

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. Scattered across the cover are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of a small branch with two leaves. These motifs are positioned in the top left, top center, top right, middle right, bottom right, and bottom left areas.

# ATLANTIC CONVOYS AND NAZI RAIDERS

---

The Deadly Voyage of HMS Jervis Bay

**Bruce Allen Watson**

 *Greenwood*  
PUBLISHING GROUP

ATLANTIC CONVOYS  
· AND ·  
NAZI RAIDERS

*This page intentionally left blank*

ATLANTIC CONVOYS  
· AND ·  
NAZI RAIDERS

*The Deadly Voyage of HMS Jervis Bay*

BRUCE ALLEN WATSON

---

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut  
London

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Watson, Bruce, 1929–

Atlantic convoys and Nazi raiders : the deadly voyage of HMS Jervis Bay /  
Bruce Allen Watson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-98827-9 (alk. paper)

1. Jervis Bay (Ship) 2. Admiral Scheer (Cruiser) 3. World War, 1939–1945—  
Naval operations, British. 4. World War, 1939–1945—Naval operations, German. 5.  
Naval convoys—History—20th century. 6. World War, 1939–1945—Atlantic Ocean.  
I. Title.

D772.J4W37 2006

940.54'293—dc22 2005019271

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 2006 by Bruce Allen Watson

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be  
reproduced, by any process or technique, without the  
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2005019271

ISBN: 0-275-98827-9

First published in 2006

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the  
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National  
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Copyright Acknowledgment

Photograph 4, attributed to the book *Pocket Battleship: The Story of the Admiral Scheer*, by Theodor Krancke and H. J. Brennecke, originally published by William Kimber, London, was reproduced for use in this study. A good faith search has been made for the copyright holders but to no avail. If the holder is eventually found, credit will be given in any future edition of this book.

# CONTENTS

Preface	vii	
Acknowledgments	xi	
<i>Chapter 1</i>	Armed Merchant Ships: A Background	1
<i>Chapter 2</i>	Rebuilding the German Navy between the Wars	17
<i>Chapter 3</i>	The Royal Navy between the Wars	31
<i>Chapter 4</i>	War: September 1939 to November 1940	49
<i>Chapter 5</i>	The Battle between HMS <i>Jervis Bay</i> and the <i>Admiral Scheer</i>	71
<i>Chapter 6</i>	The Continued Voyage of the <i>Admiral Scheer</i>	101
<i>Chapter 7</i>	<i>Götterdämmerung</i> : Twilight of the German Surface Raiders	111
<i>Chapter 8</i>	The Reasons Why	129
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Last Things	141
<i>Appendix A</i>	Selected Convoy Code Designations	151
<i>Appendix B</i>	List of Merchant Ships in Convoy HX-84	153

## CONTENTS

<i>Appendix C</i>	List of <i>Jervis Bay</i> Crewmen Lost in the Battle	155
<i>Appendix D</i>	List of <i>Jervis Bay</i> Survivors	161
Notes		165
Glossary		179
Selected Bibliography		183
Index		189

*Photo sections follow page 30 and page 99.*

## PREFACE

In November 1940, the British Armed Merchant Cruiser HMS *Jervis Bay*, escorting a convoy from Halifax, Nova Scotia, was blown out of the water by the German pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*. At that time, I was eleven years old, living in San Francisco a few blocks from the bay—about as far removed from the action as one can imagine. Despite the enormity of World War II, which shaped the psyches of so many of us who lived during those years, that single naval action is one I have always remembered.

The reasons for that persistence of memory are simple enough. A few of my friends and I were consumed by what was happening in Europe. In 1938, we posted a large map of Spain on a basement wall, pretending we understood the ever-changing Spanish civil war battlefronts. In 1939, we were horrified when the Nazis invaded Poland and cheered when Britain entered the war. We wanted to join the Royal Air Force and fight the Nazi horde. Age notwithstanding, that was no more than a romantic fantasy because we knew nothing about war much less what was really happening to the RAF Hurricane and Spitfire fighter pilots during the Battle of Britain. We did know that times were dangerous and filled with noble deeds.

