criticism of a number of political commentators such as Lloyd George and Winston Churchill at face value and, in coming to their conclusion, they have neglected to analyse the positive features of the work of the Admiralty under Jellicoe in the context of whether or not such criticism or the dismissal was justified. To ascertain whether the dismissal was justified, this dissertation seeks to undertake this analysis.

Basis of Argument and Structure

The arguments here focus on six separate premises. The first is that Jellicoe's effectiveness as First Sea Lord should be measured, not in isolation, but in the context of the state of affairs and problems that were prevalent at the Admiralty at the time of his appointment. Therefore, Chapter II firstly discusses this legacy, particularly in terms of organisation and weaponry then available to counter the German U-boat threat. Secondly, it considers the organisational, strategic and technological initiatives undertaken by Jellicoe. Thirdly, Chapter II seeks to put the foregoing in perspective by considering briefly the change in German naval strategy in its

²⁰ Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea* (Oxford, 1983), 305. Strictly, Hough's comment is inaccurate in that Jellicoe had been appointed by Asquith as Prime Minister before Lloyd George assumed that office.

²¹ N A M Rodger, *The Admiralty*, (Lavenham, 1979), 133.

²² Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 346.

reversion in February 1917 to a wholly unrestricted submarine campaign against British, Allied and neutral merchant shipping.

However, it is the perceived delay in introducing a general system of convoying merchant ships as a counter to the U-boat threat that has generated the most severe criticism of the Admiralty under Jellicoe's command. Lloyd George, referring to this delay, wrote, 'they [the High Admirals] acted as men who ... proceed with excessive caution and with an ill-concealed expectation that their forebodings will be justified by the experience.'²³ Marder was also of the view that 'he [Jellicoe] had been dangerously slow to appreciate the value of a general convoy system.'²⁴ Even the historian Nicholas Black, who holds a more positive view on the work of the Admiralty under Jellicoe than do most commentators, remarked in his recent book, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*, 'the one major blot was the tardiness with which he [Jellicoe] and his staff eventually grasped the potential of the convoy.'²⁵ The second premise is that such severe criticism was unwarranted. Chapter III therefore considers the Admiralty's initial policy towards the convoy system and analyses the circumstances surrounding its introduction. This chapter also challenges the controversial claim that the introduction of the convoy system was forced on Jellicoe by his political masters rather than as a result of the Admiralty's own initiative.

As will be seen, one hypothesis is that the perceived delay in introducing the convoy system was a contributory cause of Jellicoe's departure from the Admiralty. However, it is notable that a period of more than six months elapsed between the introduction of the general convoy system and his dismissal. Moreover, Lloyd George claimed in his *War Memoirs* that he had decided in June 1917 to replace

²³ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, (London, 1934), III, 1164.

²⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 346.

²⁵ Nicholas Black, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*, (Woodbridge, 2009), 213.

Jellicoe as First Sea Lord.²⁶ This begs the question as to why Jellicoe was not dismissed until 24 December 1917, particularly as by that time the German submarine threat had been contained, if not eliminated entirely. There were, however, a number of incidents that occurred through the latter part of 1917 which Jellicoe himself referred to in his biographical notes and which had resulted in some difference of opinion between himself and Geddes. Thus, the third premise on which the central argument is based is that none of these incidents, either in isolation or together, provided sufficient grounds to relieve Jellicoe of his position. Chapter IV discusses and analyses these incidents in detail.

The fourth premise is that Lloyd George, in his efforts to remove Jellicoe from office without being seen to be responsible for such unwarranted action, sought firstly, to involve General Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France, in the matter and then conspired with the press baron, Lord Northcliffe, in conducting a vitriolic press campaign against both the Admiralty and Jellicoe personally. With regard to the former, Chapter V considers the events surrounding the appointment of Geddes, firstly as Controller of the Navy and then First Lord of the Admiralty. It also considers the relationships between the three personalities principally involved, namely Lloyd George, Geddes and Haig and seeks to establish the rationale for Haig's involvement. As to the latter, Chapter V examines the relationship between Lloyd George and Northcliffe and the nature and content of the press campaign itself. The extent to which these 'conspirators' may have been personally motivated as distinct from acting in the public interest is also discussed in this chapter.

²⁶ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1176.

The fifth premise is that the manner of the dismissal itself and the somewhat bizarre events surrounding it necessarily gives rise to the supposition that neither Lloyd George nor Geddes could offer rational grounds to the War Cabinet or to the Board of the Admiralty for replacing Jellicoe. Chapter VI of the dissertation therefore considers the actual dismissal and the events surrounding it. The starting point for this chapter is an article by the naval historian, Stephen Roskill, which sets out at length the correspondence concerning the dismissal that passed, *inter alia*, between Geddes and Jellicoe, between Geddes and the naval members of the Admiralty Board and between Geddes and Sir Edward Carson, Geddes' immediate predecessor as First Lord.²⁷ However, this article is primarily a narrative account and does not analyse the correspondence in the context of certain extraneous events, notably Geddes' desire to leave the Admiralty and the failure of Lloyd George or Geddes to consult the War Cabinet over the dismissal. Further, Roskill leaves the reader of his article to make his own judgement on the manner of the dismissal and on the extent to which Geddes relied on false representations made to the Board of the Admiralty. Thus, Chapter VI also amplifies Roskill's account and gives opinions on the matters on which readers are left to make their own judgement.

Jellicoe's dismissal might have been justified if matters had improved significantly under the tenure of Jellicoe's immediate successor as First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss. That matters did improve is certainly the view held by a number of historians. Again, however, in coming to this conclusion, those who hold this view appear to have relied on the testimony of those directly involved in the matter, notably Lloyd George, Geddes and Wemyss. The sixth premise is that this opinion is not correct. In support of this, Chapter VII considers firstly, Wemyss'

²⁷ Stephen Roskill, 'The Dismissal of Admiral Jellicoe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1, 4, (1966).

credentials for undertaking the role of First Sea Lord, secondly whether or not under Wemyss there was any change to a more aggressive strategy that would have appeased the Admiralty's political masters and thirdly, whether or not operational blunders or missed opportunities reduced under Wemyss' command. This chapter also considers certain aspects of the attempt to blockade the German occupied harbours of Ostend and Zeebrugge in April 1918 on the basis that this raid was the one naval operation in the war that received wide public and press acclamation, thus giving the perception that the Admiralty under Wemyss was more offensively minded than under Jellicoe.

Chapter VIII offers final thoughts on the dismissal in the context of Jellicoe's health, his career after his dismissal and draws conclusions from the arguments made.

Literature Review

There is an abundance of literature on the naval history of the First World War. Within that, much has been written about Admiral Jellicoe. Most of that literature relates to Jellicoe's role as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet and much of that comprises analyses of different facets of the Battle of Jutland. As one historian has said, 'Had another fleet encounter taken place ... it is unlikely that anyone would care much who won Jutland.'²⁸

Less has been written about the year on which this dissertation is centred, namely 1917, and much of that has been focused on the controversy surrounding the introduction of the convoy system. Moreover, as mentioned, most naval historians

²⁸ Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game, Jutland and the Naval Command*, (London, 2005), 562.

writing on this have concluded that Jellicoe's tenure as First Sea Lord was not successful.

It is convenient for the purposes of this review to divide the principal literature sources considered into three categories; firstly, literature published by naval historians; secondly, biographies of those involved in the events pertaining to Jellicoe's dismissal; and thirdly, the memoirs, again of politicians or naval personnel with knowledge of the events pertaining to the dismissal.

In the first category, the starting point must be *The Official History of the Great War, Naval Operations*, published in five volumes between 1920 and 1931.²⁹ The first three volumes were written by the naval strategist and historian, Sir Julian Corbett. The last two were completed after Corbett's death by the poet and author, Sir Henry Newbolt. The historian, Arthur Marder, described this work as being 'detailed and authentic' and with 'restrained judgments' and it is certainly a valuable source for the narrative of events, statistics and charts.³⁰ However, for two reasons, the commentary has to be treated with some caution. Firstly, when the monograph was written, some information was withheld on grounds of secrecy. Secondly, in the words of one reviewer, 'Perhaps the weakest characteristic of *The Official History* is the evident effort on the part of its authors to refrain from all criticism of British leaders.'³¹ In this context it is evident from Jellicoe's papers that Newbolt's original draft of the chapter relating to the introduction of the convoy system, following the start of the German unrestricted submarine campaign, underwent a number of changes

²⁹ Sir Henry Newbolt, *The Official History of the War, Naval Operations*, IV, V, (London, 1928-31).

³⁰ Arthur Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 362.

³¹ Edward Beck, review of *The Official History of the Great War, Naval Operations*, *American Historical Review*, 34, July 1929, 836.

at the behest of Jellicoe before it was finally published.³² Thus, Marder's comment that the *Official History* is 'restrained' is an understatement.

Less caution need be exercised with regard to Marder's own major work, entitled *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow*.³³ Published in five volumes between 1961 and 1970, it is thoroughly researched, with Marder having access to many of the documents not available when the *Official History* was written. Despite the fact that the last volume was published over forty years ago, it remains the seminal work on British naval history for the period 1914-1919. It covers in detail all aspects of the war at sea from a British perspective, and of particular relevance here, contains a detailed analysis of the German unrestricted submarine campaign of 1917 and the Admiralty's efforts to counter it. In the words of the war historian, John Keegan, 'Marder had achieved standards of archival research and organisation of material which defy betterment.'³⁴

Nevertheless, although Marder's opinions are generally well balanced, they are not incontestable. As pointed out by the naval historian Andrew Lambert, aspects of Marder's work have recently been challenged, notably, in the context of this dissertation, by Nicholas Black in his recent work, *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*.³⁵ Black argues that Marder was inclined to adopt the opinions of several reform-minded officers, particularly Herbert Richmond and Kenneth Dewar, both of whom served in the Admiralty during the war, in reaching a number of conclusions regarding the competence of naval staff at the Admiralty, particularly in the Jellicoe era. Certainly in this context Marder has undoubtedly been swayed by Richmond on account of having written his biography, *Portrait of an Admiral*, before writing *From*

³² Jellicoe, *Errors in Naval Operations*, BL, Add. MSS 49043.

³³ Marder, *FDSF*.

³⁴ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (London, 1978), 27.

³⁵ Andrew Lambert, review of *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*, *English Historical Review*, cxxxv, (February 2010), 229.

the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow.³⁶ Moreover, Marder's occasional trait of relying on third party opinions without supporting analysis is exemplified in Chapter VII below by his support for the view expressed by Lloyd George and Wemyss that the Admiralty was more efficient under Wemyss than it was under Jellicoe. However, Lambert's implication that Marder's work contained 'damaging assumptions and intentions of previous generations' which could only be freed through 'analysis, based on large-scale, sustained research' is unduly harsh.³⁷ Much of the narrative within *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* is the result of sustained and detailed research. Marder's work remains a most valuable source for any scholar of the naval history of the war and has been a principal source of statistics used in this dissertation.

Two other useful sources for statistics are *The German Submarine War, 1914 - 1918*, by R H Gibson and Maurice Prendergast, first published in 1931, and *Seaborne Trade, History of the Great War based on Official Documents* by Ernest Fayle, published in three volumes from 1920 to 1924.³⁸ The former is a narrative account of the German submarine war and, *inter alia*, provides detailed accounts of individual submarine actions. The language used is occasionally flamboyant and, although not expressing any opinion on Jellicoe's dismissal, the book is favourably biased towards him and the work undertaken by the Admiralty in ultimately defeating the U-boat. The book is also useful in that Gibson and Prendergast have made extensive use of German source material in their research. The latter work is in essence the official account of Merchant Navy operations during the war and the same qualifications regarding secrecy apply to that work as they do to the *Official History*.

³⁶ Arthur Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, (London, 1952).

³⁷ Lambert, review of *British Naval Staff*, 230.

³⁸ R H Gibson and Maurice Prendergast, *The German Submarine War 1914-1918*, (Penzance, 2002); Ernest Fayle, *Seaborne Trade, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents*, (London, 1920-1924).

Of the other monographs on naval aspects of the war that have been considered, *Castles of Steel*, written by Robert Massie and published in 2005 is stylishly written (as befits a Pulitzer Prize winner) and well researched, although Massie relies primarily on secondary source material and consequently the work does not have the same value to the researcher in pointing to the primary sources as the other monographs mentioned here.³⁹ Massie's chapter dealing with the German submarine campaign is relatively short and focuses mainly on the activities of the 'Q' Boats and on the relationship between the Navy and the US Navy operating around Britain after the US entered the war. He does relate Lloyd George's criticism of the Admiralty in relation to the introduction of the convoy, but expresses no firm view as to whether it was warranted. Nor does he comment on whether Jellicoe's dismissal was justified. Where this book is perceptive, however, is in the way in which Massie interweaves the personalities of the politicians primarily associated with the conduct of the war with his narrative account of naval operations.

Two other monographs on the naval war that have been referred to extensively are Paul Halpern's *A Naval History of World War I*, first published in 1994, and John Terraine's *Business in Great Waters*, first published in 1989.⁴⁰ Both of these are conventional narratives, Terraine's being specifically directed to the German submarine campaigns of both world wars. Again, neither of these books offers any firm view of the reasons for Jellicoe's dismissal or whether or not it was justified, although Halpern does suggest that the surface attack on two Scandinavian convoys in the latter part of 1917, discussed further in Chapter IV below, may have been a contributory factor. Halpern also presents Jellicoe's dismissal as Geddes having

³⁹ Robert Massie, *Castles of Steel, Britain and Germany and the Winning of the Great War at Sea*, (London, 2004).

⁴⁰ Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I*, (London, 1994); John Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, (Ware, 1999).

‘asked for and received Jellicoe’s resignation as First Sea Lord’ which, in light of the correspondence quoted at the beginning of this chapter, seems to be a particularly benign interpretation of the event.⁴¹ Moreover, both these authors adopt the received view that the Admiralty procrastinated in adopting the convoy system.

The most recent secondary source that warrants some comment here is *The British Naval Staff in the First World War* by Nicholas Black.⁴² First published in 2009, the book provides a detailed analytical history of the work of the Admiralty throughout the war, based on extensive research and analysis of relevant Admiralty papers. His assessment challenges the view of the earlier writers that the Admiralty under Jellicoe was ineffective, commenting in some depth on the reorganisation and growth of the naval staff under Jellicoe and the weapons development and intelligence work undertaken in the efforts to defeat the U-boat. Black concludes that the ultimate defeat of the U-boat in 1918 was a direct result of the building blocks put in place by Jellicoe and his staff in 1917. However, as is discussed further in Chapter III below, his statement to the effect that Jellicoe’s only failure was in delaying the introduction of the convoy system seems inconsistent with his detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding this issue.

Turning to the second category of literature that falls for discussion here, namely biographies of people involved in or with close knowledge of the work of the Admiralty during 1917 and the controversy surrounding the dismissal, the obvious starting point is the existing biographies of Jellicoe. Perhaps surprisingly given the importance of his role in the war, just three full biographies of Jellicoe have been

⁴¹ Halpern, *Naval History*, 403.

⁴² Black, *British Naval Staff*.

written and only one of these by an academic historian.⁴³ This is in contrast to the numerous biographies that have been written about Jellicoe's military counterpart, General Haig, but perhaps this imbalance is a reflection of the fact that over 700,000 British soldiers' lives were lost, whereas the total number of Royal Navy personnel killed amounted to some 34,000.

The first full biography of Jellicoe was written by Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon.⁴⁴ Published in 1936, it is unequivocally biased in Jellicoe's favour. As noted, Bacon was a lifelong friend of Jellicoe. He was recognised by his peers as being highly intelligent and, like Jellicoe, swam in the 'fishpond'. For most of the war, he was in command of the Dover Patrol, responsible for securing the English Channel and protecting the shipping traffic supporting the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front. According to Marder, it was Jellicoe's sense of loyalty in not relieving Bacon of his command at the end of 1917 that was the catalyst that prompted Jellicoe's dismissal. This biography was written shortly after the publication of Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* and is generally defensive of Jellicoe. In the words of one of Jellicoe's later biographers, Bacon 'was too close to him [Jellicoe] and in the major case too warmly partisan and too deeply immersed in the controversies to which his war time activities give rise for an objective presentation to be possible'.⁴⁵ Yet despite that, Bacon's biography is of considerable value, not only because he was close to and involved in many events as they occurred, but also because he was personally close to Jellicoe. Consequently his biography gives more insight to Jellicoe's *persona* than the other biographies discussed here.

⁴³ There is also a short biography written in 1938 by Captain E. Altham, published as part of a series of vignettes on people honoured with the Order of Merit, and as such was written more as a tribute than on objective biography.

⁴⁴ Bacon, *Jellicoe*.

⁴⁵ Patterson, *Jellicoe*, 11.

However, Bacon is highly critical of Lloyd George's decision to remove Jellicoe from the Admiralty. He concludes his chapter on 'Leaving the Admiralty' by remarking that 'then, having achieved this task [of countering the U-boat threat], one which Sir John himself, at first, deemed to be almost impossible, he was thrown, without ceremony, courtesy or excuse, on to the scrap-heap'.⁴⁶ With such strongly held views, Bacon's opinion of the dismissal must be considered with some circumspection.

Far less circumspection is required with regard to the second full biography of Jellicoe's life. First published in 1969 and written by A Temple Patterson, at the time Professor of History at Southampton University, it is much more of an academic and reliable source, if for no other reason than it followed his publication, through the Naval Records Society, of an edited selection of Jellicoe's private and official papers.⁴⁷ Again, with specific regard to the dismissal, Patterson's account of the events is primarily narrative and he does not attempt to analyse the question of whether or not it was justified. He does, however, support the view that originated in the *Official History* that the strain of office was proving too much for Jellicoe and 'could not be further prolonged with justice to him or advantage to the Service'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Patterson's account of the Admiralty's efforts to counter the U-boat campaign through the course of 1917 is primarily narrative. However, it is notable that Patterson attributes one of the causes of the Admiralty's reluctance to introduce the convoy system to the Admiralty's reliance on misleading merchant ship movement statistics, a view that is challenged in Chapter III below.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 388.

⁴⁷ Patterson, *Jellicoe*.

⁴⁸ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 203.

⁴⁹ Patterson, *Jellicoe*, 172.

The latest biography of Jellicoe was written by John Winton in 1981.⁵⁰ Winton is more renowned as a novelist than an historian and, although his work appears to be well researched, it again tends to be more descriptive than analytical.⁵¹ Further, Winton makes a number of controversial statements which do not withstand analysis. For example, whilst extolling Jellicoe's success in the large scale fleet exercises of 1913, he states that Jellicoe was 'at the peak of his mental, professional and physical fitness and had never been so sharp, so quick and accurate of decision' and from this premise draws the conclusion that 'if the Battle of Jutland had been fought in July 1913, it might have been the comprehensive victory that the nation had yearned for.'⁵² Given the difference in circumstances between an amphibious exercise and meeting the whole of the High Seas Fleet in battle, the fact that Jellicoe had acquired two years of wartime command in the meantime and the fact that there is no evidence at all to suggest any decline in Jellicoe's mental or physical powers at the time of the Battle of Jutland, Winton's conclusion can best be described as speculative. Winton, like Patterson, also argues that 'the Admiralty had made an ass of itself' over the matter of the merchant shipping movement statistics.⁵³ Moreover, his view on Jellicoe's dismissal that 'probably no single person, neither Geddes, nor Lloyd George, nor the continued press campaign of Lord Northcliffe, was responsible for what was to happen', is an opinion which is at odds with the evidence contained in the following chapters.⁵⁴ Thus, for different reasons, Winton's opinions should be treated with as much circumspection as are Bacon's.

As will be noted from the attached bibliography, biographies of a number of people referred to in this dissertation other than Jellicoe have been considered, but

⁵⁰ John Winton, *Jellicoe*, (London 1981).

⁵¹ His novels include *HMS Leviathan* and *The Fighting Temeraire*.

⁵² Winton, *Jellicoe*, 133.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 244.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 259.

there is space here only to comment on these that pertain to four people central to the arguments presented here, namely Sir Eric Geddes, Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, Sir Edward Carson and Lord Northcliffe. *The Forging of a Family*, written by Geddes' brother, Sir Auckland Geddes, is in essence a biography of the Geddes family with a substantial part of it devoted to the life and work of Sir Eric.⁵⁵ It undoubtedly reveals an element of 'brotherly bias' in its praise of Sir Eric's character and achievements. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter VI below, it also contains factual inaccuracies regarding events which occurred immediately before Jellicoe's dismissal. Despite this, however, the chapter describing Geddes' time at the Admiralty does provide an interesting perspective as to his state of mind at the time of his appointment and his time in office. It also gives Geddes' perspective on the dismissal itself and on the debacle with the other Sea Lords and Carson that occurred after the event. Notably, the biography confirms that Geddes was cognisant of the fact that Lloyd George was seeking to use Geddes as the mechanism for dispensing with Jellicoe's services, without responsibility attaching to him.⁵⁶ This supports the argument that Lloyd George engineered the dismissal, despite his protestations to the contrary.

Similarly, *The Life and Letters of Lord Wester Wemyss* provides an interesting perspective on Wemyss' time at the Admiralty and has also proved to be a useful source for some of his correspondence which could not be accessed directly.⁵⁷ However, this biography was written by his wife and in a similar vein to Sir Auckland Geddes' biography of his brother, Lady Wemyss was undoubtedly intent on commending her husband's achievements, remarking that on his appointment as First

⁵⁵ Sir Auckland Geddes, *The Forging of a Family*, (London, 1952).

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 242.

⁵⁷ Lady Wester Wemyss, *The Life and Letters of Lord Wester Wemyss, GCB*, (London, 1955). The Churchill Archives hold some papers of Lord Wemyss, but it appears that the bulk of these are held privately in France, with copies held by the University of California. Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 356.

Sea Lord, Wemyss ‘was to succeed where others had failed’.⁵⁸ Consequently, some caution has to be exercised in accepting her comments at face value. It is, however, a caution that does not appear to have been exercised by a number of historians who, contrary to the arguments contained in Chapter VII below, have adopted the view that the Admiralty was more effective under Wemyss than it was under Jellicoe.

Written independently of familial association, the biography of Sir Edward Carson by Montgomery Hyde is more objective.⁵⁹ Again, because Carson was First Lord for just six months and his political achievements are more associated with the affairs of Ireland than with the Navy, the parts of the biography that deal with his time at the Admiralty are relatively short. Nevertheless, the biography is illuminating in two respects. Firstly, it confirms that from the beginning of 1917, Carson was under considerable pressure from Lloyd George to make changes at the Admiralty, despite the fact that Jellicoe had only just been appointed First Sea Lord and had just set about its reorganisation. According to Carson, ‘Sack the lot!’ and ‘why do you not get fresh men with sea experience?’ were expressions frequently used by Lloyd George, despite the fact that Carson presented lists of service personnel proving to Lloyd George that many of the personnel Jellicoe brought to the Admiralty had recent service afloat.⁶⁰ Secondly, it confirms that Carson, despite his disapproval of Jellicoe’s dismissal, acted in the interests of the country in mollifying the Sea Lords who had threatened to resign over the matter, thus avoiding a constitutional crisis.

As is argued in Chapter V below, the press baron, Lord Northcliffe, also had a role in the dismissal of Jellicoe. Two biographical works, both by J. Lee Thompson, have been the principal secondary sources considered in this respect, namely

⁵⁸ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 368.

⁵⁹ H Montgomery Hyde, *Carson*, (London, 1953).

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 420.

Northcliffe, Press Baron in Politics 1865-1922, published in 2000 and *Politics, the Press and Propaganda, Northcliffe and the Great War*, published in 1999.⁶¹ The former is a general account of Northcliffe's life and work, whilst the latter is primarily concerned with his wartime activities. Both are objectively written and provide a useful insight to the power Northcliffe wielded, particularly through his ownership of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, and to his personal relationship with Lloyd George. There is, however, surprisingly little discussion in either of the biographies about the press campaign against the Admiralty. Nor is any clear motivation ascribed to Northcliffe for the concerted press attacks on Jellicoe other than a brief comment about Northcliffe's concern for 'the unrelenting losses to the submarines and the resulting food crisis' which 'finally moved him to unleash his newspapers on the Admiralty'.⁶² Also, no specific mention is made of the conspiracy to remove Jellicoe from office that is discussed in Chapter V. However, Thompson does claim that in October 1917, Northcliffe 'complained personally to Lloyd George and Carson that the Sea Lord [Jellicoe] should be removed', which supports Jellicoe's contention that Northcliffe was involved in the matter.⁶³

As to the third category of literature considered here, that is memoirs or other work written by those involved in or with close knowledge of the relevant events, the starting point is again Jellicoe himself. He did not publish an autobiography, but authored three books about his war time activities.⁶⁴ The first, entitled *The Grand Fleet, 1914-1916* and published in January 1919, was clearly written in the time he

⁶¹ J Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe, Press Baron in Politics, 1865-1922*, (London, 2000); J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, the Press and Propaganda, Northcliffe and the Great War, 1914-1918*, (Ohio, 1999).

⁶² Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 273.

⁶³ Thompson, *Politicians*, 175.

⁶⁴ Jellicoe, however, did leave extensive unpublished autobiographical notes which are with his papers in the British Library.

had immediately after his dismissal.⁶⁵ Whilst in the words of one commentator, ‘It is no literary masterpiece,’ it fulfils Jellicoe’s stated intent of ‘giving an account of the organisation and the development of the Grand Fleet and its bases ... after the hoisting of my flag on the outbreak of hostilities, and the manner in which the changing conditions of naval warfare were met’.⁶⁶ As such, the work provides useful background and insight into Jellicoe’s approach to command. The second and third books written by Jellicoe are more directly relevant in this context. The first, published in 1920, is entitled *The Crisis of the Naval War*, and in Jellicoe’s own words ‘is largely concerned with the successive steps taken at the Admiralty to deal with a situation [the U-boat threat], which was always serious and at times assumed a very grave aspect’.⁶⁷ Again some element of caution has to be exercised in relying on this as a source, as Jellicoe later acknowledged in his third book, *The Submarine Peril*, published in 1934, his earlier work was deficient in that ‘it was not then desirable to give full details of our methods.’⁶⁸ However, it is probably not just this that initiated the second work on the same subject. Rather, although Lloyd George’s name is only fleetingly mentioned, there is little doubt that from the timing of the book’s publication and the reference in its Introduction to ‘many misstatements on the subject’ having been published, it is written in response to the numerous criticisms in Lloyd George’s *War Memoirs*, particularly on the perceived delay in introducing the convoy system.⁶⁹ Given the extent of the criticism directed at the Admiralty both during the war by the Northcliffe press and subsequently, it is not surprising that Jellicoe, on occasion, is defensive of his position. Nevertheless, irrespective of the

⁶⁵ Admiral Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa, *The Grand Fleet 1914-1916*, (London, 1919).

⁶⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 383; Jellicoe, *Grand Fleet*, vii.

⁶⁷ Admiral Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa, *The Crisis of the Naval War*, (London, 1920), viii.

⁶⁸ Admiral of the Fleet, The Earl Jellicoe, *The Submarine Peril*, (London, 1934), v.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

foregoing reservations, both works must be considered to be authoritative sources on the Admiralty's efforts to defeat the U-boat campaign.

Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* is a further work which warrants comment here.⁷⁰ The political theorist, Harold Laski, observed that political memoirs generally 'focused on the personalities and roles of the elite, whose principal interest in writing is to vindicate their political behaviour'.⁷¹ Lloyd George's *War Memoirs* certainly exemplifies that observation. Published in six volumes between 1931 and 1936, it is an epic account of the war that is as enigmatic as its author. On the one hand, it was written on the basis of painstaking research of Cabinet and other relevant papers and diaries and with the support of the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey. On the other hand, in parts it is written with a belligerence that goes beyond all reason. It has been said that Lloyd George's version of the war, particularly the chapters on the Passchendaele Battle, did as much as any single source to 'stigmatize indelibly in popular memory the role of the military elite in the war'.⁷² The same may be said of the effect of his criticism of the naval elite, and in particular those, including Jellicoe, who served at the Admiralty during 1917. Hankey's own work, *The Supreme Command*, provides a more objective assessment of the events surrounding the controversy over the introduction of the convoy system, although it is notable that he also claims that it was his memorandum on the benefits of the convoy system, written in February 1917, that was the catalyst for the Admiralty's conversion to this approach to countering the submarine threat.⁷³ Finally in this category, two other works are worthy of note. Bacon's *The Dover Patrol 1915-1917*, published in two volumes in 1919, provides an interesting perspective on two matters discussed in

⁷⁰ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*.

⁷¹ Quoted, George Egerton, 'Lloyd George War Memoirs: A Study in the Politics of Memory', *Journal of Modern History*, 60,1, (March, 1988), 89.

⁷² *Ibid*, 90.

⁷³ Sir Maurice Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, (London, 1961).

Chapters VI and VII below, namely the controversy that arose in December 1917 over the mine barrages across the English Channel and the attempt to block the Zeebrugge and Ostend harbours in April 1918.⁷⁴ Bacon is critical both of the work of the Barrage Committee, which was established at the Admiralty to review the barrage's effectiveness, and of certain aspects of the plans to attack the Zeebrugge and Ostend harbours. Clearly, as it was his resistance to the Barrage Committee's proposals which resulted in his being relieved of command of the Dover Patrol, his opinion is likely to be biased. Nevertheless, his explanation of the technical and operational issues involved on both matters is illuminating. The other side of the picture is provided in *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Roger Keyes*.⁷⁵ Keyes chaired the Barrage Committee, succeeded Bacon in command of the Dover Patrol and commanded the attack on Zeebrugge and Ostend. It is, therefore, not surprising that he offers a more positive perspective on these events than Bacon. If nothing else, whilst works in this category are valuable sources, such opposing views highlight the degree of caution that the historian should adopt in their use.

Summary

Jellicoe at the peak of his career, arguably holding the most important service role in the war, was peremptorily dismissed without rational explanation, despite having largely fulfilled his mission of countering the German submarine threat. If that threat had been sustained, it would have seriously threatened Britain's ability to continue the war.

⁷⁴ Sir Reginald Bacon, *The Dover Patrol*, (London, 1919).

⁷⁵ Sir Roger Keyes, *The Naval Memoirs of Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Roger Keyes, Scapa Flow to the Dover Straits*, (London, 1935).

However, the accepted view is that Jellicoe was not was not a success as First Sea Lord. The central argument in this dissertation is that this view is misconceived and that Jellicoe's dismissal was unjustified. It will establish this firstly by exploring the strategies and weaponry developed on the Admiralty's initiatives during the course of 1917 in the context of the legacy Jellicoe inherited. Secondly, it will be argued that the universal criticism made over the perceived delay in introducing the convoy system as a means of defeating the U-boat was unwarranted. Thirdly, it will be argued that although there were differences of opinion between Geddes and Jellicoe, particularly during the later months of 1917, these differences were insufficient to warrant the dismissal. Fourthly, the dissertation will explore the way in which Lloyd George, with his capacity for intrigue, conspired with General Haig and then Lord Northcliffe in his efforts to remove Jellicoe from office, thus suggesting that that he had no reasonable cause for so doing. Fifthly, it will be argued that the bizarre circumstances of the dismissal and its aftermath give credence to the argument that the dismissal was unwarranted. Finally, it will be argued that the Admiralty's performance under Jellicoe's successor was no better than it had been under Jellicoe, thereby countering the statements to the contrary of Lloyd George, Geddes and Wemyss that matters were much improved.

In other words therefore, the arguments in this dissertation seek to remove the 'stigmatisation' that attached to the naval elite as a consequence of Lloyd George's version of the Admiralty's activities through 1917.

Chapter II

A Difficult Inheritance

Introduction

Admiral Sir John Jellicoe's transfer to the Admiralty at the beginning of December 1916, after two and a quarter years in command of the Grand Fleet, was undertaken with reluctance. Jellicoe accepted the offer from Arthur Balfour, then First Lord of the Admiralty, on the basis that he was 'prepared to do what was considered best for the Service'.¹ However, his appointment as First Sea Lord was largely of his own making. On 29 October 1916, a month prior to his appointment, he had written to Balfour and Sir Henry Jackson, Jellicoe's predecessor, stating:

The very serious and ever-increasing menace of the enemy's submarine attack on trade is by far the most pressing question at the present time.

2. There appears to be a serious danger that our losses in merchant ships, combined with the losses in neutral ships may, by the early summer of 1917, have such a serious effect upon the import of food and other necessities into the allied countries as to force us into accepting peace terms, which the military position on the Continent would not justify and which would fall short of our desires.

¹ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 6.

3. The methods which have been used in the past for attacking submarines are not now meeting with the success which has hitherto attended them.²

As Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, Jellicoe had no direct responsibility for the development of anti-submarine measures, but in writing to his superiors in such terms his consternation about the potential impact of the German submarine threat on the outcome of the war and the lack of development of effective anti-submarine weaponry is evident.

Such was his concern that on the following day, he again wrote to Jackson suggesting that to achieve the ‘very rapid action on any idea that seems to give promise of success’ an ‘all-powerful committee’ be established to ‘work with the idea,’ the committee to include ‘younger officers who were prolific in ideas’.³ Balfour did not follow this recommendation. Instead, he asked Jackson to resign and appointed Jellicoe as First Sea Lord in his place.

It was virtually Balfour’s last act as First Lord and arguably his most successful during his time at the Admiralty. Within three weeks of Jellicoe’s appointment, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, had resigned and a new Coalition Government formed under David Lloyd George. Balfour had been replaced by Sir Edward Carson, the Ulster Unionist MP who, by his own admission, knew little of naval matters. On his first day at the Admiralty, Carson announced, ‘I am here, gentlemen, because I know nothing at all about the job. My only great qualification for being put at the head of the Navy is that I am very much at sea.’⁴ As it transpired, Carson and Jellicoe worked well together for the brief period that Carson remained at the Admiralty. However, as will become evident later in this dissertation, the same cannot be said for Jellicoe’s relationship with Lloyd George.

² Memorandum, Jellicoe to Balfour, 29 October 1916, BL, Add. MSS 48992.

³ Memorandum, Jellicoe to Jackson, 30 October 1916, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 92.

⁴ Quoted, Ian Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson*, (London, 1936), 217.

Nevertheless, initially the change of political masters was the least of Jellicoe's difficulties in dealing with the U-boat threat. In the context of whether his dismissal was justified or indeed of the subsequent criticism to which he was subjected, it is appropriate to consider the state of affairs that existed at the time he assumed the role of First Sea Lord and the steps he initiated to address the problems encountered. Thus, this chapter will consider firstly, the Admiralty organisation in place at the beginning of 1917 and the steps Jellicoe took to change this. Secondly, to put the problems Jellicoe faced in context, it will consider the status and effectiveness of the U-boat campaign against merchant shipping up to that date and the changes made by the German naval hierarchy to its naval strategy. Thirdly, it will consider the strategic options open to Jellicoe and, in that context, the weaponry at his disposal.

The Legacy

Historians have not regarded kindly the Admiralty regime of Arthur Balfour as First Lord and Sir Henry Jackson as First Sea Lord (which ran from May 1915 to November 1916). The sometimes acerbic Andrew Gordon described Jackson as 'lacklustre' and the regime as 'comatose'.⁵ Lloyd George did not think that Balfour was the person 'to stimulate and activate the Navy in a time of crisis'.⁶ Marder was of the view that Jackson lacked leadership capabilities, imagination and energy and that the job proved 'too much for his talents and his temperament'.⁷ These views are harsh given the problems that the Admiralty faced during that period, notably the aftermath of the disaster of the Gallipoli campaign that brought about Winston

⁵ Gordon, *Rules of the Game*, 519.

⁶ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 2, 298.

⁷ *Ibid*, 299, 300.

Churchill's departure as First Lord, the resignation of Admiral Fisher as First Sea Lord and the aftermath of the Battle of Jutland. As Nicholas Black has stated, 'Jackson was not the buffoon that later accounts have made him out to be.'⁸

However, what is certainly clear is that under the auspices of Balfour, Jackson and their immediate predecessors, the Admiralty did little towards combating the looming U-boat threat. As Jellicoe wrote to his successor in command of the Grand Fleet, Admiral Sir David Beatty, shortly after his appointment, 'Everything has been left on the wait and see principle. The late Government is much to blame.'⁹

In mitigation of this failure, merchant shipping losses from U-boat attack had not seriously threatened the Allied war effort until the latter part of 1916. Such losses (to British Empire shipping) had remained fairly constant at an average of approximately 300,000 gross tons per quarter from the beginning of the war. It was not until the final quarter of 1916 that these losses began to escalate seriously.¹⁰ On the other hand, the U-boat had played a major part in determining Britain's overall naval strategy throughout the first two years of the war. It had dictated that the sea blockade against German merchant trade be carried out at a distance rather than close to shore. It had dictated the policy that other than in exceptional circumstances, the Grand Fleet curtail its operations in the North Sea to an area above latitude 55 degrees 30 minutes north. It had also dictated the Grand Fleet's battle tactics. Early in the war, Jellicoe, as Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, had written to the Admiralty stating that:

If ... the enemy battlefleet were to turn away from an advancing Fleet, I should assume that the intention was to lead us over mines and submarines, and should decline to be so drawn.

⁸ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 169.

⁹ Letter, Jellicoe to Beatty, 25 January 1917, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 140.

¹⁰ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 113.

I desire particularly to draw the attention ... to this point, since it may be deemed a refusal to do battle, and, indeed, might possibly result in a failure to bring the enemy to action as soon as is expected and hoped.¹¹

Indeed, the view has been expressed by a number of commentators on the Battle of Jutland in May 1916 that, in adopting this policy of ‘turning away’, Jellicoe lost an opportunity to inflict much greater damage on the German High Seas Fleet during that battle because he ordered his ships to turn away under threat of torpedo attack.

Moreover, and perhaps most significantly in the context of the U-boat threat to merchant shipping, the perceived necessity of screening capital ships with destroyers, the ideal vessels for hunting U-boats and protecting convoys, seriously limited the availability of such vessels for trade protection purposes. It is remarkable then, despite the fact that the loss of merchant shipping to submarine attack did not seriously affect the war effort until the end of 1916, that Carson’s and Jellicoe’s predecessors had done little to develop anti-submarine measures.

One further point should be made with regard to the legacy Jellicoe inherited. Not surprisingly on account of the lack of attention given to the problem, although several inventions had shown potential, no technical solutions had been fully developed for detecting a submerged submarine or sinking it once it had been detected. From the start of the war until the end of December 1916, just 46 German submarines had been sunk, the majority by gunfire or mine.

Thus, whilst Balfour’s statement to the War Committee on 14 October 1916 that ‘we must for the present be content with palliation ... to diminish an evil which unfortunately we cannot wholly cure’ reflected an attitude of resignation, it also

¹¹ Memorandum, Jellicoe to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 30 October 1914, BL, Add. MSS 49012.

contained an element of realism.¹² The combination of advances in the development of diesel and electric motors, pumping technology and the torpedo had created what was to become the most formidable weapon of naval warfare. At the beginning of the war, Germany had just 28 U-boats in service.¹³ By the time Jellicoe had been appointed First Sea Lord that number had grown to 138.¹⁴ Further, the capability of the U-boat had improved significantly. By 1917, the larger U-boats in service operating out of the German occupied North Sea ports generally had an endurance of more than 5,000 miles, a surface speed of over 16 knots and a submerged speed of over 8 knots. They were armed with one or two guns of 10.5cm calibre or greater and a minimum of four torpedo tubes.¹⁵ Even the smaller U-boats (classified UB), which generally sailed out of the German controlled Flanders seaports, although slower, had a range of more than 4,000 miles and armament that almost matched that of the larger boats.¹⁶ With the capability of attacking on the surface and then escaping underwater or simply attacking from underwater, the U-boat was a threat in respect of which the Navy had no answer. As Marder said, 'The submarine, which had been a fragile thing at the beginning of the war, had developed into a desperately dangerous instrument of destruction.'¹⁷

It was Jellicoe's initiative that had forced the Admiralty and his political masters to acknowledge the potential seriousness of the threat to Britain's food and raw material supplies from this 'instrument of destruction' and prompted his reluctant move to the Admiralty. His predecessors there had at best been ambivalent to the threat and had not taken positive steps to develop effective countermeasures. It is

¹² Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 3, 280.

¹³ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 363.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356, 357.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 358, 359.

¹⁷ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 54.

thus reflective of Jellicoe's dedication to the service of his country that he was prepared to forsake the command of the Grand Fleet and assume responsibility for a poisonous legacy for which there was no known antidote. It is also reflective of Jellicoe's appreciation of the wider strategic priorities that could influence the outcome of the war.

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

As stated, when Jellicoe was appointed First Sea Lord, the threat to Allied shipping could be described as serious but not critical. The received view is that at the beginning of the war, the German navy had neither the capability nor the intention of launching a submarine offensive against merchant shipping.¹⁸ Rather, in the view of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Secretary of the German Imperial Naval Office, the submarine was seen as a fleet reconnaissance and torpedo unit 'potentially capable of providing an equalization factor between opposing grand fleets'.¹⁹

This view was to change. It has been suggested that it was an article by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in the summer of 1914 entitled 'Danger! Story of England's Peril', which related how a small nation with a force of sixteen submarines destroyed British commerce and forced Britain to conclude peace terms, that was the inspiration for the change of strategy.²⁰ However, it was more likely that the British imposition of the trade blockade against Germany immediately after war started, and which Germany considered illegal, precipitated the

¹⁸ Philip Lundenberg, 'The German Naval Critique of the U-boat Campaign, 1915-1918', *Military Affairs*, 27, 3, (Autumn, 1963), 105.

¹⁹ Quoted, *ibid*, 106.

²⁰ Halpern, *Naval History*, 291.

reassessment. The German head of state, Kaiser Wilhelm II, declared on 4 February 1915 that from 28 February the waters around Great Britain, including the English Channel, would be considered a war zone in which every merchant ship encountered would be destroyed without the safety of crew and passengers necessarily being reassured. In other words, the cruiser rules whereby merchant ships would first be stopped and the crew given the opportunity to take to the ship's boats were abandoned.

However, this declaration engendered serious diplomatic opposition and was almost immediately modified. The US government issued a diplomatic note stating that if the life of any US citizen was lost as a consequence of implementing this strategy, the German government would be held to a 'strict accountability'.²¹ Bethman-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, responded to the effect that German submarine commanders would be ordered to spare neutral shipping, provided that it could be recognised as such. In turn, this angered the German naval leaders as it compromised the effectiveness of the campaign.²²

There is not space here to provide a detailed analysis of the internal politics that influenced the development of the German U-boat campaign thereafter, but three general points emerge from the foregoing that have relevance to the current arguments.²³ Firstly, the conflict of views between the German politicians and naval hierarchy stemmed primarily from the premise that the submarine does not lend itself to the complex and legalistic rules and customs that governed *guerre de course*. The submarine's crew was relatively small and therefore could not spare men to act as prize crews. It did not have the space to take on board crew from the target vessel.

²¹ Quoted, *ibid.*, 295.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ A critique of the German unrestricted U-boat campaign is provided in Philip Lundeberg's article referred to in footnote 18 above.

Most significantly, by having to surface to examine ships it intercepted, the submarine seriously jeopardised its own safety, particularly after the Allies introduced 'Q' ships.²⁴

Secondly, this conflict between the German political and naval hierarchies, with the political hierarchy fearing the adverse reaction of neutral countries (particularly the US and Holland) to the sinking of their ships, lasted until February 1917. During this period, the rules of engagement for U-boat commanders vacillated constantly, depending essentially on the level of protest from neutral countries after any of their ships had been sunk and whether politicians or the naval hierarchy had the upper hand in influencing the Kaiser. This proved extremely frustrating to the U-boat commanders. In the words of one captain:

So many [restrictions] were issued that it was impossible for a submarine commander to learn them all, and many times it was necessary for the helmsman or some other trusty support to bring the orders to the conning tower and hastily run through the mass to find out whether or not a certain vessel could be torpedoed. Even then, it frequently turned out that 'whatever you do is wrong'.²⁵

This uncertainty undoubtedly had an impact on U-boat effectiveness and it is noteworthy that during the period January 1915 to August 1916 only in three separate months did the monthly total of British merchant shipping losses rise above 100,000 tons.²⁶ Moreover, although in the last three months of 1916 the total of British merchant tonnage lost increased to an average of approximately 175,000 tons per month, primarily as the result of the greater number of submarines Germany then had

²⁴ 'Q' ships were merchant vessels with concealed guns which were only revealed after they had been attacked. They were usually manned by Royal rather than Merchant Navy personnel.

²⁵ Quoted, Halpern, *Naval History*, 304.

²⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 111.

available, by the end of 1916 the British merchant marine capacity had reduced by just six per cent from the capacity pertaining at the beginning of the war.²⁷ Further, during the period October to December 1916, approximately 75 per cent of the British shipping lost had been sunk by gunfire under the prize rules. Thus, whilst Jellicoe's October 1916 memorandum to Balfour had anticipated the threat to Britain's trade, and although at the time he transferred to the Admiralty the situation had become more serious, as stated previously, it was by no means critical.

However, this was to change dramatically. By the end of 1916, the balance of power in the debate within Germany over whether or not to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare had moved inexorably towards those who favoured its resumption. Three factors helped to bring this change about. Firstly, the outright rejection by the allies of the German peace proposals made in December 1916 strengthened German resolve. Secondly, the successful conclusion of Germany's land campaign against Romania had freed troops which could be deployed against Holland and Denmark in the event that the unrestricted submarine campaign, extended to neutral shipping, brought them into the war. The possibility of having to fight Holland on a third front had been as much a deterrent to the adoption of an unrestricted submarine campaign as was the threat of the US becoming involved.

The third reason resulted from the appointment of two new German supreme army commanders in the Western Front, Generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg, who made a fundamental change to Germany's military strategy. Recognising that their land armies could not sustain the continuing carnage, they adopted a defensive strategy by retreating from the existing front lines and constructing a formidable defensive line (known generally as the Hindenburg Line). This, they recognised, had

²⁷ Ibid.

its limitations in that adoption of this strategy could postpone matters but would inhibit any offensive operations that would lead to victory. It would also form the foundation from which peace negotiations could be initiated and, more significantly in the current context, form a background to the adoption of an unrestricted submarine campaign. In other words, for the first time in the war, the concept of unrestricted submarine warfare was seen as integral to the whole German war strategy, and not merely a piecemeal part of a naval strategy centred on the activities of the High Seas Fleet.

This time the argument for introducing an unrestricted U-boat campaign was led by the German Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff. In a memorandum of 22 December 1916, he concluded that:

A decision must be reached in the war before the autumn of 1917, if it is not to end in the exhaustion of all parties, and consequently disastrous to us. Of our enemies, Italy and France are economically so hard hit that they are only upheld by England's energy and activity. If we can break England's back the war will at once be decided in our favour. Now England's mainstay is her shipping, which brings to the British Isles the necessary supplies of food and materials for war industries, and ensures their solvency abroad.²⁸

These remarks were supported by an economic assessment as to Britain's available shipping capacity. Holzendorff had calculated that if Germany could sink 600,000 tons per month, with the additional expectation that at 'at least two-fifths of neutral sea traffic will at once be terrorised into ceasing their journeys', within five months, shipping to and from England would be reduced by about 39 per cent.²⁹ 'England',

²⁸ Memorandum, Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff, 22 December 1916, quoted, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, *Germany's High Seas Fleet*, (Nashville, 2002), 248.

²⁹ Quoted, *ibid*, 249.

Holzendorff went on to claim, 'would not be able to stand that, neither in view of the post-war conditions, nor with regard to the possibility of carrying on the war'.³⁰

Holzendorff's arguments were convincing. They were supported by Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Even Bethmann-Hollweg changed his view and accepted the situation, despite the acknowledged risk that an all out unrestricted campaign was likely to bring the US into the war on the Allied side. On this particular aspect, Holzendorff's memorandum concluded that 'I am most emphatically of the opinion that war with the United States of America is such a serious matter that everything ought to be done to avoid it. But, in my opinion, fear of a break must not hinder us from using this weapon which promises success.'³¹

The Kaiser considered that the matter was 'irrelevant', a remark which was destined to be proved most inept.³²

Moreover, this decision to embark on the unrestricted campaign not only removed the prize rule fetters from the U-boat commanders, it also changed Germany's ship building policy. Previously, this had been based on the creation of what has been termed 'a balanced fleet', i.e., with shipbuilding priorities spread between a variety of types of surface vessels and submarines. Now priority was given to the construction of submarines. Germany had started the unrestricted campaign with 142 boats in service.³³ In February 1917, a further 51 U-boats were ordered. This was followed in June 1917 by a further order for 95 boats, and yet another order for 120 boats in December 1917.³⁴

³⁰ Quoted, *ibid.*

³¹ Quoted, *ibid.*, 251.

