

A 'Well Known' Incident Reassessed - The German Attempted Mining of the Thames in August 1914

The war orders of the *Kaiserliche Marine* in force in the early days of August 1914 called for a quantitative 'equalisation' of the Royal Navy's capital ships before contemplation of direct fleet action. All possible means including offensive mining-operations were required for the initial phase. In spite of this, the Imperial minelayers were few in number and not even ready when war became inevitable. At Cuxhaven on August 1st a merchant vessel began a hurried conversion into an auxiliary minelayer: known officially as *Hilfstreuminendampfer B*.¹ She had recently been the *Königin Luise*, a coastal excursion steamer owned by the *Hamburg-Amerika* Line, which had plied between Hamburg and Heligoland.²

Ever since many references have been made to her ill-fated exploit and its immediate effect. For perfectly identifiable reasons most of the early accounts were totally worthless. However, modern commentators have overwhelmingly merely quoted the earlier fiction without any investigation. Contemporaneous operational records are confusing and state accounts, whether for public consumption or not, are less than frank.

With the political situation unclear, a minelayer was required for immediate action and the resulting modifications only took twelve hours. Whilst ammunition for two 8.8 c.m. guns had been shipped, the guns themselves had not been mounted. Lesser armament *was* however fitted. She was also altered to some degree by painting. (In peacetime she had been predominately white.) But, it was said that she must have been seen in her new guise by 'enemy' merchantmen on August 2nd. According to the German official history, *Der Krieg zur See*, these apparently British freighters were seized, but released prior to the beginning of hostilities.³

Within a British *Naval Staff Monograph* is a translation of an intriguing statement in the official German account. The minelayer's orders 'were despatched immediately after the declaration of war with England at 6.30 p.m., August 4'. The translation is accurate, although the time has been amended to Greenwich Mean Time and the fact that the instructions were transmitted by wireless was not mentioned.⁴ Earlier in the afternoon a misunderstanding appears to have arisen between the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Edward Goschen and the German Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow, whereby the newly delivered British ultimatum and demand for the diplomats' passports became inextricably linked in the mind of the latter. While Goschen then immediately met with the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, it is not unlikely that von Jagow had the major German offices of State informed of the afternoon's apparent events. Subsequently the German Embassy in London was warned, in an *enclair* telegram (which was also in *English*) that the British had 'declared war' at 6 p.m. (G.M.T.).⁵

Another element leading to the issuing of *Hilfstreuminendampfer B*'s orders in the early evening of August 4th must have been a meeting already held on her deployment the previous day. This is said to have been between the Commander-in-Chief, *Hochseeflotte* (High Sea Fleet), Admiral Friedrich von Ingenohl and Korvettenkapitän Karl Biermann, the minelayer's commanding officer. Anyway, she duly sailed from Wilhelmshaven unescorted, even although the Germans thought it highly probable that the British may already be forming a line of blockade.⁶

The operation had been postponed slightly, as there were inherent problems. Remaining largely identifiable for what she had been, the transit and arrival at the area designated for mining had to be timed well. It was judged that the full moon of August 4th was ill suited to this and on balance, entry into the Thames Estuary in daylight was

preferable. She, therefore, hugged the Dutch coast overnight. Apparently given operational leeway, Biermann decided not to attempt to enter the Thames from the south. Instead he chose the northern entry, supposedly targeting the King's Channel, slightly to the southeast of Harwich on the Essex coast. This was to be reached by way of the Outer Gabbard and Galloper. Accordingly, the minelayer altered course for England's East Coast at 07.00 hours on the 5th. A seemingly different makeshift mask of paint was applied overnight, giving an impression of a Harwich-Hook of Holland ferry⁷ of the Great Eastern Railway Company. (The usual paintwork of this company's steamers consisted of black hulls with a yellow band; white uppers with brown houses; and funnels of buff with black tops.) In spite of the tone taken in the German official history, this 'disguise' could not have given anything more than slight protection. Although roughly the same size as the Great Eastern vessels, the German's silhouette was very different: having a much higher bridge structure and a high and unbroken line to her stern. The British steamers had clearly definable midships and after islands. Similarly, having two raked funnels, the minelayer's were of an identifiably different shape and larger diameter.⁸