Then the news broke about *Jervis Bay*. My friends viewed the battle as heroic but inconsequential. I was riveted by the story; it stirred some personal idealizations, no little imagination, and some family history. I grew up in San Francisco enjoying the sights and sounds of the Embarcadero, experiences reinforced by the sea novels of Howard Pease, the stories I read in one of my father's books about Sir Francis Drake and Horatio Nelson, and

## PREFACE

Lowell Thomas's biography of Count Felix von Luckner, the German sea raider of World War I. I loved the smells and bustle of Fisherman's Wharf as it was then, counterpointed by the stately elegance of the Marina Yacht Harbor. When the United States entered the war I would walk the few blocks from our apartment to the little beach between the yacht club and the Presidio to watch the constant parade of warships and cargo vessels passing through the Golden Gate. A friend who often accompanied me once remarked, "Every time we come here you look like you wish you were on one of those ships." He was right.

In 1944, at age fifteen, the desire to "ship out," to join the Merchant Marine, nearly overwhelmed me (but not my mother). Had I gone, I would have stepped into some rather large shoes. In the 1880s my grandfather left Scotland to spend his working life as a ship's steward, sailing from Liverpool for Cunard and White Star lines. My father followed him to sea in about 1906 but left in 1914, becoming a cavalry officer in Britain's New Army. I never knew much about their actual careers but an active imagination filled the gaps. More recently, upon my marriage, I met other men who made their living on the sea. One of them, my late father-in-law Gremur Eggertsson, an Icelander, captained rust bucket Boston fishing trawlers into the North Atlantic. The constant dangers he and his friends faced quickly gained my respect and admiration.

I must confess that heavy seas have never pounded my body. Never have I stood on a burning deck. No one has ever shot at me or sent a torpedo in my direction. My time on the water is limited to occasional boyhood forays into San Francisco Bay, to some crossings of the English Channel, and a mild trip to Norway across the North Sea. Thus, my connection to the oceanic life and more particularly to HMS *Jervis Bay* is based on sympathetic understanding, tenuous but quite genuine.

So what can be made of a fairly minor naval action that lasted only twenty-two minutes? Except for George Pollock's *The Jervis Bay*, based on survivor interviews, the memoir by Captain Theodor Krancke, commander of the *Admiral Scheer*, both published in the late 1950s, and Kenneth Poolman's 1985 survey *Armed Merchant Cruisers*, historians of the Battle of the Atlantic usually offer only brief descriptions of the attack by *Jervis Bay* against the pocket battleship—a few lines, a paragraph, perhaps a few pages (published too late for use here is *If the Gods Are Good: The Epic Sacrifice of the HMS Jervis Bay*, by Ralph Segman and Gerald Duskin, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004). Brevity notwithstanding, the action has been anointed as legendary.

This study takes a different approach to the narrative. It begins with a synoptic history of armed merchant ships, reaching back to the days of pri-

## PREFACE

vateering and coming forward to World War I, which gives a broad context for the topic of armed merchant cruisers. Further context is developed by the political and military events of the interwar years and the opening phases of World War II. This may be familiar territory to many readers but the presentation is shaped to give a better understanding of how and why the British used armed merchant cruisers at all and, within that frame work, provides a particular setting for the battle between the *Jervis Bay* and the *Admiral Scheer*. The challenge to British shipping by German surface raiders is discussed, and the role of armed merchant cruisers during the battle of the Atlantic is evaluated. The book ends with a memorial note to *Jervis Bay*.