³² Quoted, Herwig Holder, *The First World War, Germany Hungary and Austria*, (London, 1997), 315.

³³ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 52. The actual numbers appear to vary a little, depending on source. According to Gibson and Prendergast, only 111 U-boats were actually available on a 'war front' footing. Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 142.

³⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 53.

Thus to quote Gibson and Prendergast, ‘Put in a nutshell, the whole effort was to be a gigantic “smash and grab” raid; the brittle glass of the world’s shipping was to be shattered, so that the U-boats could grab the gems of victory and decamp before Policeman America could lay a hand on them.’³⁵ For a short time, it appeared that ‘the raid’ would be successful. As is discussed more fully in the following chapter, removal of the prize rule constraints proved highly effective. In February 1917, the total of British, Allied and neutral merchant shipping lost through enemy action rose to just over 540,000 tons, in March to over 593,000 tons and in April to a staggering 881,000 tons.³⁶ Put in another way, during the course of April 1917 one in four merchant ships entering British waters was being sunk.

Thus, placing this discussion in the context of the problems Jellicoe encountered on his move to the Admiralty, not only did he inherit the legacy of an Admiralty ill-equipped to deal with the existing submarine threat and a Navy with very limited means of detecting or sinking the submerged submarine, within a month of his arrival he was faced with a reversal of German naval strategy. Instead of an enemy whose strategy was to use his U-boats as an adjunct to its surface fleet in making the occasional sortie into the North Sea or in relatively constrained attacks against merchant shipping, he was faced with an enemy which unleashed the full force of its U-boat flotillas against Allied and neutral merchant shipping. Furthermore, it was an enemy that was prepared to bear the wrath of the US and discount the risk of its joining forces with the Allies with all its war production and manpower capability. It cannot have been a task that Jellicoe relished. Nevertheless, it was one that he set about with considerable skill and energy.

³⁵ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 122.

³⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 111.

The New Organisation

Until Jellicoe's arrival at the Admiralty in December 1916, no one person or department had responsibility for dealing with the submarine threat. The Operations Division, the Trade Division and the Intelligence Division were all involved to a greater or lesser extent. Moreover, only four Admiralty staff were engaged in experimental work associated with finding a means of detecting and sinking U-boats.³⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that little progress had been made in finding a technical solution to the problem.

However, Jellicoe took immediate steps to rectify this. In his memorandum to Balfour of 29 October 1916, he stated:

Our present methods of offence against submarines are to a considerable extent due to suggestions put forward by some of the younger officers and the most promising method of evolving new methods appears to lie in the formation of a small committee of such officers who have shown in the past special inventive aptitude or originality. They should work under some senior officer, who will not only have the energy to carry through with great rapidity any promising suggestions that may be put forward, but will also have the power to influence those in authority as to overcome all difficulties that may be encountered.³⁸

This reference to employing younger officers at the Admiralty assuages the criticism made of Jellicoe that he was reluctant to give credence to views of junior officers.

Also, the reference to a 'senior officer' with 'energy' suggests an element of perception about the bureaucratic processes in place at the Admiralty and the need to

³⁷ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 315.

³⁸ Memorandum Jellicoe to Balfour, 29 October 1916, BL, Add. MSS 48992.

put in place a forceful senior officer that would have the authority to cut through these processes.

In essence, it was the proposals outlined in that memorandum which formed the basis of his initial reorganisation. Jellicoe separated the Operations Division and established a separate anti-submarine division, initially under Rear Admiral Duff, with two captains, four commanders, three lieutenant commanders and two engineering officers, all of whom he brought from the Grand Fleet.³⁹ Again this fact counters the criticism that Jellicoe was reluctant to introduce fresh blood to the Admiralty. This new division assumed control of all vessels and aircraft which were engaged in anti-submarine work, whether offensive or defensive. The division was also charged with ‘the duty of examining and perfecting all experimental devices for combating the submarine menace and of producing fresh schemes for the destruction of enemy submarines’.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, for the first month in the new division, things were ‘quite chaotic’ with ‘nothing organised, no principles, everyone scratching his head and wondering what to do’.⁴¹ However, within a month matters had settled down and Marder offers no faint praise when he states that by the time Germany announced their unrestricted U-boat campaign on 1 February 1917, ‘There was, thanks to Jellicoe’s foresight, initiative and prodding an organization at the Admiralty staffed by experts, whose entire efforts were devoted to defeating the U-boats.’⁴²

Moreover, this was only the first of several reorganisations that Jellicoe initiated. The staff organisation, as introduced by Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911, acted in an advisory capacity only and, although it had grown

³⁹ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Diary Entry, Herbert Richmond, 9 January 1917, Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 228.

⁴² Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 70.

in numbers during the war, its function had not changed materially by the time Jellicoe assumed the role of First Sea Lord. It had no executive power and as a consequence all orders affecting the movement of ships required approval of the First Sea Lord before issue. In other words, the organisation was over-centralised and created additional and unnecessary demands upon the First Sea Lord. By April 1917, Jellicoe had concluded that this lack of executive function was ‘illogical’.⁴³ He maintained that as a consequence, following discussion with Carson, the decision was taken to give the war staff executive responsibility, with the First Sea Lord assuming the title and the role of Chief of Naval Staff. Admiral Sir Henry Oliver, who had been Chief of War Staff, assumed the role of Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, with responsibility for the Operations Division, which was primarily concerned with surface ship activities, the Mobilization Division, Intelligence and Signals. Duff was appointed Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, with his responsibilities extending to Minesweeping and the Trade and Convoys sections, as well as the newly formed Anti-Submarine division.⁴⁴

Historians have argued that much of the pressure for these organisational changes came from outside the Admiralty, in particular from Lloyd George. That may have been the case with regard to the appointment of Geddes as Controller at the end of May 1917 and to the establishment of a separate Plans Division. However, as Black points out, these changes started to take place ‘before either Lloyd George or Geddes could have been the reason for them’, and consequently Black’s conclusion that the changes represented an example of ‘bureaucratic evolution’ rather than a ‘big bang’ forced on him by his political masters is well made.⁴⁵

⁴³ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 11

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 12, 13.

⁴⁵ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 189, 191.

Further, these organisational changes counter the view that Jellicoe was an arch-centraliser and incapable of delegation. They show quite clearly that Jellicoe was prepared to off-load responsibility. Even Marder was prepared to concede that ‘the A.S.D. [Anti-Submarine Division] ... was the first important wartime instance of decentralization at the Admiralty.’⁴⁶

Thus, from the foregoing, it is evident that in terms of reshaping the Admiralty in order to deal with the U-boat threat, little if any criticism can be levied against Jellicoe. In less than three months after his appointment as First Sea Lord, he had shaken the Admiralty from its apparent apathy and put in place an organisation with a combination of experienced sea officers and ‘younger blood’, with the sole remit of finding and implementing a solution to the U-boat threat. Moreover, he had reshaped the War Staff and given it executive functions. The key issue was whether or not that new organisation could meet the threat.

Strategies, Tactics and Weapons Development

Jellicoe summarised his strategic dilemma by stating that ‘there were only three ways of dealing with the submarine menace. The first, naturally, was to prevent the vessels from putting to sea; the second was to sink them after they were at sea; and the third was to protect the merchant ships from their attack.’⁴⁷ The first option was not open to him. That would have necessitated either a close blockade of the ports from which the submarines operated or physically blocking those ports. As to the former, whilst the close blockade had been used with considerable success in the

⁴⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 70.

⁴⁷ Quoted, *ibid.*

days of sail, notably in the Napoleonic wars, it had succumbed to progress. Before the war, the Admiralty had recognised that with the need for steam driven warships to refuel, combined with the advent of the mine, the torpedo and long range coastal ordinance, maintaining a close blockade was not feasible. As to the latter, blocking harbours, for example by sinking old ships in the harbour mouths, was not considered a practicable solution. Such a solution was only attempted once during the course of the war when, in the spring of 1918, an attempt was made to block the Ostend and Zeebrugge harbours. As discussed in Chapter VII below, that attempt proved unsuccessful.

Thus, it is in Jellicoe's adoption of the second of the above options, despite the lack of effective anti-submarine weapons that is at the root of the controversy which surrounded the introduction of the convoy system. However, as is subsequently argued at greater length, Jellicoe's initial focus on offensive, as distinct from defensive measures, did contribute significantly to the defeat of the U-boat. In *The Submarine Peril*, Jellicoe outlined no less than eleven separate initiatives started by the Anti-Submarine Division.⁴⁸ These initiatives included increasing the use of aircraft for anti-submarine work, the development and installation of hydrophones, significantly increasing the number of guns fitted to merchant ships and the use of 'Q' ships, the development and arming of warships with depth charges and depth charge throwers, the development of improved shells for use against submarines and the development and mass production of an efficient mine. Space here does not permit detailed discussion on the full extent of the work undertaken by the Admiralty in relation to each of these. However, in the context of the argument that Jellicoe

⁴⁸ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 10-13.

brought drive and energy to the Admiralty over this period, it is pertinent to consider, by way of example, just four of the most important of these initiatives.

The first that falls for discussion is the arming of merchant ships. This was the earliest of Jellicoe's major initiatives, 'being taken up with the Cabinet immediately on the formation of the Board of the Admiralty presided over by Sir Edward Carson' and considerable Admiralty resources were deployed in this direction.⁴⁹ Supplies of guns destined for the army were obtained from the War Office, from France and from Japan. According to Jellicoe, by May 1917, over 10,000 guns and howitzers destined for British merchant ships were in the process of manufacture.⁵⁰ As of 1 January 1917, just 1,420 merchant ships were armed; by 1 April 1917 that number had risen to 2,181 and by 1 July 1917 over 3000 ships had been so armed.⁵¹ 'Q' ships were also used as decoys whereby the ship would wait until it was attacked by a U-boat before revealing its armament. Some of the accounts of the fights involving these 'Q' ships can only leave a reader full of admiration for the courage and discipline of their crews, which Jellicoe maintained had 'never been surpassed afloat or ashore'.⁵²

Nevertheless, the issue in the current context is whether committing such a large resource to arming merchant ships was an appropriate strategy. Again, taking some statistics, it appears that between January 1916 and January 1917 some 310 armed merchant ships were attacked by U-boats.⁵³ Of these, 236 escaped, 62 were sunk by torpedo without warning and only 12 were sunk by gunfire.⁵⁴ On the other hand, during the same period, of the 302 unarmed British merchant ships which were attacked by U-boat, only 67 escaped, 30 were sunk by torpedo without warning and

⁴⁹ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵³ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

205 were sunk by gunfire.⁵⁵ Thus, it is evident that as long as the majority of U-boat attacks were made on the surface under the cruiser rules, which was the case when Jellicoe became First Sea Lord, the arming of merchant ships was a logical and effective counter to the U-boat threat.

Moreover, the use of 'Q' ships had become increasingly effective. The number in operation had risen from approximately a dozen craft used as decoys in 1915, to 180 in 1917 and the number of 'duels' between 'Q' ships and U-boats had risen from eight in 1915 to 63 in 1917.⁵⁶ Although only 13 U-boats were sunk by 'Q' boats throughout the war, many others were severely mauled and it was probably only the capacity of the double strength hull of the U-boat to absorb punishment that prevented the losses from being considerably greater.⁵⁷

Perversely, it can be argued that this strategy added to Jellicoe's difficulties. Whilst Holzendorff, in his memorandum of 22 December 1916, appears to have relied on economic arguments to persuade the Kaiser and his political advisers to adopt an unrestricted submarine campaign and did not specifically refer to the tactical difficulties caused by adherence to the cruiser rules, there can be little doubt that this had an influence on the decision. Prior to the introduction of the unrestricted campaign, orders issued to U-boat commanders persistently emphasised the importance of giving priority to the safety and security of the boat and its crew in formulating attack plans. The increase in the number of defensively armed merchant ships and the success of the 'Q' boat tactics increased the vulnerability of the U-boat attacking on the surface. Attacking from under water without warning in most circumstances significantly reduced this vulnerability. In other words, the very success of the strategy of arming merchant ships and deploying 'Q' ships contributed

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

to the shift in U-boat tactics. This shift to under water attack clearly reduced the effectiveness of the 'Q' ship and by the autumn of 1917, the Admiralty had virtually abandoned their use. Nevertheless, in the context of the tactics prevalent at the time Jellicoe moved to the Admiralty and the success that the arming of merchant ships had achieved, he was fully justified in his decision to give priority and impetus to the project and in convincing the War Cabinet to divert manufacturing resources from the army's requirements.

However effective the arming of merchant ships may have been against U-boats attacking on the surface, it did not resolve the issue of attacking the submarine under water. Often in the field of weapon's technology, the introduction of a new weapon leads quickly to the development of an effective countermeasure. It has been argued that the reason why this did not happen in response to the development of the U-boat was that 'in 1914, the Admirals of the Royal Navy remained contemptuous of the potential of the submarine.'⁵⁸ Whilst that statement may have had some substance in that there were some within the Admiralty who morally abhorred the concept of attack without warning, it has no real merit if for no other reason than the fact that the U-boat largely dictated both the strategic use and the battle tactics of the Grand Fleet.

Furthermore, it was not as if the need for development of an effective offensive weapon against a submerged submarine had gone unrecognised. In March 1910, a committee known as the Admiralty Submarine Attack Committee (SAC) had been formed following a series of unsuccessful trials of various methods of attacking submarines, most of which involved attempting to damage or ensnare the periscope.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Fraser McKee, 'An Explosive Story: The Rise and Fall of the Common Depth Charge', *The Northern Mariner*, III, No 1, (January 1993), 45.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

This committee proposed a number of other unlikely solutions, such as spreading chemicals in the sea that would stick to the periscope and blind the submarine, or trailing nets behind the attacking surface vessel to catch the submarine. None of the possible solutions proposed by the SAC proved to be effective except one, namely ‘the dropping bomb’; a device that was launched over the stern of the attacking vessel and exploded at a predetermined depth. In July 1914 Sir George Callaghan, Jellicoe’s predecessor in command of the Grand Fleet, requested that a number of these depth-charges be manufactured. However, it was not until June 1916 that an effective depth-charge (the type D), with a hydrostatic valve that triggered the explosion at preset depths, was available for production. A thousand were ordered in August 1916 but the rate of production was slow and when Jellicoe arrived at the Admiralty each anti-submarine vessel was equipped with just four of these devices.⁶⁰

Jellicoe attributes the difficulty in acquiring adequate stocks of depth-charges to ‘shortage of labour and the many demands on our industries made by the war’.⁶¹ However, there is little doubt that the attitude imbued through Balfour’s ‘palliative’ approach to the U-boat, if not the ‘contemptuous’ attitude of the Admirals, contributed to the delays.

What is certain, however, is that it was recognised by Jellicoe and the Anti-Submarine Division that the depth-charge was the only available effective offensive means of attacking a submerged U-boat. By July 1917, the Admiralty had increased production of depth-charges to 140 per week, by October to 500 per week and by the end of the year production had increased to 800 per week, so that by the end of 1917, each anti-submarine vessel was equipped with 30 to 40 depth-charges.⁶² Furthermore, the Admiralty had solved problems associated with launching depth-charges too close

⁶⁰ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 27.

⁶¹ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 60.

⁶² *Ibid.*

to the attacking vessel with the development and fitment of ‘throwers’, which launched the charges some 60 yards from the side or stern of the ship.

The result of the development of and arming anti-submarine vessels with depth-charges was impressive. From the 2 U-boats sunk by depth-charge in 1916, the number increased to 12 in 1917 and in the period January to November 1918, a total of 24 U-boats (i.e., more than one third of the total number of U-boats sunk in that period) were sunk by depth-charge.⁶³

Thus again, Jellicoe’s impact at the Admiralty can be seen. He recognised that the depth-charge was the one effective offensive weapon that could combat the U-boat. Jellicoe remarked that ‘the great value of the depth charge as a weapon against the submarines, and the large number that were required for successful attack became apparent early in 1917.’⁶⁴ It was evident that through his predecessors’ ambivalence, the anti-submarine vessels at his disposal were inadequately equipped with this weapon. He complained about the difficulty in procuring sufficient numbers of the weapon for reasons outside of the Admiralty’s control. Yet, by the end 1917, each of the Navy’s anti-submarine vessels had been equipped with 10 times more depth-charges than had been the case at the beginning of the year.

The depth-charge may have given the Navy the means of sinking a submerged submarine but was obviously only effective once the submarine had been detected. In the words of Gibson and Prendergast, ‘Invisibility had cloaked in mystery the movements of the submarine, and had afforded an impenetrable screen to its retreat

⁶³ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 367. Gibson and Prendergast point out that it is only possible to estimate these figures as the destruction of U-boats sometimes involved the simultaneous use of several methods. For example, some U-boats were sunk by gunfire after being forced to surface by depth-charge. These figures do not take account of the number of depth-charge attacks which damaged but did not sink the boat. McKee states that 437 and 205 such attacks were made in 1917 and 1918 respectively. The first figure seems inordinately high given that only 1,727 depth charges were expended in 1917 against a figure of 14,724 in 1918. McKee, ‘An Explosive Story’, 51.

⁶⁴ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 59.

beneath the waves.’⁶⁵ However, as Terraine remarked, ‘necessity produced, as it so frequently did between 1914-18, a burst of inventive originality’.⁶⁶ In this case it resulted in the invention of the hydrophone which, in the simplest of terms, utilised an underwater microphone to detect the noise of a submarine’s engine. The hydrophone had evolved in 1915 but, by the beginning of 1917, was still very much in the experimental stage and the devices for use afloat, as distinct from shore based devices, suffered from two problems. Firstly, it was not possible for the vessel fitted with the hydrophone to use it whilst it was moving. The noise of the vessel’s own machinery and of water passing along its side prevented detection of the submarine’s engine. If the searching vessel remained stationary it became much more vulnerable to torpedo attack by the submarine being sought. Secondly, early versions of the hydrophone were not directional, so they could only establish the presence of a submarine somewhere in the vicinity. Again however, under the direction of the newly formed Anti-Submarine Division, development work was expedited, with the result that by March 1917 two forms of directional hydrophones had been developed. Moreover, the pace of production and installation was improved. By July 1917, 2,750 non directional and 500 directional hydrophones had been supplied and by the end of the year these figures had risen to 3,680 non directional and over 2,700 directional hydrophones.⁶⁷

It must be said, however, that the hydrophone’s effectiveness has been questioned. Gibson and Prendergast take the view that ‘the introduction of the hydrophone marked the beginning of a new era in anti-submarine warfare’.⁶⁸ Marder,

⁶⁵ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 186.

⁶⁶ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 29.

⁶⁷ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 65.

⁶⁸ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 186.

on the other hand, denounces that argument, claiming ‘it did nothing of the kind’.⁶⁹ Marder also calls Gibson and Prendergast’s stress on the moral and psychological effect of the hydrophone on U-boat crews ‘nonsense’.⁷⁰ Certainly, accepting the accuracy of personal correspondence that Marder received on the effectiveness of the hydrophone from an expert on the German navy, which claimed that ‘until relatively late in the war, U-boat captains did not have to worry too much about being chased’, Marder’s view on the moral and psychological impact of the hydrophone appears correct, if expressed somewhat harshly.⁷¹

However, the issue is not so clear cut on the question as to whether the hydrophone introduced a new era in submarine warfare. Statistics show that through October 1918 only three U-boats were known to have been sunk following detection by hydrophone, with one other probably sunk and a further 22 damaged.⁷² That being the case, on a narrow interpretation of Gibson and Prendergast’s statement, Marder’s comment appears justified. On the other hand, the hydrophone, using sound, was the first invention that was able to detect a submerged submarine and, whilst that device had its limitations, it led (too late for operational use in the war) to the much more effective echo reflecting system know as ASDIC. Thus on a wider interpretation, it can be argued that Gibson and Prendergast’s claim that the hydrophone introduced a ‘new era’ was no exaggeration.

Irrespective of those opposing views, the introduction of the hydrophone again illustrates the drive and energy that the Admiralty, under Jellicoe, brought to trying to find the solution to the U-boat threat. It took on board the one means that had potential for detecting the submerged U-boat, developed it, brought it into production

⁶⁹ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 76.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

and equipped large numbers of anti-submarine vessels with the device within a short period of time.

A fourth example of where the Admiralty's initiatives under Jellicoe had an impact on the U-boat threat was in the introduction of a cohesive mining strategy. Although it had been recognised that effective mines laid in sufficient numbers in appropriate locations would prove to be a useful counter measure, in Jellicoe's baleful words, 'Unfortunately, in January 1917, we did not possess a mine that was satisfactory against submarines'.⁷³ Trials initiated by Jellicoe revealed that when a submarine brushed against the current design of British mine (with a small explosive charge), only a third of the mines detonated. Further, whilst in April 1917 the Navy had approximately 20,000 mines in stock, because of defects to the mooring system, only 1,500 of these mines were fit for use.⁷⁴

A new and more effective type of mine, based on a German design, had been developed during the course of 1916, but little progress had been made in putting it into production. Again in Jellicoe's words, 'as soon as drawings could be prepared, orders for upwards of 100,000 were placed in anticipation of its success', although it was not until November 1917 that these mines were delivered in sufficiently large numbers for an effective mining strategy to be deployed.⁷⁵

The effect of this mining strategy is discussed in greater detail in the Chapter VII below. Suffice to say for the present that the full exposure of the inadequacy of the existing British mine and the production and development of an effective replacement represented yet another example of the initiatives taken by the Admiralty under Jellicoe's auspices.

⁷³ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 50.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Conclusions

There is little doubt that when Jellicoe assumed the role of First Sea Lord in December 1916 he was left with a difficult legacy. Despite the extent to which the Navy's tactics had been dictated by the German submarine threat, Jellicoe's predecessors at the Admiralty had shown little urgency in finding the means of countering that threat. That this lack of urgency pertained through the regime of Balfour and Jackson is not surprising given their ambivalent attitude.

Consequently, after over two years of war, no means of detecting or sinking a submerged U-boat had been fully developed. Jellicoe changed that. From his arrival at the Admiralty, his principal focus was directed at defeating the U-boat threat; a threat that had escalated exponentially when, after he had been in office for a month, Germany changed its naval strategy and resorted to an unrestricted submarine campaign. Jellicoe reorganised the Admiralty to cope with that threat and brought in both senior and younger staff, many of whom had recently served afloat with the Grand Fleet.

The anti-submarine campaign conducted by the newly created division has been described by one officer as being based on 'the thousands scheme - thousands of patrol craft, thousands of mines, thousands of nets, etc'.⁷⁶ On the one hand it can be argued that this is a reflection of the efforts made. On the other it could be argued that the extent of the activities unnecessarily diluted available resources. Indeed, considering the bizarre nature of some of the projects contemplated, such as training sea lions to attack U-boats or training seagulls to perch on their periscopes, the latter

⁷⁶ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 71.

argument would seem to have some merit.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, in the development and volume production of the hydrophone, the depth-charge and an effective mine, the Admiralty under Jellicoe found effective methods of attacking the U-boat.

One further point should be made here in the context of whether Jellicoe's dismissal was ultimately justified. In his *War Memoirs*, Lloyd George was highly critical of the Admiralty under Jellicoe, particularly as regards the introduction of the convoy system, but whether deliberately or otherwise, he fails to give any credit for the work undertaken by the Admiralty in its attempt find a solution to detecting and attacking the U-boat. He certainly cannot claim ignorance of the efforts made by the Admiralty, if for no other than that in a paper to the War Cabinet in February 1917, Jellicoe out-lined no less than twelve new initiatives that had been taken by the Anti-Submarine Division. Jellicoe's expressed concern then was that shipping losses for that month would be 425,000 tons and 'may be substantially exceeded in the following months'.⁷⁸ Moreover, he advised:

The Admiralty can hold out little hope that there will be any reduction in the rate of loss ... unless new methods which have been and are in the process of being adopted ... result in the destruction of enemy submarines at a greater rate than that at which they are being constructed ... On this latter point it would not be safe to anticipate benefit during the next two or three months.⁷⁹

Despite Jellicoe's efforts, these predictions unfortunately proved to be only too accurate.

⁷⁷ The sea-lion proposal was originated by the Board of Invention and Research and not by the Admiralty. Admiral Duff at the time declared the scheme to be 'extraordinary' and later wrote that 'valuable time, personnel and money had to be wasted to prove the futility and childishness of this contention.' Duff Memorandum, 5 February 1917, NA, ADM, 137/1927.

⁷⁸ Jellicoe, Memorandum to the War Cabinet, 21 February 1917, NA, ADM, 1/8480.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Chapter III

The Convoy Controversy

Introduction

In the previous chapter, reference was made to the fact that Admiral Jellicoe, on joining the Admiralty in December 1916, elected for the second of three possible strategic options for countering the German submarine threat, namely attempting to sink U-boats while at sea. Consequently, the immediate initiatives undertaken by the Admiralty with regard to detecting and sinking submarines were primarily directed to that end. As he advised the War Cabinet in his paper of 21 February 1917, the development of new anti-submarine measures would take time.

However, time was something the Admiralty did not have. After Germany commenced the unrestricted campaign at the beginning of February 1917, the losses to Allied merchant shipping increased dramatically. In February losses through submarine attack rose to 464,599 tons; in March to 507,001 tons and in April a total of 354 Allied and neutral ships with an aggregate weight of 834,549 tons were lost.¹ Moreover, to compound the problem, at that time the British and Allied ship construction industry was incapable of building new ships to replace such losses.²

Thus, whilst there was no immediate threat of the British population suffering

¹ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 102. The figures given in the previous chapter are higher because they relate to losses through all forms of enemy action, not just submarine attack.

² In the first quarter of 1917, only 236,000 tons of new British shipping was brought on to the register. Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*, III, 467.

starvation, it was clear that such losses could not be sustained indefinitely. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, later concluded, ‘It is a horrifying thought that it [the unrestricted submarine campaign] very nearly achieved the destruction of Britain’s sea power, with all that such a disaster would have meant to the fortunes of the Alliance and humanity.’³ This may have been a dramatic assessment of the situation, but there is no doubt that for a time it seemed that Admiral Holzenborff’s strategy might actually have succeeded unless an effective counter measure could be implemented quickly. As it transpired, the solution was found in the introduction of the system of convoying merchant ships. It is the perceived obstinacy over the introduction of this system that the Admiralty under Jellicoe has been universally and most heavily criticised. The first section of this chapter will therefore consider the extent to which this criticism is warranted and, if there was delay in introducing the convoy system, whether it was justifiable.

There is, however, a second controversy concerning the introduction of the convoy. That relates to the question of who was responsible for its introduction. Did the Admiralty introduce it on its own initiative, or did Lloyd George, as he claims, compel the Admiralty to adopt it? This is a debate that did not surface, at least publicly, until after the war and to that extent it may be considered of questionable relevance to the issue of whether Jellicoe’s approach justified the perceived lack of confidence in his abilities. However, depending on the way the argument falls, it does demonstrate the extent of the Admiralty’s flexibility. Additionally, as Sir Edward Carson believed Lloyd George’s claim to be an outright lie, there is an inference that Lloyd George was seeking to justify an inappropriate course of action, namely the

³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1120.

dismissal of Jellicoe. For these reasons, this issue is considered in the second section of this chapter.

Justified or Unjustified Criticism

It is not surprising that Jellicoe adopted the second of the strategic options referred to previously. The majority of U-boat attacks at the time were made from the surface and taking steps to arm large numbers of merchant ships appeared a logical and effective step. Also, and more generically, the Navy was imbued with what has been described as ‘a culture of the offensive’. A century of uncontested sea power, without major conflict and the freedom to patrol the seas at will, had instilled the naval hierarchy with the view that attack was the best method of defence. In other words, the submarine threat could be better met by introducing hunting patrols of destroyers, rather than by wasting their time defensively escorting merchantmen. In the words of Winston Churchill:

The first security for British merchant ships must be the superiority of the British Navy, which should enable us to cover in peace, and hunt down and bring to battle in war, every enemy’s warship which attempts to keep to the seas. A policy of vigorous offence against the enemy’s warships, wherever stationed, will immediately give far better protection to British traders than large numbers of vessels scattered sparsely about in an attitude of weak and defensive expectancy.⁴

⁴ Winston Churchill, Memorandum on Trade Protection, 23 August 1913, quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 1, 365.

Consequently, when Jellicoe became First Sea Lord, the convoy system had few supporters at the Admiralty and indeed, as is discussed further in Chapter VII below, it was a view that prevailed in some quarters through 1918.

The convoy system had also been rejected on practical grounds. Admiral Arthur Wilson, First Sea Lord in 1905, had rejected it because mercantile trade was ‘too gigantic’. A War Staff study in 1913 had rejected it on similar grounds. Again Churchill who, not for the first time, was later to effect a *volte-face*, envisaged the use of convoys only in ‘exceptional cases’, but hoped that ‘this cumbrous and inconvenient measure will not be required’.⁵ Further, later in the war, a proposal by the Vice Admiral commanding the 10th Cruiser Squadron that ‘the present enemy submarine campaign would be considerably reduced if merchantmen were convoyed’ was robustly rejected by the Chief of Staff, Admiral Oliver, on the grounds that ‘ideas are of no use if they entail the employment of vessels which cannot be obtained.’⁶ Similarly, a proposal from Admiral Tupper, commanding the Western Approaches, ‘that these vessels should be despatched in some close formation, attended by a convoying squadron consisting of fast and powerful trawlers ... accompanied by a few destroyers’ was rejected out of hand by Captain Jackson, Director of Operations, on the grounds that resources were just not available to contemplate such a proposal.⁷

This attitude to the convoy was reflected in an Admiralty staff paper issued in January 1917, which read:

Whenever possible, vessels should sail singly, escorted as considered necessary. The system of several ships sailing together in convoy is not recommended in any area where submarine attack is a possibility. It is evident

⁵ Quoted, *Ibid*, 361.

⁶ Memorandum, Admiral Commanding 10th Cruiser Squadron to Admiralty, 21 October 1916, NA, ADM 137/1922; Docket Note, Oliver, 6 November 1916, *ibid*.

⁷ Memorandum, Tupper to Secretary of the Admiralty, 21 October 1916, NA, ADM, 137/1322; Docket Note, Jackson, 6 November 1916, *ibid*.

that the larger the number of ships forming the convoy, the greater is the chance of a submarine being enabled to attack successfully, the greater the difficulty of the escort in preventing such attack.⁸

Newbolt is kind in assessing Jellicoe's approach to this policy, suggesting that in his early days at the Admiralty, Jellicoe 'was bound to give great weight and consideration to Admiralty opinion as he found it'.⁹ Jellicoe defended the paper on the grounds, firstly, that he did not think he had personally seen it and, secondly, on the basis that it had been issued prior to the start of the unrestricted submarine campaign.¹⁰ Just as pertinently, he could have argued that the pamphlet was outdated as, at the time it was written, the question of introducing the convoy system, albeit to a limited degree, was under consideration.

However, historians other than Newbolt have been more critical. Winton holds the opinion that 'a more criminally stupid point of view, a more incredibly erroneous interpretation of naval history would be hard to imagine'.¹¹ Hough is equally damning:

The first difficulty to overcome was that of recognizing the nature of the threat. In its characteristics and its method of attack, the submarine was something entirely novel in commerce warfare and in the struggle for survival at sea, the fact that the U-boat was only a raider in another guise was lost in the smoke screen of new weaponry. A glance back in history and a cold hard look by an intelligent Staff Committee would have led to the simplest solution much earlier than it was reached.¹²

⁸ Quoted, Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 103.

¹¹ Winton, *Jellicoe*, 238.

¹² Hough, *Great War at Sea*, 305.

This remark seems to miss the point in that the submarines' ability to attack from underwater completely unseen was not just 'novel', but made it wholly unique from anything that had gone before. Aside from that, these remarks imply criticism on two counts. Firstly, Jellicoe was wrong to elect for an offensive strategy in the first place. Secondly, the Admiralty's rejection of the convoy system was misplaced. This criticism does not take account of a number of relevant factors. As to Jellicoe's election for the offensive approach, the counter arguments are relatively simple. Irrespective of whether or not the convoy system ought to have been adopted earlier than it was, it was still essential to develop new weaponry to combat the submarine as a counter to the threat to the Navy's capital ships. Destroyers without the ability to detect and sink a submarine could screen capital ships against surface torpedo attack, but they were much more effective against underwater attack if they had anti-submarine countermeasures at their disposal. A system of convoying merchant ships could only be effective if its naval escorts could sink Hough's 'raider', in whatever guise. Escort vessels without teeth would have made the U-boat commanders' work easy indeed. Moreover, to reiterate the point made by Jellicoe in the context of this particular argument, the pamphlet had been written before unrestricted submarine warfare was declared and the conclusions reached in the pamphlet were largely applicable to protection against surface attack. Thus, the statement that merchant ships should sail singly should be seen in the context of these circumstances.

The counter argument to the criticism that the Admiralty's rejection of the convoy system was misplaced is more generic. Hough is correct in his inference that history would have shown that the system of escorting merchant ships was as old as naval warfare itself and that it had been used with considerable success by the protagonists in the Napoleonic wars. However, things had changed significantly since

the days of sail. Heavily influenced by the theories of the US naval strategist Alfred Mahan, British naval thinking followed the principle that the primary unit of strength was the battleship; the group unit was the line of battleships. Every other vessel was considered to be auxiliary and the primary objective was to seek out and destroy the enemy fleet.¹³ As Marder stated, ‘In the pre war years there was much talk about “the Nelson touch”. The practical consequence was to think that the essence of the naval war was the battle - that the Navy’s principal *raison d’être* was to meet and annihilate the High Seas Fleet in a Second Trafalgar.’¹⁴ Thus, all other operations, including commerce raiding, were considered to be indecisive and secondary in nature. Consequently, the convoy was considered a defensive tool and in the development of the so called ‘blue water’ policy, the principle of the convoy had been discarded.

Further, there is an argument that convoying was simply impractical under modern conditions. The consensus of view within the Admiralty was that in pre-steam days, merchant ships travelled slowly and were often detained in dangerous waters by adverse winds. It was acknowledged that the convoy was the most effective method of protection in such circumstances. On the other hand, steam ships could pass relatively quickly through these dangerous waters at a time and on a route of the masters’ own choosing and consequently, in theory at least, were at far less risk than sailing ships.

Given these factors, Winton’s remarks regarding the ‘criminality’ of Admiralty policy are not justified. Obviously, it can be argued in hindsight that as soon as it had become apparent that the offensive measures against the U-boat were inadequate, Jellicoe ought immediately to have overturned existing policy and

¹³ R A Bowley, ‘The Negative Influence of Mahan on Anti-Submarine Warfare’, *RUSI Journal for Defence Studies*, Vol. 122, 4, (December, 1977), 52.

¹⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 305.

introduced the convoy system sooner. This is where Lloyd George has been most critical, writing that:

Looking back, it seems amazing that the system of escorting our ships in convoys was not adopted earlier. Yet in the teeth of the fact that other methods were proving futile and disastrous, and our sinkings were increasing at an alarming rate, the Admiralty stubbornly refused to consider adopting the convoy system and thus extending to the mercantile marine the same guardianship as that upon which they relied for their own safety in the Grand Fleet.¹⁵

This criticism raises two questions about Jellicoe's approach. Firstly, did he really resist adoption of the convoy system or was it, as Winton contends, a question of not ruling it out and withholding judgement on its introduction for the time being?¹⁶

Secondly, in either case, were there rational grounds for his approach?

As to the first issue, despite the vigour of Lloyd George's condemnation, and indeed, the existence of the Admiralty Staff paper advocating that 'vessels should sail singly', it is evident that his remarks are far from justified. In the first place, at the end of December 1916, Jellicoe had requested that the feasibility of munitions ships sailing in convoy be considered, and although Captain Webb, in charge of the Admiralty Trade division, considered that a system of general convoy would not be practicable, it could be implemented in the case of munitions ships.¹⁷ Secondly, before the introduction of a general system of convoy at the end of April 1917, it had been decided to introduce convoys on two critical North Sea trade routes, namely the coal trade with France and trade with the Scandinavian countries. As to the former, France had lost a number of its coal fields in the wake of the German occupation. To

¹⁵ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1144.

¹⁶ Winton, *Jellicoe*, 238.

¹⁷ Jellicoe, Docket Note, 8 January 1917, NA, ADM 137/1922.

continue prosecuting the war it needed to import a minimum of 1.5 million tons per month.¹⁸ Heavy losses in the last quarter of 1916 meant that by the end of the year the situation had become critical, with French factories shutting through lack of coal. This situation resulted in the Board of Trade requesting that ships carrying coal to France should be convoyed.¹⁹ Although Webb was initially reluctant, expressing the view that convoying would in essence cause ‘delays and congestion at ports of departure and arrival’, the French authorities convinced the Admiralty that delays in sailing caused by U-boat sightings outweighed delays caused by any port congestion.²⁰ Accordingly Jellicoe approved the introduction of ‘controlled sailings’ for the French coal trade on 16 January 1917.²¹

A similar situation pertained in relation to trade between the British North Sea ports and Scandinavia. Again, as a consequence of heavy losses during the last quarter of 1916, ship owners began to lose confidence in the Navy’s ability to provide adequate protection and had threatened to delay sailings. Some limited form of protection for this trade had been put in place at the end of January 1917, but the system used then was not particularly effective. By April the loss rate was running at about 25 per cent for the round trip.²² This resulted in the ‘Longhope’ conference where the representatives of the Admiralty, Grand Fleet and Orkneys and Shetland Command unanimously concluded that ‘the convoy system be used in preference to the scheme of continuous stream of traffic’.²³ Although they had reservations, both

¹⁸ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 138.

¹⁹ Letter, Board of Trade to Admiralty, 21 December 1916, NA, ADM, 137/1392.

²⁰ Webb, Minute, 1 January 1917, *ibid.*

²¹ The term ‘controlled sailing’ was used instead of the word ‘convoy’. Because of the number of neutral ships that plied the coal trade, it was feared that the use of word ‘convoy,’ denoting some form of protection, might have resulted in the Germans sinking all neutral ships on sight. Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 138.

²² *Ibid.*, 141.

²³ Minute, Longhope Conference, 4 April 1917, NA, ADM, 137/1922.

Oliver and Duff concurred with this recommendation and Jellicoe finally approved it on 21 April 1917.²⁴

Two other pieces of evidence are relevant here. The first is that in a memorandum concerning the protection of Atlantic trade against the German commerce raider, *Moewe*, which had managed to escape into the Atlantic, Jellicoe noted on a paper from Duff emphasising the difficulties of introducing the convoy system, that the ‘whole question must be borne in mind and brought up again later if needs be’.²⁵ Secondly and perhaps most conclusively, the War Cabinet minutes of 19 February 1917 included a statement that ‘the First Sea Lord stated that the Admiralty were looking into the question of convoys and that he himself had arranged to see a number of Naval Officers and Captains of Naval Vessels who had experience on this subject.’²⁶ Thus, not only was the convoy system under consideration at the Admiralty during the early part of 1917, by April it had initiated on two routes. Moreover, given Lloyd George’s presence at the War Cabinet, he had knowledge of the fact that the matter was under consideration, which belies his statement that the Admiralty ‘stubbornly refused to adopt the convoy system’.

The French coal and Scandinavian convoys proved to be successful. As to the former, some 2,600 ships were convoyed during the course of April 1917. Just five were sunk by U-boat, representing a loss rate of 0.19 per cent.²⁷ As to the latter, in May 1917, the first month of operation, the loss rate was cut 120 fold to a rate of 0.24 per cent.²⁸ It has been argued that the success of these convoys ought to have influenced the Admiralty and encouraged a change of policy sooner.²⁹ This is a valid

²⁴ Docket Note, Jellicoe, 21 April 1917, *ibid.*

²⁵ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 6.

²⁶ Minute, War Cabinet Meeting, 19 February 1917, NA, CAB/23/1/73.

²⁷ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁹ Halpern, *Naval History*, 354.

point and indeed, in the words of Terraine, it ‘threw light on the question of vulnerability’, i.e., on the belief that the convoy presented a larger target to the U-boat than a single ship and consequently its use would lead to greater loss.³⁰

This issue of timing of the introduction of the convoy leads to the second question raised by Lloyd George’s comments, namely, if Jellicoe was not opposed in principle to the convoy system, did he have rational grounds for his caution? Not surprisingly, in *The Submarine Peril*, Jellicoe defends his position at some length, claiming that the introduction of a general convoy system ‘was receiving constant consideration at the Admiralty in the early part of 1917, but the objections to it were, until a later date, far too strong to admit of its adoption’.³¹ In seeking to justify this, he lists the ‘Mercantile Disadvantages’ as including delays incurred in assembling ships ready for convoy; delays occurring through the convoy having to sail at the speed of the slowest ship; congestion at the port of destination caused by a large number of ships arriving at the same time; lack of means of darkening ships at night; and the inability of ships in convoy to keep close station, either through lack of devices such as revolution indicators or telephones between the bridge and engine room, or through not having sufficient skilled officers, many of those having transferred to the Royal Navy.³²

There is no doubt these were legitimate concerns and it was not just the Admiralty that had reservations about introducing a general convoy system. In accordance with his commitment to the War Cabinet on 19 February, four days later Jellicoe met with ten masters of merchant ships to ascertain ‘their opinion on the question of convoys against submarine attack’.³³ Their view was conclusive, the

³⁰ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 55.

³¹ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 96.

³² *Ibid*, 98.

³³ Report of a Meeting at the Admiralty, 23 February 1917, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 149.

minute of the meeting recording that ‘the masters ... were firmly of the opinion that they would prefer to sail alone rather than in company and under convoy.’³⁴

Seeking the opinion of merchant ship masters was an eminently sensible course of action. However, the event has been the subject of some criticism. Lloyd George was again vitriolic, contending that ‘it was highly probable that the form in which Admiral Jellicoe put the questions might make the seamen fear that they could never carry out proper station-keeping and joint manoeuvring that membership of a convoy demanded.’³⁵ This accusation has been vigorously opposed, no more so than by Captain Bertram Smith, who attended the meeting with Jellicoe. His view was that ‘the First Sea Lord dispassionately and impartially stated the object of the meeting, namely to get an unbiased view of the Merchant Service.’³⁶ There would seem to be little reason not to accept Smith’s view. Jellicoe was as concerned as any person to find a solution to the U-boat problem and he had little to gain by biasing the questions to give a preconceived answer.

The extent to which the outcome of this meeting delayed the introduction of a general convoy system is questionable. Marder was of the view that ‘the objections of the merchant skippers were undoubtedly a powerful factor in the Admiralty’s reluctance to adopt convoy’.³⁷ However, in addition to the ‘mercantile’ disadvantages Jellicoe described, Jellicoe was faced with a number of ‘naval difficulties’, which were more problematic and had a greater influence on the timing of the introduction of the convoy than the ‘mercantile disadvantages’. Foremost of these was the

³⁴ Ibid 150.

³⁵ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1157.

³⁶ Bertram H Smith, ‘The Introduction of the Convoy System’, *Naval Review*, XXIII, 1935, 313. Smith was a member of the Shipping Movements Division of the Admiralty during 1917 and therefore offers valuable insight to the events surrounding the introduction of the convoy. However, the article was written in response to the criticism in Lloyd George’s *War Memoirs* and his views should be considered in that context.

³⁷ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 127.

shortage of necessary escort vessels, both to protect convoys from the port of assembly up to the U-boat danger zone and then through the U-boat zone.³⁸

Secondly, Jellicoe argued that until the US entered the war, American ports could not be used as ports of assembly, nor could they land the staff necessary to effect the required organisation. Thirdly, there was a concern that the losses would be heavy if the convoy inadvertently happened to enter an enemy minefield.³⁹ These were undoubtedly valid reasons, although with regard to the unavailability of US ports, it must be questionable as to why ports on the eastern seaboard of Canada, such as Halifax, could not have been used as assembly points.

However, the most compelling argument for the Admiralty's stance was the shortage of escort vessels. It was a point frequently made by Jellicoe in War Cabinet meetings and it is a matter Jellicoe dealt with at some length in *The Submarine Peril*.⁴⁰ There he concluded that 'we could not possibly produce the necessary escorts; and, that until this difficulty was overcome we should have to postpone the introduction of a convoy system.'⁴¹ According to Admiralty calculations, forty destroyers or sloops were available for escort duty in early February.⁴² However, again by their calculations, the number of escort vessels required for inbound Atlantic convoys would be 81 destroyers or sloops, with an additional 44 required for outbound convoys.⁴³ Thus, there was a clear shortfall. Further, according to Jellicoe, introducing a policy of convoy for only a portion of the Atlantic trade would have been 'useless and dangerous on the grounds that providing escorts for the portion

³⁸ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 101, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ War Cabinet Meeting, 23 April 1917, CAB 23/2/125; Imperial War Cabinet Meeting, 26 April, 1917, CAB 23/40/12.

⁴¹ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 111.

⁴² Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 111.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

would have deprived all other vessel sailing of any protection at all'.⁴⁴ Moreover, Jellicoe was equally dogmatic on the question of transferring escorts from other duties. As this issue goes to the root of the convoy controversy and the defence of Jellicoe's rationale, it is appropriate to quote him at length:

It was out of the question to reduce the Harwich or Dover flotillas materially, as we were already running the gravest risks from the inadequacy of these forces to deal with enemy destroyers and submarines operating in southern waters from Zeebrugge or from German ports, and in addition the Harwich force furnished the sole protection for the weekly convoy running between the Thames and the Dutch ports ... The destroyers on the East Coast and in the Portsmouth Command were already inadequate to afford proper protection to the trade and the Cross-channel communications, as evidenced by our losses. Here again, however, in order to meet the very serious situation, some destroyers were eventually transferred to Devonport from Portsmouth, but at the expense of still less protection and fewer opportunities for offensive action against submarines. There remained only the Grand Fleet Destroyers on which we could draw yet further. It had always been held that the Grand Fleet required a total force of one hundred destroyers and ten flotilla leaders for the double purpose of screening ships from submarine attack when at sea and of countering the enemy's destroyers and attacking his heavy ships with torpedo fire in a fleet action ... At our *average* moment ... we could not expect that more than seventy destroyers and eight leaders would be with the Fleet.⁴⁵

The crux of the issue here is that Jellicoe was not prepared at this time to withdraw significant numbers of destroyers from protection of the Grand Fleet.

⁴⁴ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 120.

⁴⁵ Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 113.

Nevertheless, a number of commentators have challenged Jellicoe's assessment of the situation. Admiral Sir Kenneth Dewar, appointed Assistant Director of Plans in 1918, wrote that the problem was 'not so much a lack of escorts as the more efficient use of those we had'.⁴⁶ Dewar, however, does not specify how more efficient use could be made of the escorts. Marder also takes the view that better use could have been made of escort vessels. From a detailed analysis of the number available, he believed that the necessary ships could have been found early in 1917 without giving up or jeopardising other operations.⁴⁷ This argument is based on two factors. The first is that Duff, in a note of 19 April 1917, recommended that two escort vessels would be required by every merchant ship in the convoy; an extraordinarily high ratio.⁴⁸ Jellicoe, in post war correspondence with Newbolt on the accuracy of the draft of certain sections of the *Official History*, defends this point by maintaining that this comment was made only with specific reference to Scandinavian convoys where ships had to pass and re-pass over the same dangerous area and it was certainly not Admiralty policy as regards general convoy systems. Moreover, that view was not universally held within the Admiralty. Oliver, for example, expressed the opinion that in a general convoy a ratio of 1 escort to 20 merchant ships would be adequate.⁴⁹

The second factor Marder relies upon is the contention that the Admiralty remained wedded to the concept of the offensive; particularly in that they continued to send destroyers out on ineffective anti-submarine patrols. This can be countered to some extent by reference to the above quotation in that, with reluctance, Jellicoe was prepared to countenance the transfer of destroyers from Portsmouth to Devonport at

⁴⁶ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 126.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 125.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ Oliver Minute, 20 April 1917, NA, ADM 137/1322.

the expense of offensive operations. Further, although it has not proved possible to investigate the underlying basis of the figures used in Marder's analysis, he does not appear to take account of the fact that in northern waters, it was primarily Grand Fleet destroyers that were used for offensive patrols. These patrols were generally of short duration and therefore the Grand Fleet was 'denuded' of its screen for considerably less time than if the same destroyers had been used for convoy escort duties. Even so, Admiral Beatty, had, on 7 May 1917, cause to write:

The trouble is T.B.D.'s [Torpedo Boat Destroyers]. We are so very short of them, and if we have to go to sea, could not screen efficiently the squadrons. What would happen if the enemy came out with the intention of engaging us in mortal combat I can't think as he certainly would have 100 submarines so disposed as to render him the utmost assistance and today we have 37 destroyers here and 14 at Rosyth!!! Apparently we are gambling heavily on that contingency never arising.⁵⁰

Whilst Beatty exaggerates the number of submarines at Germany's disposal, the letter highlights Jellicoe's dilemma and the tension between the need to provide escorts and the underlying broader strategy of maintaining the Grand Fleet's capability.⁵¹ It also indicates the level of support Jellicoe had in this regard from Beatty.