Meanwhile, the Third Flotilla commanded by Captain Cecil Henry Fox R.N. in the light-cruiser *Amphion*, had left Harwich at 06.00 and had initially been tasked to sweep around the Outer Gabbard Light Vessel.⁹ This destroyer flotilla was part of the British forces who were 'to keep the approaches of the English Channel clear of enemy torpedo craft and mine-layers by a series of sweeps which would prevent the enemy vessels passing unobserved and unattacked through the area south of 54° N and east of 2° E'.¹⁰

British and German accounts of the ensuing action differ significantly. A fairly detailed British version of events is to be found within the relevant *Naval Staff Monograph*: produced in the 1920s for private use within the Fleet. Normally these monographs are reliable, but I have found a tendency for 'damage limitation' in cases of perceived embarrassment to the Service. In light of aspects of these events, this seems such a case. Alternatively, this may merely have been down to less than excellent post war analysis.

Having 'left the Outer Gabbard Light Vessel at about 9 a.m.', Captain Fox claimed (in a lengthy report of August 13th) that at 10.15 the destroyer *Laurel* made a report from a trawler of a suspicious ship 'throwing things overboard' in the 'probable position of 52° 12' N, 2° 27' E'. The monograph states at 10.30 that *Lance* and *Landrail* were ahead of the 3rd Flotilla, searching for this vessel and sighted *Hilfstreuminendampfer B*. The enemy vessel was said to have then put on her full speed of 20 knots, altered course to the south and 'commenced minelaying unseen by our destroyers'.¹¹

According to the monograph the chase and fight were of short duration. Supposedly the two destroyers opened fire at 10.45, at an approximate range of 4,400 yards. At 11.00 the firing ceased and *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* sank in position 52° 5' N, 2° 32' E.¹²

There is an explanation as to why this version is so much shorter than others. It is obvious that another monograph on minesweeping was used in determining the above position. This stated that the 'approximate direction of the field ... was afterwards located as E.S.Ely., slightly zigzagged between Longs. 2° 15' E. and 2° 30' E', which is in essence identical to that in the later-produced staff monograph'.¹³ The diagram accompanying the staff version simply put the sinking of the minelayer at the end of this line. In doing so those concerned must have discounted a number of operational reports that put her sinking far to the northeast of this position. She actually lies in 52° 20' 44.5" N 2° 54' 52.5" E.¹⁴ (See figure 1.)