Much of the material about the battle and the *Scheer*'s subsequent chase of scattering merchant ships is based on archival material that has not been previously published. This includes sketch maps of the battle made by an American naval officer, eyewitness accounts of the sinking of *Jervis Bay*, and the *Scheer*'s sinking of various merchant ships from the convoy. All this is supplemented by photos, many of which also have never been published. These add a note of reality to the history.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The core of this book, the battle between the *Jervis Bay* and the *Scheer*, together with narratives about other armed merchant cruisers, owes much to archivists. For help with that material I owe thanks to Berit Pistoria of the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Koblenz, the Bundesarchiv, Freiburg, and the staff of Public Records Office, Kew, Richmond. The project might not have surfaced at all without the staff of the U.S. National Archives who found the U.S. Navy Intelligence Report about the battle. Most especially, I am indebted to Michael MacDonald, Research Archivist, Canadian National Archives, Ottawa. He met my several requests with great efficiency, providing illuminating documents and considerable advice. Although the photo sources are cited I think they deserve special notice because they met my continued inquiries with patience and cooperation, and provided some rare pictures. They include the U.S. National Archives Still Photo Center, the U.S. Naval Historical Center at the Washington Navy Yard, the Canadian Joint Forces Imagery Centre, Ottawa, the Hauptstaatsarchiv, Stuttgart, the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institute, and Chris Plant, Curator, Photo Archive of the Imperial War Museum, London.

At a more personal level, Joe Marriott of New Brunswick Community College connected me to an e-mail family related to *Jervis Bay*. Thus, I am much indebted to Michael Chappell Kent, England. Our small conversations, his advice and enthusiasm, his review and corrections of portions of the manuscript, his continuing investigation of the exact size of *Jervis Bay's* crew, and the photos and other materials he supplied have been invaluable. Harold

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wright of St. John Heritage has been helpful as well with photos and his regional connections. As with Mike, he embraced the project with enthusiasm.

My son Brian contributed by making maps from my sketch drawings and doing things with his computer that are beyond my understanding. My son John listened patiently, read portions of the manuscript, and offered sound advice. As always, my wife Marilyn bore the brunt of my writing, reading the manuscript again and again, spreading red ink over my paragraphs as she went. I could not have persevered for seven years without her support.

And I need to thank my daughter-in-law Quetta Garrison Watson for re-typing the manuscript and transferring it to a disk.

· CHAPTER 1 ·

# ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS: A BACKGROUND

## TOWARD A CONTEXT

The German pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* sank the British armed merchant cruiser HMS *Jervis Bay* in November 1940. This book is the story of that sinking—the tale of a converted passenger liner fighting one of the Nazi's most powerful ships, of old 6-inch guns versus new 11-inch guns, of a solitary escort vessel protecting a convoy against a deadly surface raider. Obviously, *Jervis Bay* did not stand a chance of surviving the battle; her crew's fatalistic bravery created awe among all those who witnessed the fight. Even a vivid imagination finds difficulty grasping the horror of it all. No wonder, then, that the battle is a great Royal Navy legend.

That the unlikely opponents met mid-Atlantic seems understandable, however tragic the outcome. *Jervis Bay* was squiring a convoy and the *Admiral Scheer* was hunting convoys, a simple enough equation as usually presented in most histories. But one thesis of this study is that the story is more complicated than that.

Both the necessity of arming a passenger liner and pretending it was a warship, and the building of the *Admiral Scheer* and her sister ships for the express purpose of commerce raiding, find their roots in the events, political decisions, rearmament policies, war plans, naval traditions, assumptions, and blunders that were abroad in prewar Britain and Germany. These events and mind-sets must be explored, however familiar some of the territory, to give historical context not only as a means of understanding how the two unequal ships met in battle, but why they did.

## ATLANTIC CONVOYS AND NAZI RAIDERS

A second thesis of this study is that the battle harbors significance beyond the event itself. The sinking of HMS *Jervis Bay* symbolizes the end of an era in naval warfare. The armed merchant cruisers of World War II inherited a long sometimes-noble and sometimes-ignoble history. Well into the nineteenth century such ships plowed the seas under billowing canvas, and augmented their regular navies. During World War I, the British added hundreds of merchant vessels to the Royal Navy's list to perform a variety of services. And the Germans sent out converted merchant ships as commerce raiders. The common role of these commandeered ships on both sides was to attack enemy ships. During World War II, the Germans essentially replicated the role of their earlier commerce raiders. The Royal Navy significantly altered at least one role of the armed merchant cruisers. As in World War I, they helped establish a North Sea blockade to interdict German blockade runners, they patrolled the northern waters to spot German blockade runners, and they patrolled the northern waters to spot German raiders breaking out into the Atlantic. But they also became convoy escort vessels, a defensive duty for which they were eminently unsuited and for which *Jervis Bay* and her companions paid a fearful price.