Finally, in this context, it must also be said that it is possible with hindsight to analyse the question of availability of vessels for convoy escort duty. In the midst of a world war, Jellicoe, under resourced, was seeking to meet the demands of commanders in every theatre of operations clamouring for additional ships.

Moreover, this dilemma must be considered in the context of the necessity of

⁵⁰ Letter, Beatty to Jellicoe, 7 May 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49008.

⁵¹ In February 1917 the number of U-boats allocated to the North Sea and Flanders fleets was 72 and, at most, approximately 50 per cent were in active operation at any one time. Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 141, 142.

maintaining the Grand Fleet's capability both to keep the High Seas Fleet in its base and to be able to defeat it should Admiral Scheer have adopted a more offensive strategy. Churchill, with his usual flamboyance, describes the potential impact of a decisive defeat of the Grand Fleet thus:

The trade and food-supply of the British islands would have been paralysed. Our armies on the continent would have been cut from their base by superior naval force. All the transportation of the Allies would have been jeopardised and hampered. The United States could not have intervened in the war. Starvation and invasion would have descended on the British people. Ruin, utter and final would have overwhelmed the Allied cause.⁵²

Jellicoe, having commanded the Grand Fleet and served at the Admiralty in more junior positions, was well aware of the limitations of the British fleet. Its ships had numerical and firepower superiority but lacked the armour, speed and gunnery accuracy of the German ships and the armour piercing capability of the German shells. Jutland had exposed the frailties of the British capital ships and decisive victory was not a foregone conclusion if the fleets met at sea again. Given the risks, it would have been foolhardy indeed to denude the Grand Fleet further of the destroyer screen required to protect it from the U-boat.

There is, however, one additional factor relating to the availability of escort vessels which, on the face of it, might swing the argument in favour of Jellicoe's critics. Lloyd George describes the matter thus:

But of all their delusions the most astounding was that which concerned the number of British vessels sailing the high seas and needing escort. This was not some obscure and disputable issue that could be determined only by risky

⁵² Churchill, *World Crisis*, III, 110.

experiment. It was merely a matter of available statistics accurately added up. The blunder on which their policy was based was an arithmetical mix up which would not have been perpetrated by an ordinary clerk in a shipping office. It nevertheless bewildered the Sea Lords and drove them out of their course for months.⁵³

Lloyd George refers to a specific incident where figures were produced for publication (and for submission to the War Cabinet) showing the number of ships entering and leaving British ports and the number of ships sunk. To put the best possible slant on the losses, both to discourage the enemy and to encourage neutral shipping companies, the returns provided by the customs service on which they were based were exaggerated. Small coastal craft arriving or leaving from another British port, sometimes two or three times a week, were included and the returns specified that the number of merchant vessels of all nationalities of over one hundred tons that entered or left British ports in a week was 5000.⁵⁴

According to Marder, one of Jellicoe's staff, Commander Henderson, 'saw the light' and realised that the meaningful figure of ocean going steamers that required convoy arriving and departing was 120 to 140 of each per week.⁵⁵ Finding escorts for 40 or so arrivals and departures per day would not have constituted the insurmountable problem that 700 arrivals and departures did. Further, it seems that it was not only Lloyd George who claimed that the Admiralty were bemused by this blunder. In a paper produced by the Ministry of Shipping in 1917, the comment was made that although the returns 'may not have misled a knowledgeable enemy, it did mislead those whose energies were devoted to meeting this offensive'.⁵⁶

⁵³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1146.

⁵⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 150.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ministry of Shipping, 'System of Convoy for Merchant Shipping', *Naval Review*, V, 1917, 43.

However, the contention that the Admiralty relied on these figures appears to be a fallacy. Firstly, Smith, in his 1935 article in *The Naval Review*, vehemently denied that these returns influenced the matter, declaring firstly that ‘Commander Henderson ascertained the true figures at the Ministry of Shipping after a fruitless search in other quarters’ and secondly, that ‘from personal experience he never heard any officer who had the least responsibility for these questions make the slightest reference to the form, except to state losses.’⁵⁷ Secondly, Smith’s version of events is supported by the fact in January 1917 he prepared a memorandum, using the Operations Division’s figures, on the estimated volume of British vessels leaving North American ports. This concluded that in January 1917 there would be about 304 ships, or about ten per day, leaving the US.⁵⁸ Obviously, this memorandum does not take account of ships arriving from destinations other than the US but it does show that the Admiralty was fully aware of the scale of the traffic requiring protection. As Nicholas Black contends, the significance of these figures ‘is that the rejection of the convoy was not simply based on the belief that trade was so vast that it could not be escorted’.⁵⁹

Whether or not the contradictory statement from the Ministry of Shipping stems from some inter departmental rivalry is impossible to say. Yet, in the context of Lloyd George’s views of the matter, it is of note that the published shipping losses was a matter that frequently came before the War Cabinet, but nowhere in the minutes of Cabinet Meetings over the relevant period is there an indication that Lloyd George or other participants in these meetings posed the question that would have unravelled the so-called ‘arithmetical mix-up’. Thus again, it would seem that Lloyd George’s criticism was not justified by the facts.

⁵⁷ Smith, ‘The Introduction of the Convoy System’, 310.

⁵⁸ Smith, Memorandum, 4 January 1917, NA, ADM, 137/1322.

⁵⁹ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 175.

Two further points can be made in mitigation of this criticism of the Admiralty. The first is one that is often forgotten or ignored by biographers and historical commentators, but is well made by Admiral Bacon in his biography of Jellicoe. The organisation of mercantile convoys was a highly complex logistical affair. Before December 1916, some limitations had been imposed on merchant shipping movements, the control of imports and requisitioning of merchant ships for military purposes. However, these vessels were mainly owned and operated by private companies over which the Government had limited control. Following what can, in hindsight, be seen as a well-defined pattern of avoiding state intervention until crisis dictated otherwise, by late 1916 the tonnage shortage was such that the Government was forced to intervene. Under the powers contained in the New Ministries and Shipping Act 1916, the allocation of tonnage, licensing of voyages and control of port facilities was brought under a new Ministry of Shipping.⁶⁰ However, this reorganisation, which included the transfer of the Admiralty's Transport Division to the new ministry, was not completed until April 1917. Consequently, as Bacon wrote, 'It will now be easily appreciated that no successful convoy system could have been inaugurated unless those in control had dictatorial powers over the times of sailing, the cargoes carried and the constitution of the convoys.'⁶¹ Thus, even if Jellicoe had in principal overturned the Admiralty's existing policy on convoys immediately after being appointed First Sea Lord, or alternatively, immediately following Germany's proclamation that it would embark on an unrestricted submarine campaign, it would not have been practically possible to implement the new policy.

⁶⁰ 6 and 7 Geo 5, Ch 68.

⁶¹ Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 350. There is a further technical argument here. Because the remit of the Shipping Controller was not specified until regulation No. 39 BBB was issued under the Defence of the Realm Act on 28 June 1917, it was not strictly legitimate for the Ministry to order convoys until that date. However, as Fayle points out, in the circumstances 'there was little disposition to question this authority,' and in practice the end April 1917 can be taken as the relevant time. Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*, III, 7.

The second point is that although a major contributor in countering the U-boat threat, the convoy system was not the panacea that some commentators think. Allied shipping losses in May 1917 fell to 596,629 tons but it is thought that this was due to a reduced number of U-boats active in operational theatres during that month rather than to the introduction of the convoy system.⁶² By the end of June, despite the increased number of convoys sailing, the losses through submarine activity had again increased and on average remained at over 300,000 tons per month until the end of 1917.⁶³ It was not until after May 1918 that the losses consistently averaged less than 200,000 tons per month.⁶⁴

Further, little cognisance is given to the impact of the offensive measures being developed by the Anti-Submarine Division. Marder argues that '*sinking submarines is a bonus, not a necessity ... it is immaterial whether or not the submarine gets sunk in the process, because what matters is that the ships deliver cargoes regularly and adequately, and this, the First World War proved, can be assured by a system of convoy.*'⁶⁵ This is only part of the answer. For if U-boats had not been sunk at a rate greater than the rate that new U-boats were commissioned, the increase in the number of submarines operating must necessarily have increased their chances of success.⁶⁶

Moreover, as Terraine points out, heavy casualties would have led to a loss of efficiency through dilution in the quality of the crews.⁶⁷ The number of U-boats sunk in the first six months of 1917 (21) doubled in the second half of 1917 (42), indicating the increasing effectiveness of the development and deployment of anti-submarine

⁶² Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 61.

⁶³ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 277.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 5, 111.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 103 (Marder's italics).

⁶⁶ The previously mentioned reduction in losses from April to May and the subsequent increase from May to June 1917 illustrates this point.

⁶⁷ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 144.

measures particularly in mining, use of the hydrophone and more extensive use of the depth-charge.⁶⁸ Thus, it was not just the introduction of the convoy system that ultimately thwarted the U-boat threat. It was a combination of that and the offensive measures developed by the Anti-Submarine Division that ultimately solved the problem, which in turn gives credence to Jellicoe's leadership and effectiveness as First Sea Lord.

Credit Where Credit is Due

Lloyd George was not content with accusing the Admiralty of undue delay in implementing the convoy system. He also claimed that it was he who compelled the Admiralty to introduce it. Jellicoe, on the other hand, denies this and maintains that the Admiralty introduced it on its own initiative.

The controversy over this surfaced, at least publicly, after the war and to that extent it may be considered of questionable relevance to the issue of whether or not Jellicoe's approach justified the perceived lack of confidence in his abilities. However, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the issue does demonstrate the extent of the Admiralty's flexibility or rigidity, depending on the way the argument falls. Also, if, as Carson alleged, Lloyd George's claim is a lie, the implication would seem to be that in making the claim, Lloyd George sought to justify an inappropriate course of action. However, as with much involving the controversy over the introduction of the convoy, the respective claims are difficult to reconcile.

⁶⁸ Gibson and Prendergast, *The German Submarine War*, 366.

Lloyd George contends that, on 25 April 1917, ‘I informed the Cabinet that I had decided to visit the Admiralty and there take peremptory action on the question of convoy. Apparently, the prospect of their being overruled in their own sanctuary galvanised the Admiralty into a fresh inquisition.’⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, Jellicoe takes issue with that point of view. His account is that it was a detailed memorandum from Duff dated 26 April 1917 that persuaded him to introduce a general convoy system, not any action on the part of Lloyd George. In *The Submarine Peril* he states:

It has frequently been erroneously stated that the Admiralty decision in this matter was the result of pressure brought to bear on the Admiralty from the War Cabinet and civilian quarters. Possibly this idea has arisen from the proceedings of the War Cabinet on April 25, but is quite incorrect. The views of experienced naval officers on a technical question involving the gravest responsibility could not possibly be affected by outside opinion, however high the quarter from which that opinion emanated.⁷⁰

Historians are likewise divided on the issue. As Marder points out, Churchill, Captain Roskill, Admiral Dewar and A J P Taylor amongst others, favour what has become ‘the standard interpretation’.⁷¹ This was extravagantly expressed by Lord Beaverbrook:

On the 30th April, with the submarine peril at its height, the Prime Minister descended upon the Admiralty and seated himself in the First Lord’s Chair ... This was possibly an unprecedented action ... The meeting was a minor triumph for the Prime Minister. A re-examination of the figures of shipping

⁶⁹ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1162.

⁷⁰ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 130.

⁷¹ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 160.

losses prepared by the Minister of Shipping had brought a frame of mind in which the admirals were at least willing to experiment with a convoy.⁷² However, this 'standard interpretation' is open to challenge on a number of counts. Firstly, the relevant War Cabinet minute is less precise than suggested by Lloyd George. It states that 'the Prime Minister should visit the Admiralty with a view to investigating all the means at present in use in regard to anti-submarine warfare,' not that he should take 'peremptory action'.⁷³ Secondly, there is the timing of events. The Duff memorandum was issued to Jellicoe on the 26 April 1917, four days before Lloyd George's visit to the Admiralty. Against this, it could be argued that it was the threat of Lloyd George's visit that spurred Duff into action. However, if the length and content of this memorandum and the work necessary to compile it is considered, it is unlikely that it could have been produced at such short notice.⁷⁴ Thirdly, there were other significant factors that came together more or less simultaneously which influenced the Admiralty's thinking and caused a change of mind. As stated, the merchant shipping losses had increased dramatically through the latter part of April. The daily loss reports coming into the Admiralty must have caused consternation and the absence of effective offensive counter measures forced those seeking a solution to consider any alternative however contrary to entrenched instincts. The numbers of British escort vessels being built was increasing and finally, and most significantly, the entry of the US into the war on 7 April 1917 precipitated the immediate availability of additional escort vessels.

Also in this context, Duff's version of events is worthy of comment.

In a note to Jellicoe concerning the accuracy of drafts of the *Official History*, he wrote:

⁷² Lord Beaverbrook, *Men and Power*, (London, 1956), 155.

⁷³ War Cabinet Meeting, 25 April 1917, NA, CAB 23/2/126.

⁷⁴ An extract of this memorandum is in Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 124 et seq.

The first I heard that Lloyd George's [Lloyd George's] visit to the Admiralty was primarily in connection with the Convoy Organisation, was when the Chapter on convoy came under discussion. My impression was that he came to look into Admiralty Organisation generally ... There is no foundation for the belief that his visit was in any way the cause of my suggestion that the time had arrived for starting convoy. It must be obvious that if Lloyd George came with the intention of forcing a convoy on an unwilling Admiralty, he would have dealt with you and not with the Director of a Division of the War Staff. (A.L.D) ... My Minute of 26th April had no connection whatever with Lloyd George's visit. It was the direct result of: (1) The serious and progressive loss of ships weekly. (2) The assured prospect of additional naval forces becoming available as the organisation developed.

These two factors changed the situation and warranted the introduction of the convoy without delay. Had the losses remained stationary, the risk [of introducing convoy] in my opinion would not have been justified until the measures in course of development had been brought into use.⁷⁵

Ultimately then, the issue becomes one of credibility. Marder, commenting on the above, wrote that he saw

No reason whatever to doubt the truth of Duff's statement. It was his minute of 26 April, *not* Lloyd George's intervention that was decisive in converting the First Sea Lord to a trial of the convoy system. And this minute was prompted, *not* by the news of the Prime Minister's coming visit to the Admiralty, but by the two factors mentioned above, and by a third,

⁷⁵ Draft note, Duff to Jellicoe, (undated, but probably written in 1928), NMM, Duff MSS, DFF1.

Henderson's figures on arrivals and departures in the ocean trades, which Duff received at this time.⁷⁶

Certainly, the evidence would support Marder's views in that it was the 'serious and progressive shipping losses' and 'the prospect of additional naval forces' becoming available that swayed the decision in favour of the general convoy. As to the third factor, Commander Henderson was no doubt instrumental in developing statistics that enabled detailed escort requirements to be calculated and worked closely with the Ministry of Shipping to that end. However, it is doubtful that the production of these statistics actually influenced the decision. As indicated, from the information collated by Captain Smith on the Atlantic trade early in January 1917, the Admiralty were under no illusions as to the volume of shipping and consequently the resources required to provide adequate escorts.

There is a further point that warrants discussion on this issue. Sir Maurice Hankey also seeks credit for converting the Admiralty to the convoy system, claiming that on 11 February 1917 he 'had a brainwave on the subject of anti-submarine warfare,' namely that convoy was the only effective answer to the U-boat.⁷⁷ This 'brainwave' culminated in a memorandum to Lloyd George, which set out the objections that had been made and concluded that although these were 'formidable', the advantages of the convoy far outweighed the disadvantages.⁷⁸ This memorandum was apparently read to Jellicoe and Duff at a meeting with Lloyd George and Hankey on 13 February 1917, but once again its significance is the subject of contradictory views. Newbolt describes the memorandum as the 'clearest and most authentic account of the reasoning which enabled the War Cabinet to sustain their constitutional part in the conduct of the war; not as technical experts, but as responsible leaders

⁷⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 163 (Marder's italics).

⁷⁷ Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, ii, 640.

⁷⁸ Hankey Memorandum, 11 February 1917, quoted Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 10-14.

bringing in their powers at the decisive moment to carry forward and support their high executive officers'.⁷⁹ Jellicoe, on the other hand, is dismissive of the significance of the memorandum, remarking that he 'did not personally recollect this discussion, so that it could not have left much impression on my mind'.⁸⁰ More to the point, it would seem that at the time Lloyd George also did not attach much urgency to the matter as six weeks passed before he gave it further consideration, much to Hankey's frustration.⁸¹ Hankey believed that this delay was due to Lloyd George's preoccupation with the pending offensive on the Western Front under the command of General Nivelle and his desire to avoid 'a spectacle of disunion' on the eve of the first meeting of the newly constituted Imperial War Cabinet.⁸² He might also have added that being at odds with Sir William Robertson on the appointment of General Nivelle to command the allied armies over the head of General Haig, he did not wish to be seen to be fighting with both his senior military and naval advisers simultaneously so soon after the formation of his coalition government. Nevertheless, it can be argued that he was not justified in the level of criticism he directed at the Admiralty when he was also guilty of delay.

Finally in this context, there is an issue related to the chronology of the events and which links back to Duff's aforementioned comments on the question of risk. Germany launched the unrestricted campaign on 1 February 1917. As mentioned, Jellicoe had indicated to the Imperial War Cabinet Meeting on the 26 April that convoys would be introduced on a general basis as soon as the required

⁷⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁸⁰ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 112. The fact that Jellicoe is so dismissive of this document may be a reflection of his belief that reference to it should not have been included in the *Official History* on the grounds that it was not an 'official' document, that it was informally written, not submitted to the Admiralty for comment and merely read out at the meeting. Jellicoe, *Errors in Naval Operations*, BL, Add. MSS 49043.

⁸¹ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, ii, 648.

⁸² Ibid.

number of escorts had become available. The first convoy sailed from Gibraltar on 10 May 1917.⁸³ Therefore the length of time between the launch of the unrestricted campaign and introduction of the first convoy was just two months. Moreover, although the figures of British losses sunk by U-boats in February and March 1917 rose to 256,000 tons and 284,000 tons respectively, the situation had actually eased in the first two weeks of April and during that period losses were almost the same as the average for the first quarter of 1917.⁸⁴ The losses for the first two weeks in April were therefore appreciably below the highest level to which they had risen.⁸⁵ Further, steps taken to cut the length of certain voyages, to reroute ships and to impose restrictions on imports resulted in indications that through the early part of April, the shipping situation was actually improving.⁸⁶ However, in the second half of April the situation changed dramatically. In what has been termed ‘black fortnight,’ almost 400,000 tons of British shipping alone was sunk and as stated, by the end of April the total of world shipping sunk by U-boat had risen to over 834,000 tons.⁸⁷ Thus, it can be argued that in the first two and a half months of the year, although the losses had become serious, they did not become critical until the end of April 1917. Hence, the time it took for the Admiralty to react to the changing situation was extremely short indeed. Further, this sequence of events seems to accord with Duff’s remarks regarding risk had the ‘losses remained stationary’, thereby supporting his contention that the Admiralty made the decision to implement the general convoy system on its own initiative.

⁸³ The Admiralty had first asked the US Navy Department on 3 May to send ships under convoy with US destroyers that were being delivered to Freetown, but because of the US Navy Department’s initial opposition to convoy, the first Atlantic convoy did not sail until 24 May. Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 187.

⁸⁴ Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*, III, 56.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

Conclusions

The consensus of the majority of historical commentators is that Jellicoe delayed unduly in introducing a general convoy system. The tenor of the aforementioned remarks of Hough and Winton reflect the fierceness of much of that criticism. Even Nicholas Black, who is more sympathetic to Jellicoe's performance as First Sea Lord than most, claimed that Jellicoe had 'largely failed' in finding a solution to the submarine crisis.⁸⁸ However, this seems to be a perception, possibly stemming from the vitriolic criticism engendered by Lloyd George, which has not been seriously challenged.

Considering firstly the question of who was responsible for introducing the convoy system, there is no doubt that external pressure was applied to the Admiralty to consider the matter, notably by the Board of Trade, Hankey and, towards the end of April 1917, Lloyd George and the War Cabinet. However, ultimately it was Jellicoe's own decision and the evidence is such that he made the decision before Lloyd George's visit to the Admiralty on 30 April. In an interview given to the *Morning Post* following the publication of Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*, Carson claimed that Lloyd George's assertion that it was he who initiated the convoy system was 'the biggest lie ever told. Jellicoe did not oppose the convoy system but required time to organise it.'⁸⁹ Whether or not it was the 'biggest lie' Lloyd George ever told is debatable, but from the foregoing, there is little doubt that his claim was a gross exaggeration.

⁸⁸ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 172.

⁸⁹ Quoted, Hyde, *Carson*, 419.

A second point that appears to have received scant attention is whether the timescale that elapsed between Jellicoe becoming First Sea Lord and the decision to implement the convoy could be considered reasonable given the consensus of views, rightly or wrongly, held both at the Admiralty and amongst merchant ship captains, that ships sailing singly were less vulnerable to attack than those sailing in convoy. In this context, both the shortage of available escorts and the fact that Germany did not launch the unrestricted campaign until the beginning of February 1917 must also be considered. In these circumstances, it must be said that a period of two and a half months is not particularly long. When Jellicoe joined the Admiralty, there was no organisation in place that could have implemented the convoy system, and until the Ministry of Shipping had been established and organised, there was no mechanism for compelling ship owners to sail their ships in convoy.

Jellicoe had a major dilemma. He had insufficient escort vessels. This was not an illusion as later claimed by Captain Dewar or as a consequence of any 'arithmetical mix up'. Work undertaken by Captain Webb at Jellicoe's request in January 1917 had provided a realistic assessment of the Atlantic traffic and it was concluded on the basis of that information that there were insufficient vessels to implement a full convoy system. Jellicoe's dilemma was that to provide the necessary trade protection he would have to denude the Grand Fleet of part of its destroyer screen, thereby reducing the fleet's superiority over the High Seas Fleet. As Jellicoe later wrote in a paper for the War Cabinet:

The Grand Fleet is the centre and pivot on which all naval operations depend.

It is true that its operations are confined to the North Sea but on its very existence depends the possibility of carrying out the all-important operation of safeguarding our line of communications. The safety and efficiency of the

Grand Fleet to a large extent depend ... on its destroyers and to carry out any policy that involves a reduction in [their] number increases the already considerable risks that we now take.⁹⁰

The irony is that, as discussed in Chapter VII below, shortly after expressing that view, Jellicoe was prepared to modify his position and risk reducing the capability of the Grand Fleet in order to further the battle against the U-boat. However by that time it had become more evident that the High Seas Fleet would not sally from its harbours and engage the Grand Fleet in a major action. In February 1917, Jellicoe was surely right to exercise caution, particularly given the number of legitimate and ‘formidable’ disadvantages of the convoy system perceived both from within and outside the Admiralty.

There is no doubt that in hindsight the convoy proved successful in combating the U-boat and it is arguable that history dictated that it was the obvious solution and hence should have been introduced earlier. However, it was not the only factor involved in defeating the U-boat. Contrary to Marder’s view, the U-boat also had to be sunk and in this respect the development of offensive weaponry such as the depth-charge, hydrophone and an intensive mining strategy, played an important part.

The criticism directed by Lloyd George at the Admiralty under Jellicoe over the introduction of the convoy system is therefore unjustified. Jellicoe himself expressed the view that the perception of his failing to act promptly in introducing the convoy system may have contributed to his eventual dismissal. However on the basis of the foregoing, objectively any loss of confidence by the Prime Minister on this count was misplaced and the politicians and press who were so critical of the Admiralty were too impatient.

⁹⁰ Jellicoe, Paper to the War Cabinet on the Influence of the Submarine upon Naval Policy and Operations, 18 November 1917, NA, ADM 116/1806.

Chapter IV

Justified or Unjustified Cause

Introduction

In his *War Memoirs*, the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, stated that by June 1917, he had decided to remove Admiral Sir John Jellicoe from office.¹ At that time, Jellicoe himself recognised that a probable cause for his dismissal would be the perceived delay in introducing the convoy system, writing that ‘politicians have been ... intriguing against myself and the Admiralty for some little time ... Of course it is all as a result of the submarine campaign and it seems impossible to put into the head of the ordinary landmen that a submarine is a very different class of vessel to deal with.’² Given the seriousness of the shipping situation and the potential impact of the U-boat campaign on the future war effort, it would not have been surprising if Jellicoe had been replaced at that time. Indeed, as discussed later, there is little doubt that Lloyd George would have sacked Jellicoe then had he been able to do so. He certainly pressed Sir Edward Carson to make a change.

However, Jellicoe was not dismissed at that time. As noted, he remained in office for a further six months, by which time the U-boat threat had been contained, if not eliminated. As Admiral Sims, in command of the US Navy’s operations in the United Kingdom, wrote immediately following Jellicoe’s dismissal, ‘I was distressed

¹ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1178, 1180.

² Memorandum, Jellicoe to Browning, 7 July 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49037.

to hear of your leaving the Admiralty when the effects of all your anti-submarine measures are showing such great success.’³

The reasons for Jellicoe’s dismissal after this lapse of time are clouded by the contradictory statements by Lloyd George and Sir Eric Geddes, who had succeeded Carson as First Lord, as to who was ultimately responsible for the dismissal. In direct contrast to Lloyd George’s claim that he had decided to dismiss Jellicoe, Geddes categorically denied any outside pressure on him to do so, denied that Lloyd George had ever attempted to influence his judgement and claimed that he alone had arrived at the conclusion that a change in the office of First Sea Lord was needed.⁴

This contradiction begs the question as to who was responsible, bearing in mind that Geddes was only appointed First Lord after the convoy system had been introduced and when the indications were that shipping losses were diminishing. Further, it does not appear that Geddes, at any time after his appointment, sought to change the overall naval strategy. Thus, the question arises as to whether there were genuine alternative grounds for the dismissal that arose subsequent to Geddes joining the Admiralty, or whether he was merely a tool used by Lloyd George to engineer the dismissal which Lloyd George was already intent upon when an opportune moment arose.

The answers to this question are of significance in the context of the current enquiry for three reasons. Firstly, if Geddes was merely the tool of Lloyd George, the implication is that he wished to be absolved of responsibility, which in turn suggests that he would have difficulty publicly justifying the dismissal. Secondly, if, as very nearly transpired, a constitutional crisis arose, Lloyd George had an available

³ Letter, Sims to Jellicoe, 29 December, 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49036.

⁴ Geddes, Draft Statement, undated, NA, ADM 116/1806; PA, LG, F/18/1. This draft statement was prepared in anticipation of a question being raised in Parliament by Carson about the dismissal of Jellicoe, but was not used.

scapegoat in Geddes. Thirdly, given the importance of the role of First Sea Lord at such a critical stage of the war, it can be argued that the unjustified dismissal impinged upon the democratic accountability of executive government to Parliament. This third point was well made in a parliamentary debate on the naval Estimates in March 1918, by the Member of Parliament, Mr Ronald McNeill, when Jellicoe's dismissal was discussed at some length:

But I am sure my right hon. Friend [Bonar Law, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, who had also commented on the dismissal], would not say that when an event so very striking takes place that a man, who is universally recognised as the greatest scientific administrator the Navy has, is dismissed at a critical point in the War, therefore the principle, reasonable as it is which my right hon. Friend has just laid down, can be held to silence not only criticism, but inquiry in this House of Commons ... I doubt very much whether, on the whole, it would not be in the interests of the country for a clean breast to be made of it and that the Government should do one of two things - either explain to the country that Lord Jellicoe was no longer competent for the work, or, if they feel they can no longer do that, that they should restore him to the post in which the whole of the country and the whole of the Navy have complete confidence in him.⁵

The 'principle' which Bonar Law had made in the debate was that it was not necessary for Government to give reasons every time a change was made to the head of one of the armed services. However, McNeill must be correct in his assertion. The principle Bonar Law alluded to should not be used in matters of national importance to avoid proper inquiry into the actions of government, all the more so in this

⁵ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 6 March 1918.

particular case where, as is discussed later, Jellicoe's dismissal was not even the subject of proper debate in Cabinet. Clearly, the question as to who was best suited to lead the Navy through the war was a matter of national importance; and from the tenor of other speeches made during the debate, McNeill was not alone in his opinion. However, McNeill's protestations and his proposed courses of action were ignored, which in itself suggests that the Government, in the form of Lloyd George and Geddes, had difficulty in justifying the action taken.

Admiral Bacon also had difficulty in finding justification for the decision. It has already been noted that Bacon's opinions should be regarded with some circumspection. Yet, his assessment in this context remains perceptive. In his view, Jellicoe's dismissal 'was one of the chief of several short sighted acts committed by the British Government in the last year of the War, and one which indirectly affected greatly Lord Jellicoe's reputation'.⁶ He goes on to suggest that:

The inference drawn by the public generally must have been that there were weighty reasons to prompt such an act. It is therefore necessary to examine the reasons that were advanced for this step, and to determine so far as is possible from the known facts, what justification the politicians had for his removal. The difficulty of doing so is somewhat reduced owing to the fact that separate reasons were given to different persons in authority. If these reasons are proved to be false, then Sir John's dismissal can be triply condemned.⁷

Bacon's reference to 'separate reasons' being given to different persons probably relates to the debacle that occurred between Geddes and the other Sea Lords immediately after the dismissal, which is the subject of later discussion. However,

⁶ Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 374.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Bacon's logic in determining what the 'weighty reasons' might have been and whether or not there were genuine grounds for removing Jellicoe appears sound.

In the previous chapter, the conclusion drawn was that the controversy over the introduction of the convoy did not justify Jellicoe's dismissal. This chapter will therefore consider what other reasons for the dismissal there may have been in the intervening six month period. There is no doubt that there were a number of recorded events through October, November and December 1917 that gave rise to differences of opinion between Jellicoe and Geddes. Jellicoe himself acknowledges that 'for some weeks before I left the Admiralty I had occasion to take exception to the methods of Sir Eric Geddes, the First Lord, although no serious disagreement occurred.'⁸

These matters included the issue of honours for Admiral Duff, the aftermath of the destruction of two Scandinavian convoys in October and December 1917 and a dispute over the method of sealing off the Dover Straits from German Submarines and the related competence of Bacon. Each of these issues will be considered further in this chapter to determine whether alone or in combination they justified the dismissal.

Honours for Duff

The first incident that falls for discussion here relates to Jellicoe's recommendation of honours for Admiral Duff. To understand both the circumstances and the tenor of Geddes' objection to this recommendation, it is appropriate again to quote Jellicoe:

⁸ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, (undated), BL, Add. MSS 49039.

The next incident was the subject of an honour for Admiral Duff whom I had recommended for a K.C.B in the New Year's Honours.

Geddes ... asked if I had recommended him for his services afloat or at the Admiralty. I replied the latter. He said he objected to his manner, and I said I was recommending for his services and not his manner.

Geddes said he did not like his manner to him or the wording of some of his minutes. I then said that I feared he did not realise that the Sea Lords were his colleagues and not his subordinates, and it was both their right and their duty to state their opinions quite clearly and frankly, realising of course that he was the responsible minister.⁹

Jellicoe obviously considered that Duff's services in establishing the Anti-Submarine Division fully warranted a knighthood. On the other hand, Geddes' objection apparently lay, not in Duff's performance or capability, but in his manner.

This exemplifies the difference of approach between Geddes and Jellicoe. After five months as First Lord, Geddes still had to come to terms with the traditions of the Navy and the statutory role and responsibilities of the Board of the Admiralty. His inclination was still to act as 'Chief Executive' in a manner similar to running the railway company he had managed before the war and to regard his fellow members of the Board as subordinates, rather than as colleagues holding joint responsibility for the activities of the Navy. However, the dispute between Geddes and Jellicoe over this issue did not appear serious. According to Jellicoe, 'after some further talk' Geddes agreed to put Duff's name forward for the honour, presumably conceding that

⁹ Ibid.

Duff's work at the Admiralty was indeed justified.¹⁰ Certainly, in isolation this incident would not warrant Jellicoe's dismissal.

One further point should be noted in this context. The disagreement, such as it was, between Geddes and Jellicoe over Duff's honour, was not related to any substantive operational or strategic issue. It was related to the manner in which the Board of the Admiralty was accustomed to conducting its business. In other words, it was the way in which the Admiralty went about its affairs, not what it was doing, that appeared to concern Geddes.

The Scandinavian Convoys

The second difference of opinion arose from a more serious and more complex problem, namely the sinking of two Scandinavian convoys by German surface ships. Both of these events gave rise to considerable adverse press comment, particularly in the *Daily Mail*. The first incident arose on 17 October 1917 when a westbound convoy of 12 merchant ships, accompanied by four escort vessels, was attacked by two German light cruisers about 65 miles east of Lerwick. Nine of the merchant vessels and two destroyers were sunk. The German cruisers escaped unscathed despite the Admiralty knowing that the German cruisers were at sea and, at the time, two squadrons of British cruisers were in the approaches to the Skagerrak and a further three squadrons of British cruisers were sailing just to the north of the Dogger Bank.

¹⁰ Even if Geddes did not appreciate Duff's manner, he did appear to appreciate the work he was doing, as immediately after Jellicoe's dismissal Duff tendered his resignation, but was persuaded by Geddes to withdraw it.

The ensuing Court of Enquiry attributed the loss to the 'ill advised decision' of the commander of the escort to attack the superior German force rather than attempting to draw it off. However, it would seem that the Admiralty also appears to have been at fault in that it did not advise Admiral Beatty, responsible for the protection of the Scandinavian convoys from surface attack, as to the likely whereabouts of the German cruisers. If he had known, it is possible that he would have altered the disposition of the British cruisers at sea.¹¹

The second incident occurred on 12 December 1917. This time, an eastbound convoy from Bergen to Lerwick, comprising five neutral merchant ships, accompanied by two British destroyers and four armed trawlers, was attacked by four modern German destroyers. All ships in the convoy, apart from one of the escorting destroyers, were sunk and again the German force escaped unscathed. As Newbolt wrote in the *Official History*:

The British destroyers were no match for their opponents, and they were, moreover, in the leeward position. The Northwest swept a blinding storm of spray into the faces of the gunners and when the *Partridge* and the *Pellew* [the British destroyers] were in the trough of the waves, nothing was to be seen of the enemy except their masts and the tops of their funnels. The Germans made admirable use of their advantage, and as usual their fire was extremely accurate and rapid.¹²

Despite these excuses of inferior forces and foul weather, unquestionably there was some systemic failure. As in the previous incident, other British warships were in the vicinity but not close enough to intervene. However, it appears from the Court of Enquiry relating to this incident, held on 18 December 1917, that the commander of

¹¹ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 293 et seq.

¹² Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 189.

the escorting force was not aware of this. Beatty, to give him credit, accepted full responsibility for the strength (or lack of strength) of the escort, but not for the sailing time of the convoy, which was decided by the Admiralty. Thus the Court of Enquiry concluded 'that the cause of this regrettable incident was the continuation of a system of control of convoys which had previously proved ineffective for providing attack against fast surface vessels ... The evidence shows that the responsibility is too divided and that no definite orders for guidance had been given.'¹³

Consequently, it is arguable, particularly after the second incident, that the Admiralty was at fault both for failing to introduce a system of convoy with significantly strengthened escort cover and for not ensuring that ship commanders had the appropriate intelligence information. Certainly the press thought so, and not only the Northcliffe press in this particular instance. The *Daily News* described the incident 'as a disaster which will create indignation as well as a deep concern in the public mind' and the *Pall Mall Gazette* asserted that the affair had come so close to the previous catastrophe 'that the public mind will have considerable need of reassurance as to the state of our commerce defences'.¹⁴

Yet, as was often the case, this press criticism was not wholly justified and there were factors that militated against the Admiralty's culpability. Firstly, the attacks on the Scandinavian convoys by surface ships represented a new tactic introduced by Admiral Scheer as a result of the success that convoys were having against U-boat attacks. As Admiral De Robeck, in command of the Lerwick shore base, said at the Court of Inquiry regarding the second attack, 'I consider that the

¹³ Report of the Court of Enquiry, 18 December 1918, N A, ADM 137/3744.

¹⁴ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 315.

reason they [The German Naval Command] are risking their surface ships against the convoys is that their submarines have achieved so little against us.’¹⁵

Secondly, the Admiralty were unlucky in the timing of the second attack. After the first attack, a full scale review of the Scandinavian convoy system was initiated by Jellicoe. In the words of Admiral Sir William James, then a Captain at the Admiralty, ‘There was a devil of a row about this and Beatty came here to the Admiralty for a meeting.’¹⁶ The meeting was held on 22 October 1917, and from that meeting, by 5 November, plans for a revised system had been developed. These plans were under final consideration at a conference at Longhope on 10 December 1917; i.e., two days before the second attack.¹⁷ The issue then is not that the Admiralty failed to act, but whether it acted with sufficient expedition to improve matters.

The third factor is more generic and one that constantly troubled the Admiralty throughout the war. As discussed in Chapter III, the Admiralty lacked the resources to meet all the demands upon it. Beatty, like Jellicoe before him, persistently complained of the inadequacy of screening destroyers to protect his capital ships from submarine attack. As Beatty said at the Court of Inquiry following the second attack:

Now that the enemy have interfered with over-sea traffic, the protection must take a place in the Admiralty policy as it is quite impossible to preserve the Fleet in a state of readiness at all times to meet enemy forces and at the same time be capable of providing absolute protection to the convoys across the North Sea.¹⁸

¹⁵ Report of the Court of Enquiry, 18 December 1918, NA, ADM 137/3744.

¹⁶ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 295.

¹⁷ A revised system went into effect on 19 January 1918 which clarified the responsibilities as between the Admiralty, the Commander of the Grand Fleet and the Admiral commanding the Coast of Scotland and reduced the number, but increased the size of the convoys. This meant that only one Scandinavian convoy was at sea at any one time, thereby reducing the stress on the Grand Fleet’s resources. The fact that two convoys were at sea at the time of both attacks was a significant factor in the failure of the supporting cruiser squadrons to provide the desired protection.

¹⁸ Report of the Court of Enquiry, 18 December 1918, NA, ADM 137/3744.

Beatty's comment links to the fourth factor, an argument well made by the conservative press journals, such as the *Spectator* and the *Daily Telegraph*, after the first attack, namely that the North Sea is a large place and it was impossible to prevent a few swift, powerful enemy raiders from steaming out from time to time in darkness or low visibility and overwhelming the convoy and its escort.¹⁹ In other words, unless the naval escort for each convoy was strengthened considerably, either in terms of the number or power of the escort vessels or both, it was not possible, given the area to be covered, to provide this 'absolute protection' against swift 'hit and run' surface attacks. Beatty had been unwilling to compromise the readiness of the Grand Fleet to provide additional escort cover.

Prima facie, therefore, it can be said that the mitigating factors were such as to warrant a powerful argument that Jellicoe's dismissal on the grounds of these two incidents alone was not justified. However, the striking factor here is that it was not the attacks on the convoy *per se* that led to the contretemps between Geddes and Jellicoe, but the way in which the Court of Enquiry that followed the second incident was to be managed. According to Jellicoe:

I had a bad cold during the weekend after the attack and was in bed on the Saturday when Sir H. Oliver was sent over by Sir E. Geddes to see me. He said the First Lord desired an immediate enquiry ordered and that it was to be composed of very senior Flag Officers whose names were to be reported for approval, and that all the facts were to be brought out. He added that if I refused to order this sort of enquiry he intended to send up Lord Fisher to enquire into it. Sir Rosslyn Wemyss also saw me and said he had told the

¹⁹ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 298.

First Lord that Naval Courts of Enquiry were quite common and that there was no need to make a fuss about them as the procedure was well understood.²⁰

From this, Wemyss clearly thought that Geddes was overreacting to the situation and did not understand the usual naval processes for conducting Courts of Enquiry.

Jellicoe also considered that Geddes was overreacting. His response to the prospect of Fisher being sent north to investigate was robust. He wrote from his sickbed:

Oliver tells me you mentioned to him this morning a proposal to send Lord Fisher to Scapa to inquire into the question of the attack on the Scandinavian convoy. I can hardly believe that the suggestion is serious. Such a step would go some way to destroy the confidence of the officers in the Fleet in the Admiralty. Lord Fisher has not been to sea since about [date deleted in original] & he has absolutely no experience of modern warfare, but what is more important the Navy would not trust his judgement & impartiality.²¹

These were harsh words from the prodigy of Fisher whose career benefited significantly from his mentoring. However, following his resignation as First Sea Lord in the aftermath of the Dardanelles debacle, Fisher was not then highly regarded within the Navy. Although he had been First Sea Lord for the second time from October 1914 to May 1915, Jellicoe's opinion of his lack of relevant experience is correct in as much as Fisher had not held a sea command for 15 years. That factor, combined with Fisher's penchant for intrigue and indeed his age, suggests that Jellicoe's assessment that sending Fisher north would undermine the confidence of the officers in the Grand Fleet was correct.²²

²⁰ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

²¹ Letter, Jellicoe to Geddes, 15 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1806.

²² At this time Fisher was 76 years of age.

Two other points emerge from this exchange. Firstly, the desire to protect Beatty and his subordinates in the manner described is indicative of Jellicoe's loyalty to his subordinates. Secondly, Geddes must have been aware of Fisher's reputation. That and the tenor of the note suggest that Geddes, in threatening to send Fisher to conduct an inquiry, was either naive or was acting in a fit of pique. Moreover, this difference of approach was compounded in that Geddes altered the telegram that Jellicoe had drafted to send to Beatty and reinserted wording to include the demand that, contrary to normal procedure, the Admiralty approve the names of the officers conducting the inquiry. Geddes also sent an additional telegram to Beatty demanding that 'nothing but a full and searching enquiry would satisfy the public'.²³ However, the saga did not end there. To continue Jellicoe's account:

On Sunday he sent over to me a draft of an announcement to make in Parliament. It was worded so as to throw blame on Sir D Beatty, and in such a way as to give the idea that the loss of convoy was a disaster of the greatest magnitude as well as preventable. I objected to this wording, altered it a great deal and sent it back. Most of my alterations were adopted, but not all and the announcement was not a happy one.²⁴

This also suggests that Geddes was naïve both in political terms and in the affairs of the Navy. The destruction of the convoy was serious, but certainly not of the 'greatest magnitude'. It may well have been preventable had the recommendations agreed during the 22 October meeting been implemented sooner, but on security grounds it would not necessarily have been prudent to admit that publicly. Certainly, it would have inappropriate to place the blame publicly on Beatty before the outcome of the Court of Enquiry was known.

²³ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

²⁴ Ibid.

Moreover, Jellicoe's approach to the communication with Beatty over the matter was subsequently vindicated. On visiting the Grand Fleet on 22 December 1917, he found Beatty 'furious about the telegram which I then saw for the first time as sent by Sir E Geddes'.²⁵ Beatty thought that the telegrams implied that his authority was being usurped, that the disposition of his ships had been faulty, and implied that he might 'pack' the Court.²⁶ On his return to the Admiralty, Jellicoe told Geddes that he agreed with Beatty's view that the telegrams 'were insulting'.²⁷ Geddes, apparently, 'did not like Jellicoe's frankness'.²⁸ Nevertheless, despite it being arguable that Beatty overreacted, he was later able to extract a letter of apology from Geddes which he then read to the assembled company of his Flag officers.²⁹

Thus, it is clear that Geddes conceded to Jellicoe's point of view in not sending Fisher to conduct the enquiry. To an extent Geddes also accepted Jellicoe's approach to the matter by modifying the draft telegram to Beatty. Further, in subsequently giving Beatty the apology, it can be argued that Geddes overreacted to the situation and that Jellicoe's approach to the matter was warranted. Moreover, as in the case of Geddes' objection to Duff's honours award, again it was the way in which the Navy conducted its affairs more than any substantive operational or strategic matter that appeared to cause the problem between Geddes and Jellicoe. Geddes had no complaint over the substantive recommendations made to improve the protection of the Scandinavian convoys. Thus, given these circumstances, it is difficult to conclude that either the destruction of the convoys or Jellicoe's reaction after the incidents warranted his dismissal.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Stephen Roskill, *Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Beatty; The Last Naval Hero*, (London, 1980), 241.

²⁷ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Roskill, *Earl Beatty*, 241.

Admiral Bacon and the Dover Patrol

A third matter that Jellicoe thought may have contributed to his dismissal relates to a dispute over the Dover mine barrage. In contrast to Hough, Marder thought this to be ‘the immediate cause of Jellicoe’s dismissal’.³⁰ Patterson, in his biography of Jellicoe, describes the dispute thus:

[Admiral Wemyss], supported ... by Keyes ... felt that more could be done to prevent German submarines passing through it’ [the Dover Barrage] which the Intelligence Department had established they were doing without much difficulty. Bacon, the architect of the Barrage, obstinately refused to believe this. Towards the end of December Wemyss therefore proposed both to Geddes and Jellicoe that Bacon should be replaced. Geddes agreed; Jellicoe, who was prone to carry loyalty to his friends almost to a fault, dissented.³¹

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether Jellicoe’s loyalty was misplaced, it appears that Marder and Patterson have placed too much reliance on Admiral Wemyss’ version of events. In his memoirs, Wemyss states:

The Intelligence Department satisfactorily proved to me that the enemy did pass the Straits successfully and almost unchallenged. Sir R Bacon on the other hand maintained that they did not, that his system of nets was satisfactory and that the proof of this lay in the fact that no ship had ever been torpedoed in his area ... Towards the end of December I brought the subject up very insistently before both the First Lord and the First Sea Lord, and my contention was that Bacon was not being successful in his anti-submarine measures, that we should leave no stone unturned to try and stop the passage

³⁰ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 337.

³¹ Patterson, *Jellicoe*, 203.

of these craft and that we had better try somebody else and go on changing until we found somebody who could.³²

This, despite Wemyss proximity to the matter, is a gross oversimplification of events.

Firstly, whilst Bacon may have been sceptical about the number of U-boats thought to be passing through the Dover Straits, he was far from satisfied about the effectiveness of the barrage. The original barrage, constructed in September 1916, consisted of a line of moored mine nets running between the Goodwin Sands to the outer ends of the Ruytingen Shoals, i.e., running to the east of the line between Dover and Calais. This was supplemented by a line of deep mines about half a mile to the west of the mine nets. The purpose of the barrage was both to assist in the protection of Allied cross channel shipping from German surface attack and to inhibit the passage of German submarines to the western approaches to Britain. However, as early as February 1917, Bacon had recognised that the original barrage was not particularly effective and had submitted an additional scheme to the Admiralty whereby another line of deep mines would be run from Folkestone to Gris-Nez. However, sufficient mines for the additional minefield were not made available to him until November 1917. Nevertheless, the new minefield was virtually complete by the time Jellicoe, and shortly thereafter, Bacon was dismissed.

Secondly, the dispute did not concern the barrage *per se*. The nub of the issue arose from a report of the Channel Barrage Committee which had been established by Geddes, with the newly appointed Director of Plans, Admiral Keyes, as Chairman, and with wide terms of reference ‘to investigate and report on the possible measures for constructing a barrage between England and France’.³³ It is notable that despite being in command of the Dover patrol and having experience of the problems

³² Quoted, Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 365.