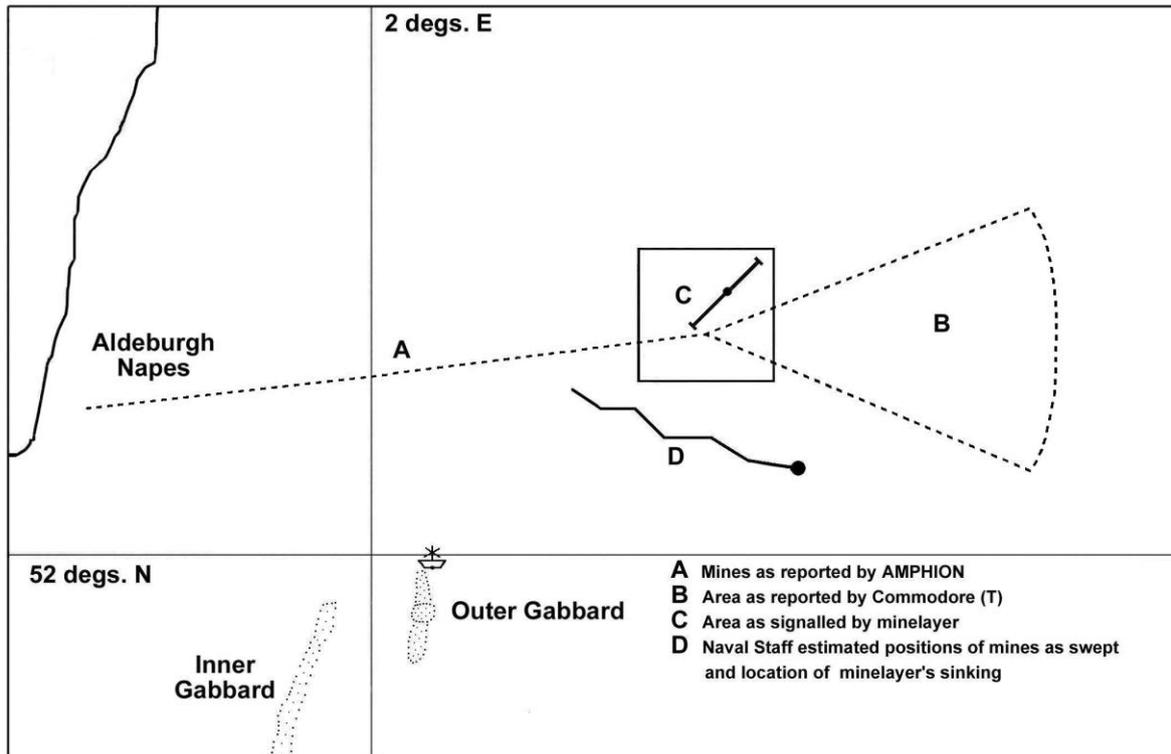


Fig. 1. Mined areas as reported and line of mines as swept by 1919. (Drawings by Len Barnett)

Unsurprisingly the German version is *very* different from the monograph. The weather was squally, which aided her transit and it was not until *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* was within the main shipping route that she was seen. Unfortunately from a German perspective, it was claimed this was by a British steamer that travelled regularly between England and Hamburg. Once out of sight the Britisher was said to have sent a wireless message and fearful that the minelayer's disguise had been seen through, an attempt was made to jam this transmission.¹⁵

At about 10.40 (G.M.T.) supposedly the rain lifted and a British destroyer flotilla was sighted on her starboard bow. Orders were said to be given to begin minelaying immediately. Two destroyers, *Lance* and *Landrail*, made for the minelayer at high speed: trying to surround her to the east and west. Increasing her own speed to the maximum of 21 knots, the Germans maintained that the minelayer reversed her course by turning to the south and then to the east. Apparently there were two reasons for this. Firstly, it was hoped that the following destroyers would fatally encounter the 'mine barrier' and secondly, to effect an escape to neutral waters. Since *Lance* and *Landrail* were riding high in the water, it was speculated that they might have been too shallow in draft to be affected by the newly laid explosive devices. All officers and men available were then engaged in launching mines. The laying equipment was in some way disguised, so that this activity remained unseen by those chasing.¹⁶

At 11.15 (G.M.T.) the destroyers' range was estimated at 4,000 metres and they were then closing rapidly, when a blank shot was fired. The minelayer hoisted her colours and a rather one-sided combat began. Between them the destroyers could bring six 4-inch guns to bear and for at least some time stayed at approximately 3,000 metres off the starboard quarter, presenting themselves as less than prime targets. As a consequence the Germans could not even effectively use their two 3.7 c.m. heavy machine-guns: with a maximum range of 2,400 metres. The German fall of shot could not be determined due to the sea state.

Unprotected in any way, men also used small arms on the after-end. Pistols were even brought into play, but the command admitted this was more out of giving men something to do than anything else. There was great emphasis of the brave, but hopeless struggle. As the heroes fell in battle, unbidden comrades took their places and were cut down in their turn.

Until the aerial was shot away, a wireless message was repeatedly transmitted to the Fleet: giving the approximate location of the minefield (as a numbered square from their *Quadratkarte*) and the fact that they were in combat. After about eight rounds the destroyers found their range and hits increasingly damaged the minelayer. At about noon (G.M.T.) firing ceased on both sides. Not only was the superstructure affected, boiler-tubes were damaged, the rudder was not answering and anyway, useable ammunition was expended. On fire, she was in danger of capsizing. Shortly after, *Amphion* and the rest of the flotilla arrived on the scene and for a short time pumped more shells into the minelayer before they too became silent. Orders to scuttle and abandon ship were then given. Because the chain of command had broken down, men made their own escapes as best they could. Shortly after 12.20 (G.M.T.) *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* sank: with one battle ensign still flying, from her foremast. Survivors were picked up and treated in a gentlemanly manner.¹⁷

So much for the German official version. While the basic chronology of the combat bears up to examination, important elements do not. Before discussing these, further events need taking into consideration.