The background of that transition begins in the days of privateering.

### PRIVATEERS

Privateers—the forerunners of armed merchant ships in both world wars—were, as the name suggests, privately owned vessels, purchased, provisioned, and armed by wealthy investment groups seeking to become wealthier. These financiers obtained for their ships and crews government-issued letters of marque and reprisal, granting them authority to seize enemy shipping. A prize crew from the privateer sailed the captured vessel to a friendly port where a prize court adjudicated matters of rightful seizure and the value of the ship and its cargo. A judgment for the privateers meant that everything captured could be sold, a percentage going to the government, the remainder divided among the investors, ship's officers, and crew, in descending order of profit.

That was the normative, the legal, system. Enormous variations existed. For example, at first in the British American colonies and then later in the United States, qualifications of letters of marque and reprisal, who could issue the letters, and regulations actually applied to the privateers varied from colony to colony, from state to state. Granting letters was the task of both the state's governor and an Admiralty judge. But in New York colony, the Admiralty judge often granted letters without the governor's approval.<sup>1</sup> Nepotism, bribery, and illicit payments for letters also undercut the official system.

## ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS

Privateering inevitably attracted its share of scoundrels who willingly stepped over a fine line to outright piracy. Thus, some captured ships never made it to prize courts but were immediately converted to privateering, their original captains, crews, and cargoes either disappearing or left stranded at a neutral port. Letters of marque were readily forged, ships' paper and cargo manifests often altered, and customs officials and prize court judges sometimes bribed. Occasionally letters of marque and reprisal were rescinded by the issuing government. The now-former privateer might easily turn to outright piracy.

In 1708, letters of marque and reprisal were granted to a group of Bristol investors.<sup>2</sup> Two frigates, the *Duke*, mounting thirty guns, and the *Duchess*, armed with twenty-six guns, went a-raiding in the Pacific to capture gold-laden Spanish galleons headed from Peru and Mexico to Manila in the Philippines. From there treasures would be shipped to Spain, thus financing the War of Spanish Succession. The overall commander of the British expedition was Woodes Rogers. However, to ensure his officers and crews remained loyal and came home, the investors created a council of all the ships' officers chaired by Dr. Thomas Dover. This physician was given command of the marine detachment and the rank of ship captain. He knew nothing about seamanship and less about fighting, yet his council had to agree to any course change or battle plan.

The ships left Bristol on 2 August 1708, sailed around Cape Horn and raided Guayaquil, Ecuador, in April and May of 1709. Amid much flustering by Dr. Dover's council over how much they would extract from the Spanish governor to make them go away, the privateers departed on 8 May, carrying away hostages, some 300 prisoners, less loot than they literally bargained for, and a number of smaller vessels. They headed north and patrolled the waters off Baja California. In December 1709 the British vessels at last captured the Manila galleon *Bigonia* just north of Cabo San Lucas. The task was not easy, for the *Bigonia* was larger than any of the British ships and more heavily armed, with twenty major guns and twenty smaller swivel guns. The galleon caused considerable damage and several casualties among the pursuers. But the privateers outmaneuvered the heavier galleon and fired their guns more rapidly, thus forcing the Spanish to surrender. The attack was a tactical mistake, the greed of Dr. Dover's council notwithstanding, because the privateers' function was to capture ships, not risk getting sunk themselves.