³³ Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 121.

encountered with the original barrage, neither Bacon nor a representative of the Dover Patrol was appointed to this committee. The Committee's report, dated 29 November 1917, was a partial indictment of Bacon. It concluded 'that the present barrage forms no effective obstacle to the passage of submarines'.³⁴ On the other hand, it also concluded that 'Admiral Bacon's latest proposal regarding the Folkestone to Gris-Nez mine-field coincides generally with the views of the Committee.'³⁵ Three other recommendations that are pertinent here were made. Firstly, the area above the minefield should be more closely patrolled by surface vessels to force U-boats to dive into the minefield. Secondly, the area above the minefield should be brightly illuminated, ultimately by searchlights in specially constructed stationary lighthouse ships, but pending their availability, by flares and searchlights on patrol vessels. Thirdly, the Committee recommended that 'the construction, maintenance, defence and patrol of the same should be under the control of one officer, who should be solely and directly responsible to the Admiralty in all matters relating thereto.'³⁶

Bacon objected to the first recommendation on the grounds that he did not have the resources to meet the 24 hour patrols suggested by the Barrage Committee and to meet his other responsibilities, notably protecting the cross Channel shipping from surface attack. He objected to the second because he believed the suggested interim measures would light up the patrol vessels making them vulnerable to attack. He had no objection in principle to illuminating the minefield, but he wanted to wait until the stationary light ships were ready. Indeed, in one of several letters Bacon wrote to Geddes on the issue, he remarked that 'if the Admiralty are whole hearted in the matter and will provide me with the material and follow my plan we can practically

³⁴ Interim Report of the Channel Barrage Committee, 29 November 1917, Paul Halpern (ed.), *The Keyes Papers*, (London, 1972), I, 420.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 421.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

close the Straits, but if my plan is emasculated by makeshift lightships or fears - groundless - of the loss of shipping it will be a failure.³⁷

However, it is Bacon's response to the third point that caused the most irritation within the Plans Department of the Admiralty, but more in the manner than in the actual substance of the objection. In a further letter to Geddes, Bacon wrote, 'The whole matter is one of compromise and difficulty and must be run on practical experience and not on preconceived notions.'³⁸ Moreover, he later commented that:

The above statement put, as politely as I possibly could, the obvious fact that it was better to leave the defence of the Straits to the Admiral who had local knowledge, experience, and the whole responsibility entailed by the command at Dover, than to allow dabbling by a committee who had no local knowledge, experience or responsibility.³⁹

From this it is evident that Bacon was challenging the competence of the Barrage Committee on the grounds that they did not have the requisite experience. In his reference to 'compromise and difficulty' he was asserting his right as commander of the Dover Patrol to utilise the resources available to him as he, and not the Barrage Committee, considered appropriate. Indeed, Bacon's sensitivity to interference was not without support at the Admiralty. For example, in one docket, Admiral Oliver noted that 'it is undesirable to give Senior Officers detailed orders as to the disposition and working of vessels under their command.'⁴⁰

Thus summarising, towards the end of 1917 a dispute had arisen between the Plans Division at the Admiralty and the officer commanding the Dover Patrol on the temporary method of illuminating the minefield, the extent to which the minefield

³⁷ Letter, Bacon to Geddes, 23 November 1917, NA, ADM 116/1806.

³⁸ Quoted, Bacon, *Dover Patrol*, II, 410.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Minute, Oliver, 12 December 1917, Halpern, *Keyes Papers*, 429.

should be patrolled and as to who should be responsible for prioritising resources within the Dover Patrol, the Admiralty or the local admiral in command.

Keyes's frustration over the dispute was evident and culminated in an internal note to Jellicoe that included the following comments:

Concur with D.C.N.S [Deputy Chief of Naval Staff] as to the undesirability of giving Senior Officers detailed orders as to the dispositions and working of vessels under their command. The present case, however, would appear to be one in which some departure from established custom is necessary ... The net result is that up to the present no adequate steps have been taken, and the enemy continues to pass through the Straits of Dover without hindrance ... The measures which the Vice-Admiral are to take to meet this very serious situation ... are so inadequate that the Admiralty must either take action by directing certain measures to be carried out and accept the responsibility, or they must accept the still greater responsibility of knowing that the measures which the Vice Admiral proposes are inadequate to deal with a situation which is vitally affecting our power to carry on the war.⁴¹

Thus, on the one hand Keyes agreed with Oliver on the general principle that the Admiralty should not be giving local commanders 'detailed orders' as to the disposition of ships, but in his view the persistent intransigence of Bacon to devote sufficient resources to patrolling the minefield to the detriment of other critical activities warranted a departure from the general principle. Keyes' overriding concern was to combat the U-boat threat, which 'vitally' affected the war effort, by preventing their passage through the Channel.

⁴¹ Memorandum, Keyes to Jellicoe, 13 December 1917, *ibid.*

Jellicoe's response to Keyes' note is illuminating from a number of perspectives. Firstly, he stated that:

I am not able to accept the sweeping indictment of the work of the V.A. [Vice Admiral] Dover, as stated by the Director of Plans. The V.A's dispositions are based on experience, not only of the submarine action but of destroyer attacks, and he is naturally reluctant to ignore the latter in the attempt to deal with the former.⁴²

Thus, Jellicoe rejected the criticism of Bacon and was supportive of Bacon's right to allocate his resources according to the dangers as he perceived them. Moreover, the use of the term 'sweeping indictment' implies that Jellicoe thought Keyes had been over critical.

However, Jellicoe then proceeded to endorse Keyes' recommendations by ordering Keyes as follows:

The submarine menace is the greatest danger with which we are faced and all other considerations must give way to combating this menace and to denying the Straits of Dover to the enemy's submarines ... In order to carry out this policy it is essential that the attention of the Dover Force should for the present be directed to anti-submarine measures, and to provide the strong patrols necessary for this purpose ...

Patrol craft are to be provided in sufficient numbers in the vicinity of the deep minefield to force every submarine that is attempting to pass to dive into the minefield and a great number of drifters will be required in conjunction with patrol boats to achieve this objective ... The use of a very large number of drifters and patrol boats in the vicinity of the deep minefield

⁴² Memorandum, Jellicoe to Keyes, 14 December, 1917, *ibid*, 430.

will necessitate a strong destroyer force to safeguard them against an attack by the enemy's destroyers based on Zeebrugge and pending the provision for the proposed boom vessels fitted with searchlights, it is considered necessary for the patrol boats and destroyers to use their searchlights intermittently, the drifters using flares ...

Inform the V.A. [Vice Admiral] that the arrangements are to be put in place at the earliest possible moment, and request him to forward his scheme of patrol to the Admiralty at a very early date.⁴³

Thus, Jellicoe overrode Bacon both in the matter of providing patrol vessels for the barrage and in the matter of lighting the barrage temporarily by flares. Consequently, Jellicoe was prepared to give absolute priority to preventing the passage of U-boats through the Channel.

A further conclusion can be drawn from this response. In recognising that Bacon had wider responsibilities and that Keyes had been over-critical on the one hand, but on the other, was prepared to accept the greater risk of surface attack to focus on the U-boat issue, the order was measured and balanced. As such it counters the argument, discussed in Chapter VIII, that stress had impaired Jellicoe's judgement. Moreover, the fact that Jellicoe was prepared to override Bacon's objections in no uncertain terms dispels any concept of misplaced loyalty towards Bacon, in so far as it relates to giving necessary orders.

Whether Jellicoe's decision not to replace Bacon in these circumstances constitutes misplaced loyalty is a different issue. It is not easy to come to any conclusion on this as the interpretation of the events of those directly involved differs considerably. On the one hand, Wemyss was adamant that Bacon should be replaced,

⁴³ Ibid, 431.

holding the view that 'as Bacon was not successful in anti-submarine measures ... Jellicoe maintained Bacon was the best man we had for the job and should remain. I on the other hand maintained that he was not.'⁴⁴ Moreover, Wemyss was prepared to resign over the issue. He had not been particularly comfortable in the role of Deputy First Sea Lord because he believed he was not being given sufficient responsibility, and the difference of opinion with Jellicoe over Bacon was the final straw which 'determined me to resign'.⁴⁵ The question of replacing Bacon was therefore a matter of considerable importance to him.

To Jellicoe on the other hand, the dispute had not assumed the same magnitude. His version of events was:

I fancy that Admirals Wemyss and Keyes represented to Sir E. Geddes their view that Admiral Bacon should be replaced. As to this, I always said that if Sir R. Bacon did not carry out the wishes of the Board, he would, of course, have to go, but so far he had as quickly as was possible altered his arrangements in accordance with any views expressed by me. This process was going on and it was early yet to talk of any such measure as supersession. An Admiral must be responsible for carrying out Admiralty orders in the way he thought best.

We [Geddes and Jellicoe] had not any particular difference of opinion on the subject. Sir E Geddes saw Admiral Bacon on the subject and was apparently satisfied with the interview.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, neither the Geddes papers in the public domain nor the biographical work by Auckland Geddes, provide any direct clarification of these contradictory accounts. However, Bacon did meet with Geddes on the barrage issue and after this

⁴⁴ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 365.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 366.

⁴⁶ Jellicoe, *Account of Circumstances of Dismissal*, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

meeting Geddes acknowledged that ‘I was glad to hear from our conversation that the matter will continue to receive your unremitting attention on the lines approved by the Board.’⁴⁷ This implies that Geddes was satisfied with the outcome of the meeting.

Certainly, after Jellicoe’s intervention, Bacon did take action to implement all the steps recommended by Keyes and his Barrage Committee.⁴⁸ Keyes, on the other hand, did not agree that Bacon had implemented these steps ‘as quickly as possible,’ and it would thus seem that Jellicoe’s use of the term ‘as expressed by me’ has a considerable bearing on his decision not to remove Bacon. In other words, Bacon was prepared to execute a direct order from Jellicoe, but was reluctant to brook interference by an Admiralty committee which lacked, as he thought, the necessary experience of his command.

There are two further factors that may have influenced Jellicoe in the matter. Marder suggests that ‘Bacon’s personality enters into the picture’ and there can be little debate about this.⁴⁹ Bacon, whilst recognised as being clever and often innovative, was at times irascible and arrogant and he was not particularly popular in some quarters of the Navy. As he confessed to Geddes, ‘I own I like my own way. I own in some matters I have firm convictions. But then I know the place and am generally right!! I own I do not suffer fools gladly.’⁵⁰ Moreover, his recalcitrance irritated Wemyss who was of the view that Bacon’s letters to the Admiralty disclosed ‘what is in my opinion, an impossible attitude of mind on Admiral Bacon’s part, and show the impracticability of carrying out in the Channel any scheme which does not

⁴⁷ Letter, Geddes to Bacon, 11 December 1917, NA, ADM. 116/1806.

⁴⁸ It was Jellicoe’s opinion that there was no suggestion made by the Barrage Committee of value which had not already been put forward by Bacon. Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 319.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Note, this quotation does not appear in the biography of Wemyss by his wife. It is possible that Marder had access to Wemyss’ unpublished memoirs located in the USA.

⁵⁰ Letter, Bacon to Geddes, 12 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1806.

originate in Dover'.⁵¹ Thus, it is not surprising that Wemyss advocated Bacon's removal from the Dover Patrol.

However, it was not just Bacon's personality that 'entered the picture'. Keyes, too, was single minded and opinionated and saw his contretemps with Bacon as the 'battle for the closing of the Dover Straits'.⁵² He had been brought to the Admiralty by Wemyss in September 1917 as Director of Plans, having previously been Wemyss' second in command of naval operations in the Dardanelles fiasco. Thus, it can be said that he was as much Wemyss' man as Bacon was Jellicoe's. Also, according to Marder, there were suspicions that one of the Barrage Committee's objectives was to have Keyes replace Bacon in command of the Dover Patrol.⁵³ Oliver certainly thought as much, believing that since Keyes was appointed Director of Plans he had 'devoted himself to engineering a plan to unship Bacon from the Dover Patrol on the grounds that submarines still sometimes got through the Straits'.⁵⁴ That view is supported in correspondence from Keyes where he writes, 'I do think Bacon has been delivered into the hands of the Board. They have ample grounds for kicking him out – on his own showing.'⁵⁵ Further, it has been said that 'Bacon had more brains in his little finger than Keyes had in his head.'⁵⁶ Jellicoe was not over-enamoured with Keyes' appointment as Director of Plans in the first place, possibly because of this relative lack of intellect. Thus, whilst he was prepared to overrule Bacon's objections and support Keyes and the Barrage Committee's recommendations, he did not see Keyes as a suitable replacement for Bacon.

⁵¹ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 319.

⁵² Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, ii, 148.

⁵³ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 320.

⁵⁴ Quoted, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Letter, Keyes to Beatty, 5 December 1917, Halpern, *Keyes Papers*, 422.

⁵⁶ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 40.

The other factor to be borne in mind is that irrespective of Bacon's reluctance on this issue, there is no doubt that in all other respects his command of the Dover Patrol was successful. In the Epilogue to *The Dover Patrol*, Bacon wrote that 'we had maintained sea communication with the Armies in France, without intermission, in spite of destroyers, submarines, mines and air-craft, and our commerce had passed freely and with almost equal security to and from the Thames as it did peacetime.'⁵⁷ This is no exaggeration. The boundaries of the command extended from the Scheldt to the North Foreland and from Beachy Head due south to the French coast, an area of some 4000 square miles of water. Throughout the war, 125,100 merchant ships passed through the Patrol, of which only 73 were sunk.⁵⁸ Further, over 12 million troops were transported across the Channel with only 85 lives lost in just one incident.⁵⁹ Bacon commanded the Patrol for over two and a half years and even Keyes, despite his difference of opinion on the barrage issue, later admitted that 'the activities of the Dover Patrol were immense and Admiral Bacon had built up an enormous organisation, which carried out its daily duties with great regularity and efficiency.'⁶⁰ Given these circumstances, Jellicoe's loyalty to Bacon was not misplaced.

One further aspect of this debate warrants discussion. Often in warfare, the aftermath will vindicate the efficacy of any decision. It did not do so in this instance. On 19 December 1917, the first day on which Bacon fully implemented Jellicoe's orders regarding night time illumination of the minefield, the German submarine UB-56 was forced by the searchlights and flares to dive into the minefield and was blown up. Keyes later claimed that this provided 'an overwhelming argument in support of

⁵⁷ Bacon, *Dover Patrol*, II, 607.

⁵⁸ Ronald Handley, *The Dover Patrol Memorial*, (Dover, 1998), 8, 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, ii, 159.

the policy the Plans Division had so insistently urged, and Sir Reginald Bacon had so strenuously resisted'.⁶¹ Further, he is probably correct in his claim that the sinking of UB-56 sealed Bacon's fate as he was replaced by Keyes as commander of the Dover Patrol a week after Jellicoe's dismissal. However, on 14 February 1918, Bacon's worst fears were realised. That night, destroyers of the High Seas Fleet Second Flotilla sailed into the Channel undetected and attacked the barrage patrols. The destroyers sank seven drifters and a trawler and severely damaged a further five drifters, a trawler and a minesweeper and then escaped unmolested. Newbolt, in his description of the raid, concluded that 'the trawlers burning flares were particularly vulnerable.'⁶² Thus, it can be said that the arguments advocated by Bacon and Keyes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of patrolling and lighting of the barrage both had merit. Jellicoe's view is less sympathetic, claiming after the war that 'the heavy losses sustained were due to the system of patrols adopted by Keyes against the advice of Bacon.'⁶³ The irony is that it was Jellicoe who had ordered Bacon to adopt Keyes' proposals.

At the beginning of this discussion on the dispute over the barrage, the argument was made that Wemyss' version of events was over-simplified. Undoubtedly, Bacon was reluctant to believe that a large number of U-boats were able to pass through the Channel to the Western Approaches. However, the issue goes beyond that. In terms of overall strategy, Bacon firmly believed as commander of the Dover Patrol that his remit was wider than just preventing submarines passing through the Channel. Consequently, he was not prepared to divert resources such that the risk of surface attack to Channel shipping was increased. Jellicoe was prepared to accept

⁶¹ Ibid, 143.

⁶² Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 218.

⁶³ Jellicoe, *Errors in Naval Operations*, quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 44.

that risk on the basis that his absolute priority was to counter the U-boat threat.

Bacon accepted that and acted upon Jellicoe's orders accordingly.

Bacon also accepted that the Dover barrage was deficient. Some nine months before the Barrage Committee had been convened, he had developed a plan for improving the barrage. Lack of suitable mines meant that the plan could not be implemented. Nevertheless, the Barrage Committee had concurred with that plan.

The major difference between Keyes and Bacon related to the extent to which the new barrage should be patrolled and illuminated at night. In the latter case, there was no difference in principle. Keyes wanted the patrolling vessels to use flares immediately. Bacon thought that the risk of the patrolling vessels being subject to surface attack was too high and wanted to wait until permanent lighting stations could be constructed. Again, in the interests combating the U-boat, Jellicoe was prepared to accept that risk.

It is also quite clear that there was a personality clash between Bacon and Keyes. Both were strongly opinionated and there is evidence to suggest that Keyes was trying to oust Bacon. If Bacon, or at least a representative of the Dover Patrol, had been appointed to the Barrage Committee, the dispute may well have been avoided. Jellicoe would have been aware of the personality clash. His note to Keyes certainly indicates that he was not prepared to countenance 'a wholesale indictment' of Bacon's capability as a consequence of the difference of opinion.

The issue then is whether in these circumstances Jellicoe's loyalty to Bacon was misplaced and, if Marder is correct in his assertion that it was the immediate cause of Jellicoe's dismissal. Jellicoe believed that as far as Geddes was concerned the matter had been resolved to Geddes' satisfaction. If that was the situation, Marder's assertion is not correct. Defining strategy and resolving differences of view

between the Admiralty and senior operational commanders was an inherent part of the role of the First Sea Lord. Given all the foregoing circumstances, Jellicoe fulfilled his responsibilities. His loyalty to Bacon was not unduly misplaced and as a consequence, the issues over the mine barrage did not justify his dismissal.

Conclusions

It is difficult to justify Jellicoe's dismissal from any of the issues described in this chapter. Geddes conceded ground on the issue of honours for Admiral Duff and in isolation some disagreement that stemmed from a person's particular manner (unless abusive), as distinct from his competence, should not constitute a reason for dismissal of an Admiral from high office. Geddes had no issue over Duff's competence.

Whilst it may be argued that Duff, in charge of the Anti-Submarine Division, ought to have recognised the potential of the convoy system sooner than he did, his dedication and efforts in implementing it and in overseeing the development of offensive anti-submarine weapons was hard to fault.

As to the attacks on the Scandinavian convoys, whether Geddes' apology to Beatty over his approach to the enquiry process was born out of true contrition or merely a desire to appease Beatty in the immediate aftermath of Jellicoe's dismissal is impossible to say. However, the fact that he did so justified Jellicoe's concerns about the manner in which Geddes wished to handle the enquiry. Moreover, following the first of the attacks, the Admiralty did take steps to review the existing convoy protection arrangements. It can be argued that the switch of German tactics ought to

have been anticipated. However, as Geddes pointed out to the House of Commons during the Naval Estimates debate on 1 November 1917:

The Scandinavian convoy system was started in April of this year, and more than 4,500 vessels have been convoyed by the British Navy in that convoy alone. This is the first occasion upon which a single ship has been lost by surface attack in the Scandinavian convoy ... we must, I think, write it down as one of the legitimate risks of war.⁶⁴

In these circumstances, if there was a degree of complacency at the Admiralty as to the effectiveness of the system then in use, it is understandable. Moreover, Geddes could not publicly declare that the incident was 'a legitimate risk of war' and then use the incident as a legitimate reason for sacking Jellicoe.

Whether or not the destruction of the second convoy could have been avoided if the Admiralty had acted more quickly must also be open to debate, but in the context of the decision to dismiss Jellicoe, this is largely irrelevant as it was the process of establishing blame at an operational level that caused the contretemps between Jellicoe and Geddes, not the fact that the attacks had occurred. Also, it can be argued that if fault was to be attributed to the Admiralty, Geddes ought also to shoulder some blame. As can be seen from his appointment of the Barrage Committee, he was not slow to intervene in operational matters when he thought fit.

It is perhaps in the contretemps over the Dover mine barrage that the strongest argument for justifying Jellicoe's dismissal lay. As noted, Marder believed that it was the catalyst for the dismissal. However, when the circumstances are fully analysed it is difficult to conclude that those commentators who view Jellicoe's loyalty to Bacon as being 'misplaced' are correct. Jellicoe was prepared to override Bacon because,

⁶⁴ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 1 November 1917.

strategically, defeat of the U-boat had priority over any other factor. He must have been aware of the internal politicking between Bacon and Keyes. Bacon implemented the Barrage Committee's recommendations immediately on receiving direct orders from Jellicoe to do so.

However, perhaps the most telling factor here is that Geddes did not appear to force the issue of Bacon's removal from command. There is no suggestion in Jellicoe's notes or in the Geddes papers in the National Archives that Geddes insisted on Bacon's removal or that this was a resigning matter. Indeed, the correspondence supports Jellicoe's view that following Geddes' interview with Bacon the matter had been resolved satisfactorily. Further, if Geddes had appointed a representative of the Dover Command to the Barrage Committee in the first place, it is quite possible that the whole dispute would have been avoided.

On the one hand, logically it can be argued that if none of the above incidents in isolation warranted dismissal, a combination of the incidents could not warrant the dismissal. On the other hand, it could be argued that it was the cumulative effect of all these incidents which ultimately led Geddes to the conclusion that he and Jellicoe were incompatible. However, there was no disagreement on strategic or operational matters. The differences as regards the matter of the Duff honours and the aftermath of the Scandinavian convoy incidents were related to the manner in which Geddes treated his associates on the Admiralty Board and other senior commanders. In modern day parlance this may be described as a difference in management style.

Jellicoe did not believe that these incidents had led to any serious disagreement between Geddes and himself. It may have been that Geddes did not appreciate the challenge to his management style, but given the critical nature of Jellicoe's role, that alone was not sufficient to warrant his dismissal.

Chapter V

Conspiracies

Introduction

In the previous chapter the argument was made that the series of incidents which occurred between June 1917, when Lloyd George said he had decided to replace Admiral Jellicoe, and the end of December 1917, did not justify Jellicoe's peremptory dismissal. This chapter will argue that despite there being no grounds for dismissing Jellicoe, as early as May 1917 Lloyd George was conspiring to remove him from office. At the end of June, however, Lloyd George found himself in a political dilemma and as a consequence could not remove Jellicoe at that time. Nonetheless, in the words of Sir Maurice Hankey, Lloyd George was still 'hot for getting rid of Jellicoe' when the opportunity arose, irrespective of whether or not he had grounds for doing so.¹ Furthermore, Sir Eric Geddes, appointed First Lord of the Admiralty in July 1917, would be the means through which this would be achieved.

It will also be argued that Lloyd George's desire to remove Jellicoe was personally motivated. In this context the difficult personal relationship that existed between Lloyd George and Jellicoe both before the war and through 1917 is of relevance.

The second aspect that will be considered in the context of Lloyd George's intrigue is the role that General Sir Douglas Haig played in the matter. That Haig, as Commander in Chief of the British Army in France, may have been involved in a

¹ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, ii, 655.

conspiracy to remove Jellicoe from office appears surprising, particularly as both men advocated the same war strategy before the War Cabinet; namely that ‘side shows’ should be abandoned in favour of concentrating forces on the Western Front. However, Haig’s position was under threat at the time, to the extent that it has been suggested that Haig’s involvement in Jellicoe’s removal was an attempt to deflect attention away from him.²

The third matter that will be considered in this chapter is the virulent press campaign waged against the Admiralty through the latter part of 1917, particularly by the newspapers owned by the press baron Lord Northcliffe. It was suggested by a number of politicians that this campaign, if not directed by Lloyd George, was at least condoned by him.³ Also, there is strong circumstantial evidence arising both from a consideration of the press campaign itself and the relationship that existed between Northcliffe and Lloyd George which supports the theory that the press campaign was an integral part of a conspiracy to remove Jellicoe. Indoctrinating the public about deficiencies at the Admiralty would certainly have eased Lloyd George’s path in this respect.

An Uneasy Relationship

Before the war, Jellicoe and Lloyd George held strongly differing views on the matter of naval estimates when Lloyd George, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, sought

² Beaverbrook, *Men and Power*, 166.

³ For example, Sir Edward Carson stated during the Naval Estimates Debate in March 1918 that when he had made a speech to the Constitutional Club in November 1917, he had been ‘smarting under constant and persistent efforts of a section of the Press, which might indeed be said to be associated with the Government, to try and get Lord Jellicoe turned out of his post.’ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 6 March 1918.

to introduce major social reforms to Britain. However, before reaching the nub of this contention, it is pertinent to understand the background to their relationship.

Firstly, it should be noted that during the first two and a half years of Lloyd George's Chancellorship in Asquith's 1908 to 1915 Liberal Government, Jellicoe was at the Admiralty as Controller of the Navy. As such, he was primarily responsible for the Navy's shipbuilding programme. At this time, the German navy's warship building programme was approaching its zenith. Secondly, in Jellicoe's own words his 'years in office [as Controller] were difficult'.⁴ It was a period when the size of capital ships and the calibre of guns constituting their main armament were steadily increasing. Further, it was not only the size of capital ships that concerned Jellicoe, it was also their number. 'Secret information' on Germany's forward construction programme, which Jellicoe had received from a 'private source', resulted in a critical memorandum written in January 1909, from four Sea Lords to Sir Reginald McKenna, then First Lord of the Admiralty.⁵ This Memorandum stated:

We concur in the statement of the First Lord that there is a possibility that Germany, by the spring of 1912, will have completed 21 Dreadnoughts (including large cruisers) and that there is a practical certainty that she will have 17 by that date; whereas, presuming we lay down six in the coming year, we shall only have 18 ...

We therefore consider it of the utmost importance that power should be taken to lay down two more armoured ships in 1909-10, making it eight in all.⁶

⁴ Jellicoe, Autobiographical Notes, BL, Add. MSS 49038, 206.

⁵ Jellicoe, undated hand written note, BL, Add. MSS 48990; Jellicoe, Autobiographical Notes, BL, Add. MSS 49038, 203, 209.

⁶ Memorandum, Sea Lords to McKenna, January 1909, BL, Add. MSS 48990.

Thus, Jellicoe was involved in the controversial political debate regarding the 1909-1910 Naval Estimates in which the Tory press, campaigning vociferously for a larger Navy, adopted the infamous slogan, 'We want eight and we won't wait!'⁷

Space here does not permit a detailed account of that controversy and the political ramifications that ultimately ensued. Suffice to say for the purposes of this argument, Lloyd George was vehemently opposed to the Admiralty proposals as, if accepted, they would have significantly compromised his plans for social reform and reneged on the Liberal Party's pre-election pledge to reduce expenditure on armaments. In writing to Asquith he considered that the discussion on the Naval Estimates

threatens to re-open all the old controversies which rent the [Liberal] party for years and brought us to impotence and contempt ... I therefore earnestly pray you not to commit to the very crude & ill-considered Admiralty demands without giving full consideration to the arguments urged upon you by ... other members of the Cabinet who cannot see their way to assent to these demands.⁸

It is evident from this that Lloyd George had a poor opinion of the basis for the Admiralty's calculations.

However, he lost the debate. After several weeks of heated argument, during which threats of resignation on both sides were made, McKenna and the Sea Lords triumphed, with the Cabinet ultimately agreeing for provision to be made in the 1909-1910 Estimates for all eight capital ships to be built. If, then, as one of his biographers suggests, Lloyd George could do nothing more than 'gnash his teeth and talk about a betrayal of Liberal principles', it is conceivable that he harboured a grudge against Jellicoe, particularly as it later transpired that Jellicoe's assessment of

⁷ Quoted, Peter Rowland, *Lloyd George*, (London, 1975), 214.

⁸ Letter, Lloyd George to Asquith, 2 February 1909, quoted, *ibid*, 212.

the German build programme on which the Cabinet decision was based was exaggerated.⁹ Given that the competition for funds with the Navy had a serious impact upon Lloyd George's ambitious plans for social reform, this conflict must have left him bearing a grudge against Jellicoe and the Admiralty. As Winton said, given Lloyd George's attitude to the Navy during the war, the Admiralty's triumph over Lloyd George on the Naval Estimates 'might have been something of a Pyrrhic victory'.¹⁰

Evidence of ill will between Lloyd George and the Admiralty at this time can also be found in a note that Jellicoe sent to McKenna recording remarks made at a meeting in January 1909 in the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey's office. According to Jellicoe, during a discussion on the relative times that British and German manufacturers took to produce heavy gun mountings, Lloyd George suddenly remarked, 'I think it shows extraordinary neglect on the part of the Admiralty that all this should not have been found out before. I don't think much of any of you Admirals and I should like to see Lord Charles Beresford at the Admiralty and the sooner the better.'¹¹ Again, according to Jellicoe's note, McKenna's immediate riposte to Lloyd George was, 'You know perfectly well that these facts were communicated to the Cabinet at the time we knew of them and your remark was "It's all contractors' gossip" or words to that effect.'¹²

This reference to Lord Charles Beresford must have been particularly insulting as, at the time, the Navy was severely divided by a dispute that was both public and,

⁹ Ibid, 214. By April 1912 (i.e., the date which had largely figured in the Admiralty's assessment of the German building programme) only nine German capital ships had been completed as against the 17 that the Admiralty had intimated as 'possibilities' and 13 which were said to be 'certainties'. Marder, *FDSF*, 1, 178.

¹⁰ Winton, *Jellicoe*, 111.

¹¹ Memorandum, Jellicoe to McKenna, 24 February, [1909]. BL, Add. MSS 48990. The year of the Memorandum is not noted on it, but from the sequence of events and related documents, it can be assumed that the year was 1909.

¹² Ibid.

at times, vitriolic, between Beresford and Admiral Sir John Fisher, then First Sea Lord. Beresford had been in command of the Mediterranean Fleet from 1905 to 1907 and then the Channel Fleet from 1907 to 1909. Throughout his naval career he had also served intermittently as a Conservative Member of Parliament. The history of this feud between Fisher and Beresford is complex, but essentially it stemmed from two factors. Firstly, Beresford's ambition to achieve the ultimate position of First Sea Lord had been thwarted by Fisher on account of his promotion to Admiral of Fleet, thereby extending his time in office beyond the usual retirement age of 65. Secondly, Beresford was opposed to both the wholesale changes to the Navy's organisation that Fisher had introduced during his first term as First Sea Lord and to the ruthless methods by which he sought to introduce them. Beresford's criticism of the Admiralty and Fisher's methods at times verged on mutiny. By 1908, the schism in the Navy, in the words of Marder, 'had become so subversive to the discipline of the service, so scandalous in the eyes of the public, and so dangerous to the security of the nation, that all shades of press opinion were calling for a halt to the dissension'.¹³ By December 1908 McKenna had eventually succeeded in obtaining Cabinet approval to merge the Channel Fleet (which Beresford then commanded) and the Home Fleet thereby giving the Admiralty the opportunity to remove Beresford from his command. The matter did not end there, however. Ultimately, Beresford's persistent public attacks resulted in a Cabinet inquiry into the Navy, which although in the main vindicated the Admiralty, it resulted in Fisher's premature retirement in March 1910.

It is also of note that although he was Fisher's prodigy, Jellicoe appears not to have made any comment in any of his books, in his autobiographical notes or in available correspondence about the feud between Fisher and Beresford. By all

¹³ Marder, *FDSF* 1, 100.

accounts, he managed to negotiate a path between the two factions, which in the circumstances cannot have been easy. Nevertheless, the fact that Jellicoe felt obliged specifically to record the informal exchange between Lloyd George and McKenna suggests that the remarks must have rankled.

There is no evidence that the paths of Lloyd George and Jellicoe crossed again to any meaningful extent until December 1916 when Lloyd George became Prime Minister and Jellicoe had been appointed First Sea Lord. However, the establishment of a new War Cabinet, which, in Jellicoe's opinion, required his all too frequent attendance at their meetings, again brought the two into close contact.¹⁴ Then, even if their past differences had diminished through the passage of time, their respective personalities would not have endeared them to one another. Lloyd George was a political animal. Whilst he has been described as a 'statesman of the first rank' and as 'The Man who Won the War', others hold the opinion that his character was seriously flawed.¹⁵ In the words of one of his biographers:

His faults had been pretty glaring and pretty constant ... He bullied; he fibbed; he blustered; he wheedled. He could be outrageously intolerant. He engaged in wholesale misrepresentation and chicanery on a grand scale. He was selfish, vain and boastful. He attributed mean motives to his opponents and splendid intentions to himself. He was devious and cunning ... He was a rogue, a trickster, an opportunist, a will of the wisp.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jellicoe frequently complained that he wasted far too much time attending War Cabinet meetings, sitting through meaningless discussions. For example, in April 1917, he wrote to Beatty that 'The Imperial War Cabinet meets three times a week besides the ordinary War Cabinet daily and I find as a consequence very little time for the work of the war. The waste of time is abominable.' If Patterson is correct in stating that Jellicoe did not always conceal impatience in this regard, this cannot have enhanced his relationship with Lloyd George. Letter, Jellicoe to Beatty, 2 April 1917, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 154.

¹⁵ A J P Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy*, (London, 1975), vii.

¹⁶ Rowland, *Lloyd George*, 799.

By all accounts he used all these ‘attributes’ to achieve his ends. Moreover, he believed that the ‘mark of genius’ in a man of action is that, when faced with a novel or difficult situation, ‘he extricates himself by adopting a plan which is at once daring and unexpected.’¹⁷ In other, words, Lloyd George was not inclined to take a conservative or cautious approach to a problem.

Jellicoe was of a different ilk. He was a professional sailor with an analytical mind. He was methodical and self controlled. In the words of one historian, ‘He believed in naval traditions, procedures and decorum, among which were loyalty, scrupulous fairness and a genuine concern for the personal affairs of his officers and men.’¹⁸ Jellicoe, as has been seen from the discussion on strategy and the convoy controversy, was cautious, and with that caution came a perception that he was overly pessimistic, particularly when the shipping losses were at their peak. It is little wonder that the two men did not always see to eye.

Jellicoe’s pessimism is evident from one particular oft quoted example. Just after the US entered the war, Jellicoe explained the seriousness of the U-boat threat to Admiral Sims, who commanded the US Navy’s detachment in Britain. When Sims asked if there was any solution to the problem, Jellicoe apparently replied, ‘Absolutely none that we can see now.’¹⁹ However, this pessimistic approach must be considered in the context of both the prevailing circumstances and Jellicoe’s strongly held views on the strategic approach that ought to be adopted by the War Cabinet. His views stem from his initial assessment of the disparity between the rate of merchant shipping losses and the rate at which ships could be replaced and can be seen from a paper he sent to Admiral Beatty shortly after he arrived at the Admiralty:

¹⁷ Quoted, *ibid*, 804.

¹⁸ Massie, *Castles of Steel*, 57.

¹⁹ Admiral William Sims, *Victory at Sea*, (Fairfield, 2002), 9. Jellicoe disputes he was so adamant, contending that he was only explaining that the countermeasures then under development would take time to become effective. Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 71.

One of the greatest difficulties with which the Admiralty has to contend consists of the immense amount of shipping which is engaged in maintaining the Army in all parts of the globe, particularly the Army at Salonika ... The tax on our shipping is immense, as is also the tax on our war-vessels - destroyers and other craft - for escort duty in the Mediterranean. Similarly, we have to feed Egypt with troops, while very considerable number of vessels is continuously employed in bringing troops home from the Colonies.²⁰

Again and again through the first half of 1917 Jellicoe sought to have these views adopted by his political masters. In February 1917, shortly after Germany announced that it was embarking on its unrestricted U-boat campaign, he argued, 'It is evident that the material available is quite inadequate for efficient protection of both transports and other merchant shipping in all of the various areas over which the attack is spread.'²¹ He advised the War Cabinet that it only had two alternatives, namely accept the serious losses then being incurred, or reduce the number of transports and supply ships that required escort 'so that more adequate protection may be given to ships bringing supplies to our country and to our allies'.²² The paper concluded:

The Board of the Admiralty is of the opinion that, in view of the present rate of loss of merchant tonnage it is imperatively necessary that steps should at once be taken to effect the second of these two alternatives. The only

²⁰ Enclosure with letter Jellicoe to Beatty, 30 December 1916, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 129. Jellicoe calculated that at this time British, Allied and neutral mercantile shipping was being lost at the rate of approximately 300,000 tons per month, whereas he estimated that over the succeeding six months no more than 500,000 to 600,000 tons of new shipping would be produced. *Ibid*, 128.

²¹ War Cabinet Paper, 21 February 1917, BL, ADM 1/8480.

²² *Ibid*.

practicable method of doing so is by reducing our commitments for the supply of the various expeditions in Salonika, Egypt, East Africa and Mesopotamia.²³

In April 1917, Jellicoe wrote, 'it is a continual fight to prevent more side-shows being started. He [Lloyd George] is at present mad on one in Palestine, fed from the sea.'²⁴

Later in the same month in a note to Carson, Jellicoe went so far as to state:

It should be clearly intimated that the Admiralty can no longer accept responsibility for conducting the war on its present basis ... In my opinion the War Council fails entirely to realise the position in spite of the repeated efforts which I have made to explain its gravity. It may be that I have not spoken and written with sufficient emphasis. If that is the case I regret it, but will not repeat the error in this paper.²⁵

Finally in this vein, at the War Cabinet meeting on 20 June, Jellicoe stated, 'There is no point in discussing the plans for next Spring. We cannot go on.'²⁶ These constant remarks must have irritated the optimistic Lloyd George.

However, it can be argued in defence of Jellicoe's approach that the shipping situation was dire and without an immediate answer to the submarine threat, the only solution then available to the Admiralty was to preserve both naval and mercantile shipping by withdrawing from peripheral theatres of the war. Again to quote Jellicoe, 'the [submarine] menace can only be met with by a radical change in the policy with regard to the overseas expeditionary forces.'²⁷ This was a belief vehemently held and the position had been exacerbated with the introduction of the convoy system. It was thus a frustration to Jellicoe that his views were not accorded proper credence by his political masters. Indeed, Jellicoe's insistence was such that it caused Hankey to

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Letter, Jellicoe to Beatty, 12 April 1917, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 156.

²⁵ Memorandum, Jellicoe to Carson, 27 April 1917, NA, ADM 1/8480.

²⁶ Haig, Diary Entry, 20 June 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 114.

²⁷ War Cabinet Paper, 21 February 1917, NA, ADM, 1/8480.

remark, 'I sometimes wondered whether his [Jellicoe's] pessimism was not assumed in order to induce politicians to make a still greater naval effort.'²⁸ Hankey was perceptive and given Jellicoe's comments to Carson about not having written 'with sufficient emphasis', on the issue, Hankey's assertion undoubtedly has merit.

It was not just in the context of his pessimism that Jellicoe's insistence on withdrawing from the peripheral theatres of the war placed him at odds with Lloyd George. It was also a reflection of a fundamental difference in war strategy. After the failure of General Nivelle's campaign during the spring of 1917, there was considerable debate between Lloyd George and his two principal army commanders, Generals Robertson and Haig, about where the thrust of the military campaign should be focused. The army commanders were adamant that all efforts and resources should be directed towards the Western Front in the belief that 'if our resources are concentrated in France to the fullest possible extent, the British armies are capable and can be relied upon to get great results this summer – results which will make the final victory more assured and which may even bring victory this year.'²⁹ Lloyd George, on the other hand, after the huge casualties sustained at the Battle of the Somme in the previous year and the failure of the Nivelle campaign, was reluctant to commit more men and other resources to embark on yet another bloody campaign in France. His view was that Germany should be attacked through the peripheral theatres further east, believing that if Austria-Hungary could be knocked out, 'Germany would be at our mercy'.³⁰ Thus, Jellicoe's insistence on withdrawing from the peripheral theatres aligned him firmly with the views of Robertson and Haig, much to the chagrin of Lloyd George. As Jellicoe noted:

²⁸ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, ii, 656.

²⁹ Robert Blake, (ed.), *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, (London, 1952), 238.

³⁰ Lloyd George, Note of A Speech to the War Policy Committee, 21 June 1917, quoted, John Terraine, *The Road to Passchendaele*, (London, 1977), 164.

My consistent support of the policy of concentrating our military efforts on the Western Front and my criticism of the secondary Eastern campaigns as placing a strain on our naval and shipping resources ... undoubtedly tended to inspire Mr Lloyd George, (a convinced Eastener) with hostility towards my views and was no doubt one of the factors leading up to my dismissal at the end of 1917.³¹

Ian Colvin, in his biography of Carson, gives an even more graphic perspective of the Prime Minister's attitude to Jellicoe, claiming that being baffled by the 'granitic front' of Robertson's resistance to further eastern campaigns, Lloyd George 'turned to the simpler elements of the sea, and wasted his eloquence on vain attempts to launch the Grand Fleet upon the fortified harbours of the enemy'.³² The fact that he met an equally hard front from his First Sea Lord in refusing to contemplate risking the ships of the Grand Fleet on such operations would not have improved the relationship between them.

Lloyd George had a dilemma. It is likely that Robertson, Haig and possibly Jellicoe would have resigned if he had persuaded the War Cabinet to adopt his strategy. He would then have had to replace them with military and naval chiefs who were prepared to execute that strategy. It was not a route he chose to take. In the face of such combined opposition, Lloyd George ultimately bowed to the views of Robertson, Haig and Jellicoe and in July 1917 the War Cabinet gave approval for the Flanders campaign to proceed. Jellicoe's participation in the cabal must have irritated Lloyd George as much as his pessimism.

Whether this difference of opinion justified Lloyd George's decision to remove Jellicoe is questionable. Generally, a fundamental difference in opinion as to

³¹ Jellicoe, Notes on Work at the Admiralty, BL, Add. MSS 49043.

³² Colvin, *Carson*, 254.

strategy would undoubtedly constitute grounds for a government to replace a senior military or naval adviser. That was not the case in this instance; although it had considerable reservations, the government agreed to implement its military advisers' plans. Moreover, the principal protagonists in this instance were Robertson and Haig. Jellicoe only played a supporting role. On that basis it should have been Robertson and/or Haig that should have been removed. After all, it was not the Navy's fault that the Passchendaele offensive ground to a halt in the mud at the cost of 250,000 British casualties.³³

Nevertheless, whether from the earlier days of his Chancellorship or as wartime Premier, Lloyd George must have perceived Jellicoe as one who frequently thwarted his ambitions.

Haig's Intervention

Lloyd George claims that his decision to dismiss Jellicoe was influenced by General Haig, stating in his *War Memoirs* that 'a conversation I had with Sir Douglas Haig in the early summer of 1917 finally decided me'.³⁴ It is, however, difficult to understand Haig's motivation in this respect. In his squabble with Lloyd George over military strategy, Haig had sufficient worries without interfering in the affairs of the Admiralty. Moreover, as discussed, he had in Jellicoe an ardent supporter for the strategy of withdrawing from eastern theatres of the war and concentrating resources on the Western Front.

³³ Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, (London, 1986), 483.

³⁴ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1176.

Further, this support did not just extend to the arguments within the War Cabinet. It also had an operational element. A key objective of the planned military offensive through Flanders in the summer of 1917 was to free Ostend and Zeebrugge, used as German submarine bases, through a combined military and naval seaborne attack. Admiral Bacon, in command of the Dover Patrol, and his staff were closely involved in the planning of this operation. Haig noted in his diary that on 17 June 1917 ‘Admiral Bacon came to Calais to meet me. He is whole heartedly with us and has urged in writing to the Admiralty the absolute necessity for clearing the Belgian Coast before winter.’³⁵ Again, the following day, Haig noted that a meeting at the Admiralty with both Jellicoe and Bacon ‘was quite satisfactory, the Navy promising to help me in the matter of guns and aeroplanes’.³⁶ Thus, it would seem that up to that point Haig had no cause to complain about his relationships with the Admiralty insofar as it affected his strategy or operations.

However, this apparent satisfaction was short lived and it was Sir Eric Geddes again who was instrumental in effecting the change of heart. Therefore, before analysing the reasons for this change and Haig’s motives for involving himself in the matter, it is pertinent to understand Geddes’ background, his relationship both with Lloyd George and with Haig, and the circumstances in which he moved to the Admiralty as Controller in May 1917.

At the outbreak of war, Geddes, after a multifaceted career that included time in India in 1904 organising complicated railway traffic on the Rohilkund and Kumaon Railway, was a senior manager with the North Eastern Railway Company. In May 1915, keen to make a greater contribution to the war effort, Geddes joined the Ministry of Munitions, established under Lloyd George following ‘the munitions

³⁵ Haig, Diary Entry, 17 June 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 114.

³⁶ Haig, Diary Entry, 18 June 1917, Ibid.

scandal'. According to Geddes' brother, Auckland, 'The work of Eric and his brilliant team in straightening out the shell – production muddle marked a turning point in the War.'³⁷ From there Geddes moved with Lloyd George to the War Department and thence to Haig's command in France as Director General of Transportation, with the remit of solving the then chaotic logistics problems of supplying the front lines with men and supplies. In this he was also successful. Again, according to his brother, 'Eric's triumph – and it was a real triumph – was that by organisation, improvement of road and rail facilities ... the almost unimaginable feat of successfully doing all this was achieved in the Battle of Arras.'³⁸ There is unquestionably an element of brotherly bias in these remarks, but nevertheless, Geddes was successful in both these roles.³⁹ More to the point in this argument, he was highly regarded and on good terms with both Lloyd George and Haig. Indeed, at one time Lloyd George was moved to write that 'I shall be delighted to break bread with your merry men. The best menu will be your Weekly Reports and the returns of the last few weeks will provide the most sparkling champagne.'⁴⁰ Later, when Geddes was transferred from Haig's command back to Britain, Haig wrote to the War Office stating that 'I have the honour to place on record my appreciation of the eminent services this officer has rendered.'⁴¹ Moreover, Haig's admiration was such that when Geddes was appointed to the Admiralty, he 'arranged that although Geddes will become a Lord of the Admiralty, he will remain as a Consultant on railway

³⁷ Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 231.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 238.

³⁹ Winston Churchill described Geddes as a man who 'possessed not only the practical organising power of a skilful business man, but the *quasi*-official outlook of the head of a great public service. To this he added those qualities of mental and physical energy, of industry and compulsive force, often successful, always admirable and never more needed at this time'. Winston Churchill, *The Great War*, (London, undated), II, 1013.

⁴⁰ Letter, Lloyd George to Geddes, 22 May 1916, quoted, Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 230.

⁴¹ Letter, Haig to The War Office, 12 May 1917, quoted, *ibid*, 239.

questions attached to my staff'.⁴² Given the extent of the Controller's responsibilities, this retention as a consultant may seem bizarre, but it does highlight both Haig's belief in the man's abilities and the fact that a close association was maintained after Geddes' departure from Haig's command.

If Geddes' retention as a consultant was bizarre, so also were the circumstances surrounding his appointment as Controller. Originally, he had been called home by the Army Council to assume the role of Inspector-General of Transportation. As Geddes had largely resolved the transportation problems at the front in France, the Council considered that he was the best person to resolve similar problems which ranged across all theatres of the war. However, Lloyd George once more intervened. Again, Auckland Geddes offers an interesting perspective on this intervention. He was of the opinion that the problems with the Admiralty were analogous to the problems that had given rise to the munitions scandal and to the transportation issues that had been prevalent on the Western Front. He believed Lloyd George was at odds with both Carson and Jellicoe and was angered by the delays in ship building and development of anti-submarine weapons. Auckland Geddes believed it was for these reasons that Lloyd George had decided that his brother should be appointed to the Admiralty as Controller instead of Inspector-General of Transportation, and 'insisted that Eric should be placed in charge of the provision of naval supplies – to do for the navy what the Ministry of Munitions was now doing successfully for the Army'.⁴³ Apparently Jellicoe then insisted that the Controller must be a naval officer, whereupon Lloyd George countered by creating Geddes a Vice-Admiral. Auckland Geddes then continued:

⁴² Haig, Diary Entry, 7 May, 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 113.