It is clear that Captain Fox was in wireless contact with his superior, Commodore 2nd-class Reginald Yorke Tyrwhitt (at sea, with his pendant on *Amethyst* and engaged in towing an E-class submarine across the North Sea). The senior officer signalled the Admiralty, via Ipswich W/T station:-

‘Captain D 3rd Destroyer Flotilla has received following information survivors of Konigen Louise (sic) a long line of mines was dropped East from latitude 52.10N longitude 2.25E and many mines remained on board when she sank’.¹⁸

At 17.40 Commodore (T) also signalled the 1st and 3rd Flotillas. ‘Avoid going within area contained between bearings 16 miles ENE and ESE from lat. 52° 10' N, long. 2° 25' E where mines are reported to be laid’.¹⁹

The position stated in both signals could not have been all that far from where the minelayer was initially sighted and subject to the confusion of the events, the positioning and northeasterly line of retreat could be seen as roughly correct. The Commodore’s action was in making an area to the east of this position out of bounds to the local flotillas. Apparently post war staff officers could not ascertain if *Amphion* received this particular signal.²⁰ (See figure 1.)

After the sinking the flotilla continued its sweep, completing the outward leg at 21.00. Onboard *Amphion* there must have been a re-think. At 02.20 on the 6th the Admiralty was signalled, stating that the probable location of the mines as laid by the enemy was a line *from* Aldeburgh Ridge to 52° 10' N 2° 25' E.²¹ Later, Cecil Fox stated that *he* had ‘been informed by signal that mines were probably laid off Aldborough (sic) Ridge’. Continuing, he ‘was of the opinion that a line had been run from Aldborough (sic) Ridge to the position in which she was sighted...’²² Quite who informed the good captain of this and why mines to the *east* of this position were then discounted by him is not forthcoming. (See figure 1.)

Study of this report is illuminating though. Classified secret, it was an explanation made on August 13th on the subsequent loss of *Amphion*. This puts the position of the ‘suspicious vessel’ in the report made to *Laurel* by the trawler as ‘roughly 52° 12' N 2° 27' E’.

There is an important difference in this position and the one made at the time. On August 10th he and two other naval officers had interrogated *Hilfstreuminendampfer B*'s late 'chief officer'. What must have been the original form of the trawler's report was given in this document as a bearing and distance: '20 to 25 miles from the Gabbard'. If delineated as a ballpark²³ from the lightship the position as of August 13th is the mid point. However, if drawn from the sands themselves the position as signalled both to Commodore (T) during the afternoon of August 5th and to the Admiralty early the next morning results: at a range of 22 ½ miles. This points to confusion on the bridge of *Amphion*, inasmuch as sometime between the afternoon and middle watches Captain Fox must have re-evaluated the information on the location of the mines: but did not realise the *very* basic plotting error. (See figure 1.)

This had a direct consequence when planning the return sweep to Harwich. Thinking that his way was blocked to the west and knowing that submarines were on patrol on a line fifteen miles southeast of the Outer Gabbard, a course to miss the mines by seven or eight miles was planned. Unfortunately, this took the flotilla directly across the track of the minelayer the forenoon before.²⁴ At 06.30 *Amphion* struck the first mine below the bridge. With her back seemingly broken and on fire forrard, the abandonment was conducted in an orderly manner: although she was still under way for a time. (One relatively accurate post war account, by 'Taffrail' stated that this was only for a few minutes whilst the cruiser 'circled'²⁵.) Twenty minutes later as the evacuation was continuing she struck a second mine, judged by Captain Fox to have been about a mile and a half to the northwest (although he was concussed and therefore this cannot be regarded as reliable). There was a massive explosion, debris was thrown far and wide, damaging nearby rescue boats in the water and the destroyers that had been ordered to close on her. Rapidly she broke up and sank. One British officer, 150 of the lower deck and some P.O.W.s died as a result, bringing the total German dead in this operation to 77. Many more on both sides were wounded.²⁶

It was not until about 15.00 hours on the 6th that the Admiralty learned of *Amphion*'s demise, through a short signal from the Senior Naval Officer (S.N.O.) at Shotley. In early evening a follow-up message was received.²⁷

Remaining on the subject of signalling, another element *could* have caused further casualties, but did not. Commodore T's message of the afternoon before, stating that mines were to the east of 'latitude 52.10N longitude 2.25E' was not received at the Admiralty until the forenoon of the 6th. However, receipt was taken during the morning watch of Fox's 02.20 message, maintaining that the danger was to the *west* of this position. The erroneous information was certainly passed to Lloyd's of London and most probably all the national newspapers. Lloyd's and one 'national' published this information in full.²⁸ Unfortunately, later in the month two merchantmen, the *Maryland* and *Christian Broburg* were lost to these mines. Both Danish, apparently they were oblivious to this danger.²⁹

Before dealing with aspects of *Amphion*'s sinking and aftermath I return to unresolved issues in regards to the minelaying operation. This is in an effort to explain when *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* began laying, where, why and how many were actually laid.