The expedition, carrying their hostages and accompanied by an outbreak of plague, crossed the Pacific in leaking vessels to Batavia, Java. Repairs made, the privateers headed for home across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, and arrived in the London Pool in October 1711. They

## ATLANTIC CONVOYS AND NAZI RAIDERS

were the third group of English seamen, behind Sir Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish, to circumnavigate the globe.

The expedition's overall prize value has been estimated at a million pounds sterling. But the East India Company filed suit, claiming ownership and the prize money was adjudicated by the courts. One of the crew was Alexander Selkirk, who, some years earlier and after a sharp disagreement with his ship's captain, had been voluntarily abandoned on the Juan Fernandez Islands off Peru. Woodes Rogers rescued Selkirk and made the cast-away's tale a part of his own memoir. Thus was born an inspiration for Daniel Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe*.

Britain again went to war with Spain and then with France between 1736 and 1748. Britain enlisted privateers to interdict her enemy's commerce on the Atlantic and in the West Indies. Although many privateers were commissioned in Britain, the assistance of her North American colonies was eagerly sought. On both sides of the Atlantic, the British commissioned 2,598 privateers.<sup>3</sup>

Sloops, single-masted with fore-and-aft rigging, or a ship carrying fewer than twenty-four guns on a single deck, were a favorite privateering vessel in the colonies. Available in considerable numbers, they were fast, did not require large crews, and drifted little from their heading in narrow waters—a great advantage when overtaking another ship. Their size varied from 20 to 40 tons, but larger sloops from 50 to 80 tons were preferred because they could sail deep water without pitching and wallowing. The sloops, among all types of British colonial privateers, accounted for 20 percent of the prizes captured.<sup>4</sup>

The cost to the investors of purchasing a sloop, equipping, manning, and then sending it out on a seven-month cruise was about £1,000 sterling. A successful voyage could yield a financial return of over 130 percent. However, 25 percent of colonial privateers failed to take any prizes. The backers lost their investment. Sometimes the investment was put in outright danger when, in a spate of patriotism, the British colonial privateer attacked a Spanish or French privateer. There was small profit if victorious and absolute disaster if vanquished.<sup>5</sup>

The French Revolution of 1789 spurred further privateering. Britain, along with other European nations, went to war against the revolutionary government. The British saw possibilities of wealth, possessions, and defeat of the enemy in the Caribbean. French colonies were in upheaval, trying to decide whether it would be more prudent to remain loyal to the monarchy or openly support the revolution. The Royal Navy, its own ships blockading French ports, relied on privateers in the West Indies. The French, their regular navy in revolutionary disarray because so many of their officers were

## ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS

royalists, encouraged privateering to counter the British vessels. Their primary base was not one of their Caribbean possessions; rather, it was Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

Despite President George Washington's efforts to keep the United States neutral, South Carolina felt some sympathy toward the French because of strong Gallic roots in their colonial heritage. Thus, French agents granted letters of marque and reprisal from Charleston. Small vessels, such as the sloop *Mediator*, formed the bulk of the first privateers because they were inexpensive to convert and could operate inshore among the Caribbean Islands. As the war lengthened, larger ships, such as the barque *Recovery*, mounting eighteen guns, went hunting in deeper water. The assaults against merchant shipping became fairly standardized: overtake the slower cargo ship, fire a few canon shot as warning, send aboard a prize crew, and sail the captured vessel to Charleston and the prize courts. The Charleston privateers reached their zenith in 1796. After that, profits diminished as the United States federal courts increasingly made their presence felt, much to the disfavor of the privateers.

Privateering in American continental waters reached a high point when the United States and Britain fought the War of 1812.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Navy, with but sixteen ships and only seven of them frigates, seemed to stand little chance against the Royal Navy's awesome power. Much as the British did in both world wars, the U.S. Navy augmented their fleet by commissioning armed merchant vessels—only these were privateers, some 526 of them by war's end, carrying letters of marque and reprisal.<sup>8</sup>

Schooner-rigged vessels were again the favorite vessel used, comprising two-thirds of the ships commissioned because they were fast and maneuverable, or, as a seaman might say, they were quick to answer the helm. These tenacious privateers upset British shipping. By the end of the war they took 1,300 British ships as prizes. At one point, during a seven-month period prior to March 1813, 500 British ships were seized, causing an outcry in England.<sup>9</sup> Schooners, such as the *Rossie*, *Comet*, *Providence*, and *George Washington*, created havoc as they cruised the Atlantic and Caribbean.