⁴³ Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 241. Jellicoe disputes this version of events in so far as he claims that he came to the conclusion that Geddes' appointment 'would be of benefit to Admiralty work, and therefore gave him the assurance and said that I would do my best to smooth over any difficulties with the existing Admiralty officials, whether naval or technical.' Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 233.

It is difficult to say who was made the most angry by this manoeuvre. Eric was painfully conscious that he knew nothing about naval supplies. Jellicoe had to be coerced by the P.M into acquiescence ... The Lloyd Georgian solution was grotesque: Eric was to remain a Major General with some vague responsibility for Army transport ... The existence of the Vice-Admiral-Major-General provided a superb opportunity for cartoonists. Eric was supposed to have intrigued himself into this position, whereas in fact he loathed it.⁴⁴

From this it is clear that Geddes was not enamoured or comfortable with the role Lloyd George had foisted on him. Thus, given Geddes' ignorance of naval matters, his level of discomfort with his new role and the close working relationship he clearly had with Haig, it was not surprising that Geddes turned to Haig for advice.

This Geddes did in no uncertain terms. On 7 May 1917, during a meeting at Haig's headquarters in France, Geddes complained 'that the Admiralty expect to win without fighting or running risks, that old inefficient officers are seldom removed, and that altogether our naval arrangements are most unsatisfactory'.⁴⁵ Whether problems at the Admiralty were perceived or real have been discussed previously, but what is striking about this remark is that it was made two days before Geddes officially assumed the role of Controller. Presumably, therefore, his remarks were based on opinions from outside the Admiralty, rather than from his own assessment. Again, having been Controller for just six weeks, on 20 June 1917, Geddes complained to Haig. This time it was about Carson who, according to Geddes, having just recently married, 'Is very tired and leaves everything to a number of incompetent sailors'.⁴⁶ He thought Jellicoe was 'feeble to a degree and vacillating' and concluded that the

⁴⁴ Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 241.

⁴⁵ Haig, Diary Entry, 7 May 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 113.

⁴⁶ Haig, Diary Entry, 20 June 1917, *ibid*, 114.

appropriate course of action was to arrange to put the matter before Lloyd George and also the King.⁴⁷ Then at lunch on 24 June, Geddes, who was again ‘very anxious about the state of the Admiralty,’ made the extraordinary proposal, to which Haig evidently agreed, that Robertson be appointed as ‘Head of the Board of the Admiralty’, in place of Carson.⁴⁸

Following that, on 25 June 1917, Haig spoke to Lloyd George and to another member of the War Cabinet, Lord Curzon, regarding the ‘seriously inefficient state of the Admiralty’, both of whom ‘seemed much perturbed already’.⁴⁹ Even Asquith, whom Haig met later the same day, said that he knew at the beginning of the war how unsatisfactory the state of the Admiralty was and ‘how ignorant most of our high naval officers were of the role of our Navy in a World War’.⁵⁰ Consequently, Haig and Geddes were invited to join Lloyd George at breakfast the following day where ‘Geddes gave his views very definitely,’ Lloyd George ‘decided something must be done immediately’ and the proposal ‘to put Robertson in Carson’s place was considered, replacing Jellicoe and two or three other “numbskulls” now on the Board, etc’.⁵¹ Later that day when the proposal was put to Robertson that he should become First Lord, he apparently declined ‘as that would mean becoming a politician’.⁵² Haig then returned to his headquarters in France with the matter unresolved.

Given these circumstances, what can be deduced as to Haig’s motivation? Political and historical commentators have differing views. Admiral Bacon, in his biography of Jellicoe, writes:

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Haig, Diary Entry, 24 June 1917, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Haig, Diary Entry, 25 June 1917, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Haig, Diary Entry, 26 June, 1917, *ibid.*

⁵² Haig, Diary Entry, *ibid.*

Mr Lloyd George in his *War Memoirs* states that Sir Douglas Haig expressed the opinion that Sir John should leave the Admiralty. Anything more foreign to Sir Douglas's general reserve and discretion can hardly be imagined. There is, moreover, nothing in Sir Douglas's diary or papers that gives the slightest colour to such a statement.⁵³

There is little doubt that Bacon, working closely with Haig on the plans for the combined operation to free the Channel Ports, had a high regard for Haig which coloured his view. However, as evidenced by the foregoing extracts from Haig's diary, Bacon was wrong in that Haig was involved in the discussions regarding changes to be made at the Admiralty. Whether Haig specifically suggested Jellicoe's removal is impossible to say without any categorical evidence.

Lord Beaverbrook had a different perspective. He interpreted Haig's activities during June 1917 as part of 'a well-organised, thoroughly considered and widespread campaign to drive the First Lord and also Jellicoe out of office' and then adds:

It is interesting to speculate on Haig's motives. It may have been that he was moved by genuine anxiety. He had informed Lady Haig as early as May that he looked on Jellicoe as an 'old woman'. Or again, it is possible that that he may have been interested in diverting the lightning from striking at himself, for the dismissal of Haig had been a principal objective of Lloyd George for many months.⁵⁴

Marder takes the view that 'it was the former, with the shared alarm over Jellicoe's views drawing the Prime Minister and the Field-Marshal into a temporary alliance.'⁵⁵ However, this interpretation is difficult to accept. Lloyd George had little confidence

⁵³ Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 378.

⁵⁴ Beaverbrook, *Men and Power*, 166.

⁵⁵ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 207.

in his military advisers; a view he was apt to proclaim to the War Cabinet. Haig was therefore under some considerable pressure.

Moreover, there is the proposal that Robertson be appointed First Lord of the Admiralty to consider. Although Robertson and Haig showed a united front against Lloyd George to the War Cabinet, the evidence suggests that Robertson did have reservations about the Flanders offensive, particularly in light of the apparent reluctance of the French army to lend its full support. For example, on 4 June 1917 Robertson wrote to Haig stating that ‘the general situation at present requires a great deal of watching. The strain everywhere is becoming great and we need to consider every move in all theatres very carefully.’⁵⁶ On 9 June 1917 Haig noted in his diary:

He [Robertson] wished me to realise the difficult situation in which the Country would be, if I carried out large and costly attacks without full cooperation by the French. When Autumn came round, Britain would then be without an Army! On the other hand it is possible that Austria would make peace, if harassed enough. Would it not be a good plan, therefore, to support Italy with guns?⁵⁷

This suggestion to redeploy resources from the Western Front was anathema to Haig and therefore despite the perceived united front, Haig may well have considered Robertson’s support to be on the wane and the proposed transfer to the Admiralty as opportune. In any event, as the historian David Woodward has remarked, the suggestion may have been a ‘surprise and delight’ to Lloyd George, who had ‘long hoped to destroy the Robertson-Haig monolith in strategy and now wonder of wonders, Haig was offering him an opportunity to end Robertson’s strategical

⁵⁶ Letter, Robertson to Haig, 4 June 1917, David Woodward (ed.), *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir William Robertson*, (London, 1989), 197.

⁵⁷ Haig, Diary Entry, 9 June 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 114.

dictatorship with minimum fallout'.⁵⁸ Thus, whilst there may have been an element of patriotic concern in Haig's motives, the extent of his discord with Lloyd George and the attempt to move Robertson does support Beaverbrook's notion that Haig was 'diverting the lightning'. After all, as shown in the part he played in the removal of Sir John French and his own appointment as Commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France in December 1915, Haig was well capable of intrigue and political machinations when it suited his purpose.

Yet, the somewhat bizarre nature of events leaves the impression that Beaverbrook's notion is not the complete answer either and, indeed, the proposal regarding Robertson might not have induced the element of 'surprise' that Woodward attributed to Lloyd George. Here, some re-analysis of certain facts gives rise to a different interpretation that matches the circumstances. Firstly, Geddes, in the work undertaken at the Ministry of Munitions and subsequently at the War Ministry, was clearly 'Lloyd George's man'. Secondly, there is a question over the timing of events. As noted, Auckland Geddes stated that his brother 'knew nothing about navy supplies'. From that and his previous roles, it can be assumed that, similarly, he knew little about naval strategy, or the inner workings of or staff competence within the Admiralty. Yet, two days before he started as Controller, Geddes was at Haig's headquarters in France complaining that 'our naval arrangements are most unsatisfactory'. Also, it will be noted that Lloyd George's intervention in the appointment of Geddes as Controller was made just after his trip to the Admiralty on 30 April 1917. Further, after just six weeks in office Geddes was again making complaints to Haig. It can be argued that that was not sufficiently long in a position, which was alien to him, to make such a damning assessment of the state of affairs at

⁵⁸ David Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, (London, 1983), 182.

the Admiralty. Also, as noted in Haig's diary of 24 June 1917, it was Geddes, not Haig, who suggested moving Robertson to the Admiralty. On the basis of Geddes' relative ignorance of naval matters and the personalities involved, this gives rise to the suspicion that the proposal did not emanate from Geddes, but from a third party with strong views about deficiencies at the Admiralty and who wished to make changes to its staff, namely Lloyd George.

Thirdly, Lloyd George had a dilemma. His attempt to undermine Haig by subordinating him to General Nivelle in the early part of 1917 had backfired in the failure of the spring offensive on the Western Front. As Lloyd George's secretary, Francis Stevenson wrote, 'In the meantime, Nivelle has fallen into disgrace and let D. [Lloyd George] down ... Sir Douglas Haig has come out on top in this fight between the two Chiefs, & I fear D. will have to be very careful in future as to his backings of the French against the English.'⁵⁹ Moreover, he had 'grave misgivings as to the correctness of the advice given by the Military Advisers to the Government'.⁶⁰ Ultimately, responsibility for matters of overall strategy rested with him, but to obtain the consent of his colleagues on the War Cabinet against the advice of his two most senior military advisers would have been politically extremely difficult. There was a real possibility that such a course would have resulted in the resignation of both Robertson and Haig, which in turn could well have brought down his Coalition Government.⁶¹ Further, his dilemma extended to the Admiralty. As noted, he was at odds with it in terms of its strategy, organisation and people. However, Carson was the doyen of the right wing of the Conservative Party. Removing him unilaterally

⁵⁹ Francis Stevenson, Diary Entry, A J P Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: A Diary by Francis Stevenson*, (London, 1971), 157.

⁶⁰ Haig, Diary Entry, 21 June 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, No 114.

⁶¹ Robertson, when writing to Haig on the demerits of sending men and guns to Italy, wrote 'They [the men and guns] will never go when I am C.I.G.S.' Letter, Robertson to Haig, 13 June 1917, NLS, Acc 3155, No 114.

could well have meant loss of Conservative support and again, the consequent collapse of the Coalition Government. Likewise, removing Jellicoe would have incurred the wrath of the Navy and could well have invoked the resignation of the Board of the Admiralty, with the same political result. Even Beatty, who was not always wholly supportive of Jellicoe, was at this time moved to write to Jellicoe stating, 'And you must stick at all costs to your intention of not volunteering to go; that would be fatal.'⁶²

The final factor to consider in this analysis is the relationship which each of Haig and Lloyd George had with King George V. Haig had moved in royal circles from early in his career, regularly communicated directly with the King and was a frequent guest at Buckingham Palace. He had been ADC to Edward VII in 1902 and had married Doris Vivian, a Maid of Honour to Queen Alexandra. On the other hand, Lloyd George's relationship with the King was, at best, inequable. The King was titular head of both the Army and Navy. In April 1917, 'sharp words' had passed between the King and Prime Minister over the latter's subordination of command of the British Expeditionary Force to Nivelle without first informing the Palace.⁶³ Therefore, if further confrontation with the King were to be avoided, any attempt to interfere with those in charge at the Admiralty would require, if not the King's approbation, at least his acquiescence. Lloyd George's path in this respect would have been smoothed if the problem and proposed solution had been suggested, or at least commended, by a highly-regarded third party such as Haig.

Thus summarising, Geddes, an able administrator, but not a politician, was asked by Lloyd George to undertake a role for which he had little experience, in circumstances whereby Lloyd George, rightly or wrongly, believed changes at the top

⁶² Letter, Beatty to Jellicoe, 2 July 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49008.

⁶³ Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*, 444.

of the Admiralty must be made. He was frustrated by the combined obduracy of his top military and naval advisers, but could not take direct action because of the political risk to his government. Further, he had been at odds with his monarch. Geddes, who was politically naive, complained persistently about a department of which he had little detailed knowledge to one of those military advisers, Haig, who had high regard for Geddes' ability and was close to the King. Moreover, he proposed a solution that can best be described as bizarre, but which would break the military advisers' union. Haig may not have had a particularly high opinion of Jellicoe, but he had no reason to intervene from an operational perspective. He may have been motivated to do so both from 'patriotic' reasons and to divert the 'lightning strike.' However, Lloyd George was a renowned manipulator. Geddes, for all his administrative capability, was in essence 'controlled' by Lloyd George. Indeed, Carson's wife referred to him as Lloyd George's 'satellite'.⁶⁴

If the forgoing factors are pieced together with the timing events, then the conclusion can be drawn that Haig's intervention resulted not just from patriotic reasons or for attempting to avoid 'the lightning strike'. It was engineered by the Prime Minister as a means of breaking the Robertson/ Haig alliance and of making changes at the Admiralty. The evidence also suggests that before Geddes had an opportunity to assess the problems that existed at the Admiralty for himself, he was told by Lloyd George what these problems were. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the proposal to appoint Robertson as First Lord could also have come from the Prime Minister. In other words, both Geddes and Haig were manipulated by Lloyd George in his attempt to remove Jellicoe from office. Thus, despite his penchant for

⁶⁴ Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 1 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/ 14/1.

exaggeration, Lord Beaverbrook's claim that Haig's involvement was 'part of a well organised plan' to oust Jellicoe seems valid.

The Role of Northcliffe

On 29 December 1917, the following statement appeared in the *Cologne Gazette*: 'The retirement of Sir John Jellicoe is hardly surprising. In England it is not unusual for leading men, even in a military position to be sacrificed to public opinion.'⁶⁵ Carson would have endorsed that statement. On 6 March 1918, in the House of Commons debate on Naval Estimates, he stated:

I saw no one and I knew no one in the Navy who could advise me of anybody who was at all equal to Sir John Jellicoe for the particular position he occupied. When I made that speech at the Constitutional Club ... I was smarting under constant and persistent efforts of a section of the Press to try and get Lord Jellicoe turned out of his post. The whole time that I was First Lord of the Admiralty, one of the greatest difficulties I had was the constant persecution ... of certain high officials in the Admiralty who could not speak for themselves – which I have no doubt, I could have traced to reasons and motives of the most malignant character.⁶⁶

These are strong words from Carson. It is evident from this that he believed a section of the press was intent in having Jellicoe removed from office and, in the use of the term 'malignant character', he believed that public interest was not the primary motive for doing so.

⁶⁵ Quoted, *The Times*, 31 December 1917.

⁶⁶ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 6 March 1918.

Carson did not name the particular section of the press responsible for the ‘constant persecution’. Jellicoe, however, had no doubt that it was the press magnate, Lord Northcliffe, who was responsible and who was instrumental in his dismissal. At the end of June 1917, i.e., at the time Lloyd George said that he had decided that Jellicoe must go, Jellicoe wrote, ‘I fancy there is a scheme on foot to get rid of me ... I expect it will be done first by discrediting me in the Press. That is the usual political move and I have seen signs of it already.’⁶⁷ More specifically, in the account Jellicoe gave of the circumstances leading to his dismissal, he wrote:

That evening I received a letter from Geddes dismissing me. The assumption in my mind is that Lord Northcliffe was pressing the Prime Minister to get rid of me, the Prime Minister was pressing Geddes, the latter wanted to avoid trouble and so tried to get away from the Admiralty, but failing that carried out the desire of Northcliffe.⁶⁸

Both Geddes and Lloyd George persistently denied any scurrilous use of the press in this context. In the Parliamentary Debate referred to above, when the issue of Jellicoe’s dismissal was under discussion, Geddes stated that ‘I personally saw certain representatives of the Press and protested against these attacks.’⁶⁹ In the same debate, a remark by Bonar Law, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, is also revealing.

The Prime Minister has assured me in private that he had absolutely nothing whatever in any shape or form with anything that appeared in the Press in this connection, and my right hon. Friend beside me (Sir E Geddes) has not only said in private, but over and over again he has said it in the House, and I think it is entirely unfounded to have any suggestion that any member of this

⁶⁷ Letter, Jellicoe to Beatty, 30 June 1917, *Patterson, Jellicoe Papers*, II, 173.

⁶⁸ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

⁶⁹ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 6 March 1918.

Government, either the Prime Minister or the First Lord, has taken a course which ... was an utterly despicable course.⁷⁰

The latter two statements clearly contradict those of Carson and Jellicoe. Thus, two particular questions arise. Firstly, was Jellicoe correct in his assertions that the press would be the vehicle used to manoeuvre him from office, and secondly, despite the denials, was Northcliffe actually involved in this? There is no direct evidence either way, and therefore it is pertinent to examine the relationship between Lloyd George and Northcliffe, and the particulars and nature of the campaign itself.

If, then, Northcliffe's involvement appears likely, two further questions arise. Firstly, did he act of his own accord or did he act in collaboration with Lloyd George? Secondly, was the press campaign justified in the public interest either in terms of the strategy adopted by the Admiralty or in its direction of naval operations, or was there some other motive for it? However, before dealing with these particular questions, it is appropriate to provide some background to Northcliffe.

At the outbreak of the war, Arthur Harmsworth, Viscount Northcliffe, was the pre-eminent journalistic force in Britain.⁷¹ He controlled approximately 30% of the London morning and evening press, substantially more than any of his competitors.⁷² However, what made him unique was that, in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*, Northcliffe had both a quality and a popular newspaper under his control, thereby reaching a wide spectrum of society. Moreover, he was more involved in the editorial work than other proprietors of the day. Indeed, it has been said that as far as the *Daily Mail* was concerned, for all practical purposes, he was effectively editor as well as

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Thompson, *Politicians*, 2.

⁷² John McEwen, 'The National Press During the First World War: Ownership and Circulation', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17.3, July 1982, 471.

proprietor.⁷³ His influence was huge. In the opinion of A J P Taylor, Northcliffe was a ‘newsman first, last and all the time’, and that there was no doubt that he held ‘a prominent place in the accounts of the rise of the new journalism, the press barons and the political press in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’.⁷⁴ According to the historian, John McEwen, he was frequently described as ‘the Most Powerful Man in the Country’.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Northcliffe has also been severely criticised. The political biographer, E T Raymond, warned in 1919 that ‘his present indirect power was one of the chief dangers of the state’.⁷⁶ A more recent political commentator, Hugh Cudlipp, described Northcliffe as ‘a man corrupted by power and wealth, who desecrated journalistic standards and became dominated by the pursuit of political power, unguided by political prescience’.⁷⁷ Churchill described him as a person ‘who wielded personal power without official responsibility, enjoyed secret knowledge without the general, and disturbed the fortunes of national leaders without being willing to bear their burdens’.⁷⁸ Thus, Northcliffe was a man of some influence, and if these criticisms have validity, a man who was inclined to use that influence to meet his own ends irrespective of means. Moreover, it was an influence he exercised with some arrogance and it was one that Lloyd George both sought to exploit and feared.⁷⁹

Reverting to the question as to whether Northcliffe was acting on his own account or in collaboration with Lloyd George, the nature of the relationship between

⁷³ Ibid, 464. Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times* during the war was more independently minded than Thomas Marlowe, editor of the *Daily Mail*. Hence *The Times* was not as critical of the Admiralty as the *Daily Mail*.

⁷⁴ Quoted, Thompson, *Northcliffe*, xii.

⁷⁵ John McEwen, ‘Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914 1918’, *The Historical Journal*, 24, 3 (1981), 651. McEwen relates that a quip circulating at the time was that ‘The Cabinet had resigned and Lord Northcliffe has sent for the King.’

⁷⁶ Quoted, Thompson, *Northcliffe*, xii.

⁷⁷ Quoted, *ibid*.

⁷⁸ Quoted, *ibid*.

⁷⁹ In a letter to a correspondent in January 1917, Northcliffe apparently stated ‘I believe the independent newspaper to be one of the future forms of government. Paul Ferris, *The House of Northcliffe*, (London, 1971), 202.

them is clearly material to the argument. Northcliffe had initially been introduced to Lloyd George in the House of Commons in 1909. Northcliffe's brother, Cecil Harmsworth, who was present at that first meeting, described the encounter thus: 'During the whole of this time LIG. [Lloyd George] devoted all his powers to capturing N [Northcliffe]. It was a dazzling performance.'⁸⁰ Clearly then, from the beginning of their association, Lloyd George recognised the potential for Northcliffe either to harm or to assist in realising his political ambitions. However, Northcliffe cannot have been wholly blinded by the 'dazzling' performance as thereafter this was, in the opinion of A J P Taylor, 'a curious on-and-off relationship'.⁸¹ For instance, the *Daily Mail* was vociferous against both the Parliament Bill engendered by the House of Lords revolt against Lloyd George's 'Peoples Budget' of 1909 and later Lloyd George's special creation, The National Insurance Scheme. On the other hand, Northcliffe's papers offered far less criticism than perhaps was appropriate in relation to Lloyd George's involvement in the Marconi share scandal, which threatened to bring his political career to an untimely end.⁸²

This curious relationship continued throughout the war. Both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* were instrumental in exposing 'the great shell scandal' of 1915 that ultimately resulted in the curtailment of Lord Kitchener's power as War Minister and Lloyd George's appointment as Minister of Munitions. As Lord Esher later remarked:

Finally, by becoming the watchword of faction, this dispute became the historic ensign for the legitimate ambition of a man [Lloyd George] who was

⁸⁰ Quoted, McEwen, 'Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War', 652.

⁸¹ Quoted, *ibid.*

⁸² That Lloyd George was moved to write to Northcliffe thanking him for 'the chivalrous manner in which you have treated the Attorney General and myself over the [Marconi] case' suggests Lloyd George was very appreciative of Northcliffe's restraint in the matter, if not actually beholden to him. Letter, Lloyd George to Northcliffe, 13 March 1913, BL, Add. MSS 62157.

destined to lead the people of England with such fire and vigour that their fleets and armies were ultimately to achieve what in May 1915 seemed beyond achievement.⁸³

In other words, Esher appears to be asserting that it was the Northcliffe press that was responsible for launching Lloyd George on the road to the Premiership. Through 1916, during which Lloyd George acted as War Minister, and despite Francis Stevenson's concerns over the trustworthiness of Northcliffe, the relationship was more 'on than off'. Cecil Harmsworth noted in his biography of Northcliffe that the early summer of 1916 was 'a period of something like real friendship between them'.⁸⁴ Finally, in the context of this relationship, the Northcliffe press aided Lloyd George's cause enormously during the political crisis of December 1916, which culminated in the collapse of the Asquith government and the succession of Lloyd George to the premiership.⁸⁵

Thus, going into 1917, a situation pertained whereby the Prime Minister had a 'friendly' association with the most influential newspaper magnate in the country. On the one hand, he had exploited this to further his own ambitions, but on the other hand it had resulted in a degree of obligation. In other words, the nature of the relationship was such that Lloyd George would have had no hesitation in exploiting it to meet his political ends and Northcliffe would have obliged him, so long as he was not acting against his own interests.

Turning to the nature and content of the press campaign *per se*, a number of points emerge. Firstly, there is the issue of timing. For the first part of the year, with one exception, the content of commentary about the Admiralty was reasonably balanced and was to a large extent directed to those in charge of the Admiralty prior

⁸³ Quoted, Thompson, *Politicians*, 65.

⁸⁴ Pound and Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, 500.

⁸⁵ McEwen, 'Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War', 664.

to Jellicoe's appointment as First Sea Lord.⁸⁶ For example, the *Daily Mail* editorial of 27 January 1917 commented, 'So different is this new kind of war from the old that experience in past surface naval war is rather a disqualification than an advantage for it ... Our veneration for white whiskers is a positive danger in a war of this kind.'⁸⁷ In the same vein, in an Article on 29 January the war correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, Lovat Fraser, remarked:

We must be content to accept the firm assurances of Sir Edward Carson and Admiral Jellicoe given on Friday to the Navy League, that steps which it is hoped will be adequate are being taken to counter the depredations of enemy submarines. The pity is that the late Board of the Admiralty lacked foresight.⁸⁸

Moreover, following the announcement of the organisational changes made at the Admiralty in May 1917, in particular the appointment of Geddes as Controller, reporting was considerably more positive. An article on 15 May referred to 'A good beginning at the Admiralty' and continued with the comment, 'After a thousand days of war we are beginning to return to the system that existed in Nelson's day.'⁸⁹ Even more complementary was an editorial three days later that stated:

The figures [for shipping losses] which were published yesterday show that for the week ending May 13 there had been a very marked reduction in the number of ships sunk by submarines. That is all to the good and though we

⁸⁶ The exception was a series of articles bemoaning the excessive powers and bureaucratic interference of the civilian Permanent Secretary to the Admiralty, Sir Graham Greene. An article in the *Daily Mail* of 5 May 1917 which complained about him 'having equal powers with Naval Officers who are directing Naval Operations' and being placed in 'a wholly false position' is representative of the nature of the comments made. The pursuit of Greene through these articles culminated in his enforced resignation in July 1917.

⁸⁷ *Daily Mail*, 27 January, 1917.

⁸⁸ *Daily Mail*, 29 January, 1917.

⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, 15 May 1917.

cannot as yet be certain that the improvement will be maintained, we congratulate the officers and men of the Navy very warmly upon it.⁹⁰

However, after the end of June 1917, matters changed. In early July, an editorial in the *Daily Mail* proclaimed that ‘Ships and men will not be rashly and foolishly sacrificed if we have strategists in charge who know what war is ... The recent changes as Mr Lovat Fraser has pointed out did not go far enough or high enough.’⁹¹

Through August 1917, the criticism intensified both in its frequency and its virulence. Again by way of example, an article in August 1917 by ‘A Naval Student’ claimed, ‘Its [The Admiralty’s] attitude towards that of the Navy is very much that of a stupid and elderly nurse who believes that a high spirited child is almost certain to get himself into trouble and danger unless he is constantly being repressed and prohibited.’⁹² By the end of October 1917, the regularity and demeaning nature of criticism was such that Geddes, at Jellicoe’s behest, felt obliged to seek advice from the Attorney General, F E Smith, as to whether legal action could be taken against the *Daily Mail* to prevent the criticism. Issues arising from that advice are discussed below. What is evident from the foregoing extracts is that the change of tenor of the criticism after the end of June was sudden and marked. No explanation for this is given within any articles or editorials appearing in the *Daily Mail* during this period. It could be argued that legitimate concern over the increase in the published shipping losses for June 1917 over May 1917 was the reason.⁹³ However, this does not take account of the fact that the figures for June were still better than those for April 1917. Nor does it explain why the virulence of the articles increased as the year progressed, despite the fact that the shipping losses reduced.

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1917.

⁹¹ *Daily Mail*, 6 July 1917.

⁹² *Daily Mail*, 18 August 1917

⁹³ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 111.

There is an alternative possibility. As mentioned, the debacle that followed the meetings at the end of June 1917 between Lloyd George, Geddes and Haig that culminated in Robertson's refusal to accept the role of First Lord, Carson's elevation to the War Cabinet and Geddes' appointment as First Lord effectively made it politically impossible for Lloyd George to dismiss Jellicoe at that point. Lloyd George therefore had to bide his time. Thus, given the nature of the relationship between Lloyd George and Northcliffe, it is reasonable to assume that it was at this point that they colluded in embarking on a campaign of publicly disparaging the activities of the Admiralty. This change of editorial policy would certainly have matched an ambition to ease the path to Jellicoe's dismissal at a later and more politically convenient time.

The second point that emerges from the nature of the press campaign is drawn from the content of various articles. Here a distinct pattern can be seen in that throughout July, August and September 1917, virtually all of the articles that appeared in the *Daily Mail* focused on two particular issues. The first was a demand for publication of accurate information as to merchant shipping lost by U-boat action. The other was a persistent demand to improve the strategic thinking at the Admiralty by bringing in brighter, younger officers who had studied warfare and whom the authors of the articles were convinced could be found in abundance throughout the fleet. For example, an editorial on 2 August proclaimed, 'Until we have officers who are masters of the history of war – which is also the science of strategy – and who can plan a proper offensive, in charge of our Staff and Operations Divisions, we have not exhausted every resource. There are such men in our Navy on the captains' and commanders' lists.'⁹⁴ Again, an editorial on 18 September, remarked, 'There are men

⁹⁴ *Daily Mail*, 2 August 1917.

who have made a close study of the problem [of sinking U-boats] ... Have they been called in and have the younger minds been given a chance of attacking the problem.'⁹⁵

It could be argued here that the obvious solution to any moribund organisation is an infusion of new blood and that this editorial theme was simply a reflection of that belief. However, what is striking is that at this time, Lloyd George, impatient over the delays in introducing the convoy, was continually pressing Carson to make sweeping changes at the Admiralty. As noted, according to Carson, 'Sack the lot' and 'why don't you get fresh men with sea-experience?' were favoured expressions.⁹⁶ Thus, the themes of the critical press articles matched Lloyd George's persistent complaints about the need for younger blood, which again suggests a degree of collusion between Northcliffe and Lloyd George over the nature of the press campaign.

Two further points should be noted with regard to the press campaign. Firstly, it is evident through the autumn of 1917 that the criticism of Jellicoe, both by inference, and eventually by name, increased in intensity. This culminated in a series of articles which were particularly malevolent. On 19 October, following the German capture of Riga the editorial read:

The country will naturally expect him [Sir Eric Geddes] to deal with the question of how far his strategical advisers at the Admiralty are responsible for this humiliating display in the Baltic. It will also equally naturally expect him to consider very seriously whether the recent changes in the high command in Whitehall have gone far enough.⁹⁷

It is arguable that it was quite within the public interest for the press to challenge the Navy's strategy of not sending the battle fleet (or a section of it) into the Baltic, but a

⁹⁵ *Daily Mail*, 18 September 1917.

⁹⁶ Colvin, *Carson*, 261.

⁹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 19 October, 1917.

more balanced critique would have at least made reference to the difficulties and potential risks of so doing.

Similar criticism arose following the attack on the Scandinavian convoy on 18 October 1917. An article on the 22 October read, ‘The British navy is an incomparable weapon if only it is placed in hands with the skill to wield it. It is not the fleet at sea that is concerned – for no one blames our seamen – but the Admiralty in London.’⁹⁸ Again, it might be argued that criticism over the debacle that led to the sinking of the convoy was justified, but in this instance a knowledgeable author writing a balanced piece would have realised that certain mistakes made were in fact at an operational level. As mentioned previously, responsibility for escorting the Norwegian convoys fell within the remit of Beatty as Commander of the Grand Fleet. In other words, in this instance it was the ‘fleet at sea’ that was primarily at fault.

These disparaging remarks continued. On 25 October 1917 an editorial entitled ‘Weaknesses at the Admiralty’, proclaimed that ‘we have not yet found a man or set of men at the Admiralty with the instinctive genius for carrying on our naval share of the war.’⁹⁹ This was accompanied by an extremely unflattering photograph of Jellicoe. The editorial of 1 November 1917 claimed that ‘the best Navy in the world may be paralysed by feeble control – our strategical direction for which our First Sea Lord is primarily responsible – has shown weakness in three various theatres of war.’¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the strongest indictment of all appeared in the editorial on 21 November, which read, ‘Sir Edward Carson at the Constitutional Club said he “read” day after day in the *Daily Mail* attacks upon Sir John Jellicoe and then he added, “this

⁹⁸ *Daily Mail*, 22 October, 1917.

⁹⁹ *Daily Mail*, 25 October, 1917.

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mail*, 1 November, 1917.

sort of thing must stop.” We demur.’¹⁰¹ From the foregoing it is evident that the *Daily Mail* was waging a personal vendetta against Jellicoe.

There is a further factor that adds to the contention that the *Daily Mail* campaign exceeded reasonable standards of journalism. As mentioned, by the end of October, the articles had become so extreme that Geddes sought legal advice from the Attorney General as to whether action could be taken to prevent them. His advice was that the *Daily Mail* articles of 23 October and 27 October 1917 would contravene the Defence of the Realm Act regulations to the extent that ‘the probable or likely effect of the articles ... is to use language likely to prejudice the administration of the Navy’ and that ‘I think on the whole, a magistrate ought to convict.’¹⁰² His advice was rejected on the basis that it would not be expedient for the Admiralty to be exposed to court action where they would be required to justify their actions publicly. That the Cabinet decided not to prosecute in these circumstances is understandable, but what is less clear is why Smith’s alternative suggestion of ‘communicating with Lord Northcliffe, who is after all almost a colleague of ours’ was not followed.¹⁰³ Given Northcliffe’s quasi-governmental role, Lloyd George could well have taken steps to intervene. That the adverse criticism continued unabated would suggest that he did not.

The implication from the foregoing is that Lloyd George condoned the attacks on Jellicoe by the *Daily Mail*. There is no direct evidence that he went further and actually conspired in perpetuating the press campaign against the Admiralty. However, he had the motive for doing so and in the circumstances it would appear to be more than coincidence that the themes of Lloyd George’s complaints matched those of the press articles.

¹⁰¹ *Daily Mail*, 21 November 1917.

¹⁰² F E Smith, Note of Advice, 31 October 1917, NA, ADM 116/1805.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

The rationale for Northcliffe's complicity is more difficult to comprehend. He was not 'anti-military'. The reverse was the case. Despite the ever-increasing casualties on the Western Front, Northcliffe was extremely supportive of General Haig personally and of his strategy of concentrating all available military resources there. Northcliffe's newspapers were constantly urging that politicians should not intervene in military strategy or operations. Indeed, according to Haig, Northcliffe's support was such that at the beginning of January 1917, after meeting with Lloyd George in Paris, 'He [Northcliffe] told him it would be impossible to continue to support his Gvt if they continued to scatter their forces in the Balkans, when all sound military opinion urged concentration on the Western front!'¹⁰⁴ That Jellicoe was also a strong advocate of this particular strategy makes Northcliffe's attitude towards him even more surprising.

What then, was the reason for the belligerence? Jellicoe believed that it resulted from a case of mistaken identity. After the war, in a letter to Commander Frewen, he explained:

Northcliffe came one day to the Admiralty in 1917 to see Sir Edward Carson about air raids at Ramsgate and Sir Edward asked me to be present.

Northcliffe arrived before Sir Edward and I received him. He became very abusive about the Naval Air Force at Dover ... Commodore Geoffrey Paine, head of the R.N.A.S [Royal Naval Air Service] at the time, who was present, did not mince his words in replying to Northcliffe ... and gave Northcliffe 'what for' pointing out that the R.N.A.S did not pretend to stop air raids.

They were for a totally different purpose ... I think that Northcliffe mixed up the 1st Sea Lord and the head of the R.N.A.S, as he wrote Sir E Carson after

¹⁰⁴ Haig, Diary Entry, January 1917, NLS, Acc. 3155, 109.

the interview an abusive letter about me which Sir Edward showed me ... At any rate, the Northcliffe press consistently attacked me subsequently.¹⁰⁵

Whether Jellicoe was correct in thinking that Northcliffe was mistaken must be open to question as it would have been surprising if someone in Northcliffe's position was unaware of the distinction between the rank insignia on Paine's and Jellicoe's uniforms.

However, what is not open to doubt is that Carson received correspondence from Northcliffe, which, if not abusive, was uncomplimentary. Jellicoe does not give a date as to when the meeting with Northcliffe took place, but the letter Jellicoe mentioned is probably one dated 17 March 1917 in which Northcliffe wrote:

The matter about which I spoke is one that I thoroughly understand, and I know Sir John Jellicoe is wrong. I hope he is not misleading you in other matters ... I hope I am not trying to teach my grandmother to suck eggs, but watching events in a very tiny part of our sphere of naval operations for two and a half years, I have never seen any sign of prevision.¹⁰⁶

Carson's response was robust, stating, 'I do not like it to be suggested that Sir John Jellicoe may be misleading me, as I have the most complete confidence in him,' which could not have done much to appease Northcliffe.¹⁰⁷ Thus, irrespective of whether Jellicoe was correct in thinking that it had been him and not Commodore Paine who had given Northcliffe 'what for' during the course of their meeting, the subsequent correspondence makes it clear that Northcliffe had doubts as to Jellicoe's integrity and foresight.

¹⁰⁵ Letter, Jellicoe to Frewen, 8 July 1921, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 412. At the time Frewen was assisting Sir Julian Corbett in compiling *The Official History*.

¹⁰⁶ Letter, Northcliffe to Carson, 29 March 1917, quoted, Thompson, *Politicians*, 136.

¹⁰⁷ Letter, Carson to Northcliffe, 29 March 1917, quoted, *ibid*.

There is a further factor which aggravated Northcliffe. This was his inability to obtain (and he believed it to be the press's right to obtain) information from the Admiralty regarding naval operations. In contrast to Haig, Jellicoe was reticent in his dealings with the press. Again, this reticence can be seen from his correspondence with Frewen after the war:

You may ask what the truth is about the removal of the *Daily Mail* correspondent from the Grand Fleet. The only occurrence in this direction was that while the *Iron Duke* was at Invergordon ... Admiral Pears one day informed me that a *Daily Mail* correspondent was at Inverness and was coming on ... to gather naval news from the ships. Admiral Pears asked if he was to be allowed to come and of course I said 'Certainly not' and he had to go back to London. There was nothing more than that.¹⁰⁸

Jellicoe may not have thought much about the incident, but it is conceivable it remained in Northcliffe's mind. Certainly, this inability to acquire information continued to trouble Northcliffe in the following year when he wrote to Carson stating:

It is possible that if the public do not hear more about the Navy, they will demand unwise changes in the administration of the Navy. I send you the type of simple narrative that is being 'killed' as we say, by your people. Such narratives are in the nature of advertisements of the Navy, of which we hear so little. Out of sight, out of mind.¹⁰⁹

Once again, Carson's response was more than sufficiently robust to deal with the hint of threat within the letter.

¹⁰⁸ Letter, Jellicoe to Frewen, 8 July 1921, Patterson, Jellicoe Papers, II, 412.

¹⁰⁹ Letter, Northcliffe to Carson, 5 March 1917, BL, Add. MSS 62158. Unfortunately a copy of 'the narrative' is not with the correspondence.

I am in complete sympathy with your view that the more the public can learn of the work the Navy is doing, the better ... But there are some things that if published would help the enemy and perhaps the most important of these is our use of 'decoy' vessels of all kinds ... The First Sea Lord and the War Staff regard it as vital that the doings of these 'decoys' should be kept as secret as possible. They assure me that however harmless the narrative may read to you or me, the details it contains would be of immense value and would give them an insight into our methods which would go far in increasing our difficulties – already so grave.¹¹⁰

Given that the submarine campaign had reached its zenith at that time and decoy ships were the one means devised that had proved successful against the U-boat, Carson's response is understandable. Nevertheless, it is yet another instance where Northcliffe had been rebuffed at the behest of Jellicoe.

There is one other factor which may have contributed to Northcliffe's motivation for railing the Admiralty. On 25 February 1917, Northcliffe's house in Essex was hit during a bombardment by German destroyers. The bombardment struck the library where Northcliffe regularly worked and killed a woman and baby and wounded two others who lived nearby.¹¹¹ Northcliffe afterwards complained to Carson about the ineptitude of the Navy and Carson responded to the effect that the Admiralty could not guarantee there would be no such raids in the future. Again, the timing of this event does not quite match the timing of the change of tenor of the press critique, but nevertheless Carson's response can only have added to Northcliffe's grievances.

¹¹⁰ Letter, Carson to Northcliffe, 7 March 1917, *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Thompson, *Politicians*, 131.

In his biography of Northcliffe, *The Times* war correspondent, Hamilton Fyffe, stated that when it was necessary to supersede Admiral Jellicoe, ‘Northcliffe had to do the politicians’ work for them’ and that Lloyd George had suggested to Northcliffe, ‘You kill him [Jellicoe], I’ll bury him.’¹¹² Fyffe gives no reference as to when or in what circumstances that remark was made and the research undertaken has failed to corroborate Fyffe’s allegation, but from the circumstances discussed here, there is no doubt that the intent behind the remark, if not the remark itself, was accurate. There was a close association between Lloyd George and Northcliffe that Lloyd George would have had no hesitation in exploiting. Much of the adverse press comment originated in the *Daily Mail*, particularly in the leader articles, which were often written by Northcliffe. As one early biographer stated, it was Northcliffe’s own leaders which gave the *Daily Mail* ‘its dynamic force’.¹¹³ Lloyd George wished to sack Jellicoe and make changes at the Admiralty. However, in June 1917, he had a dilemma. He did move Carson from the Admiralty and appoint Geddes in his place. To remove Jellicoe at the same time would in all probability have been political suicide. He had to bide his time and in the meantime disparaging the Admiralty publicly would diminish the political risk when he did remove Jellicoe.

Northcliffe had a low opinion of Jellicoe. Whether, as Jellicoe thought, this was as a result of being given ‘what for’ during the course of his meeting with Jellicoe and Commodore Paine is questionable, but there is no doubt from his correspondence with Carson that Northcliffe had little regard for Jellicoe’s competence. Moreover, the Admiralty would not provide his newspapers with information about naval operations that he thought they were entitled to acquire. Nor would they guarantee protection from German coastal bombardment. The press campaign waged against

¹¹² Hamilton Fyffe, *Northcliffe, An Intimate Biography*, (London, 1930), 184.

¹¹³ Louise Owen, *The Real Lord Northcliffe*, (London, 1922), 12.

Jellicoe and the Admiralty was at times vitriolic and in content mirrored the complaints regarding Admiralty personnel that Lloyd George persistently made to Carson. Thus, although Lloyd George denied any scurrilous use of the press in this regard, if all these factors are taken together the evidence (albeit circumstantial) does point to the conclusion that Lloyd George and Northcliffe conspired publicly to disparage Jellicoe and the Admiralty. Jellicoe's contention that his dismissal was as a result of Northcliffe's bidding is a perhaps step too far in assessing Northcliffe's role in the matter. More likely, it was a conspiracy jointly hatched with, as Fyffe's remark implies, Northcliffe being the assassin and Lloyd George the undertaker.

Conclusions

The analysis of the circumstances surrounding Geddes' appointment as Controller, the timing of his complaints to Haig about the state of affairs at the Admiralty, the fact that Geddes' complaints were a reiteration of the views of Lloyd George, all point to the conclusion that Haig's involvement in the plan to remove Jellicoe was engineered by Lloyd George.

Haig's motivation for supporting the attempt to remove Jellicoe is less clear given Jellicoe's support for Haig's military strategy. It may be that as Lord Beaverbrook claimed, Haig saw this as a means of deflecting the 'lightning strike' from him. However, to an extent that issue becomes irrelevant in as much as Haig was pulled into the matter by Lloyd George and Geddes. In other words, he had little option but to become involved.

Determining Lloyd George's motivation for involving Haig is more difficult, particularly if the somewhat bizarre proposal, supported by Haig, to move General Robertson from the War Office to replace Sir Edward Carson as First Lord is added to the equation. It may have been that he thought Haig's close association with King George V would have helped to secure the King's approval for sacking Jellicoe. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Lloyd George would have been keen to break the triumvirate of Robertson, Haig and Jellicoe that strongly opposed any change to their military strategy. Merely moving Robertson to the Admiralty would not have achieved that objective. Robertson was as obdurate a personality as Carson, so there was no guarantee that he would have acceded to Lloyd George's demands to remove Jellicoe.

In any event, 'the well organised plan' failed. Robertson refused to move. Lloyd George resolved his dilemma by making Carson a full member of the War Cabinet and appointed Geddes as First Lord in his place. He had 'his man' in place, but given Geddes' lack of political and naval experience, he could not risk the furore that would have resulted had he removed Jellicoe at the same time.

Failure of the intrigue with Haig did not deflect Lloyd George from his objective of removing Jellicoe and although there is no direct evidence, circumstantial evidence suggests that despite his public denials, Lloyd George exploited his relationship with Northcliffe in seeking to denigrate the public perception of the Admiralty under Jellicoe. As noted, the timing of the change of the tenor of the *Daily Mail* articles and the fact that the criticisms proffered aligned with Lloyd George's perceptions of the Admiralty's failings support this view. Public perception that Jellicoe was not up to the task, whether ill conceived or not, would certainly have assisted Lloyd George in justifying the dismissal.

Northcliffe's motives are more difficult to determine. Justified press criticism is in the public interest. Nevertheless the nature of the criticism was such that it went beyond the bounds of objective journalism and this would suggest an element of personal motivation on the part of Northcliffe. From his correspondence with Carson, he clearly had no regard for Jellicoe's competence or his integrity. It may have been that this was a reflection of views imparted to him by Lloyd George, but it is nevertheless clear that in his direct dealings with the Admiralty his views had been rejected and his demands rebuffed. Given Northcliffe's status and personality, that is not a situation that would have endeared Jellicoe to him and hence no doubt contributed to his willingness to embark on the campaign against the Admiralty. However, Jellicoe, in claiming that Lloyd George had dismissed him on the instructions of Northcliffe, probably over-emphasised the role that Northfield played in the matter. Lloyd George was clearly determined to remove Jellicoe from office in any event and the conspiracy with Northcliffe to use his newspapers to demean Jellicoe and the Admiralty was simply a means to that end.

The fact that Lloyd George engaged in these intrigues begs the question as to why he felt it necessary to do so. He admitted that he had decided to dismiss Jellicoe at the end of June 1917, although from the foregoing discussion on Haig's intervention, it is evident that he had contemplated doing so at least a month beforehand. The assumption therefore must be that Lloyd George was not prepared to risk the furore that would have resulted both politically and from within the Navy. That in turn leads to a conclusion that despite the conflict in personalities and the differing views on military strategy, Lloyd George did not consider that he had sufficient grounds to justify removing Jellicoe. If the dismissal was genuinely

warranted, he could have stated the reasons, and avoided the need for the conspiracies.

This leaves the thought that Lloyd George's determination to remove Jellicoe from office was founded in the resentment of the fact that eight years previously, Jellicoe had been instrumental in the government giving precedence to the capital ship building programme over Lloyd George's social reform programme. To repeat Winton's comment, given Lloyd George's attitude to the Admiralty during the war, winning that battle was 'a Pyrrhic victory'.

Chapter VI

The Dismissal and its Aftermath

Introduction

Despite Admiral Jellicoe being conscious of the press campaign waged against him and the Admiralty, and the fact that he had some differences with Sir Eric Geddes, there is little doubt that he was surprised by his dismissal. Whether this was because he did not feel that it was warranted, because it was peremptory, or because of its timing, he did not reveal. What did rankle him, however, was that there was no reason given. As noted in Chapter I, Jellicoe, in his response to the dismissal letter, complained that Geddes did not ‘assign a reason’ for his action.¹ Similarly, he complained to Admiral Beatty, ‘I received a letter [of dismissal] last night from the 1st Lord notifying me of this and giving no reason.’² Even in writing to King George V, Jellicoe complained that ‘he [Geddes] gives no reason for his desire.’³ As is also mentioned, Jellicoe never did receive a rational explanation, nor has one ever been given by those directly involved in the matter.

However, several historical commentators have speculated as to the reasons for the dismissal. Arthur Marder believed that it was the dispute between Admirals Bacon and Keyes over the Dover Barrage that was the immediate cause.⁴ On the

¹ Letter, Jellicoe to Geddes, 24 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1807.

² Letter, Jellicoe to Beatty, 25 December 1917, Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, II, 252.

³ Letter, Jellicoe to King George V, 25 December 1917, quoted, Roskill, ‘Jellicoe’s Dismissal’, 75.

⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 337.

other hand, Paul Halpern hypothesised it was the two attacks on the Scandinavian convoys that caused Jellicoe's downfall.⁵ Stephen Roskill thought that it was brought about by a combination of Jellicoe's inability to decentralise and stress related health problems.⁶

However, Roskill's article is primarily a narrative account of events and he leaves it to the reader 'to judge for himself whether ... Geddes' method of making the change was judicious, and whether he was justified in claiming the political support for his action which he did claim'.⁷ Thus, whilst he reproduces much of the relevant correspondence amongst those involved in the matter, he does not analyse this correspondence in depth or place it in the context of certain relevant background events, either of which may have assisted the reader in making his own judgement. Moreover, Roskill makes no attempt to assess if the dismissal was justified.