Unfortunately, a dark side lurked behind all the victories. Privateers typically selected their victims with care. Ships containing cargoes of high commercial value were prized over those carrying military stores, for money was more important to many privateers than what damage they might inflict on the British war effort. That could have been significant, for Britain was not only fighting the Americans but was in a desperate war on the Iberian Peninsula. Unwilling to be on the losing side of a fight, privateers let pass ships that looked more heavily gunned than their own or whose crews seemed determined to do battle. Thus, for all the flag-waving and martial music that

## ATLANTIC CONVOYS AND NAZI RAIDERS

accompanied departure from their home ports, privateers on the high seas made the early decision to be pragmatic businessmen.

George Little, who had sailed on six privateering expeditions, found himself on his seventh voyage first lieutenant aboard the schooner *George Washington*. Finally, sickened by the life, he determined it would be his last voyage. He wrote despondently, "I behold a band of ruthless desperadoes, for such I must call our crew, robbing and plundering a few defenseless beings who were pursuing both a lawful and peaceful calling. It induced me . . . to relinquish . . . an unjustifiable and outrageous pursuit. . . . No man of conscience could be engaged in privateering."<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, Europe had enough of this gray area of naval warfare. Privateering was abolished by most nations under the 1856 Declaration of Paris. But some ambiguities remained. The Second Hague Convention in 1907 erased much confusion by clarifying definitions. Thus a merchant ship cannot be a warship unless under the direct command and authority of the commissioning nation, and its crew must be subject to military discipline. The ship must also exhibit external markings common to regular warships—such as a bow number—and it must be listed as part of the commissioning nation's navy.

On the face of it, the grand and romantic days of high adventure seemed over. But World War I demonstrated that new developments remained possible.

## WORLD WAR I: ARMED MERCHANT CRUISERS AND THE BRITISH BLOCKADE

Much of our understanding of World War I is conditioned by the land war in Europe. The human cost was appalling. An average of 5,600 soldiers were killed each day—the total over four years was 8,500,000. Trench warfare, a seemingly unending claustrophobic vertical existence, killed most of them. Hemmed by dirt walls, the soldiers saw little but the sky above. Exposure meant death. The major offensives, attack over open ground against artillery and machine-gun fire, devastated a generation. Edmund Taylor concluded that "the trench warfare of 1914–1918 was perhaps the cruelest large-scale ordeal that the flesh and spirit of man have endured since the Ice Age."<sup>11</sup> The war at sea took on different dimensions. The ocean was horizontal, featureless. Another ship, much less an enemy vessel, might not be seen for days or weeks or, in some cases, not ever. The sea battles of World War I—Jutland, Dogger Bank, Helgoland Bight, Coronel, and the Falklands—each killed a few thousand men. But most sea fights were between individual ships. No sea battle ever produced 20,000 British dead in a few hours as did the

## ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS

Somme offensive of 1916. Thus, as Martin Gilbert notes, the “death toll [at sea] was not determined by the intensity of the fighting, but by the size of the ship and how quickly it sank.”<sup>12</sup>