This chapter seeks, therefore, to amplify Roskill's account and draw conclusions on the issues on which Roskill believes the reader should make his own judgement. It will do so firstly, by considering the events in the context both of the War Cabinet meetings that took place immediately preceding and following the dismissal and of Geddes' desire to leave the Admiralty and return to the railways. This, it will be argued, supports the contention that Jellicoe's removal was engineered by Lloyd George. Secondly, the chapter will re-analyse the somewhat bizarre events which occurred after the dismissal and which involved Geddes and the other Sea Lords. Thirdly, it will consider the related correspondence that passed between Geddes and, respectively, Sir Edward Carson, Arthur Balfour and Lloyd George, all of whom became embroiled in the affair. Here the argument will be that Geddes unjustifiably used the names of his two predecessors as First Lord of the Admiralty in

⁵ Halpern, *Naval History*, 379.

⁶ Roskill, 'Jellicoe's Dismissal', 69.

⁷ *Ibid*, 72.

an attempt to appease the other members of the Admiralty Board, thus suggesting that both Geddes and Lloyd George recognised the possibility of a ‘mutiny’ by the other Sea Lords in circumstances where there was no real justification for Jellicoe’s dismissal.

An Opportunity Seized

On assuming the Premiership following the collapse of the Herbert Asquith’s coalition in December 1916, Lloyd George reorganised the machinery of Government so that the war was ‘managed’ through a small committee chaired by himself and known as the War Cabinet. It generally met on a daily basis. In addition to Lloyd George, as at the end of December 1916, its members were Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson, G R Barnes, Lord Curzon, Lord Milner and the South African, General Smuts. Apart from Bonar Law as Chancellor of the Exchequer, none of the members had departmental responsibility. Departmental heads were asked to attend as and when required, as were the chief military and naval advisers, usually Sir William Robertson as Chief of the Imperial General Staff and Jellicoe on behalf of the Royal Navy.

Thus, given the remit of the War Cabinet, it might be assumed that there would have been some discussion over such an important issue as the dismissal of the First Sea Lord.⁸ Indeed, Auckland Geddes, in his biography of his brother, claims that during the course of the War Cabinet meeting of 21 December 1917, ‘There was a long discussion. At the end it was decided ... that Admiral of the Fleet Viscount

⁸ By way of comparison, it should be noted that when Robertson was dismissed as Chief of the General Staff in February 1918, the matter was debated at length in the War Cabinet. War Cabinet Minutes, 14 and 16 February 1918, NA, CAB 23/13/345A, 23/13/347A.

Jellicoe of Scapa should cease to become first Sea Lord.’⁹ However, there is no mention in the War Cabinet meeting minutes of 21 December of any discussion on the replacement of Jellicoe. Nor was there any mention of the matter in the minutes of the next meeting held on 24 December 1917, or in the minutes of the meeting held on 26 December where Wemyss is recorded as being present as Deputy First Sea Lord, i.e., the position he held before Jellicoe was dismissed.¹⁰ Further, Jellicoe was present for at least part of the meetings held on 21 December and 24 December and there is nothing at all in the notes he wrote regarding his dismissal to suggest that at this time he was given any inkling he was about to be replaced. All these factors point to a conspiracy of silence between Lloyd George and Geddes.¹¹

The other significant factor that was not considered by Roskill in his article on Jellicoe’s dismissal is that Geddes did not wish to remain at the Admiralty. From the outset it is clear that Geddes was not comfortable in his role as First Lord. His brother remarked that ‘plunged into a strange environment governed by age-long tradition of which he was ignorant, Eric felt like a fish out of water’.¹² The Cabinet Secretary, Maurice Hankey, also noted that after Geddes was appointed First Lord, he ‘took a long time to settle down’.¹³ Further, this discomfiture was probably not helped by the disagreements with Jellicoe referred to in the previous chapter. Thus, it is not surprising that when the opportunity of a more suitable alternative role in transportation arose, he sought to move.

This opportunity had arisen as a consequence of the poor state of the railways across all Allied theatres of the war and the impact that this had on the logistics of

⁹ Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 242.

¹⁰ NA, Cab 23/4/304; Cab 23/4/305; Cab 23/4/306.

¹¹ NA, Cab 23/4/306. As is discussed later, during the House of Commons debate on the Navy Estimates in March 1918, Geddes actually acknowledged that the War Cabinet had not been consulted on the matter, let alone approved Jellicoe’s removal.

¹² Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 242.

¹³ Hankey, *Supreme Command*, ii, 655.

troop and materials movement on the respective fronts; a problem that would be exacerbated by the pending influx of American troops. The matter had been discussed at several Anglo-French leadership conferences through the autumn of 1917, and, finally, at the November Allied Conference in Paris, it had been concluded that the situation was so bad that the only person with the relevant experience to resolve the problem, and with sufficient prestige with the French military advisers, was Geddes. Further, it appears that at that time Lloyd George had agreed to Geddes' move. However, as was his wont, Lloyd George changed his mind. Consequently, on 20 December 1917, Geddes wrote to Lloyd George in the following terms:

I am deeply concerned at the view the Cabinet is taking about the Transportation abroad.

The transportation problem of the Allied Armies by sea and land is, I think, conceded to be not only the basis of our man power effort, because it governs the American strength in Europe, but also the basis of our strategy and tactics, because it gives us the only power of successful surprise or quick concentration for mass defence in warfare as it has developed ...

My present work is that of a Political Chief among Naval Experts, and my scope is to me depressingly limited. I am essentially an executive man now employed in a non-executive job – a square peg in a round hole – and I feel that I am far less difficult to replace at the Admiralty than in Transportation ...

It goes without saying, of course, that I abide by the decision of the Cabinet and yourself, but I am, I venture to think, entitled to say to you ... that

procrastination or an ill advised appointment may well mean disaster. The Navy is no such urgent or uncertain problem.¹⁴

Three points emerge from this letter. Firstly, despite having been at the Admiralty for eight months, Geddes acknowledges that he is still not the right person for post of First Lord. Secondly, he suggests that despite the differences he has had with Jellicoe, there is nothing of any urgency that requires attention at the Admiralty; certainly nothing as serious as the transportation problems on the continent. His comment in this respect implies that at that point he had no urge to dispense with Jellicoe's services. Thirdly, despite his willingness to accept the Cabinet's decision on the role he should undertake, the tenor of the letter suggests a strong plea for release from the Admiralty.

Further, this plea continued during the War Cabinet meeting held on the following day. Here, Geddes asserted that he could serve his country better in the role suggested by Lloyd George at the Versailles conference.¹⁵ However, although the Cabinet was unanimous in its view that 'Sir Eric Geddes was the most suitable person, if indeed he was not the only person with all the right qualities and qualifications for the transport post', the minute of the meeting recorded that 'the post of First Lord of the Admiralty was second to none in importance' and consequently the Cabinet did not reverse their original decision that Geddes should stay at the Admiralty.¹⁶

Two other facts are pertinent to this discussion. Firstly, the War Minister, Lord Derby, was against the decision, as was General Smuts who, in the subsequent meeting on 24 December, asked, to no avail, that the matter be reconsidered and

¹⁴ Letter, Geddes to Lloyd George, 20 December 1917, PA, F/17/6/19.

¹⁵ Cab 23/4/304. Lord Derby was not a member of the War Cabinet, but as War Minister had considerable influence.

¹⁶ Ibid.

‘strongly urged that Sir Eric Geddes should undertake the [transport] work’.¹⁷ The other fact is that after the Cabinet Meeting, Geddes had yet another meeting with Lloyd George during which he again reiterated the request to leave the Admiralty, which Lloyd George again rejected. According to Lloyd George, it was only then that Geddes raised the issue of Jellicoe’s fitness to continue as First Sea Lord claiming that:

He [Geddes] therefore immediately raised the question of Lord Jellicoe’s position and fitness for his post, and said that although his personal relationship with Lord Jellicoe was and always had been excellent, he was convinced that the present Deputy First Sea Lord was better fitted to the post than was Lord Jellicoe ...

I knew the views of my colleagues in the War Cabinet. Lord Jellicoe was informed in a most courteous letter that night, and he himself asked to go on leave at once.¹⁸

Clearly, the fact that Geddes yet again sought to persuade Lloyd George to allow him to leave the Admiralty re-emphasises that Geddes was desperate to move; so desperate that if Lloyd George’s explanation is taken at face value, Geddes was prepared to leave the Admiralty in the hands of someone who, it would seem, was unfit for the post. As to Lloyd George’s explanation, his statement that ‘I knew the views of my colleagues’ is misleading. It is questionable whether they would have given their approval even if it had been sought. Certainly, given Carson’s previous defence of Jellicoe and the views expressed in his later correspondence with Geddes,

¹⁷ Ibid; Cab 23/4/305. General Smuts was not present at the meeting of the 21 December 1917.

¹⁸ Draft Statement, (undated) NA, ADM 116/1806. This statement appears in one of several draft documents in the Geddes Papers that were prepared for Lloyd George in anticipation of his having to answer awkward questions in the House of Commons regarding Jellicoe’s dismissal. Although, as noted previously, several Members did later raise the matter, none of these draft statements were used and both Lloyd George and Geddes thus adroitly avoided having to go into detail as to the reasons for the dismissal.

it is probable that he would have dissented if he had been present at any Cabinet meeting at which the issue had been discussed. The remark that Lloyd George considered that the letter of dismissal was ‘courteous’ adds to the disingenuousness of his statement.

There is one final factor to consider in this particular context. Wemyss was approached by Geddes on the evening of Sunday 22 December 1917 and asked if he would be prepared to take over from Jellicoe. According to Wemyss, Geddes informed him that ‘he had been studying me for the last three months and in his opinion I was the best man.’¹⁹ In other words, Geddes had asked Wemyss if he was prepared to assume the role of First Sea Lord whilst he was still trying to persuade Lloyd George to allow him to relinquish the role of First Lord. What would have happened to Wemyss if Lloyd George had agreed to the move and Jellicoe remained at the Admiralty is open to speculation.

This somewhat bizarre set of circumstances gives rise to three questions. Firstly, why was Geddes so desperate to move from the Admiralty? Secondly, why did Lloyd George refuse to allow Geddes to move despite the crisis in military transportation, Geddes’ pleas, those of his War Minister and at least two of his War Cabinet colleagues? Thirdly, why was there a need for secrecy and lack of consultation with his War Cabinet colleagues on such an important issue as the replacement of the country’s most senior naval officer?

As to the answer to the first question, in terms of competence, Geddes himself recognised that, given his background and experience, transportation was his forte and he would have been much more comfortable in an executive rather than a political role. However, according to his brother, ‘Eric realized that the P.M. intended to get

¹⁹ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 366.

rid of Jellicoe. His was to be the responsibility before the public for the First Sea Lord's dismissal.²⁰ Geddes was reputed to be a man of some vanity and given the furore that was likely to arise following Jellicoe's dismissal, he would not have relished the prospect of being made the public scapegoat. Thus, it is likely that Geddes' desire to move was also motivated by this possibility.

The answer to the second question is more speculative. Obviously the War Cabinet had to prioritise; the Admiralty or transportation. In this context, Geddes' argument that 'the Navy is no urgent or uncertain problem' is significant. The U-boat threat to merchant shipping had been contained, and the anti-submarine weapons technology developed under Jellicoe's auspices was starting to reap dividends in terms of the number of U-boats being destroyed. The High Seas Fleet was contained in harbour and intelligence suggested that the British naval blockade was having an increasingly adverse impact on the German populace.²¹ Processes were also in place to improve other areas of perceived weakness prevalent at the time; i.e., the need for better protection of the Scandinavian convoys and deficiencies in the Dover barrage. Further, as will be seen, an aggressive plan to blockade the German occupied ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge had been approved by Jellicoe and was in the course of preparation, which would have gone some way towards answering criticism that British naval strategy was over cautious.

Thus, it can be argued that there was a clear case for giving priority to resolving the transport issues. Consequently, that would suggest an ulterior motive on Lloyd George's part, namely, to use the opportunity to have Geddes remove Jellicoe, and as Auckland Geddes contended, ensure that the responsibility fell squarely on the

²⁰ Geddes, *Forging of a Family*, 242.

²¹ As early as February 1917 the Foreign Office had come to the conclusion that the naval blockade against Germany 'had undoubtedly succeeded in reducing Germany to a desperate plight and is gradually forcing her to the brink of famine'. Foreign Office Report to the War Cabinet, 27 February 1917, PRONI, D1507/ B2/12.

shoulders of the First Lord rather than his own. Lloyd George could, of course, have allowed Geddes to move and dismissed Jellicoe at the same time, but in that event responsibility would have attached to him rather than to Geddes. Moreover, it is doubtful that depriving the Admiralty of both its political head and its operational head at the same time would have been politically sustainable given the fragility of his coalition government.

If the foregoing argument has validity, then the answer to the third question becomes self evident. Had Lloyd George declared to his War Cabinet that he wished Geddes to remain at the Admiralty because he was contemplating replacing Jellicoe with Wemyss, there is a strong possibility that the Cabinet would have been split. Indeed, as already noted, Carson's subsequent reaction to the dismissal and the way it was handled indicates that he may well have resigned had the matter been discussed in Cabinet beforehand. By presenting his colleagues with the *fait accompli*, the Prime Minister had alleviated these possibilities.

Further, there can be little doubt that Lloyd George and Geddes were given additional respite from the potential furore by the fact that the House of Commons had risen for the Christmas vacation and that no newspapers were published on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. It has already been noted that Winton, in his biography of Jellicoe, suggests that this was probably not planned but that 'the emotional aftermath of the argument with Wemyss over Bacon, and the slow accumulation of feelings over the previous months, all combined to give the event a momentum of its own which made it come to pass on Christmas Eve.'²² There may be some merit in that argument in relation to Geddes' motivation but it does not match with Lloyd George's long held desire to remove Jellicoe. As stated, Geddes

²² Winton, *Jellicoe*, 261.

‘was just the satellite of Lloyd George.’²³ In refusing to allow Geddes to move from the Admiralty, Lloyd George engineered the opportunity to achieve his long held ambition. By having Geddes write the dismissal letter within what can have been only a matter of few hours at most after the War Cabinet meeting at which Jellicoe was present and without consulting the War Cabinet, Lloyd George certainly seized his opportunity and took advantage of the hiatus in parliamentary proceedings and the press.

A Mutiny Avoided

If the timing and the peremptory nature of the dismissal was an attempt by Lloyd George and Geddes to mitigate the anticipated furore, their strategy was ultimately successful. However, it came very close to failure. The news did not break in the press until 27 December 1917. Not surprisingly, the Northcliffe press in the form of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* approved, the latter commenting that ‘the sole and sufficient ground for our objections to him as First Sea Lord was the conviction that the naval guidance of the war in his hands was losing in initiative, flexibility and prevision.’²⁴ Otherwise the press was surprisingly ambivalent, although later, on 17 March 1918, the *Morning Post* reflected that Jellicoe was most discourteously treated, and that the business wore ‘an ugly complexion’.²⁵

²³ Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 1 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/4/1. Although obvious caution must be exercised in taking account of Lady Carson’s views in that they are no doubt biased towards those of her husband, she appears to have led a particularly active social life amongst the political elite of the time and her journal entries leave an impression of an intelligent and perceptive woman.

²⁴ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 342.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Politicians in the main were more disapproving. Carson was infuriated. In a letter to Jellicoe he stated, 'I look upon your departure from the Admiralty as a national loss.'²⁶ The Liberal Party's leading politicians, Herbert Asquith, Reginald McKenna and Walter Runciman were of the same view. According to Jellicoe they discussed the issue at some length and were disturbed by it. They asked Bonar Law for some explanation but, although he had been called into the final meeting when the decision to oust Jellicoe was taken, he could only vaguely offer the view that no specific reason would be given other than that a change was considered desirable. However, none of Asquith, McKenna or Runciman was prepared to raise the issue in Parliament. In Jellicoe's words, 'The three ex-Ministers considered it would be useless to press the question. They realised that the reasons would not be the whole reasons; but that the attitude adopted was one that from which no result could be obtained. I agreed, and no action with my consent was taken.'²⁷

In his discussion with the three Liberal politicians, Bonar Law also suggested that the Prime Minister and Geddes thought it would be best 'to have as First Lord an officer who was not committed to the older methods'.²⁸ Jellicoe, both on his own account and at the behest of his political masters, had made significant changes to the organisation of the Admiralty. As noted in Chapter II, he was also intent on finding new technological solutions to the U-boat threat. Also, as will be seen from the brief vignette of Wemyss in the next chapter, Wemyss was as much 'old school' as Jellicoe. Thus, to suggest that Jellicoe was more committed to 'older methods' than Wemyss is disingenuous. The vague rationale provided by Bonar Law for replacing Jellicoe was therefore, at best, unconvincing.

²⁶ Letter, Carson to Jellicoe, 27 December 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49036.

²⁷ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

²⁸ Ibid.

All ranks of the Navy were considerably more indignant about the dismissal than the leading liberal politicians. Jellicoe's papers in the British Library contain dozens of letters of support and condemnation of the press and the politicians regarded as being responsible. Even Beatty, who, some have argued, was not on the best of terms with Jellicoe, was 'amazed' and wrote:

The manner of your dismissal was apparently in keeping with the usual way they have at the Admiralty of dispensing with the services of officers who have given their whole lives to the services of their country ... What experience Wemyss has to run the complex and great machine, I do not know, but I fear for the future.²⁹

It could be argued from the wording of this letter that Beatty was sympathetic as to the manner of the dismissal and not to the fact that it was unjustified, but from the last sentence there is little doubt that he rated Wemyss' capability below that of Jellicoe.

There were no such reservations as regards justification from the naval rank and file. For example, the 10th Submarine Flotilla cabled:

We heard with regret of your retirement and would wish to know what was the cause, you know of course that we have implicit trust in you and please do not take it lying down. We want you back ... You quite understand how we are situated and you know that we would not Mutiny because love of home and beauty come first ... But Speak my Lord let us hear your voice in the Grand Fleet for we wish to hear it.³⁰

This is, perhaps, an over emotional reaction to the dismissal, but nevertheless it does illustrate Jellicoe's reputation and the respect with which he was held within the fleet. However, as he had realised, in reality, there was no way back.

²⁹ Letter, Beatty to Jellicoe, 27 December 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49008.

³⁰ Telegram, 10th Submarine Flotilla to Jellicoe, undated, BL, Add. MSS. 49037.

It was not just in the 10th Submarine Flotilla that the thought of mutiny arose and was then dismissed because of ‘love of home’. The naval members of the Board of the Admiralty, other than Wemyss, were of a like mind and it was in their reaction that the greatest risk to Lloyd George’s coalition arose. Here, again, the events took a somewhat bizarre turn and some narrative explanation is of assistance in understanding the arguments.

As mentioned, Jellicoe received the letter of dismissal from Geddes on the evening of 24 December 1917 at around 6 pm. However, because the letter was marked ‘Personal and strictly private’ he felt constrained in consulting anyone as to what action he should take.³¹ Notwithstanding, he did consult the Third Sea Lord, Admiral Halsey, who agreed that it would be difficult for Jellicoe to carry on in the circumstances and that he should immediately take leave and tell Wemyss ‘to carry on’.³² Thereafter, events involving the Sea Lords and Geddes become confused, but the most comprehensive contemporary explanation can be found in Admiral Duff’s notes on the matter:

Thursday Dec. 25th 1917

About 6p.m., Halsey came to my room and told me that J. had been dismissed, and that the manner of his dismissal was curt, if not offensive. Meeting of the Sea Lords in my room to discuss the situation. Various opinions expressed, no decision reached. Eventually went in a body to see Wemyss. Result of conversation was a letter to 1st Lord, written in Heath’s [Second Sea Lord] name, asking for an interview in order that the reasons for J’s dismissal might be explained to us, as we were very much perturbed in view of the responsibility to the Navy and to the country... Left the conference at 8p.m., it

³¹ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal BL, Add. MSS 49039.

³² Ibid.

having been agreed that the letter to 1st Lord should be sent to him by special messenger. Dec.26th. The situation this morning is as follows: Heath (apparently in agreement with Wemyss) had withheld the letter, and was interviewed by 1st Lord (or asked for an interview). He (G.) told Heath that the dismissal of the 1st S. L. was no concern of ours, that it was entirely a matter for the Cabinet, and that as 1st Lord he entirely declined to give any reasons for the course of actions taken. But, he proceeded, as man to man, I am prepared to tell you what I will not tell you as 1st Ld ... He then explained the circumstances in detail, and amongst other reasons for the action taken stated, that - some 3 months ago - a meeting had been held in the P. M's room, at which were present the P. M., Balfour and Geddes. The question of J's retention was discussed, and both Mr. B. and Sir E. G. agreed that a change of 1st S. Ld. was desirable. On this particular statement, the whole affair eventually hinged.

Tohill [Fourth Sea Lord] and Halsey were next interviewed Heath being present, and to him [*sic*, them], the 1st Lord reiterated the statement quoted down.

At the end of the interview, the Sea Lords had another conference, but adjourned without coming to a decision, as it was felt that until Oliver and myself had seen the 1st Lord, a decision should be postponed.³³

³³ Duff, Notes re Lord Jellicoe's dismissal from the post of 1st Sea Lord, (undated), NMM, DFF/2. It also should be noted that on 28 December 1917 Duff verbally tendered his resignation and was 'verbally dismissed' by Geddes at the same time. However, he was later persuaded by Geddes to stay in his role in charge of Anti-Submarine Operations. Given that Duff had been brought to the Admiralty by Jellicoe, had initially been reluctant to introduce the convoy system on a wholesale basis and appeared to have been disliked by Geddes for his manner, it is perhaps surprising that Geddes changed his mind. However, it can be surmised from correspondence that passed between Geddes and Duff immediately following his resignation that Geddes, after the intervention of Sir Joseph McClay, the Shipping Minister, was forced to recognise that much of the success in containing the U-boat threat was the result of the work undertaken by the Anti-Submarine Division and that introducing a new head who lacked Duff's detailed knowledge and experience would have added to the turmoil at the

From a constitutional perspective, the appointment and dismissal of the First Sea Lord undoubtedly does fall within the remit of the Government acting through the First Lord, and technically Geddes was correct when he claimed that the dismissal was of ‘no concern’ of the Sea Lords. What is more difficult to understand is why Geddes should have refused to see them *en masse* or why he should have insisted that he would only give an explanation ‘man to man’ and not in his capacity as First Lord. If there was a rational explanation for the dismissal, or indeed for its manner or timing, then logically he should have had no difficulty on either count. Indeed, it can be argued that such a course was more likely to have avoided any ensuing furore.³⁴

It is also evident from Duff’s notes that during the course of the conversations, Geddes’ use of the names of his predecessors, in trying to allay the concerns of the Sea Lords, was critical to their response to the dismissal. Again to quote Duff, ‘I argued strongly that the opinions of Balfour and Carson carried so much weight, that the Sea Lords would not be justified in resigning, as a protest against what - in their opinion - might prove a calamity to the country.’³⁵ On that basis, and at that point, the Sea Lords decided not to resign.

However, to continue the narrative, the Sea Lords then learned that Carson had ‘absolutely denied’ that the meeting Geddes had referred to in his discussions with the Sea Lords had taken place and ‘furthermore declared that he had always maintained

Admiralty and been counter productive. This view was also held by Lady Carson who claimed that ‘One admiral he [Geddes] has sacked he has had to ask back as his department can’t get on...’ Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 1 January, 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/4/1. It should also be noted that in the first paragraph of his notes, Duff refers to the meeting at which Jellicoe’s future was discussed as being attended by Geddes, Balfour and Lloyd George, but there is no mention of Carson being present. Given the subsequent references to Carson and other evidence mentioned later, it is assumed that this is probably an omission on Duff’s part.

³⁴ Admiral Keyes claimed that ‘all we were told at the time, was that it had been suggested to Sir John Jellicoe ... that it was time that he took a rest,’ which given the circumstances, can only be described as an embellishment of the truth. Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 147.

³⁵ Duff, Notes re Jellicoe’s dismissal, NMM, DFF/2.

that J. was the only possible man for the post of 1st Sea Lord'.³⁶ Consequently, on 1 January 1918, Halsey met with Carson who confirmed the foregoing.³⁷

The affair then developed on two levels, the first involving the Sea Lords and Geddes and the second, involving Geddes, Carson, Balfour and ultimately, Lloyd George. As regards the former, the Sea Lords met again in the evening of 1 January 1918 and decided to write to Geddes, stating four things. Firstly, they reaffirmed that they 'had full confidence in Sir John Jellicoe's ability and fitness to perform his responsible duties' and that they 'were most gravely concerned and disturbed by this sudden removal of a most able and distinguished officer'.³⁸ Secondly, they pointed out that in their discussions with Geddes, he had told them that both Carson and Balfour, in the presence of the Prime Minister, had informed Geddes that they did not consider Jellicoe to be the best man for the position of First Sea Lord. It was the opinions of these 'most experienced and eminent Ministers of the Crown' who knew Jellicoe 'intimately' that had persuaded them to accept the situation.³⁹ Thirdly, and most significantly, they asserted that if Geddes could not clear up the apparent 'misunderstanding' and 'all doubts be set at rest', they could no longer 'continue to serve as your colleagues unless this is done'.⁴⁰ The Sea Lords concluded by stating that 'we wish to add that we have no desire to hamper the public service by our action and that we will continue to carry out our duties loyally until we are replaced or until a satisfactory explanation is afforded.'⁴¹ Roskill, in his article on Jellicoe's dismissal, suggests that this memorandum was 'somewhat minatory'.⁴² That seems to understate

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Letter, Halsey to Carson, 1 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/B/38/3; Memorandum, Carson to Halsey, 1 January 1918, Ibid, 38/1.

³⁸ Memorandum, Sea Lords to Geddes, 2 January 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Roskill, 'Jellicoe's Dismissal', 79.

the position grossly. The memorandum was initialled by all the Naval Sea Lords except Wemyss, and Admirals Duff and Oliver, as respectively Assistant and Deputy Chiefs of Naval Staff. They were all loyal, long serving successful sea officers, who were prepared to put their own careers in serious jeopardy and create what would have been severe disruption within the Navy. Their resignation would have provided Germany with a significant propaganda opportunity. Moreover, there was a strong probability that their resignation *en masse* would have provoked a crisis of confidence in the Government, with a real prospect of an ensuing collapse. Notably, however, this threat revolved, not around the dismissal of Jellicoe *per se*, but a representation, made by one politician but denied by another, as to who supported the dismissal.

By dint of some adept foot work on part the part of Geddes, the crisis was averted. Firstly, Geddes sought the support of the Civil Lords of the Admiralty. On the 26 December 1917, he had written to each of them advising that ‘Sir John Jellicoe has relinquished his post’ and stating that he was ‘confident that I can count on your support to secure that there shall be no dislocation of Admiralty business as a result this and consequent changes’.⁴³ Further, it appears that after the Memorandum that threatened resignation, three of the Civil Lords (The Earl of Lytton, T J McNamara, and E G Prettyman) duly provided this support by meeting the Sea Lords (probably on 3 January 1918) and sought to persuade them that for patriotic reasons they ought to remain and that ‘their going would create a great furore in the country; and that they would be universally condemned for creating turmoil in the country on a question of which of two men was speaking the truth’.⁴⁴ Thus the Civil Lords had also adroitly circumvented involving themselves in any discussion on Jellicoe’s capability.

⁴³ Letters, Geddes to the Earl of Lytton, T J McNamara, and E G Prettyman, 26 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1807.

⁴⁴ Duff, Notes re Jellicoe’s dismissal, NMM, DFF/2.

Secondly, it seems that Geddes sought to divide the naval Sea Lords by focusing his persuasive skills on the most senior and probably the least strong willed of their number, Admiral Heath. Again, according to Duff's notes in relation to the events of 2 January, 'No development that day, except that Heath lunched with the First Lord!! and seemed to have been alternatively cajoled and threatened.'⁴⁵ Duff did not comment on the extent to which Heath was persuaded by Geddes, but Admiral Richmond, then a captain serving at the Admiralty, had no doubts about the matter, later noting in his diary, 'Saw ... Heath (2nd Sea Lord) who shouts and blusters, the hearty seaman all over – as dense as mud and obstinate as a mule, but I suspect easily frightened, for Geddes was able to put him in his kennel when he threatened to resign over Jellicoe's dismissal.'⁴⁶ Richmond was renowned for his acerbic character and for being critical of his colleagues. Nonetheless, even making allowances for that, if his comments are taken in conjunction with Duff's, it is evident that Geddes' 'cajoling' of Heath influenced the outcome.

It is also probable that the outcome was influenced by Geddes' formal response to the Sea Lord's memorandum threatening resignation. Geddes waited two days before replying formally by letter to the Sea Lords making three specific points. Firstly, he reiterated that he was not prepared to discuss the matter with them officially and complained that his previous conversation on the subject had been in confidence and that they had broken that confidence.⁴⁷ Secondly, he reminded the Sea Lords that the appointment or removal of the first Sea Lord was 'entirely a matter for His Majesty and his Majesty's Government'.⁴⁸ Thirdly, and undoubtedly the point that had most bearing on the Sea Lords' decision on whether or not to resign, he

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Richmond, Diary Entry, 15 April 1918, quoted Roskill, 'Jellicoe's Dismissal', 80.

⁴⁷ Letter, Geddes to Heath, 4 January, 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

confessed ‘his amazement’ to this threat and reminded them ‘that at this time more than any other, it is the privilege of every citizen loyally and whole-heartedly to carry on the duties assigned to him’.⁴⁹

Duff’s notes do not mention this letter or the Sea Lords’ response to it. However, the fact that the response gives nothing more by way of explanation or clarification, by focusing on the Sea Lords’ so called ‘breach of confidence,’ and reminding them that Jellicoe’s dismissal was none of their business, can only have added to a growing perception of the futility of their position. If nothing else, the fact that Geddes had already received an apology for the breach of confidence from one of the Sea Lords, would suggest that by the time they had received the letter their stance was weakening.

Two other people influenced the Sea Lords’ decision. Firstly, despite his protestations, Carson believed the Sea Lords ought not to resign. In his article, Roskill refers to a statement in an unpublished biography by Oliver to the effect that Carson had ‘asked them [the Sea Lords] to take no further action’, but then concludes that as Oliver’s account ‘was written long afterwards and contains at least one definite inaccuracy, one may doubt whether it should be regarded as reliable evidence’.⁵⁰ Given Carson’s anger over the affair, it is understandable that Roskill reached such a conclusion. On the other hand, Jellicoe’s dismissal was a particularly significant incident on which Oliver had been prepared to stake his career. Consequently, it is unlikely that he would have forgotten who influenced his decision, even if there were inaccuracies over the timing of events. Further, Halsey, in his initial request to meet with Carson, indicated that the Sea Lords were considering whether they should remain on the Board, and it would thus seem inconceivable that there was not some

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Roskill, ‘Jellicoe’s Dismissal’, 80.

discussion with Carson on such a critical issue.⁵¹ Finally in this context, in his biography of Carson, Colvin claims that although Carson ‘disapproved of the change’, he ‘added the advice to put duty before inclination and remain at their posts’.⁵²

Thus, contrary to Roskill’s view, there would seem no reason to doubt the reliability of Oliver’s remarks. Certainly, given Duff’s comments on the importance the Sea Lords attached to Carson’s opinion as to whether Jellicoe should have been replaced, his views on the question of their resignation would also have weighed heavily with them.

The other person to influence the Sea Lords was Jellicoe himself. He states that ‘I advised Halsey that the Sea Lords should not resign as it would do no good and be bad for the Country. Geddes would only get in as Sea Lords officers that would do his will and who had no knowledge of the Admiralty, and the results might be fatal to efficiency.’⁵³ As much as anything, Jellicoe’s refusal to aggravate the situation, despite his self confessed ‘wounded feelings’, epitomises the dignity of the man and his overriding loyalty to his country.⁵⁴ There is little doubt that this advice also weighed heavily with the Sea Lords in coming to their decision.

Hence, according to Admiral Duff, ‘after interminable discussion’, the Sea Lords withdrew their threat of resignation, Geddes accepting that ‘there has been an entirely honest misunderstanding between us of the impression intended to convey in my reference to the opinion of others when we met on December 26th.’⁵⁵ That latter remark conveys a sense that Geddes was backtracking.

⁵¹ Letter, Halsey to Carson, 1 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/B/38/3.

⁵² Colvin, *Carson*, 290.

⁵³ Jellicoe, Account of Circumstances of Dismissal, BL, Add. MSS 49039.

⁵⁴ Letter, Jellicoe to Carson, 28 December 1917, PRONI, D/1507/B/37/19.

⁵⁵ Duff, Notes re Jellicoe’s dismissal, NMM, DFF/2; Letter, Geddes to Heath, 5 January 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

If Carson was at least partially instrumental in calming the turmoil at the Admiralty, as far as Geddes was concerned, he was not prepared to let the matter rest. On 29 December 1917, after his meeting with Halsey, he had written to Geddes complaining that he had been informed that Geddes had stated that at conference with the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour and themselves that ‘you and I agreed it was time Admiral Jellicoe left the Admiralty’ and presumably out of courtesy, continued, ‘I do not of course believe you made such a statement, but I think it right to bring it to your notice.’⁵⁶ Carson also stated that no such conference had taken place, and that the only conversation he could recollect on the subject was a private discussion that they had had at the Admiralty when Carson made the point that ‘he knew of know one to replace him [Jellicoe].’⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, the response from Geddes was terse. He reasserted that the meeting with the Prime Minister had taken place, but denied he had stated that Carson had agreed with him that Jellicoe should leave the Admiralty.⁵⁸ Moreover, he complained that:

What I have said and I have confined this to a very limited circle in strict confidence which has been violated is that my opinion of Adml Jellicoe was not come to hastily and that I had some 2 1/2 months ago I thought - consulted my two predecessors about it & that from the interviews I felt that my opinion of him had been confirmed.⁵⁹

Further, such was Geddes’ concern about the affair, he asked his secretary, Gerald Steele, to talk to Carson when delivering the letter. Steel’s account of that meeting is

⁵⁶ Letter, Carson to Geddes, 29 December 1917, PRONI, D/1597/B/37/ 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Letter, Geddes to Carson, 29 December 1917, *ibid*, D/1597/B/37/23.

⁵⁹ Ibid. In the draft of this letter which is in Geddes’ papers, he has deleted the words ‘and I know by whom’ after his reference to his confidence being violated, perhaps highlighting the irritation he was feeling about the whole affair. Draft Letter, Geddes to Carson, 29 December 1917, NA, ADM 116/1807.

illuminating in that he believed firstly that Carson understood and accepted the extent to which Geddes had used Carson's name in providing an explanation for the dismissal and, secondly, that Steel was of the view that Carson would not try to 'aggravate the position'.⁶⁰ Geddes' handwritten endorsement on Steel's letter reads 'Thanks. Quite satisfactory.'⁶¹ However, either Steel had misread the situation, or he had been misled by Carson as, on 1 January 1918, Carson again wrote to Geddes stating that 'I find it difficult to understand why my name was introduced into the matter of Ad: Jellicoe's dismissal.'⁶² Carson then sought to bring Lloyd George and Balfour into the dispute. After some time had elapsed, Balfour's response came in a lengthy letter in which, perhaps atypically, he appeared on the one hand to side with Carson, but on the other, to distance himself from the matter entirely.⁶³ Not surprisingly in view of what had gone before, Lloyd George was unequivocally supportive of Geddes. Carson had sought an interview on the matter with Lloyd George on 31 December 1917, 'being very much concerned about the dismissal of Admiral Jellicoe and even more so about the appointment of Wemyss as First Sea Lord and resenting 'the manner in which my name has been brought into the matter'.⁶⁴ Lloyd George's response is evident from two sources. Firstly, there is a holograph endorsement by Geddes on a copy of Carson's note requesting the meeting with Lloyd George, which confirmed both that the October meeting had taken place

⁶⁰ Memorandum, Steel to Geddes, 29 December 1917, NA, ADM, 116/1807.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Letter, Carson to Geddes, 1 January 1918, *ibid.*

⁶³ Letter, Balfour to Geddes, 8 March 1918, *ibid.* In this letter Balfour acknowledged that the meeting in October 1917 with Carson and the Prime Minister at which Jellicoe's future was discussed did in fact take place and he also acknowledged that 'I am for my part quite ready to accept the judgment which you have deliberately ... arrived at, namely that a change of in the office of First Sea Lord was necessary.' However, in support of Carson's argument Balfour also states: 'This is rather a long screed. I trouble you with it only to make it quite clear that merely to say that you consulted me ... is likely to be very misleading, unless you add that I offered no opinion upon the wisdom or unwisdom of keeping Sir John as First Sea Lord, and that I did not myself know of any sailor who could possibly be described as having better qualifications for the post.'

⁶⁴ Memorandum, Carson to Lloyd George, 31 December 1917, *ibid.*

and that Lloyd George had approved ‘the changes in detail’.⁶⁵ Secondly, Lloyd George then wrote to Geddes confirming that ‘I am perfectly clear that such a meeting took place at which the four of us were present – perhaps about two months ago – and that it was arranged at your request. My private secretary is able to confirm my recollection.’⁶⁶

Thus, Lloyd George had not only conspired to act in a way which came close to causing the mass resignation of the executives in control of the Navy, in essence he was the root cause of an acrimonious dispute between a member of the War Cabinet and the political head of the Navy; something that could not have been entirely conducive to the war effort.

The matter did not end there. The exchanges of correspondence continued for at least three months after Jellicoe’s dismissal, despite Balfour pointing out that ‘it is in the public interest that the matter be allowed to sleep.’⁶⁷ As to why this happened, Carson was obviously aggrieved that, as a member of the War Cabinet, he had not been consulted. He was angry and resented that ‘my name should have been brought into an explanation of his dismissal to some of the Sea Lords and that they should have been given the impression that I had expressed approval of his leaving office’.⁶⁸ However, he had nothing to gain from continuing the dispute. There was no way back for Jellicoe, and in the interests of the conduct of the war, he had advised the Sea Lords not to resign. Carson also resigned from the War Cabinet on 22 January 1918, so ostensibly thereafter he no longer had a direct involvement in the prosecution of

⁶⁵ Ibid. The fact that the note from Carson to the Prime Minister was passed to Geddes adds to the evidence of close collusion between them in the handling of the whole affair.

⁶⁶ Letter, Lloyd George to Geddes, 4 January 1918, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Letter, Balfour to Geddes, 8 March 1918, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Letter, Carson to Geddes, 5 January 1918, *ibid.*

the war.⁶⁹ Thus, it can be surmised that Colvin is correct in his assessment that apart from Carson's desire not to be associated with the dismissal, he 'intervened merely to do justice to Sir John Jellicoe'.⁷⁰

Despite the fact that it would have been in Geddes' interests to end the matter *post haste*, if for no other reason than to restore calm at the Admiralty, he also was unable to let the matter rest. In his case, however, he had little alternative. Roskill suggests that the 'rumbles continued' as 'there had been some agitation in the Press ... and Geddes was evidently aware that the matter might be raised in the House of Commons.'⁷¹ However, Roskill misses the point in as much as it was the fact that the matter had been raised in the House of Commons that prolonged the 'rumbles'. On 5 March 1918 Geddes had made a speech in the House of Commons debate on the Navy Estimates for the ensuing year. This gave Members of Parliament the opportunity to challenge Geddes on the issue of Jellicoe's dismissal and over the first two days of the debate a number of Members did so with considerable vigour. George Lambert, the Liberal MP for South Molton, focusing on the Admiralty reorganisation that Geddes had referenced in his speech, queried whether the reorganisation 'was simply an excuse for the dismissal of Sir John Jellicoe', and considered that 'the Government can find no virtue in a distinguished naval or military officer until they have dismissed him.'⁷² He further considered that Jellicoe deserved somewhat more sympathy in the way he had been treated and, perhaps most

⁶⁹ Publicly, Carson resigned because he wished to be unfettered by any potential conflict of interest arising from the Government's position on the Irish Home rule controversy. According to Colvin, the letters exchanged between Carson and Lloyd George and published in the press were carefully crafted to reassure the public, as Carson had no desire to weaken the Government at such a critical point in the war. If Colvin is correct as to the rationale given for his resignation, the question must also arise as to whether the way Jellicoe was treated, and the machinations that were then ongoing to remove Sir William Robertson as Chief of the Imperial General Staff, also had a bearing on Carson's decision to resign. Colvin, *Carson*, 309.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 334.

⁷¹ Roskill, 'Jellicoe's Dismissal', 87, 88.

⁷² Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5, 6 March 1918. Lambert's views have significance as he was a Civil Lord of the Admiralty between 1905 and 1915.

significantly, obtained confirmation that neither Carson nor the War Cabinet had been consulted over the dismissal.⁷³ Moreover, Geddes, when pressed later in the debate, refused to disclose the members of the War Cabinet with whom he had discussed the matter.⁷⁴ Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Hedworth Meux, Unionist MP for Portsmouth, was another who was critical of Geddes stating that he ‘never was more surprised as just now when I heard that ... Mr Lambert had extracted the fact that the dismissal of Lord Jellicoe was not made with the knowledge of the War Cabinet. I cannot help wondering where the First Lord got his knowledge and inspiration’, the implication being that the decision to dismiss Jellicoe had not been of Geddes’ own making.⁷⁵ Meux went on to remark that, ‘When I saw this thing done ... at Christmas I was so angry that I could not go to church. I believe that is the feeling throughout the Navy. They were violently angry.’⁷⁶

This attack came from both Liberal and Conservative Members of Parliament. It was not therefore merely a ‘party’ motivated assault. It focused, not just on the way that Jellicoe had been treated, but also on his relative competence and the lack of consultation. Also, during the first three days of the debate, Geddes had been virtually unsupported. Lloyd George had not been present, a matter which also attracted no little criticism in the House. The only two other politicians present who had intimate knowledge of the circumstances of the dismissal were Carson and Balfour; the former believing the matter to be a ‘national calamity’, and the latter being at pains to avoid being associated with the affair. Hence, coming from the House of Commons at close of business on 7 March, Geddes must have felt bruised, and no doubt it was this that prompted his writing on 8 March what can only be

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

described as a remarkable letter to Lloyd George, who was due to appear in the continuation of the debate on 11 March. In this, Geddes firstly stated that he had consulted no less than three ministerial private secretaries in an effort to confirm that the October meeting at which Jellicoe's future was discussed did in fact take place.⁷⁷ Secondly, he suggested, 'It would be a great mistake to bring Mr Balfour's opinion into the controversy to the discussion at all.'⁷⁸ Thirdly, he wrote, 'I hope very much that in any statement you make will bear in mind that it is essential that my bona fides and veracity... should be established ... and you will do what you can to accomplish this.'⁷⁹ This letter, from someone holding down the position of political head of the Navy in a world war, verges on the astonishing. In the first place, the letter is garrulous and repetitive, particularly with reference to the issue as to whether or not Geddes and the Prime Minister met with Carson to discuss Jellicoe's future. Secondly, it highlights a dilemma. On the one hand Geddes was anxious to involve Balfour to prove that the October meeting took place, but on the other hand he knew that Balfour was of the view that Jellicoe 'had unique experience both of work within the Admiralty and with work in the organisation of a seagoing fleet' and that 'in these respects he had no real rival among living sailors'.⁸⁰ For Balfour, as well as Carson, to have expressed such a view publicly, would have undermined Geddes' position. Thirdly, the plaintiff cries for Lloyd George's support and the need to establish 'his bona fides' implies considerable insecurity on Geddes' part. The irony is, however, that when Lloyd George appeared in the House of Commons on 11 March, although there was some acerbic discussion on the relationship between the press and the Government and the manner in which the press was used by the Government, nothing

⁷⁷ Letter, Geddes to Lloyd George, 8 March 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Letter, Balfour to Geddes, 8 March 1918, *ibid.*

was said directly about Jellicoe's dismissal. Why this should be so given the persistence of certain members during the previous days of the debate is impossible to explain with certainty. It can only be surmised that having been presented with the *fait accompli* of the dismissal and having made their point, as with the Sea Lords, it was not a matter that warranted bringing down the Government at a critical time in the war.

Despite this, however, the matter still continued to trouble Geddes for some time. His papers in the National Archives contain several drafts of a statement that was ultimately sent to Lloyd George on 28 April 1918, the draft being marked with the handwritten comment, 'In case he wishes to use it in debate on Air Ministry Charges on 29th April.'⁸¹ This statement has been referred to previously in the context of Geddes' plea to leave the Admiralty immediately prior to Jellicoe's dismissal. As noted, it was not used by Lloyd George, but it is of significance because it is the only document in Geddes' papers which at least, *prima facie*, purports to provide some explanation of the reasons for the dismissal. The draft opens by stating that:

It is distasteful to me to discuss the personal merits of an Officer who has provided such distinguished service in certain capacities, but it is in the national interest that his removal from the position of First Sea Lord should be explained, and it is due to my Right. Hon. Friend, the First Lord that this explanation should be given to the country.

When my Right Hon. Friend became First Lord, the Cabinet – the great majority of the Cabinet – felt that however great Lord Jellicoe's services may have been as Commander-in-Chief afloat, which position he held under great

⁸¹ Draft Statement, Geddes, 29 April 1918, *ibid.*

strain for 28 months, he lacked certain qualities as the Chief of Naval Staff and as the Chief Naval Adviser of the Government.

I, personally, had frequently discussed his qualities – as was my right and duty – with the late First Lord. I was dissatisfied with Lord Jellicoe, and I told the Right Hon. Friend, the member for Trinity College Dublin [Sir Edward Carson] that this was so. He has referred in this House to ‘constant pressure’ and if it is not the duty of a Prime Minister to give a colleague in the position of First Lord of the Admiralty or the Secretary of State for War, his views as to the Chief Naval and Military Advisers of the Government, I do not know what his duties are.⁸²

The statement then goes on to recount elements of the reorganisation at the Admiralty that was carried out immediately following the appointment of Geddes as First Lord, the circumstances of the October meeting with Balfour and Carson and then continues:

I knew the several views of my colleagues on the subject of Lord Jellicoe. I held strong views myself and I had confidence in my Right Hon. Friend’s judgement after three years of close association with him, having regard to his experience of, and in, the Admiralty, from May to December ...

I took counsel with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was in the building and the change advocated was agreed upon. I knew the views of my colleagues in the War Cabinet.⁸³

The matter was not raised in the debate of 28 April, but whether Lloyd George would have used the statement if he had again been challenged on the issue must be open to

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

doubt, for apart from embellishing certain facts, it raises more questions than it answers.

Firstly, despite Jellicoe's persistent pessimism through the early part of 1917, there is no evidence that Jellicoe had lost the confidence of the members of the Cabinet other than Lloyd George either then, or immediately prior to the dismissal. Secondly, maintaining that he 'knew the views of my colleagues' implies that they would have approved of Geddes' action had they been consulted beforehand. As discussed earlier, at least two members of the War Cabinet subsequently disapproved of it. Balfour too, did not think there was anyone better qualified for the job than Jellicoe. Thirdly, the statement again begs the question as to why, if Lloyd George was so dissatisfied with Jellicoe during Carson's tenure at the Admiralty, he did not force the issue and remove Jellicoe then, or alternatively after the October meeting at which Jellicoe's future was discussed. Finally, although the intent behind the statement was to provide the country with an explanation for Jellicoe's removal, on analysis, it does not. Lloyd George does not explain why he was dissatisfied with Jellicoe, the 'qualities' he lacked, or the failings Geddes had observed during his time at the Admiralty. What the statement does show, however, is that four months after the event, Geddes was still uncomfortable with his role at the Admiralty and that he remained concerned over his reputation.