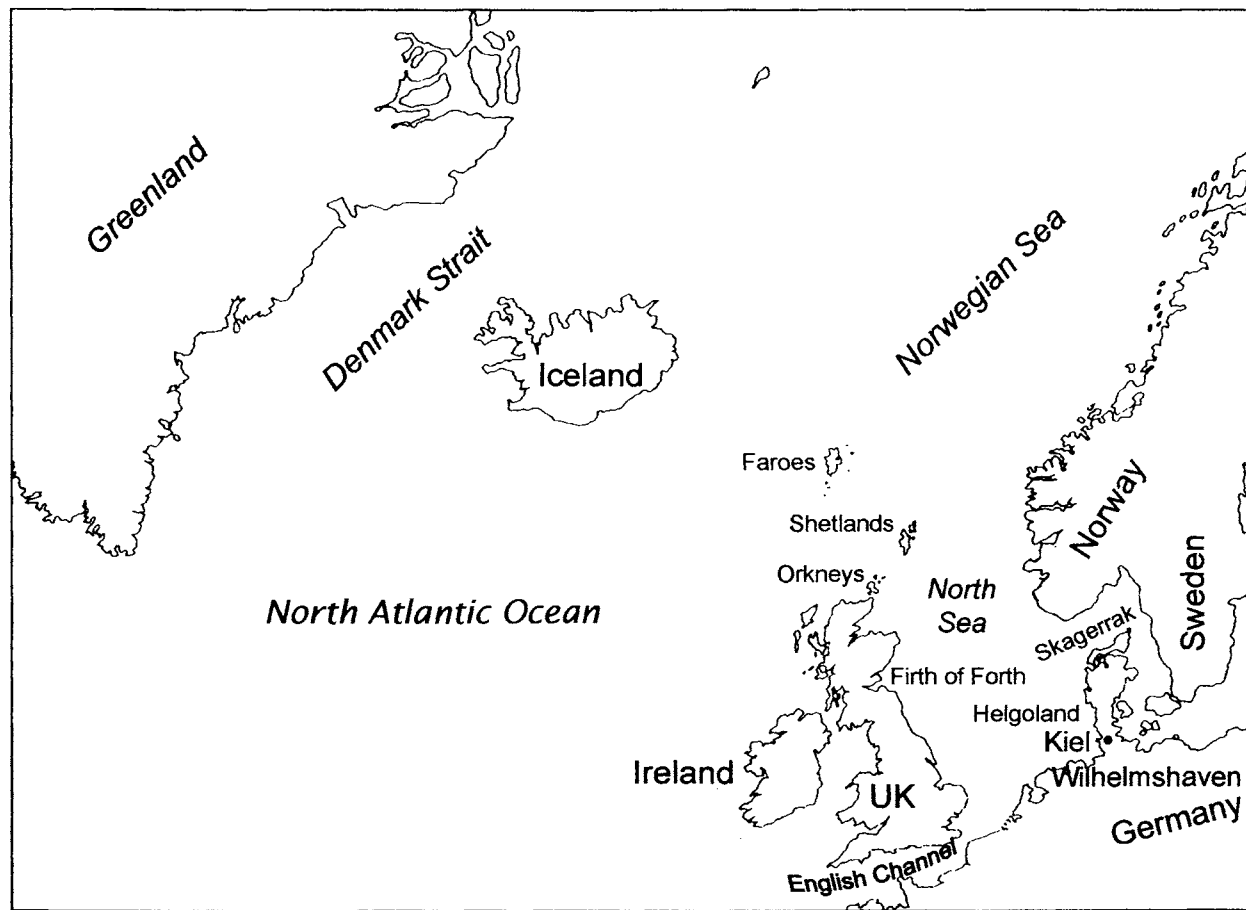
The centerpiece of Britain's naval war was their North Sea blockade, established 12 August 1914, to prevent merchant ships carrying war-related goods and food from reaching German ports. The blockade necessitated patrolling a vast expanse of ocean (Map 1). The tightest blockade closed the Skagerrak, the waters between Denmark's most northern tip and Norway. Patrols also extended across the northern entrance to the English Channel, to the Norwegian Sea—the area between Norway and Iceland—and into the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. Royal Navy ships also patrolled as far south as the Falkland Islands that covered Cape Horn (the Panama Canal was not yet open).

The Royal Navy enjoyed a numerical superiority of thirty-four cruisers to the Germans' eight. Nevertheless, Britain's cruiser forces, the backbone of the far-reaching patrols, was stretched thin from Gibraltar to Suez to South Africa, on to India, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand, and across the Pacific's vast reaches where the Germans claimed several islands. Royal Navy cruisers were deployed virtually around the world. The British found two ways of filling the gaps.

One method was laying mines in the North Sea. This forced many Germany-bound merchant ships into British ports for inspection of their crew's papers, cargo manifests, and the cargoes themselves. Contraband was confiscated and, in some instances, so were the ships.

A second method of compensating for the cruiser shortage was commandeering passenger liners and arming them, creating a class of ships called armed merchant cruisers (AMCs). By April 1915, twenty-nine such ships were organized into the Tenth Cruiser Squadron that operated as the blockade's outer screen from the Denmark Straits to zones north and south of Iceland and around to Scotland. The converted ships were usually fast enough at about 15 knots to overtake any freighter or, for that matter, most existing German submarines operating on the surface. Mounting from six to ten 6-inch guns, with an occasional 12-pounder and some smaller caliber guns such as 6-pounders, 2-pounders, and machine guns and rifles, the AMCs appeared to be adequate replacements for regular cruisers. After all, they were never considered “real” warships that would have to fight major engagements. Alas high, even modest, expectations soon were dashed at four levels.

First, whatever speed the merchant cruisers generated was lost to unwieldiness in combat situations. True, they seldom confronted German warships, but chasing a merchant ship or trying to outwit a surfaced U-boat necessitated a measure of maneuverability. Liners were designed for the



Map 1. North Atlantic

## ARMED MERCHANT SHIPS

straight-ahead dash. The AMCs were like so many racehorses suddenly expected to meet the stop-and-go abilities of a cowboy's quarter horse. The liners did not comfortably fit their new assignment. Second, the liners were usually big and bulky, conspicuous in profile, easily avoided by German U-boats and surface raiders, or easily dominated by a faster, more heavily armed and armored enemy warship. Third, the liners consumed huge amounts of coal, a matter of grave concern to Admiralty at a time when conversion to oil-burning engines was still in its infancy. And fourth, the AMCs, being conspicuous, were vulnerable to submerged submarine torpedo attacks, partially explaining what happened to the 32,000-ton Cunard liner, *Lusitania*.

For the *Lusitania* was built in 1907 with the provision that she could be converted to an AMC if war erupted. In August 1914, the liner was put on the official list of AMCs, and 6-inch gun mounts were positioned on her decks. Then the Admiralty changed their mind, deciding not to use the ship as a merchant cruiser. Although no guns had been installed, the gun mounts were left in place, and the Admiralty made the fatal mistake of leaving the ship on the AMC list. The Germans technically had few reasons to consider the *Lusitania* anything but an AMC. She was torpedoed on 7 May 1915 by the U-20. Nearly 1,200 people lost their lives.

### GERMAN WARSHIP RAIDERS: THE VOYAGE OF THE *EMDEN*

The British blockade slowly but steadily strangled Germany. As Martin Gilbert states in *The First World War*, the 1915 blockade caused 88,232 deaths. The next year 121,114 died. Food riots erupted in over thirty German cities.<sup>13</sup>

The German Navy retaliated. They bombarded a few British seacoast towns, such as Scarborough in North Yorkshire, and they dropped mines in the sea-lanes around various channel ports. The Germans also sent out surface raiders to effect their own stranglehold on Britain, an island nation that had to import everything from food for its people to raw materials for its industries.

An early and legendary example of German surface raiders by a regular warship was the light cruiser *Emden*. Launched in 1908, she was another of the Kaiser's entries into the catch-up race against the Royal Navy. Unfortunately for the Kaiser, she was obsolete before leaving the drawing boards. To be sure, at 3,600 tons and 387 feet long, *Emden* was a sleek ship. Yet her piston engines were out of date; in fact, she was the last German warship of her kind. She burned coal, giving her limited range (because of the necessity of refueling) and speed of (24 knots). Dan van der Vat points out in