Conclusions

In the introduction to this chapter, reference is made to Roskill's wish for his readers to decide whether the way Geddes went about dismissing Jellicoe was

judicious and whether he was ‘justified in claiming the political support for his action which he did claim.’⁸⁴ The correspondence which Jellicoe received from within the Navy, from politicians and from other associates makes it very clear that peremptory dismissal, in a curt letter, without prior warning, and more pertinently without explanation, was, to say the least, inappropriate. Lady Carson made the telling remark, ‘A great row on at the Admiralty as Sir Eric Geddes has dismissed Jellicoe as one might a dishonest butler and everybody in the navy is seething with discontent.’⁸⁵ From the correspondence that Jellicoe received following his dismissal, there is little doubt that Lady Carson’s comment was a reflection of the views within the Navy. Lloyd George and Geddes, in acting as they did, without the authority or consensus of the War Cabinet, had created a potentially serious state of affairs indeed, not least because of the effect it may have had within the Admiralty and throughout the fleet. It almost caused the resignation of naval members of the Board of the Admiralty and, arguably, had it not been for the sense of duty of both Carson and Jellicoe persuading the Sea Lords to remain at their posts, they may well have resigned. From the tenor of the correspondence and Duff’s notes on the matter, had Jellicoe sought the Sea Lords’ backing, they may well have followed through on their original threat. If that had happened, there was a real risk that Lloyd George’s coalition would have collapsed. Either event would, at the very least, have handed a real propaganda opportunity to the enemy at a critical point in the war. Further, although it is not possible to argue with certainty as to whether it would have affected German naval strategy, the turmoil within the Admiralty may have resulted in German naval command reversing its policy and risking an attack by the High Seas Fleet. Moreover, from a personal perspective, the correspondence between Geddes and

⁸⁴ Roskill, ‘Jellicoe’s Dismissal’, 72.

⁸⁵ Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 1 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/4/1.

Lloyd George and Geddes and Balfour, and the public criticism he sustained, clearly caused Geddes considerable angst for a period of at least three months after the dismissal; not something that the political head of the Admiralty should be troubled with in war. Thus, the conclusion is that in dismissing Jellicoe in the way that they did, Lloyd George and Geddes were most injudicious in their approach, except that in the timing of the event they avoided immediate challenge in the House of Commons and, following the adage that ‘yesterday’s news is no news’, immediate and potentially damaging adverse press commentary.

Accepting that, however, gives rise to the question as to what alternatives Geddes could have adopted, given that he was forced into the situation by Lloyd George’s refusal to allow him to move from the Admiralty. It is just possible that in direct discussion with Jellicoe, he may have persuaded him to leave on a ‘mutually agreed’ basis and allow him the dignity of talking to his colleagues and communicating with the fleet openly.⁸⁶ The disadvantage of taking this approach is that it would have taken more time. Thus, Lloyd George and Geddes would have lost the ‘opportunity’ of the Houses of Commons not being in session and of there being no press coverage over the Christmas period. However, such an approach would have alleviated both the political turmoil and the turmoil from within the Navy.

With regard to the question as to whether or not Geddes was justified in claiming the political support of his immediate predecessors as First Lord, the answer must unequivocally be that he was not. Indeed, given the furore that resulted from this and his subsequent pleas to preserve his integrity, in hindsight, it must have been

⁸⁶ There is some evidence to suggest that Geddes did not like personal confrontation, despite his reputation as a skilled industrialist. To an extent this can be gleaned from his reaction to the attacks he received in the House of Commons and a reluctance to attend there. Lady Carson also made a telling remark in her journal, where she stated that ‘Edward and I had lunch with Admiral Halsey ... he is leaving the Admiralty & says he has had a most unhappy time since Edward left. Geddes is too frightened to see them and & tell them they are to go, so he takes to his bed and writes to them.’ Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 12 June 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/4/1.

something that Geddes himself regretted. Irrespective of whether Carson's memory was at fault over the 26 October meeting and what was said there, from the strength of Carson's support for Jellicoe when he was at the Admiralty (during part of which time Geddes was Controller), and the strength of Carson's reaction after the dismissal, Geddes must have been aware of Carson's views on matter. If not before, then certainly after the October meeting, Geddes must also have been aware of Balfour's views on who was best qualified to hold the post of First Sea Lord.

Presumably, despite this knowledge, Geddes had hoped that by providing an explanation to the Sea Lords on a 'personal' basis and in confidence rather than in his capacity as First Lord, his explanation would remain private; his complaint in several letters that confidentiality had been breached would suggest so. However, to assume that on such a momentous issue the essence of the conversations would not leak or those involved would not seek to verify his contentious claims, was naive in the extreme. Geddes and his methods were not wholly respected within the senior echelons of the Admiralty staff, and as indicated by his requests to leave the Admiralty, he was not comfortable in his role. Thus, it can be assumed that by implying he had the support of Carson and Balfour, he thought he would avert any rebellion from the Sea Lords.⁸⁷ Ironically, it had the opposite effect. Initially, the Sea Lords had concluded that they would not resign. It was only when they were informed that Carson had not supported Jellicoe's dismissal as Geddes appears to have claimed, that the resignation threat was made. In claiming the support of Carson and Balfour, Geddes had made a serious misjudgement.

⁸⁷ By way of example, Oliver wrote that 'we have been upside down here ever since the North-Eastern Railway took over ... Geddes is mad about statistics and has forty people always making graphs and issuing balance sheets full of percentages ... It may be well enough in a Life Assurance business or a railway.' Quoted, Winton, *Jellicoe*, 261.

Several other issues arise from the analysis of the correspondence and surrounding events referred to in this chapter. Firstly, accepting that the meeting between Balfour, Carson, Geddes and Lloyd George was held, on or around 26 October 1917, the question arises as to why Jellicoe was not dismissed then rather than two months later? It may have been that the opinion of Carson and Balfour caused Lloyd George and Geddes to procrastinate. On the other hand, at that time, the press campaign against Jellicoe and the Admiralty was at its zenith. Sacking him then would have laid them both open to criticism that the dismissal was the result of this campaign and consequently that they were mere servants of the press. The fact that Geddes was particularly sensitive to public criticism, as shown by his later correspondence with Lloyd George, supports this contention.

The second issue relates to the extent of Lloyd George's influence, or indeed, involvement in the matter. Geddes claimed that the decision was entirely his. However, this claim is misleading and unquestionably he was manipulated by Lloyd George, who used the mechanism of rejecting Geddes' request to move from the Admiralty to seize the opportunity. Moreover, Geddes did not have the political experience to deal with the aftermath of the decision. Winton claims that the way Geddes outmanoeuvred the Sea Lords showed 'the uncommon degree of political agility he had acquired in his short time at Whitehall'.⁸⁸ However, the manner in which he went about replacing Jellicoe, his subsequent performance in the House of Commons and the extent to which he sought to rely on Lloyd George to salvage his integrity after the event, suggests otherwise. This in turn leads to a sense that as well

⁸⁸ Winton, *Jellicoe*, 262.

as engineering the dismissal, Lloyd George, with his penchant for intrigue, also played a prominent, if undisclosed, role in sorting out the aftermath.

Thirdly, having thus condemned Geddes, it is possible to have a degree of sympathy with his predicament. The root cause of this stemmed from the fact that despite the claims made in the draft statement of 28 April 1918, there was no obvious or justifiable reason for dismissing Jellicoe. That factor influenced the content and abruptness of the letter of dismissal, which in part may have engendered the other Sea Lords' hostility towards Geddes. Geddes would not have had to claim the support of his immediate predecessors in providing an explanation to the other Sea Lords; and he would not subsequently have been subject to the attacks in the House of Commons.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day, Lloyd George's intrigue had proved successful, and Geddes, having publicly to declare that the decision to dismiss Jellicoe was his alone, was rendered the scapegoat.

Chapter VII

For Better or For Worse

Introduction

One approach to assessing whether Admiral Jellicoe's dismissal was justified is to consider if matters at the Admiralty were better after he left than before. The received position is that they were. Not surprisingly, Jellicoe's successor, Admiral Wemyss, was of that view, remarking that 'I had not been many weeks in the First Sea Lord's chair before I had the pleasure of knowing that the machine was running more smoothly and efficiently than before.'¹ Sir Eric Geddes was of the same mind. In his letter to Lloyd George of 28 April 1918, he claimed that:

As a general impression as to the working conditions in the Admiralty and the efficiency of the machine, I have no personal doubt whatever that the comparison is immensely in favour of the last four months, and this is not only apparent here, but in our relationship with the principal fighting commands afloat.²

However, as mentioned, this letter was written in response to a request from Lloyd George to provide information in anticipation of questions being raised in the House of Commons as to why Jellicoe was dismissed. Having been severely criticised during the Navy Estimates debate in March 1918, there was little else Geddes could

¹ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 370.

² Letter, Geddes to Lloyd George, 24 April 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

say if he was to justify the dismissal. Also, within the Navy, there were certain voices that considered that there had been an improvement. According to Stephen Roskill, '[Admiral] Beatty found the changes to his liking, and relations between him and Wemyss were, at this stage, far better than his relation with Jellicoe had been.'³ It will be argued, however, that this may have been as much due to the consensus of views between Wemyss and Beatty as to the role of the Grand Fleet than as to Wemyss' less demanding style. Arthur Marder was of the view that 'the New Order was overall a smashing success.'⁴ It must be said that this remark is not typical of Marder's generally balanced approach, and it may be that this is a particular instance where, in his admiration for Admiral Richmond, he has relied on Richmond's view without due consideration. Richmond was highly critical of Jellicoe and what he perceived to be Jellicoe's over cautious strategy.

Whilst superficially things may have appeared better, in reality, there was no significant difference in the efficiency of the Admiralty or in the way it conducted the war. If anything, in terms of overall strategy, it became more defensive and confused. Thus, if there was no material improvement, the question must arise as to why the change was made in the first place as Wemyss lacked the qualifications and experience of his predecessor. Indeed Wemyss, when asked to assume the role of First Sea Lord, apparently questioned his own ability to undertake that role, remarking, 'I had some doubts as to whether I should be able successfully to grapple with the enormous problems that confronted the First Sea Lord.'⁵ Geddes,

³ Roskill, *Earl Beatty*, 249.

⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 9. On hearing of Jellicoe's dismissal Richmond remarked, 'One obstacle to a successful war is now out of the way.' Richmond, Diary Entry, 28 December 1917, Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 290.

⁵ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 366.

nevertheless, persuaded him that he was the ‘best man’ for the job.⁶ The first part of this chapter will therefore consider whether that statement was justified.

In seeking to counter the argument that matters improved under Wemyss, the second, third and fourth parts of this chapter respectively will discuss the strategy adopted by Geddes and Wemyss, particularly as it relates to the role of the Grand Fleet, the continuing war against the U-boat and operational blunders and missed opportunities that continued to hound the Admiralty. The fifth part of this chapter will consider aspects of the naval attack on the Ostend and Zeebrugge harbours which took place on 22 April 1918. As noted, although discussion of this operation might ordinarily have fallen under the heading of strategy, it has a particular significance because it is the only British naval operation throughout the war that received wholesale press and public acclamation. For that reason it is addressed separately.

Jellicoe versus Wemyss

Although Jellicoe and Wemyss were both products of boyhood entry to the Navy through the *Britannia* Naval College (Wemyss followed five years after Jellicoe) and rose through the ranks in a period of rapid technological change, their background, experience and route to Flag rank was very different. As mentioned, Jellicoe’s background was middle class, and although his potential was identified early in his career by Admiral Fisher, his progression was achieved largely on merit. To recap, he had excelled as a student at *Britannia*; he was a gunnery specialist; he had held senior administrative posts at the Admiralty and consequently had a deep

⁶ Ibid.

knowledge of the capabilities and weaknesses of the ships in the Navy and in the German navy. He had also held senior seagoing commands in peacetime and had excelled commanding large fleet exercises undertaken shortly before the outbreak of the war. He commanded the Grand Fleet at the start of the war and was responsible for bringing it to battle readiness. He led the Grand Fleet at the Battle of Jutland, the only significant battle fought against the High Seas Fleet, and initiated many material improvements dictated by the lessons learned in the course of that battle. It had been Jellicoe who, in the autumn of 1916, had persuaded Arthur Balfour of the seriousness of the U-boat threat and it was this warning that had resulted in Jellicoe's move from the Grand Fleet to the Admiralty.

Wemyss was of a different ilk. He was of the aristocracy. His father was James Hay Erskine-Wemyss of Wemyss Castle in Fife and his maternal grandmother was the illegitimate daughter of King William IV. He was in the same *Britannia* class as his royal cousins, the future Duke of Clarence and the future King George V. He spent the first three years of his time at sea cruising the world in the corvette *Bacchante* in the company of the Royal Princes. In 1896, he served as First Lieutenant on the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, and his promotion to Captain at the relatively young age of 37 came as a 'special promotion' after being second in command of the liner, *Ophir*, which in 1901 had conveyed Prince George on a dominion tour.⁷ Thus, in the words of Marder, 'Wemyss was, at least until 1914, regarded as a Court sailor – an officer without exceptional ability, let alone the ability to conceive brilliant strategic surprises.'⁸ Moreover, he was not a specialist (one of only four First Sea Lords between 1905 and 1945 not selected from gunnery or torpedo officers), and although he had held shore appointments in command of the

⁷ Wemyss Naval Record, CA, WMYS 1/1.

⁸ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 4.

Royal Naval College, *Osborne*, and the Royal Naval Barracks at Devonport, he had never held a senior Admiralty appointment.

This is not to say Wemyss was incompetent. At the beginning of the war, he commanded the 12th Cruiser Squadron, with responsibility for ensuring the safe passage of the British Expeditionary Force to France. He acted as second in command to Admiral De Roebuck in the Dardanelles Campaign of 1915, and despite the ignominy of that campaign's failure, Wemyss was commended for his organisation and execution of the evacuation of troops from Suvla, Anzac and Cape Helles. He was subsequently appointed Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies and Egypt station and had been destined to take command of the Navy's Mediterranean operations before being summoned to the Admiralty in August 1917 to fill the newly created role of Deputy First Sea Lord. He was a popular officer which he owed 'to his buoyancy, charm, invariable courtesy, incomparable tact and talents for storytelling and mixing', attributes that no doubt stemmed from his background.⁹

Yet despite these attributes, Wemyss' appointment raised consternation both within and outside the Navy. Admiral Madden, Jellicoe's Chief of Staff when he commanded the Grand Fleet wrote, 'I am full of fear for the future; the Grand Fleet is all right as Beatty is strong enough to refuse to throw it away on wild cat schemes, but the wider field of operations is not in such able hands.'¹⁰ As mentioned previously, Beatty also expressed concerns about Wemyss' ability to run as complex an organisation as the Admiralty and had a 'fear for the future'.¹¹ From outside the Navy, perhaps the comment made in a journal entry by Lady Carson is the most telling of all:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Letter, Madden to Jellicoe, 27 December 1917, BL, Add. MSS. 49039.

¹¹ Letter, Beatty to Jellicoe, 27 December 1917, BL, Add. MSS 49008.

Phil Neville came to luncheon; he was Adml. Wemyss flag lieut: in the Mediterranean so was pleased I think for him to be 1st Sea Lord, but thought it a joke as do all the fleet. If it was peace time it would be funny, but in war it is dangerous and sad.¹²

Thus, the controversy over Jellicoe's dismissal was compounded by the choice of his successor.

That being the case, the question then arises as to why Geddes should have chosen someone who palpably lacked the relevant command and administrative experience, particularly as Geddes' own experience of naval matters was limited. Clearly Geddes, having worked with Wemyss for a period of approximately four months, would have had an opportunity to assess Wemyss' capabilities and because of Wemyss' more relaxed style, no doubt found him more malleable than Jellicoe. However, the choice of Wemyss as a potential successor was not made in December 1917, but in July 1917, i.e., shortly after Geddes was appointed First Lord. Thus again, the hand of Lloyd George appears in the affair.

Two factors support this contention. Firstly, given that Wemyss had served in the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the first half of 1917, it is unlikely that Geddes would have been sufficiently aware of Wemyss' capabilities to make any recommendation. However, Lloyd George was renowned for going behind the backs of his senior military and naval advisers and seeking information and advice from their juniors. Indeed, he admits as much in his memoirs, claiming that amongst others, 'Captain – now Admiral Sir Herbert – Richmond, to whom reference was made, was one of the able young men whom I found helpful.'¹³ It was during the

¹² Lady Carson, Diary Entry, 11 January 1918, PRONI, D/1507/C/4/1.

¹³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, III, 1175.

course of a meeting Richmond had with Lloyd George on 5 June 1917 that Richmond recommended Wemyss as a successor to Jellicoe.¹⁴

The second factor stems from an intriguing entry in Lady Wemyss' diary for 26 July 1917, which reads 'Marriotte arrives from England to expressly tell him [Wemyss] that there is an intrigue on foot to appoint him First Sea Lord in place of Jellicoe – it seems that it is the young Navy with whom he appears not to be very popular. R [Wemyss] says that nothing in this world would induce him to accept.'¹⁵ However, despite his wife's remarks, Wemyss was reluctantly persuaded to forgo command of the Mediterranean and move to the Admiralty.¹⁶

As already noted, in July 1917, the political situation and potential disquiet within the Navy precluded Lloyd George from removing both Carson and Jellicoe at the same time. However, these circumstances all point to a conspiracy to appoint Wemyss as successor to Jellicoe when the opportunity arose. Whether the suggestion was formally put to Wemyss then that he should take over from Jellicoe in due course is impossible to determine. However, given his reluctance to move to the Admiralty and to assume the role as First Sea Lord when Jellicoe was dismissed, it seems unlikely that he was directly involved in the conspiracy to oust Jellicoe. He must, nevertheless, have been aware that Jellicoe was vulnerable and accepted the role knowing he was the probable replacement should Jellicoe be sacked.

Thus, at a critical point in the war, the Prime Minister was motivated to replace the person who was regarded, certainly from within the Navy, as the person best qualified to fulfil the role of First Sea Lord by an officer who not only lacked the requisite command and administrative experience but had doubts about his own

¹⁴ Richmond, Notes prepared for conversation with Lloyd George, 5 June 1917, Marder, *Portrait of an Admiral*, 253.

¹⁵ Lady Wemyss, Diary Entry, 26 July 1917, CA, WMYS 9/10.

¹⁶ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 362.

capability of fulfilling the role. Moreover, Lloyd George's appointment of Wemyss as the potential successor to Jellicoe was made on the recommendation of a relatively junior officer at the Admiralty who was perceived by his fellow officers to have unconventional views. In these circumstances Geddes' comment that Wemyss was the 'best man for the job' lacks credibility.

A Strategic Retreat

If Lloyd George had thought that the appointment of Wemyss would bring about a change in naval strategy, he was to be disappointed. Throughout 1917, he had complained about the conservative nature of the Admiralty's approach. 'In that year', Jellicoe wrote, 'He [Lloyd George] pressed for more offensive action on the part of the Navy in general and the Grand Fleet in particular, pointing out the superior Naval strength as possessed by us as compared to the Germans.'¹⁷ Thus, it might have been anticipated that dismissal of the principal advocate of that policy would have brought about a significant change. It brought about some change, but arguably, it was to an even more conservative policy.

Two weeks after Jellicoe's dismissal, Beatty wrote to the Admiralty concluding that:

The correct strategy of the Grand Fleet is no longer to endeavour to bring the enemy to action at any cost, but rather to contain him in his bases until the general situation becomes more favourable to us. This does not mean that

¹⁷ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 185.

action should be avoided if conditions favour us, or that our role should be passive and purely defensive.¹⁸

Beatty based this conclusion essentially on five grounds; depletion of the Grand Fleet through the need for ships to cover the Scandinavian convoys; the effect of superiority in numbers of battleships being diminished as a consequence of ‘the enemy having the power of selecting the moment for inviting a Fleet action’; concern over the frailty of the British battle cruisers, despite a numerical superiority of nine to six over those of the High Seas Fleet; the inefficiency of the shell which the Grand Fleet was using; and the loss of its nominal compliment of destroyers for anti-submarine and convoy escort duties.¹⁹ There is not space here to analyse the validity of each of these reasons, but it is sufficient for the purposes of the present argument to say that Beatty’s conclusions were accepted by Geddes and the Admiralty Board. More significantly, this strategy was accepted by the War Cabinet when the matter came before them on 18 January 1918, albeit, according to Madden, with the members looking ‘very glum’ throughout the discussion.²⁰ John Terraine perceived this to be ‘a moment in history: a moment of farewell to the supremacy of British sea-power that had been taken for granted since Trafalgar’.²¹ Marder, on the other hand, argued that with available resources having been directed primarily at developing the convoy system through the best part of 1917, the ‘new’ strategy as regards the role of the Grand Fleet had in practice been in effect throughout that year. Therefore this strategy was not truly radical.²² Nevertheless, whether the policy accepted by the War Cabinet represented a real change or not, it is not surprising that Jellicoe found ‘it

¹⁸ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 134.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

²⁰ War Cabinet Meeting, 18 January 1918, NA, CAB 23/15/338A.

²¹ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 117.

²² Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 134.

difficult to reconcile the decision thus arrived at with the views expressed by Lloyd George in 1917'.²³

Two other factors are of relevance in considering whether the change of First Sea Lord resulted in a change of strategy. The first relates to Beatty's motivation for producing the strategy document referred to above so soon after Jellicoe's dismissal. It may have been the natural outcome of Beatty's discussions with Geddes and Wemyss early in January 1918, and it was merely intended as clarification or restatement of the role of the Grand Fleet. However, one of the principal areas of tension between the Admiralty and the Grand Fleet was the redeployment of Grand Fleet destroyers for convoy protection. By mid December 1917 Jellicoe was contemplating a reduction in size and readiness of the Grand Fleet so as to reallocate some of its resources to trade protection.²⁴ That being the case, the question arises as to whether Beatty's memorandum was an attempt to deflect further reductions in the size and capability of the fleet under his command, or to cover himself against the eventuality of being drawn into a fleet action in unfavourable circumstances. Certainly, it was perceived by Geddes that the new policy was 'rendered necessary only by the exigencies of the present situation and should be regarded as purely a temporary measure because of the deficiency of destroyers', which might point to an ulterior motive on the part of Beatty.²⁵ However, the policy was not reversed during the remainder of the war.

Furthermore, there is some irony in this situation in that Jellicoe later wrote that 'I should never have accepted this view had I been at the Admiralty.'²⁶ This view differed from that which he held in the early part of 1917 when contemplating the

²³ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 185.

²⁴ Jellicoe Minute, 14 December 1917, NA, ADM 137/ 1374.

²⁵ Geddes Memorandum, Naval Situation in the North Sea, 17 January 1918, quoted, Marder *FDSF*, 5, 135.

²⁶ Jellicoe, *Errors in Naval Operations*, quoted, *ibid*, 137.

introduction of the convoy system. However, his reasoning for the change was that by the latter part of 1917 the Grand Fleet was considerably stronger than it had been at the Battle of Jutland, both numerically and in terms of material improvements made, particularly in reducing the battle cruisers' vulnerability. That he would have been prepared to reduce the capability of the Grand Fleet by diverting more of its resources to counter the U-boat threat and, at the same time, countenance a fleet action 'if the opportunity should arise' without the constraints imposed by Beatty, suggests he was less risk averse than either Beatty or Wemyss and Geddes.²⁷ In other words, for all Lloyd George's complaints about Jellicoe's conservative strategy as to the role of the Grand Fleet, he appears to have replaced him with an Admiral who adopted an even more conservative strategy.

The second point to consider in the context of whether Wemyss was committed to a different strategy than Jellicoe stems from arguments put forward by Nicholas Black in *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*. Although the introduction of the convoy system had significantly reduced British merchant shipping losses from U-boat attack, the losses for the last quarter of 1917 still amounted to 783,000 tons, whilst new merchant ships coming on to the shipping register during the same period only amounted to 389,000 tons.²⁸ Thus, understandably, the Admiralty's focus was still primarily directed towards defeating the U-boat, to the extent that on 14 December 1917 Jellicoe wrote, 'The shipping situation is now most serious and the greatest danger that we face is unquestionably the shortage of shipping, and for this reason some of the destroyers relieved from the Grand Fleet must be directed to trade protection.'²⁹ Admirals Duff and Oliver concurred with this view, Duff believing that 'so long as the submarine campaign

²⁷ Jellicoe, *Submarine Peril*, 185.

²⁸ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 113.

²⁹ Jellicoe Minute, 14 December 1917, NA, ADM 137/1374.

gives reasonable prospects of bringing the war to an end, and it certainly does at the present, it is almost inconceivable that the High Seas Fleet will come out committed to a decisive action.’³⁰ Thus, Jellicoe and two of his most experienced senior subordinates thought it highly unlikely that the High Seas Fleet would commit to a fleet action. Moreover, as argued above, it appears that Jellicoe would have been prepared for the Grand Fleet to fight the High Seas Fleet even with its superiority reduced.

Wemyss did not share this view. He thought that if the German naval command believed that the submarine campaign was not going to be decisive, they would reverse their strategy, bring the High Seas Fleet out and force a fleet action. Further, he believed that the chance of that happening was greater than it had been at any time during the preceding 18 months.³¹ He then concluded that ‘so long as there is a chance of a general naval action being brought about, the risk of denuding the Grand Fleet of destroyers is one which should not be taken.’³²

Further, Wemyss persisted with this view throughout 1918, despite the contrary position of the Plans Division of the Admiralty. This division had been established in September 1917 as part of the reorganisation undertaken by Geddes shortly after his appointment as First Lord. The intention was that the division should be separate and be concerned with strategic plans as distinct from day to day operations. However, on at least three occasions through the first half of 1918, it produced memoranda questioning the strategic role of the Grand Fleet. In February 1918, it recommended that ‘the primary function of the Grand Fleet should be defined as the support of the barrage and the prevention of submarines passing out of the

³⁰ Duff Minute, 28 November 1917, *ibid.*

³¹ Wemyss Minute, 18 December 1917, *ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Northern exit.³³ In March 1918, the Plans Division's recommendations went even further by concluding that 'the idea of inveigling the High Seas Fleet into a fleet action should be abandoned in favour of an anti-submarine blockade of the Northern exit.'³⁴ Again in June 1918, the need for the Grand Fleet to have so many destroyers was questioned.³⁵ However, based on Wemyss' belief that the High Seas Fleet would come out and fight as Germany collapsed and Beatty's strong opposition to reducing the capability and readiness of the Grand Fleet, none of the recommendations of the Plans Division in this regard were implemented, with Wemyss putting an end to the matter by endorsing the relevant docket with the words, 'An interesting paper containing many truths, the policies proposed however cannot be implemented now. No further action required.'³⁶ This adds to the irony in that these anti-submarine recommendations, which were rejected by Jellicoe's successor, were advanced by the Plans Division, whose very creation Jellicoe only agreed to most reluctantly in the first place.

One further point can be made in the context of this discussion. In the introduction to this chapter, reference was made to the fact that the received view is that relations between the Admiralty and Grand Fleet were better under Wemyss than they had been under Jellicoe. Certainly, those with a vested interest in justifying the change said as much.³⁷ It may have been that Wemyss' more relaxed style in dealing with Beatty contributed to this view. However, given that Wemyss, in contrast to

³³ Plans Division Memorandum, 11 February 1918, NA, ADM 137/2707. As is discussed later, one of the principal offensive measures taken against German submarines was to lay a mine barrage from Orkney to the coast of Norway. However, to be fully effective it was recognised that it should be patrolled by surface vessels to force the submarines to dive into the minefields, and hence the recommendation that Grand Fleet resources should be diverted for this purpose.

³⁴ Plans Division Memorandum, Anti-Submarine Policy in the Immediate Future, 28 March 1918, NA, ADM 137/2708.

³⁵ Joint Memorandum by the British and American Planning Sections, 13 June 1918, NA, ADM 137/2709.

³⁶ Wemyss Minute, 21 June 1918, NA, ADM, 137/2709; Black, *British Naval Staff*, 219.

³⁷ Roskill, *Earl Beatty*, 249; Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 9.

Jellicoe, accepted that the capability of the Grand Fleet should not be compromised in favour of anti-submarine measures, the reason for much of the tensions between the Admiralty and Grand Fleet disappeared, and that too must have contributed to the better relationship. In other words, when Beatty had his way in retaining his destroyers, the relationship between the Grand Fleet and the Admiralty improved.³⁸

Whether or not the strategy that Wemyss adopted was the correct one and the extent to which Jellicoe would have reduced the Grand Fleet's capability must be open to question.³⁹ However, the mere fact that in December 1917 he was prepared to do so to a degree that his successor was not counters the argument that Jellicoe was over cautious and British Naval strategy was too defensive whilst he was First Sea Lord.

Submarine Problems Continue

Although losses to merchant shipping had dropped considerably through the latter part of 1917, they continued at an unacceptably high level during the first quarter of 1918. The tonnage of British merchant shipping sunk during that period averaged approximately 200,000 per month, but as stated previously, on the other side of the equation, the output of new merchant shipping still lagged well behind the

³⁸ The relationship between Wemyss and Beatty deteriorated significantly towards the end of 1918 when Beatty took umbrage because he was not fully consulted during negotiations on the terms of the Armistice. In this context Beatty's letters to Wemyss are irascible. This gives force to the argument that all was well with Beatty as long as his view prevailed. Letters, Beatty to Wemyss, 19 October and 7 November, 1918, CA, WMYS, 11/2.

³⁹ There does seem to be some inconsistency in Wemyss thinking. As noted in the previous chapter, he was prepared to give priority to anti-submarine measures and risk the threat of surface attack in the English Channel when siding with Admiral Keyes in the controversy over the Dover barrage, but not in the attempt to shut off the northern exit from the North Sea.

losses sustained.⁴⁰ Jellicoe, in his minute of 14 December 1917, had recognised that this remained the most significant threat to Britain. Newbolt summed up the position eloquently in commenting that ‘the excess of losses over replacements must, in the end, swallow up the tonnage saved ... and then the breathing space would end in national asphyxiation.’⁴¹ However, there was no immediate relaxation of the stranglehold. It would be five months after Wemyss’ appointment before the replacements exceeded the losses and this fact in itself gives weight to the argument that, at least in terms of results alone, Wemyss proved no more effective a First Sea Lord than his immediate predecessor. This may seem a harsh conclusion given that Wemyss was only appointed on 25 December 1917. Nevertheless, as the following discussion will show, eventual success was not achieved as the result of any inspired strategy on the part of Wemyss or his team. Rather, it came about as a consequence of the building blocks put in place by Jellicoe in the previous year.

As has been discussed in Chapter III, the substantial reduction in shipping losses from their peak in April 1917 largely resulted from the introduction of the convoy system. By the end of that year, only just over half Britain’s overseas trade was undertaken in convoy.⁴² However, apart from the convoy system, Jellicoe left another legacy. Through the course of 1917, he had ‘promoted an aggressive mining strategy’, initially directed at the Channel and the Heligoland Bight.⁴³ This strategy had been seriously hampered at the beginning of 1917 by a shortage of effective mines. However, through the initiatives of the Anti-Submarine Division, by the latter part of 1917 increasing numbers of an improved mine, based on a German model, began to be delivered. Thus, by the end of 1917, over 20,000 mines had been laid in

⁴⁰ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 111.

⁴¹ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 128.

⁴² Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 85.

⁴³ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 204.

the Dover Straits and the Heligoland Bight alone, compared to a total of just over 6,000 mines in all minefields in home waters during the preceding two and a half years.⁴⁴ Moreover, the strategy had started to prove successful, both in hampering German surface fleet and U-boat movements. During the course of 1917, six U-boats were destroyed in the Bight minefields, and perhaps just as significantly, through that year and 1918, Germany lost 28 destroyers and 70 minesweepers and patrol craft in that area in their attempts to keep channels clear.⁴⁵

However, despite these losses, the fact that the Bight minefield was close to German occupied ports allowed German minesweepers frequently to clear and mark channels through the fields. As a consequence, at the Allied Naval Conference in September 1917, Jellicoe resurrected the idea, advocated in 1916 by Admiral Bacon, of sealing off the northern exits from the North Sea by laying a minefield from the Orkney Isles to the Norwegian coast. The thought behind this proposal was that, if implemented and effective, in combination with the Dover Barrage, German submarines would be confined within the North Sea. The scheme had originally been rejected because of the difficulties of laying mines in the deep waters of the North Sea and the scale of production that would have been necessary to supply the 100,000 mines required. However, the combination of the development of an 'antenna' mine in the US, the availability of production facilities there and a particular liking for the scheme by the US Navy had shifted the feasibility of the project. Thus, by early November 1917 both the British and US Governments had agreed to proceed with the scheme, despite its scale and its potential cost.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the Northern Barrage has been questioned. The mine laying was hampered by technical difficulties. The barrage was never fully

⁴⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 226.

⁴⁵ Patrick Beesly, *Room 40*, (Oxford, 1940), 268.

completed and it probably only accounted for the destruction of 6 U-boats during the course of 1918.⁴⁶ Moreover, Beatty particularly was against the minefield. It irritated him as it constricted the Grand Fleet's freedom of manoeuvre, and as stated, the need to provide destroyers to patrol the barrage, in his view, weakened the Grand Fleet.⁴⁷ On the other hand, there seems little doubt from a German perspective, that the barrage did create difficulties for the U-boat commanders. In the words of the German Official Historian of North Sea operations, 'The Northern Barrage made its presence felt. The main reason for this is that it lay too far from the German bases, ruling out all minesweeping possibilities and also the provision of escorts for U-boats.'⁴⁸

There is also no doubt that the improvements to the Dover Barrage discussed in Chapter IV had the desired effect of sealing the North Sea exit through the Channel. Again to quote a German source, 'towards the end of the war the U-boats experienced considerable difficulty in breaking through the North Sea to and from their operation areas west of England. The closure of the Dover Strait had become more or less effective.'⁴⁹ Thus, despite there being some doubt as to the effectiveness of the Northern Barrage, on that basis it can be said that when Wemyss assumed the role of First Sea Lord, he inherited from Jellicoe a comprehensive offensive plan for attacking the U-boat. It was under Wemyss' auspices that the mining strategy was fully implemented, but much of the work in devising the plan, organising the production of the required mines and mine-laying vessels and organising the logistics of laying the mines, was down to Jellicoe and his team.

⁴⁶ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 74.

⁴⁹ Quoted, *Ibid.*, 84.

Perversely, however, the effectiveness of the mining strategy helped to prolong the high level of merchant shipping losses. The extensive mining undertaken in 1918 did not significantly increase the number of U-boats destroyed by mines (20 in 1917 as against 22 in 1918).⁵⁰ What it did do was force the German naval hierarchy to divert the principal area of attack from the Atlantic approaches and the south west coast of Britain to the east coast, where apart from the Scandinavian trade and French coal trade, merchant ships generally did not sail in convoy.⁵¹ It was not until May 1918 that the Admiralty started to implement a general convoy system on the east coast on a large scale. From June onwards the number of ships convoyed increased substantially, so that by the end of the war virtually all shipping from the Humber north was undertaken in convoy.⁵² The effect was marked. In August 1918, the total tonnage of British merchant shipping sunk by submarine reduced to approximately 145,000 tons, and by October 1918 that figure had fallen to approximately 55,000 tons.⁵³

Why the Admiralty under Wemyss was so slow to implement the convoy system on the east coast is not evident from the sources considered. However, it probably resulted from the continuing shortage of escort vessels compounded by the reluctance of Wemyss and Beatty to divert destroyers from the Grand Fleet. Again, it is conjecture as to whether the Admiralty under Jellicoe would have reacted any quicker, but the sense taken from his 14 December minute, and the priority he gave to the U-boat problem in ordering Bacon to illuminate the Dover Barrage at the risk of provoking a surface attack, suggests that Jellicoe may well have done.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 78.

⁵¹ Holger Herwig and David Task 'The Failure of Imperial Germany's Undersea Offensive against World Shipping, February 1917-October 1918', *The Historian*, 33, 4 (August 1971), 621.

⁵² German submarines did not usually operate south of the Humber due to the shallow shoal waters off the coast. .

⁵³ Marder, *FDSF*, 78.

There is one other factor that may have contributed to the length of time taken finally to defeat the U-boat. Although the convoy system proved successful, there remained within the Admiralty a perception that the convoy was purely a defensive measure and that alone would not defeat the U-boat. The Plans Division paper of 11 February 1918 had concluded that ‘attempts to defeat the submarine campaign mainly on a basis of local trade protection have been a failure, in the sense that if the sinkings are not permanently reduced during 1918, the war will probably have an unsatisfactory ending.’⁵⁴ Wemyss was certainly of this view, remarking that ‘to counter the submarine menace Defence only had been used. To me it appeared absolutely necessary that the tables must be turned and we must hunt the enemy submarines instead of them hunting us.’⁵⁵ These may have been Wemyss’ thoughts at the time, but the plans to form concentrated hunting groups of destroyers to implement this strategy were never executed, because, as Nicholas Black argues, ‘in the end, the senior members of the Staff chose not to reduce the readiness of the Grand Fleet in the face of opposition from Beatty, particularly as their decision coincided with the launch of the German Spring Offensive.’⁵⁶ Thus, on the one hand, Plans Division, in theory supported by Wemyss, was advocating one strategy, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet dictating another, in practice supported by Wemyss. Further, it is open to argument that this confusion obscured the fact that it was the convoy system that remained the principal means of reducing merchant shipping losses, despite Wemyss’ earlier acknowledgement that ‘the convoy has proved so eminently successful.’⁵⁷ Again, it is impossible to be categorical as to whether this confusion in strategy would have been perpetuated under Jellicoe. What

⁵⁴ Plans Division Memorandum, 11 February 1918, NA, ADM, 137/ 2707.

⁵⁵ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 370.

⁵⁶ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 219.

⁵⁷ Wemyss, Minute of 11 January 1918, quoted Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 97.

it does show however, is a lack of clarity of thought on Wemyss' part. It also shows that, at least in certain parts of the Admiralty, there remained a legacy of ambivalence to the convoy system after Jellicoe's dismissal that Wemyss did nothing to dispel.

Blunders and Missed Opportunities

The Admiralty was not only criticised for its cautious strategy during the Jellicoe era. It was also criticised for what may be described as operational blunders and missed opportunities. Again therefore, it can be argued that if some reduction in such incidents resulted from the change of First Sea Lord, there would have been some justification for dismissing Jellicoe, whether or not the Admiralty was directly responsible. However, as will be seen from the following discussion of three incidents, blunders continued and opportunities continued to be missed.

The first of these was the attack on 14 February 1918 by a flotilla of German destroyers on the vessels patrolling the Dover Barrage. Reference has already been made to this in Chapter IV. Briefly the narrative is that, in response to the increasing difficulty U-boats had encountered in using the English Channel as the route to the Western approaches, seven German destroyers sailed into the Channel unnoticed and attacked the barrage patrol boats. As noted, eight boats were sunk and a further seven badly damaged. Eighty-nine officers and men were killed or posted as missing.⁵⁸ The raid lasted over two hours. Through a combination of poor signalling, doubt as to the cause of gunfire, the German destroyers not being recognised as such despite not answering recognition signals correctly and general confusion, the destroyers escaped

⁵⁸ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 217.

unscathed. In the words of Marder, 'The denouement is almost incredible, even when one allows for the fact that a patrol maintained for months on end without an encounter tends to be less alert than it should be.'⁵⁹ Admiral Keyes, then in command of the Dover Patrol, was 'consumed with cold fury against those whose failure had let the patrol down so badly'.⁶⁰ However, it must be open to question as to who was to blame for this. Keyes subsequently ordered a Court of Enquiry, the outcome being that three officers commanding British patrolling destroyers and a monitor were relieved of their command.

This conclusion was harsh. In the first place, Keyes himself admitted that the trawlers that burned the illumination flares were vulnerable and stated that 'it is most doubtful whether any system of reporting, or any distribution of forces could have prevented the Germans from entering or leaving the Straits if they were determined to do so.'⁶¹ Secondly, the Court of Enquiry criticised the inadequacy of the signalling arrangements in place to alert to the fact that an enemy raid was underway. Keyes sought to abrogate responsibility by claiming that these arrangements had been in place when he assumed command of the Dover Patrol and he had not altered them. However, as it was Keyes who was responsible for implementing the new illumination and patrol arrangements after he assumed command, it must be open to argument that he ought also to have reviewed the communication and signalling arrangements, particularly as he claimed to have anticipated that the increased enemy submarine losses sustained as a result of the improved barrage 'would provoke reprisals before too long'.⁶² Thus, Keyes should have shouldered at least part of the responsibility for the debacle.

⁵⁹ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 43.

⁶⁰ Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 175.

⁶¹ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 218.

⁶² Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 174.

Would the German raid have been so successful had Bacon remained in command? Jellicoe thought not. As stated previously, he believed that the heavy losses sustained ‘were due to the system of patrols adopted by Keyes against the advice of Bacon’.⁶³ Nonetheless, that judgement would also seem harsh given that Jellicoe had overridden Bacon’s arguments and ordered that Keyes’ proposals be implemented in the interests of giving priority to stopping U-boats using the Channel.

Irrespective of this, however, what the enemy raid and its aftermath established was that Wemyss’ dismissal of Bacon and the appointment of Keyes was not the panacea for any operational problems that existed within the Dover Patrol that some expected. To Wemyss the raid was just ‘one of the inevitable incidents of war’.⁶⁴

The second example of an operational blunder that occurred after Jellicoe’s dismissal concerns two German ships, the battle cruiser, *Goeben* and the cruiser *Breslau*, which were the Admiralty’s greatest nemesis of the War. On 22 January 1918 an article appeared in *The Times* which claimed:

In spite of the ignominious nature of their career, no two warships have had such an important effect upon the war ... The story of their escape from Messina represents one of the greatest of our war blunders ... a blunder, a pail of whitewash and rigid secrecy – these are the three main factors in the Goeben case, and the example thus unfortunately set has been copied far too often. The mistake made outside the Straits of Messina led straight to the splendid failure at Gallipoli and to the siege of Kut. Very rarely in war has a single error had more far reaching consequences.⁶⁵

⁶³ Jellicoe, *Errors in Naval Operations*, quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 44.

⁶⁴ Lady Wemyss, *Lord Wester Wemyss*, 372.

⁶⁵ *The Times*, 22 January 1918.

It is doubtful if this article correctly assessed the impact of the escape of the two ships to the Dardanelles as Turkey had signed an alliance with Germany on the 3 August 1914, i.e., the day before Britain declared war on Germany and a week before the *Goeben* and *Breslau* reached the Dardanelles. Nevertheless, even if the escape of the two ships was not the direct cause of Turkey's alliance with Germany, it certainly facilitated Germany's objective in this respect. What is not open to doubt is that the two ships escaped the clutches of the Navy through the 'listless fumbling of two British admirals' combined with ineptness on the part of both the Admiralty and the Foreign Office.⁶⁶ Three and a half years later, in the third week of Wemyss' tenure as First Sea Lord, the blunder was repeated.

Briefly, the circumstances were as follows. Throughout the war both the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* had sailed under the Turkish flag and their operations had been limited to the Black Sea in opposition to the Russian Black Sea fleet. However, with hostilities there ending on 15 December 1917 following the armistice between Germany and Russia, the German Admiral, then commanding the Turkish squadron, planned a sortie into the Dardanelles to destroy allied patrol craft. Admiral Fremantle, in command of the Aegean Squadron, had anticipated that the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* might attempt a break out with a view either to joining with the Austrian fleet in the Adriatic, raiding allied trade routes in the Mediterranean, or attacking the allied bases in Egypt.⁶⁷ Despite the third of these options being considered to be 'a desperate venture which could only end in the destruction of the enemy', it was the last option that the German commander, Admiral von Rebeur-Paschitz, selected and, on 19 January 1918, the *Goeben*, in company with the *Breslau*, set sail with that

⁶⁶ Ulrich Trumpener, 'The Escape of the *Goeben* and *Breslau*: A Reassessment', *The Canadian Journal of History*, Vol. 6, 2, (September 1971), 171.

⁶⁷ Fremantle, Memorandum 31 December 1917, quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 12.

objective in mind.⁶⁸ However, in the interests of achieving surprise he failed to reconnoitre the Allied minefields and the following day, having bombarded one Allied shore station and sunk two British monitors, both the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* hit mines. As a consequence, the *Breslau* sank. The *Goeben* was severely damaged and forced to abandon her sortie and turn for home. However, sailing through the Dardanelles, she ran aground and remained stuck fast on a sandbank for six days. Frequent bombing attacks from British aircraft proved ineffective and ultimately she was towed off the sand bank and returned to port.

Wemyss was not pleased, remarking that, ‘The *Goeben* getting away is perfectly damnable and has considerably upset me, since we at the Admiralty were under the happy delusion that there were sufficient brains and sufficient means out there to prevent it: of the latter there were; of the former apparently not.’⁶⁹ Whether there were ‘sufficient means’ is debatable, as the Aegean squadron was well dispersed. Moreover, the most powerful ships that the Navy had in the vicinity were two pre-dreadnought battleships, which, even if they had been ordered to sail together as soon the first report of *Goeben*’s sortie had been received, would not have matched her speed or firepower.

However, Wemyss’ comment to the effect that there were insufficient brains ‘out there’ to deal with the situation seems fully justified. Firstly, Admiral Hayes-Sadler, who had replaced Fremantle on 12 January 1918, had used one of the two battleships to sail to Salonika, contrary to a predetermined understanding that they should be kept together; one pre-dreadnought battleship would have been no match at all for the *Goeben*. More importantly, after the *Goeben* had run aground, Hayes-Sadler procrastinated about sending either of two available submarines to attack the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Letter, Wemyss to Beatty, 7 February 1918, quoted Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 19.

Goeben whilst aground, despite the entreaties of the submarine commanders. It was not until the Admiral in command of the Mediterranean arrived on the scene that the decision was taken to make a submarine attack, by which time the *Goeben* had been re-floated and returned to harbour.

It may be said that this was purely an operational *faux pas* and not the fault of the Admiralty. Also, the consequences of the *Goeben*'s escape on the second occasion was far less damaging to the war effort than on the first, as it transpired that the damage caused to the *Goeben* had put it out of action for the remainder of the war. Furthermore, on the second occasion the *Breslau* had been sunk. On the other hand, it can be argued that, given Russia's withdrawal from the war and the fact that an attempted breakout by the *Goeben* had been anticipated by Admiral Fremantle, Wemyss was at fault for recalling the highly regarded Fremantle to the Admiralty on 12 January 1918 and leaving the Aegean Squadron in command of Hayes-Sadler, reputed to be no more than 'a good average officer of no outstanding qualities' in command.⁷⁰ The fact that the unfortunate Hayes-Sadler was relieved of his command immediately following the incident is indicative of the fact that he should not have been left in command in the first place.

The third incident that falls for discussion in the context of whether matters improved after Wemyss' appointment may be described as more of a missed opportunity than a blunder. Since October 1916, the German High Seas Fleet had not made one major sortie beyond the Heligoland Bight. Despite this, Beatty in particular feared another sortie, being convinced that 'the Scandinavian supporting system was wrong ... and the importance of it was not sufficient to justify the possibility of strong

⁷⁰ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 13.

enemy forces effecting a surprise and inflicting a defeat on the supporting force.⁷¹ In this expectation, he was proved right. Admiral Scheer, commanding the High Seas Fleet, had gleaned from intelligence reports that as a consequence of the German spring land offensive, the Navy had strengthened its resources in the Channel in support of the increased demands on troop and material transportation. Scheer had also gleaned from U-boat intelligence that, following the successful attacks on the Scandinavian convoys in October and December 1917, the level of protection for these convoys had been improved to the extent that larger convoys protected by battleships, cruisers and destroyers had become the norm. Consequently, Scheer concluded, 'A successful attack on such a convoy would not only result in the sinking of much tonnage, but would be a great military success, and would bring welcome relief to the U-boats operating in the Channel and round England, for it would force the English to send more warships to northern waters.'⁷² Thus, on 23 April 1918, Scheer, with all available units of the High Seas Fleet under his command, sailed for the Norwegian coast with Admiral Hipper and his scouting groups of battle cruisers and cruisers leading the search.

However, the sortie achieved nothing. Firstly, Scheer's intelligence was wrong. The convoy in question had sailed two days before the date anticipated by Scheer's sources, and by the time Hipper and his scouting group arrived at the planned intercept point, the convoy had long since passed. Further, Scheer's intelligence sources had made another error that could have proved disastrous. They had failed to report that on 12 April 1918, the Grand Fleet had moved its base south from Scapa Flow to Rosyth in the Firth of Forth. Rosyth was no nearer the planned

⁷¹ Beatty, Note of Conversation with Dewar, 7 March 1918, quoted *ibid*, 148.

⁷² Scheer, *Germany's High Seas Fleet*, 318.

point of intercept of the High Seas Fleet and the convoy, but sailing from Rosyth made it easier for the Grand Fleet to intercept the High Seas Fleet returning to base.

In the event, Scheer was lucky. By the time the Admiralty had realised that the High Seas Fleet was at sea and ordered Beatty to sail, it was too late. It appears that returning to base on 24 April, Scheer had crossed ahead of Beatty's course with Beatty some 150 miles away.

Again, the issue in the context of the current argument is whether the Admiralty was at fault in not ordering the Grand Fleet to sail earlier. The German Fleet's signal security had been improved. All orders to the Fleet were given in writing rather than over the wireless and, in this particular instance, strict radio silence had been imposed. Thus, it was not until the battle cruiser *Moltke* suffered mechanical problems, necessitating wireless exchanges between Hipper and Scheer early in the morning of 24 April 1918, that British Naval Intelligence had a definite indication that the High Seas Fleet was at sea. Further, the High Seas Fleet had made changes to its wireless coding sequences which meant that the cryptanalysts in the Naval Intelligence Division were taking longer to decipher messages. Consequently, they had not realised that the operation had been planned and in these circumstances it is arguable that no blame should attach to the Admiralty.

On the other hand, from the enquiry that followed, it was established that although it was not possible to decode the intercepted signals, there was sufficient signal traffic to suggest that an important operation was in progress. Further, around midnight on 23 April, messages ordering Zeppelin airship reconnaissance had been intercepted. This should have indicated that an attack was being contemplated, and indeed on the basis of that information the Harwich force, but not the Grand Fleet, was ordered to raise steam. As Patrick Beesly wrote, even if 'there were no firm

indications that the *Hochseeflotte* was on the move, or if it was, in what direction ... surely the Grand Fleet should have been brought to the same state of readiness as the Harwich Force'.⁷³ In the event, the Grand Fleet was not ordered to sea until 10.47 am on 24 April 1918.

However, it was not just the Admiralty that was at fault. Recognising the difficulty in anticipating German naval operations in the North Sea, the Admiralty had stationed four submarines around the western perimeter of the Heligoland Bight to report on and attack any German shipping. One of them, *J 6*, actually sighted the leading destroyers and cruisers of the High Seas Fleet at approximately 8 pm on 23 April. Mistaking these ships for British ships, the commander failed to report this sighting and even, 'the sighting of five battle cruisers escorted by destroyers about half an hour later, followed soon after by battleships, the van of the battle fleet, headed in a northerly direction, told *J 6* nothing.'⁷⁴ Beatty was damning, writing that 'it was incredibly stupid and indeed heartbreaking' and certainly, on the face of it, there would seem to be merit in the historian Beesly's argument that there 'can really be no charitable excuse for this failure'.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, three points can be made in mitigation of the maligned submarine commander. Firstly, visibility was apparently poor at the time. Secondly, it appears that the submarine commander had been advised that British heavy ships would be operating in his patrol area and he had mistaken the German ships for British ships.⁷⁶ Thirdly, there must be some question over the efficacy of the briefing by senior officers. As one naval commentator remarked:

⁷³ Beesly, *Room 40*, 286.

⁷⁴ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 150.

⁷⁵ Letter, Beatty to Wemyss, 5 May 1918, quoted *ibid*; Beesly, *Room 40*, 285.

⁷⁶ Woodward, 'The High Seas Fleet', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 113, (August, 1968), 248.

It is easy to see now what a grave neglect of duty this was; but it is not so easy to judge to what extent it was the personal fault of the Captain of *J 6*, and how much may be attributed to the Higher Command failing to make it quite clear to subordinates – junior flag officers and captains of detached ships – what was required of them.⁷⁷

Ultimately, it is doubtful if *J 6*'s failure to report would have made a difference. One analysis suggests that for Beatty to have intercepted Scheer in daylight hours on 24 April 1918, the Grand fleet would have had to have left Rosyth no later than midnight of 23 April, at which time there was thick fog in the Firth of Forth. Thus, even if the commander of *J 6* had reported his sighting of the heavy ships and the Admiralty had reacted immediately, it is unlikely that Beatty would have been in time to make the intercept.

Nevertheless, Beatty was bitter, remarking that 'we have just returned once again disappointed. It promised well but as on many other occasions was doomed to disappointment.'⁷⁸ His attitude is not surprising. Prior to this incident, the High Seas Fleet had ventured out four times in the course of over three and a half years of war in circumstances where the Grand Fleet had an opportunity to inflict major damage on it. On only two occasions was contact made between the main forces, and in terms of damage caused, neither of these two engagements resulted in a satisfactory outcome for the Navy.⁷⁹ On each occasion the failure was caused in part by miscommunication between the Admiralty and the Grand Fleet, miscommunication amongst those in command afloat, or a combination of both. The same conclusion can be drawn in respect of the missed opportunity described above. The Admiralty

⁷⁷ John Cresswell, 'The Grand Fleet 1917-1918', RN Staff College Lecture, 1931, quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 150.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 153.

⁷⁹ The occasions referred to were the Battle of Dogger Bank and the Battle of Jutland which took place on 24 December 1914 and on 31 May 1916 respectively.

failed to pick up that the High Seas Fleet was at sea, its sailing orders to Beatty were too late, and a commander afloat, whether through his own stupidity or poor briefing, failed to communicate with the Admiralty as he should have done. Thus, it can be argued that opportunities to bring the High Seas Fleet to battle were as likely to be missed and miscommunication between the Admiralty and the Grand Fleet was just as likely to happen under Wemyss as under any of his predecessors at the Admiralty.

Zeebrugge and Ostend

Whilst Scheer was patrolling the North Sea in search of a Scandinavian convoy, a specially constituted naval force ‘hurled itself at the defences of the Belgian coast in a desperate endeavour to block the submarine bases at Ostend and Zeebrugge’.⁸⁰ In stark contrast to the negative comments that the Admiralty attracted whilst Jellicoe held the post of First Sea Lord, the press comment following the raid was little short of rapturous. *The Observer* thought that the raid ‘was magnificent and the soul of war’.⁸¹ *The Times* concluded that ‘no meed of praise can be too high for those who skilfully initiated and developed the plan or those who with dauntless courage carried it to execution.’⁸² Jellicoe’s nemesis, the *Daily Mail*, proclaimed that ‘our High Command to-day believes in using our sea-power to strike and not merely to fend off blows’, this last remark no doubt being an obtuse reference to the perceived negative strategy of the previous incumbents at the Admiralty.⁸³

Politicians, too, were impressed. Churchill thought that the raid had given the Navy

⁸⁰ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 251.

⁸¹ *The Observer*, 28 April 1918, quoted Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 58.

⁸² *The Times*, 24 April 1918.

⁸³ *Daily Mail*, 24 April 1918, quoted Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 58.

back ‘the *panache* it lost at Jutland’ and Lloyd George congratulated the Admiralty ‘most heartily’ upon an achievement that ‘was worthy of the greatest traditions of the British Navy, both in conception and execution’.⁸⁴ Moreover, Admiral Keyes, who commanded the raid, was knighted for his part in it. *Prima facie*, then, it appeared that the Navy under Wemyss had scored the magnificent success it had failed achieve under Jellicoe.

However, two significant issues arise in the context of determining if this accolade was warranted. Firstly, the raid was not as successful as claimed by the press, the politicians or the Navy itself. In fact, in many respects it was a fiasco. The primary objective of the raid had been to block the harbours at Zeebrugge and Ostend and prevent Bruges, with its linking canals, from being used by the German navy as an advanced submarine and destroyer base. Bruges had the advantage of being some 300 miles closer to Dover than the German North Sea ports. If the two harbours could be blocked the German submarine campaign would be seriously disrupted.⁸⁵ The plan was to sink three old cruisers in the mouth of the Zeebrugge canal and two in the mouth of the Ostend canal. At the same time a diversionary attack was to be made by Royal Marines and seamen from the Naval Brigade against the Zeebrugge harbour mole, with the intent of diverting German defensive fire from the block ships entering the harbours.

So, on 22 April 1918, 165 vessels of various sizes and types, accompanied by 82 officers and 1698 seamen and marines, set sail for the two ports.⁸⁶ In a number of respects, the raid went wrong. The ship carrying the majority of the seamen and marines for the diversionary attack on the Zeebrugge harbour mole docked in the

⁸⁴ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 58.

⁸⁵ From January 1917 to October 1918, the U-boats of the Flanders Flotilla sank over 2.1 million tons of merchant shipping, i.e., approximately one third of all shipping sunk by German submarines over that period. *Ibid*, 5, 46.

⁸⁶ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 291.

wrong position, leaving the shore parties badly exposed to enemy fire. Of the three block ships destined for the Zeebrugge harbour, two were sunk, more or less in the correct position, but due to a marker buoy having been moved, the two block ships destined for Ostend missed the harbour completely, ran aground on the beach and were blown up there.⁸⁷ In terms of men and materials, the cost was high; 170 men were killed, 400 were wounded and 45 posted as missing; an attrition rate of over 30 percent.⁸⁸ Moreover despite the accolade, the objectives were not met. Ostend was never blocked; Zeebrugge only partially. Aerial photographs taken after the raid seemed to confirm that large destroyers were bottled up in Bruges for some weeks after the raid and until June 1918, submarines could be seen outside their shelters, suggesting that the shelters were full. It was perhaps this that led Keyes to believe that the raid had been successful. The Germans claimed the contrary. Scheer wrote, 'It was found possible for the U-boats to get round the obstruction, so that connection between the harbour at Zeebrugge and the shipyard at Bruges was never interrupted even for a day.'⁸⁹ The Admiralty also knew that the raid had failed. Admiral Sir William James, at the time director of 'Room 40' of the Naval Intelligence Division, later wrote, 'At the Admiralty we knew five hours after the attempt from an intercepted signal that the canal had not been blocked, but no good purpose would be served by publishing this.'⁹⁰ Hence, the public spin was maintained.

The second point to make in the context of this argument is that despite the accolades going to Wemyss and Keyes, the raid had been initiated and approved by Jellicoe prior to his dismissal. The possibility of carrying out a blocking operation against the enemy occupied channel ports had been contemplated as early as the

⁸⁷ A second attempt to block Ostend was made a few days later, but this attempt was also unsuccessful.

⁸⁸ Halpern, *Naval History*, 414.

⁸⁹ Scheer, *Germany's High Seas Fleet*, 339.

⁹⁰ Quoted, David Ramsay, *'Blinker' Hall, Spymaster*, (Port Stroud, 2009), 267.

autumn of 1914, and the idea resurrected but rejected from time to time throughout the war. Specifically, in May 1917, Commodore Tyrwhitt, in command of the Harwich Force, had proposed a highly ambitious amphibious operation that entailed attacking the harbour mole at Zeebrugge, then occupying the town so that it could be used for a forward base for a possible army advance on Antwerp. This plan was opposed, principally by Admiral Bacon, firstly on the grounds that it had little prospect of success, and secondly, on the basis that it was essential to keep the Belgian ports clear to accommodate the large scale amphibious landing then being planned in conjunction with the imminent land offensive at Ypres. However, when it became apparent that the land offensive had stalled in the mud of Passchendaele and the objective of reaching the channel ports would not be met, in September 1917 Jellicoe resurrected the idea of carrying out a naval operation to block the Zeebrugge and Ostend harbours and directed Keyes, then Director of the Admiralty Plans Division, to examine the feasibility of such an operation. Bacon, who had been closely involved with General Haig and his staff in planning the original amphibious operation, had always been against a mere blocking scheme. He believed that ‘a blocking operation was a farce, so far as sealing the port against the egress of destroyers and submarines was concerned’ on the grounds that ‘any blocking operation must be ineffective unless the rise of the tide above low water is appreciably less than the draught of water of the vessels which it is intended to block in or out.’⁹¹ According to Jellicoe, the rise and fall of the tide at Zeebrugge was about 13 feet and at Ostend 14 feet for about half the days in any month.⁹² It would therefore have been relatively easy for the Germans to cut a passage through the block ships by cutting off a portion their superstructure sufficient for both destroyers and submarines to pass

⁹¹ Reginald Bacon, *The Concise Story of the Dover Patrol*, (London, 1931), 211.

⁹² Jellicoe, *Crisis of the Naval War*, 199.

through for a few hours either side of high water. Bacon therefore proposed an alternative plan of attacking the Zeebrugge harbour mole and bombarding the lock gates. Jellicoe compromised. On 4 December 1917, he approved a plan that combined Bacon's idea of an attack on the harbour mole with Keyes' idea of attempting to block the harbours. It was, however, a plan he approved in the knowledge that blocking the harbours, even if successful in the first instance, 'would only be temporary, but that it would undoubtedly be a source of considerable inconvenience'. At the same time, he acknowledged that '*the moral effect alone of such an operation would be of great value.*'⁹³ From that and the length of time that elapsed between initiating preparation of the plan and its eventual approval, it would seem that this approval was given with some degree of reluctance. Nevertheless, it was this plan that was, in essence, subsequently adopted by Wemyss and executed by Keyes as Bacon's successor, albeit with modifications in detail, particularly as to the method of disembarkation of the troops attacking the harbour mole.

Bacon, in *The Concise Story of the Dover Patrol*, was critical of the detail of the plan finally adopted by Keyes, particularly as to the type of ship used for the attack on the mole, the method of docking and disembarkation and the size of ships used to attack the mole gun batteries.⁹⁴ The points he made have merit, although given the lack of experience within the Navy of undertaking an operation of this nature with the conditions, types of vessels and defensive armoury then prevailing, whether the raid would have fared better if his plan had been adopted in full or if Bacon had been in command, must be open to speculation.

⁹³ Ibid (Jellicoe's Italics).

⁹⁴ Bacon, *Concise Story of the Dover Patrol*, 221, 222.

Keyes, on the other hand, never acknowledged that the raid was unsuccessful. *The Official History*, not published until 1931, contained the first public admission as to the true effect of the raid:

Previous to the operation about two submarines were entering or leaving the Flanders bases every day; during the week after the operation, this figure was maintained ... In May there were fifty-six entries and exits, so that the average passage of nearly two passages a day was maintained during the five weeks immediately subsequent to the operation.⁹⁵

Yet in his autobiography published four years later, Keyes still maintained that:

Week after week our aerial photographs of Bruges clearly showed large destroyers lying in Bruges basin and in the canal system ... Until the middle of June large submarines could also be distinguished in the open, so we were justified in supposing that the huge submarine shelters were occupied by as many submarines as they could hold.⁹⁶

Moreover, in Keyes's authorised biography, its author claimed, 'The Zeebrugge Canal was to be useless to the enemy for many critical weeks, and for the most of that period forty German destroyers and submarines ... could not take part in the war.'⁹⁷ Marder suggests on evidence from Admiral James that the biographer had been subject to 'pressure' from the 'redoubtable Lady Keyes who never ceased extolling and magnifying her husband's achievements'.⁹⁸ This may be understandable but, if correct, would suggest that Lady Keyes was as blind to the facts as her husband.

Why Keyes was so adamant is more difficult to understand. It is unlikely that he was concerned to justify the horrendous losses in that he appears to have accepted

⁹⁵ Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 274.

⁹⁶ Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 319.

⁹⁷ Quoted, Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 63.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 64.

this possibility at the outset, writing, ‘I feel very strongly that we shall not be asking the personnel engaged to take any greater risks than the infantry and tank personnel are subjected to, on every occasion on which an attack is delivered on shore’, an approach that does not necessarily warrant commendation given the inordinate casualties suffered by the land armies.⁹⁹ It may just have been pride that prevented him acknowledging the veracity of Bacon’s comments.

When reading detailed accounts of the operation, what cannot be doubted is the courage of those involved, witness the fact that eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for bravery. Most historical commentators believed that despite the actual outcome, the raid had been justified. Marder was of the view that ‘the psychological effect was considerable.’¹⁰⁰ More recently, David Ramsay argued that:

The Zeebrugge operation was a massive boost for morale both in the Navy, where the inactivity in the Grand Fleet enforced by the HSF’s [High Seas Fleet’s] consistent avoidance of offensive action had inevitably engendered a sense of frustration, and in the Army, who had experienced the costly stalemate at Passchendaele, and the hammer blow of the March offensive. The press was ecstatic, hailing the operation ... as a rebirth of the offensive spirit of Nelson and Drake.¹⁰¹

Jellicoe’s view was clearly in accord with that of Ramsay in that he recognised the need for demonstrating the Navy’s offensive spirit. In approving the raid, he believed that strategically no long term advantage would stem from it, and in this he was also proved to be correct. All the accolades following the operation went to Wemyss and Keyes and there can be no doubting Keyes’ tenacity in executing the raid. However, in the accolade, what was forgotten was that the operation had been initiated and

⁹⁹ Memorandum, Keyes to Wemyss, 3 December 1917, Keyes, *Naval Memoirs*, II, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 60.

¹⁰¹ Ramsay, *‘Blinker’ Hall*, 266.

approved by Jellicoe and much of the initial planning undertaken by Bacon. If the operation had been initiated by Wemyss, then it could have been argued that this exemplified a more 'offensive spirit' on the part of the Admiralty after Jellicoe's dismissal. However, that was not the case.

Conclusions

The view that the Admiralty under Admiral Wemyss was more effective and less prone to making operational blunders than under Admiral Jellicoe appears to be based on the opinions of those with a vested interest in claiming that such was the case, notably, Lloyd George and Geddes, who had to defend their position publicly before Parliament in the Naval Estimates debate of March 1918. This position has been perpetuated as a consequence of their being unable to provide a justifiable reason for dismissing Jellicoe. Moreover, this position appears to have been accepted by a number of naval historians at face value from the biographies of Lloyd George and Geddes, without comparing specific aspects of the work of the Admiralty under the respective regimes of Jellicoe and Wemyss. Making that comparison places a different perspective on the claims of Lloyd George and Geddes.

The relationship between the Admiralty and Beatty may well have improved under Wemyss, partly as consequence of Wemyss' more relaxed style of command. However, it is evident that Wemyss was less prepared than Jellicoe to divert resources from the Grand Fleet to strengthen anti-submarine and trade protection measures. That also would have reduced any friction between the Admiralty and the Grand Fleet. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that the relationship between the

Admiralty and the Grand Fleet was unworkable during Jellicoe's tenure. Indeed, the difference of opinion between Geddes and Jellicoe regarding the inquiry into the destruction of the Scandinavian convoy in December 1917 is an example of Jellicoe's support for Beatty and his commanders.

In terms of the Grand Fleet strategy, Lloyd George persistently complained that Jellicoe's approach was too conservative. Two reputable naval historians have opposing views on the naval strategy that Geddes and Beatty proposed and was accepted by the War Cabinet shortly after Jellicoe's dismissal. John Terraine concluded that this strategy was 'radical' and denoted the end of British sea power. Arthur Marder, on the other hand, thought that there had been no change to the strategy that had, perforce, because of the U-boat threat, been followed by the Admiralty under Jellicoe. In a sense, this difference of opinion is immaterial in the context of the current argument as at best, the old strategy was maintained. Jellicoe's dismissal did not bring about the more offensive strategy that Lloyd George craved.

The policy of maintaining the Grand Fleet at maximum strength also had an impact on the efforts to contain the U-boat threat. It was at least part of the cause of the delay in introducing the convoy system to east coast merchant shipping and although Wemyss appeared to agree with the Admiralty Plans division to set up submarine 'hunting groups', these groups were never established. As mentioned, it may be speculative to suggest that merchant shipping losses would have reduced more quickly had Jellicoe remained in office. Nevertheless, from the remarks that Jellicoe made about being prepared to divert resources from the Grand Fleet to add to the resources available to counter the U-boat campaign, it was certainly a strong possibility that they would have done.

It has also been established that blunders continued to be made and opportunities continued to be missed. It can be argued that incidents of this nature were inevitable in the course of war. On the other hand, the Admiralty certainly were partly at fault in the escape of the *Goeben* and in the missed opportunity to attack the High Seas Fleet on 24 April 1918. The weakness of local command was the principal issue in the former case. It was the Admiralty's responsibility to ensure there was a capable officer in command. In the latter case, the opportunity was missed due to a combination of misread intelligence and the late issue of sailing instructions to Beatty.

As to the attack on the Channel barrage patrol boats, part of the confusion resulted from the lack of proper signalling and communication arrangements and, therefore, the fault lay at a local operational level. However, it can be argued that Keyes, whom Wemyss had appointed in place of Bacon in command of the Dover Patrol, ought to have ensured appropriate signalling and recognition procedures were in place. Bacon had predicted the destroyer attack and had resisted Keyes' proposal for illumination of the barrage by the patrol vessels on the grounds that it made them more vulnerable to attack. That is not to say that the attack of 14 February would have been any less successful had Bacon remained in command. However, what it does say, in the context of the current discussion, is that Jellicoe's support for Bacon during the controversy over the Dover barrage was not misplaced and Wemyss' choice of replacement commander was far from infallible.

Ostensibly, the attack on Zeebrugge and Ostend in April 1918 rekindled the 'Nelson spirit' and resulted in much kudos for both the Admiralty and Keyes, who commanded the attack. Much of this accolade stemmed from the fact that it took place at the same time as the German spring land offensive. In the words of Newbolt, 'The blocking operations were executed during weeks of great national anxiety, for it

was during those weeks that the British armies ... were yielding before an onslaught that seemed irresistible.¹⁰² In other words, when the armies were in retreat on the Western Front, the attack on Zeebrugge and Ostend displayed an offensive approach which the Admiralty had often been accused of lacking. However, the raid was not successful in achieving the strategic objective of restricting the passage of German submarines and destroyers from the harbour at Bruges. The Admiralty were aware of this within hours, yet failed to acknowledge this publicly - understandably, perhaps, given the persistent press criticism that it had sustained in the past, the 'great national anxiety' prevalent at the time and the particularly high casualty count. However, it was Bacon, not Keyes, who prepared the initial plans for the raid, and it was Jellicoe, not Wemyss, who resurrected and approved the plan following the failure of the Flanders military offensive in the autumn of 1917. Thus, at least part of accolade should have been attributed to Bacon and Jellicoe. Moreover, the fact that Jellicoe was prepared to approve the raid, recognising that the strategic gain would, at best, be only temporary and, in reality, would only benefit morale, dispels the perception that Jellicoe's mindset was wholly defensive.

Thus, if the foregoing is taken in combination, there is no substance in the claim that the Admiralty proved to be a more effective organisation under Wemyss than it was under Jellicoe. To an extent, this been recognised by Nicholas Black, who remarked, 'There was a clear progression from the work that the Naval Staff was doing under Jellicoe and that which was done under Wemyss. To that extent, the events of Christmas Eve 1917, when Jellicoe was summarily sacked, made little real difference.'¹⁰³

¹⁰² Newbolt, *Official History*, V, 276.

¹⁰³ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 228.

The legacy left by Jellicoe on the work that had been undertaken on the northern mine barrage is an example of this 'progression'. However, Black's argument can be taken a stage further. Taking into consideration the delay in introducing the east coast convoys, the restated Grand Fleet strategy, and indeed the confusion caused by the contradictory strategies of the Plans Division and the Operations Division, there is a powerful argument to the effect that under Wemyss, the Admiralty took a backward step. That being the case, the contention of Lloyd George, Geddes and Wemyss himself that the Admiralty was greatly improved after Wemyss' appointment is misleading and as such cannot be taken as a reason for justifying Jellicoe's dismissal.

Chapter VIII

Conclusions

This chapter is primarily directed at consolidating the conclusions made in the previous chapters. What can be said at the outset is that despite the number of hypotheses put forward for Jellicoe's dismissal by several historians, and indeed the research undertaken for this dissertation, no rational explanation has come to light. This would suggest that it was simply an expression of Lloyd George's mercurial and vindictive character.

However, before moving to the conclusions, there are two other issues that warrant brief discussion, namely the question of whether the stress of command during three years of war had impaired Jellicoe's ability to continue as First Sea Lord, and, perhaps perversely, the commands offered to him after his dismissal.

The Stress Factor

As mentioned, Newbolt, in the *Official History*, concluded that the stress of command had been too much for Jellicoe and it was in his own and the Navy's interest that he left. Whether or not this was just an example of Newbolt's 'restraint', it was a view that was perpetuated by two of Jellicoe's biographers, Patterson and Winton. The former concluded that by the end of 1917, 'Jellicoe was no longer fit to

continue as First Sea Lord.’¹ Winton was of the view that ‘the strain showed on him physically’ and, in support of this view, relied on an incident in August 1917 whereby ‘one of his papers was so lacking in direction and prosily diffuse and so confusedly set out, that Geddes wrote on it “Better not use this argument.”’² Marder was also of the view that at the end of 1917 Jellicoe was ‘overtired’ and that ‘[his] ability to grapple with his problems of First Sea Lord was sapped by the cumulative mental and physical pressures of three years.’³

However, this view is inconsistent with much of the evidence, including evidence quoted by Marder himself. Firstly, Marder appears to have had direct correspondence with Jellicoe’s family over the issue in which a niece of Lady Jellicoe observed that through 1917 ‘Lady Jellicoe never showed any anxiety about the Admiral’s health and that he [Jellicoe] seemed always his usual shrewd, quietly observant self.’⁴ Lord McKenna, First Lord of the Admiralty from 1908 to 1911, also wrote that ‘the suggestion that Jellicoe was suffering from strain is new to me and quite ridiculous. I saw him constantly at the time and he certainly showed no indication of unusual fatigue.’⁵ The Sea Lords, in their correspondence with Geddes after the dismissal, wrote that ‘we have full confidence in Sir John Jellicoe’s ability and fitness to perform his responsible duties’, a collective remark they would have been unlikely to make if they had any doubts as to Jellicoe’s physical or mental capacity.⁶ Moreover, there is a counter to Winton’s argument that the ‘confused document’ supported the view that Jellicoe was ‘over tired’. In Chapter IV, reference was made to orders that Jellicoe issued to Bacon in December 1917 regarding

¹ Patterson, *Jellicoe*, 205.

² Winton, *Jellicoe*, 252.

³ Marder, *FDSF*, 4, 330.

⁴ *Ibid*, 329.

⁵ Letter, McKenna to Bacon, 21 August 1936, quoted, Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 386.

⁶ Letter, Sea Lords to Geddes, 2 January 1918, NA, ADM 116/1807.

measures to be taken in connection with the patrolling and illumination of the mine barrage across the English Channel. As noted there, those orders were measured, balanced, decisive and showed a clear appreciation of the relative risks involved. In contrast to the example quoted by Winton, they do not appear to have been issued by someone whose judgement had been impaired through stress or ill health.

The final point on this issue is one that has been expressed by Bacon. He claimed that ‘had mental or physical failing been the real cause, both Sir Eric Geddes and Mr. Lloyd George would have stated the fact openly, but to have done so would have been to court ridicule and contradiction’.⁷ Irrespective of any concern about Bacon’s bias, the point is well made. If Jellicoe’s health was an issue, he need not have been dismissed, or certainly not in the manner that he was. He could have been rested for a short period, or at worst asked to resign on health grounds. There is no suggestion in any of the source material consulted that either Lloyd George or Geddes regarded Jellicoe’s health as an issue. Thus, it was not a justifiable reason for his dismissal.

Aftermath

The argument that Jellicoe’s health was not a factor in his dismissal is supported by the fact that not long after he was offered two further command posts. Firstly, he was offered the command of the naval base at Devonport in place of Admiral Bethell, but declined this on the grounds that he was not prepared ‘even in wartime - to take a command which involves depriving a brother flag officer of his

⁷ Bacon, *Jellicoe*, 385.

appointment before its proper termination, when that officer, so far as I am aware, has filled it with merit'.⁸ Geddes had made this offer on 3 April 1918, i.e., when he still appeared to have concerns about being questioned in the House of Commons over Jellicoe's dismissal. Consequently, his motivation for offering Jellicoe the command of Devonport in these circumstances may well have been to deflect potential criticism over the matter. Bethell certainly was of that view, claiming that the offer to Jellicoe was made 'to quiet the agitation which has been caused by your relief as First Sea Lord'.⁹

The second offer was of a much more significant value than that of commanding Devonport. For some time the Allied War Council had been concerned about the lack of cohesion in the command of the British, French, Italian and Japanese naval forces operating in the Mediterranean. Their proposed solution to this problem was to appoint an 'Admiralissimo' in overall command of these forces. Early in May 1918, Jellicoe, with the approval of the War Cabinet, was offered and indicated that he would be prepared to accept the role. In the event however, the appointment did not materialise as, after lengthy debate within the Allied War Council, the proposal fell through, in essence because the Italian Chief of Naval Staff did not like the prospect of Jellicoe being able to order the Italian ships to sea.¹⁰

Clearly, if the proposal to appoint Jellicoe as 'Admiralissimo' had materialised, the role would have been an important and challenging one which would have demanded considerable leadership, administrative, and not least of all, diplomatic skills. Thus, in the context of this dissertation, perhaps the most striking factor about the nomination was the fact that it had been approved by Lloyd George

⁸ Letter, Jellicoe to Geddes, 10 April 1918, BL, Add. MSS 49037.

⁹ Letter, Bethell to Jellicoe, 6 April 1918, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Jellicoe, Note on proposed appointment as Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, undated, *ibid.*

and Geddes just four months after Jellicoe's dismissal. Moreover, Jellicoe's nomination for this post was, as discussed in Chapter VI, made at about the same time as Lloyd George was preparing to make a statement to the House of Commons to the effect that he had been 'dissatisfied' with Jellicoe; a confusing situation to say the least and again one which gives rise to the question of motivation. It may have been that Lloyd George believed from the outset that the proposal to appoint the 'Admiralissimo' would not have been accepted by all of the Allies, and this again leads to the suspicion that the motivation for nominating Jellicoe was simply 'to quiet the agitation'. Irrespective of the motive, in the event, Jellicoe's contribution to the war effort ended on 24 December 1917.

However, despite the offers of other commands, Jellicoe's ignominy did not end with his dismissal. On 21 November 1918, 370 British ships, with 90,000 men on board, sailed from various ports around Britain to rendezvous about 40 miles west of the Firth of Forth to accept the surrender of the High Seas Fleet.¹¹ Jellicoe, despite his contribution to the war effort, was not invited to the surrender. Admiral Beatty received all the accolades of the day. Further, when the post war honours were awarded for war services, Beatty received an earldom and the sum of £100,000. Jellicoe received the sum of £50,000.¹² Jellicoe's ignominy was thus complete.

Final Perspectives

After the war Jellicoe, at the behest of the Admiralty, embarked on an 'Empire Tour' to examine the post war naval needs of the principal Dominion

¹¹ Marder, *FDSF*, 5, 190.

¹² Jellicoe had been awarded the lesser peerage of viscount on leaving the Admiralty.

countries and then, from 1920 to 1924, served successfully as Governor General of New Zealand. For the latter services he received the earldom which ought to have been awarded at the end of the war. However, despite the success of his post war career, Jellicoe's reputation remained sullied. This was partially as a result of the outcome of the Battle of Jutland relative to the level of public expectation of 'a Nelsonian' victory and partially as a consequence of his perceived lacklustre performance as First Sea Lord. Andrew Gordon has written that 'Jellicoe had gone to the Admiralty partly to get to grips with the submarine menace. He failed.'¹³ As the foregoing demonstrates, this was manifestly not the case. Jellicoe inherited a difficult legacy. Before he was appointed First Sea Lord, the Admiralty had done little towards combating the U-boat. Within a month of his arrival at the Admiralty, Germany decided to risk the wrath of the US and other neutral countries and altered its naval strategy by embarking on a wholly unrestricted campaign against merchant shipping, thereby rendering the British strategy of arming merchant ships virtually obsolete. Lloyd George could not fault this strategy as it had been endorsed by him. As he later wrote, 'the conclusion we [the War Cabinet] arrived at on this point was that it was a question of the first importance to increase the production of these [merchant ship guns].'¹⁴ Given the changes made at the Admiralty, the initiatives taken in the development, supply and equipping anti-submarine craft with depth charges and hydrophones and in the development and supply of effective mines, the perception that Jellicoe failed in tackling the U-boat threat is not credible. Indeed, on the basis of the statistics referred to in Chapter II, it could be argued that the progress made by the end of 1917 was little short of remarkable. Moreover, in this context Marder's argument that it was 'immaterial whether or not the submarine gets sunk in

¹³ Gordon, *Rules of the Game*, 531.

¹⁴ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* III, 1141.

the [convoy] process' is fallacious. That argument implies that the work undertaken in finding and introducing effective means of sinking the U-boat was unnecessary. Apart from the argument made in Chapter III that the greater the number of submarines that are operating, the greater their chance of success, escort vessels were of little use if they did not have weapons to deter U-boat attacks. Thus, embarking on a programme of developing weapons capable of detecting and sinking submarines was essential.

Where the Admiralty under Jellicoe has been universally criticised is in the perceived delay in introducing a general convoy system. There is no doubt that the Admiralty staff paper issued in January 1917, recommending that 'vessels should sail singly', is evidence that the prevalent view within the Admiralty was that merchant ships sailing in convoy was not the answer. However Lloyd George's vitriolic criticism that the Admiralty was totally opposed to the introduction of the convoy is not sustainable. The source documentation referred to in Chapter III provides evidence that Jellicoe had the issue under review, and indeed gave early approval to the introduction of escorted convoys for the coal trade with France and for trade with Scandinavia. Furthermore, the Admiralty had grounds for being somewhat cautious. It was not as if the rationale for this caution was spurious. As Hankey acknowledged in his Memorandum of 11 February 1917, advocating the introduction of the convoy, the potential problems perceived by the Admiralty of slow speed, difficulty in station keeping, providing a larger target for submarines to attack and potential port congestion, were 'formidable' objections.¹⁵ Also, there is no doubt that unless the Grand Fleet was to be deprived of its screening destroyers, there was a chronic

¹⁵ Hankey, Memorandum, 11 February, 1917, quoted, *Official History*, V, 11.

shortage of vessels for escort purposes and the timing of the entry of the US into the war was critical in this respect.

Nevertheless, despite their reservations, the Admiralty did initiate the use of a general convoy system at the end of April 1917. Lloyd George claimed that it was his threatened visit to the Admiralty on 30 April 1917 that provoked the change of mind. Again, the evidence adduced in Chapter III counters this claim. A combination of the timing of Admiral Duff's memorandum of 27 April 1917, the dramatic increase in the shipping losses over the last two weeks of April, the prospect of additional escort vessels being supplied by the US Navy and Duff's later outright denial that he was responding to political influence, all point to the fact that Lloyd George grossly exaggerated his involvement.

Jellicoe believed that the perceived delay in introducing the convoy system was a contributory factor in Lloyd George's decision to replace him. However, considering the time that elapsed between Germany embarking on an unrestricted campaign and first introducing a general convoy system, given the enormity of the logistical issues and, as Bacon pointed out, the fact that until April 1917 the Admiralty had no power to direct merchant ship owners, there is a powerful argument to the effect that any delay was more perceived than real.

This raises the question as to why Jellicoe appears to have been universally condemned on this issue by historical commentators. In part the answer lies in the proposition that if the Admiralty had taken 'a cold, hard look' back at history they would have come to the convoy solution sooner than they did.¹⁶ However, apart from changes brought about by the advent of steam, the critical element of Britain's sea trade during the Napoleonic wars was carried out by some hundreds of small wooden

¹⁶ Hough, *Great War at Sea*, 305.

ships, whereas by June 1914, British Empire shipping alone totalled in excess of 20 million tons, carried in much larger ships of immeasurable numbers.¹⁷ Consequently, as Terraine points out, 'It is not entirely to be wondered at if the Admiralty balked at the sheer size of the task if it attempted constant trade protection on the lines of the old convoy system.'¹⁸

The other part of the answer lies in the proposition that historians have been swayed by the criticism of Lloyd George, and to a lesser extent Winston Churchill, and these historians have not considered the circumstances in the context either of the legacy Jellicoe inherited or the novel and unique problems raised by an undetectable enemy attacking unseen. Even if the argument that the Admiralty under Jellicoe was slow to realise the benefits of the convoy system is accepted, any delay was short lived and indeed the fact that Jellicoe was prepared to overturn the prevailing view and grasp the logistical difficulties involved counters the perception that he was too rigid and inflexible in his approach.

Thus, as stated in the conclusion to Chapter III, the extensive and severe criticism the Admiralty under Jellicoe has been subjected to over this matter has not been warranted. It therefore follows that Lloyd George would not have been justified in dismissing Jellicoe for reasons related to the introduction of a general system of convoys for merchant shipping.

The fact that six months passed between the time when Lloyd George stated that he had finally decided to replace Jellicoe and actually doing so, also gives rise to the question as to whether further grounds for dismissal may have arisen during the intervening period. Although there were differences of opinion between Geddes and Jellicoe during that period, an analysis of the circumstances leading to these

¹⁷ Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

differences leads to the conclusion that they did not constitute grounds for dismissal. The issue over honours for Admiral Duff appeared relatively trivial in the context of the war effort. Moreover, when Duff tendered his resignation after Jellicoe's dismissal, Geddes was at pains to persuade Duff to remain at the Admiralty, clearly recognising the significance of Duff's contribution to countering the U-boat threat. The destruction of the two Scandinavian convoys in October and December 1917 showed deficiencies in operational procedures, but these incidents themselves were not the source of the argument between Jellicoe and Geddes. Rather it was the way Geddes handled the enquiry by undermining Beatty's authority. Again Jellicoe's concerns over this were vindicated by Geddes' later apology to Beatty.

As to the dispute between Admirals Bacon and Keyes over the Dover barrage, they both had valid grounds for adopting the position they did. Jellicoe's intervention in the matter was considered and balanced. Given the respective rights and wrongs of the positions taken by the feuding Admirals and the success of the Dover Patrol under Bacon in protecting the Channel, Jellicoe's loyalty to Bacon in refusing to relieve him of command was not misplaced. There is no evidence of any difference of opinion on strategy or on operational matters between Geddes and Jellicoe. The differences that did exist related more to 'style' of management than to any substantive issues.

Furthermore, for two reasons Lloyd George had less cause to replace Jellicoe at the end of December 1917 than at the end June. Firstly, friction that may have existed between Lloyd George and Jellicoe through June and July 1917 over Jellicoe's support for the military's war strategy had disappeared in as much as the War Cabinet had, with reservations, accepted the strategy advocated by Generals Haig and Robertson and had authorised the Flanders offensive. Secondly, Jellicoe had largely succeeded in his primary mission at the Admiralty, namely containing the German U-

boat threat. Finally in this context, the fact that different historical commentators have attributed different hypotheses as to the circumstances that may have triggered the dismissal, does in itself suggest that there was no rational explanation for it.

Turning to the circumstances of the dismissal discussed in Chapter VI, three points can be drawn in conclusion. Firstly, there is no doubt that the inappropriate manner of the dismissal was bound to induce resentment from within the Navy and from Jellicoe. It would certainly appear that in acting with such haste, Lloyd George and Geddes took advantage of the fact that Parliament was in recess and that newspapers were not published over the Christmas period. Further, by just leaving the dismissal letter on Jellicoe's desk, Geddes avoided a personal confrontation with him, which would have resulted in being asked for an explanation as to the reasons; an explanation that Geddes did not have. Secondly, the aftermath of the dismissal was mishandled by Geddes. The Sea Lords initially decided not to resign; a decision they made on the basis that Geddes' two predecessors, Arthur Balfour and Sir Edward Carson, supported the decision to remove Jellicoe. It was when they were told otherwise by Carson that they threatened resignation. If there had been a rational explanation for dismissing Jellicoe, Geddes would not have had to rely on the misleading claim that he had the support of his predecessors. Thirdly, the dismissal was effected without the knowledge or concurrence of the War Cabinet. Lloyd George was no doubt aware that there were members of the Cabinet who would resist Jellicoe's removal and the fact that the Cabinet were presented with a *fait accompli*, once again points to the fact that he would have had difficulty in providing his Cabinet colleagues with justifiable reasons.

Subterfuge on the part of Lloyd George is also evident in the way General Haig was brought into the matter. The circumstances surrounding Geddes' appointment as

Controller and the timing of his complaints to Haig about the state of affairs at the Admiralty point to the conclusion that Haig's involvement was engineered by Lloyd George. Certainly Haig's support would have helped ease the path to obtaining the King's consent to replacing Jellicoe and the approval of the War Cabinet had the matter been brought to it at that time. Why Haig should have become involved is not clear. He may have wished to deflect attention from himself as Lord Beaverbrook maintained. Alternatively, Haig may just have felt that he had no option but to become involved after Geddes had raised the issue with him.

Haig's involvement came to nothing. Political expediency dictated that Lloyd George could not dismiss Jellicoe at that time. By appointing Geddes as First Lord in place of Carson, he had his 'satellite' in place, but with Geddes lacking the requisite experience, he was obliged to retain Jellicoe for the time being. However, it is evident that Lloyd George prepared the ground for removing Jellicoe in two ways. Firstly, he appointed Admiral Wemyss as Deputy First Sea Lord. As explained in Chapter VII, given Wemyss' background and limited experience, this was a peculiar choice. It was based on a discussion that Lloyd George had with a junior captain then serving at the Admiralty. Marder states that there was a suspicion amongst Jellicoe supporters that Wemyss' appointment was part of a conspiracy to remove Jellicoe from office and that would seem to be confirmed by the remarks made by Lady Wemyss at the time of her husband's appointment. Thus, there is little doubt that the motivation behind his appointment was to have an available successor who was considerably more malleable than Jellicoe.

The second way Lloyd George prepared the ground for Jellicoe's dismissal was by conspiring with Lord Northcliffe to embark on a press campaign to discredit the Admiralty. Despite Lloyd George's persistent claims to the contrary, the nature of the

relationship between Lloyd George and Northcliffe, the timing and content of the press attacks and, latterly, their virulent and personal nature, all give credence to Hamilton Fyffe's allegation that Lloyd George told Northcliffe, 'You kill him, I'll bury him.'¹⁹ Certainly, there is little doubt that, given Northcliffe's quasi-governmental role at the time, Lloyd George could have brought an end to the press campaign by following the Attorney General's advice and asking Northcliffe to desist. There is no evidence to suggest that Lloyd George acted on that advice.

Beaverbrook was of the view that Haig's involvement in the matter was part of a well constructed plot to remove Jellicoe. At times, Beaverbrook was prone to exaggeration. However, if the circumstances surrounding, firstly, Geddes' appointment as Controller, secondly, the involvement of Haig, thirdly the appointment of Wemyss as Deputy First Sea Lord and fourthly, Northcliffe's press campaign against the Admiralty are taken together, on this occasion Beaverbrook's view undoubtedly has merit. It did perhaps take longer for the plan to come to fruition than Lloyd George may have originally contemplated.

This leaves the issue as to whether the Admiralty performed better under Wemyss than it did under Jellicoe. Again, despite the assertions of Marder and other historical commentators, the answer is that it did not. If anything, the Grand Fleet strategy became more defensive. Operational mistakes continued to be made and opportunities continued to be missed. In the conflict that emerged between the Operations Division and the Plans Division, the Admiralty's strategy became confused. Moreover, despite the public and press accolades, the raid on Zeebrugge and Ostend was a failure; a very costly one in terms of casualties.

¹⁹ Fyffe, *Northcliffe*, 184.

Nicholas Black has suggested that ‘the events of Christmas Eve 1917, when Jellicoe was summarily sacked, made little real difference.’²⁰ To the extent that the German submarine was ultimately defeated as a result of the building blocks Jellicoe put in place during his tenure as First Sea Lord, Black is correct. However, at the end of 1917 Jellicoe contemplated reducing the capability of the Grand Fleet by diverting yet more escort vessels to strengthen trade protection measures. If that had been done, merchant shipping losses could well have reduced more quickly. Consequently, on that basis it can be argued that the ‘difference’ under Wemyss was an adverse one.

Thus, reverting to the central theme of this dissertation, based on the conclusions drawn from the six premises referred to in Chapter I, there was no rational explanation for Jellicoe’s dismissal. On an analysis of the work undertaken by the Admiralty through 1917 coupled with the resulting success in combating the U-boat, the view of those historical commentators who have concluded that Jellicoe was not an effective Sea Lord is misconceived. Moreover, the criticism made regarding the introduction of the convoy system does not stand up to critical appraisal. Jellicoe’s predecessors at the Admiralty may be accused of dilatoriness in this respect, but not Jellicoe.²¹ The shipping losses through the latter part of April 1917 had risen to such an extent that the balance of risk had changed and, courtesy of the US, additional escorts had become available. His dilemma was real and given the catastrophe that would have resulted if command of the surface of the seas had been lost as a consequence of leaving the Grand Fleet without sufficient escort vessels, his caution in this respect was warranted.

²⁰ Black, *British Naval Staff*, 228.

²¹ Admiral Fisher, who served as First Sea Lord from November 1914 to May 1915, particularly could be criticised in this respect as he had predicted as early as June 1913 that unrestricted submarine warfare was inevitable. Terraine, *Business in Great Waters*, 4.

This leaves the question as to why, in all these circumstances, Lloyd George, through Geddes, dismissed Jellicoe. He took a huge risk. His action almost brought about the resignation of all the Sea Lords, which probably would have resulted in the collapse of the Government with the Conservative members withdrawing their support for him. There is no doubt that by the end of 1917 Lloyd George was frustrated by events of that year, particularly with the failure of the Passchendaele offensive, and in needing to effect some change he sacked the one senior commander he felt he could without major repercussions. He was no doubt also frustrated by Jellicoe's pessimism, particularly when it was coupled with forceful argument from Jellicoe that supported the strategic views of Haig and Robertson. It must have been galling for Lloyd George to have his ideas on military strategy resisted by a triumvirate of advisers who were appointed by his political predecessors. On the other hand by the end of 1917, the dispute over military strategy that had persisted through June and July 1917 had passed and, according to Geddes, 'There was no urgent issue at the Admiralty.' This leaves the perception that Lloyd George dismissed Jellicoe on a whim. There was no logic to it or to the choice of Jellicoe's successor. The only feasible explanation is that he resented that Jellicoe had frequently thwarted his ambitions, not least in the compilation of the 1909 – 1910 Naval Estimates, whereby he curtailed Lloyd George's plans for social reform. In other words, the dismissal was simply an expression of Lloyd George's vindictive nature. King George V certainly was of that view, claiming that 'the Prime Minister had his knife into him [Jellicoe] for some time.'²²

The military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, wrote, 'The subordination of the political to the military point of view is absurd, because politics has produced the war;

²² Letter, King George V to Beatty, 10 February 1918, B L Ranft (ed.), *The Beatty Papers*, (Aldershot, 1989), I, 511.

it is the intellect and the war only the instrument and not the other way round.²³

From this it is logical to infer that the appointment and dismissal of commanders of the fighting services must lie within the prerogative of their political masters. That is not to say that such powers should be exercised without justification, if for no other reason than the unreasonable exercise of that power will undermine the loyalty of those lesser ranks that are required to fight. Lloyd George was fortunate. If the ensuing political furore had resulted in the downfall of the coalition government, 'the political' would have been subordinated to the 'military' and the ensuing 'state of absurdity' could only have impaired Britain's war effort. That the Admiralty Board did not resign was due in no small part to Carson and Jellicoe placing the country's interests above their own, in spite of the machinations of Lloyd George and Geddes. Lloyd George was also fortunate in that the foundations Jellicoe put in place in terms of strategy, weapons development and the organisation necessary to operate the convoy system meant that by August 1918 the Navy had achieved a comprehensive victory over the U-boat.

In one respect, Jellicoe was less fortunate. Despite the success of his post war career, his reputation remained tarnished. As suggested in Chapter I, Lloyd George's version of the war 'stigmatised indelibly' the popular memory of those in charge of the Admiralty during 1917. That popular memory has been perpetuated by those historians who have demeaned Jellicoe's effectiveness as First Sea Lord. It is hoped that the arguments made in this dissertation will go some way towards removing the stigma. Jellicoe's career cannot be likened to an Aristotelian tragedy. He was not responsible for his own downfall.

²³ Quoted, Herwig and Task, 'The Failure of Germany's Undersea Offensive against World Shipping', 636.

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