The report made to *Laurel* of the 'suspicious vessel' gives a believable position for the minelayer and importantly, within the area signalled back to Germany as the minefield: 52° 8' N to 52° 14' N and 2° 20' E to 2° 30' E.³⁰ (See figure 1.) This does not give a time as to when this sighting was made though. It is known from *Laerte*'s ship's log that not only was she on the same patrol line as *Laurel*, but that she too encountered and examined fishing craft. Taking the course and speed as noted by *Laerte*'s navigator (N17°E and 15 knots)³¹ this would put the sighted position roughly eleven miles east by north. As British fishing craft were slow, did not carry wireless and may well not even have known about Britain's entry

into the war, this appears to indicate that *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* was at this earlier point laying mines.³²

Der Krieg zur See emphatically stresses that none of the minelayer's survivors gave information to the British. It goes as far not only to claim that threats were made against the ex-merchant first officer by the British officers interrogating him but that the German volunteered to pilot a British destroyer to the minefield, with the secret aim of taking it onto the mines.³³ Slightly at variance with this is the original British 'interrogation' report signed by Captain Cayley, S.N.O. Harwich and dated August 10th. Although the prisoner showed 'no disposition to conceal anything' it was not deemed necessary to use him 'in actually locating the mines', as the assessed positioning of the minefield was not made on the basis of 'his information'.³⁴

Incidentally, the German official history made much of the merchantman's peacetime officers and some others volunteering for naval service.³⁵ Nevertheless, the crew agreement of 1912/13 required 'voluntary' service if the vessel was taken over by the *Kaiserliche Marine* in time of war by all onboard: except boys and non-Whites.³⁶

The German officer undoubtedly told a good sea-story and the resulting report cannot be relied on, although there are some interesting insights. It seems he inferred that the Germans saw the British flotilla first and claimed that 150 mines had been sown 'in about 10 to 12 minutes' at between 18 to 20 knots, before being disturbed. The consensus is that she carried 180 mines in total.³⁷ But, taking into consideration the rate of mine-dispatch by regular and presumably well-practiced German warships in not dissimilar operations, this would have been an extraordinarily rapid rate.³⁸ This is especially less than convincing, since prior to the war the British had bought four German carbonit mines for trial purposes. They were not particularly easy to lay, being over six feet high on their rail they were described as 'unhandy' in this limited British experience.³⁹ (Of course, those sown on this operation might not have been 'carbonits', but the basic arguments remain.) An alternative number was given in a short report wired to London from Queensferry, stating that prisoners reckoned that only 26 mines were laid. This information was relayed with a caveat doubting its accuracy.⁴⁰

There is, however, a hint as to the number of mines that *could* have been laid easily. The official German version maintains that during the transit 40 'defence' mines had been made ready.⁴¹ In all likelihood, only these would have been on rails, the rest requiring manhandling and arming. Comments on the subsequent sweeping of this field tend to lend weight to a relatively small number of devices sown.⁴²

If the official German history is to be believed then the minelaying only began *after* the entire 3rd Flotilla was spotted, at approximately 10.40 on a southerly course, four or five points off the minelayer's starboard bow and infers that *Lance* and *Landrail* came from this direction. Other records show that this simply could not have been the case though.

Plans for this operation had been required of Commodore Tyrwhitt, by Admiral Sir George Astley Callaghan, then C-in-C Home Fleets as of late July.⁴³ Two flotillas (1st and 3rd) were to be used in this continuous patrolling, allowing for about one day in four in harbour for all vessels. Within the confines of the orders, a wide corridor across the North Sea up the Dutch coast and extending near to the German coast was to be swept. So as to gain the required spacing, divisions or sub-divisions were to fan out from the Outer Gabbard light-vessel on bearings roughly from north-north-east to east. In the first version of 30th July, ten patrol-lines (numbered 1-10) were proposed. By August 3rd these had been increased to twenty lines, since the Commodore was ordered to keep lines three miles apart. The next day's version scrapped line one beginning on an easterly course from the Outer Gabbard, as it was judged too close to the Dutch coast.⁴⁴ (See figure 2.)

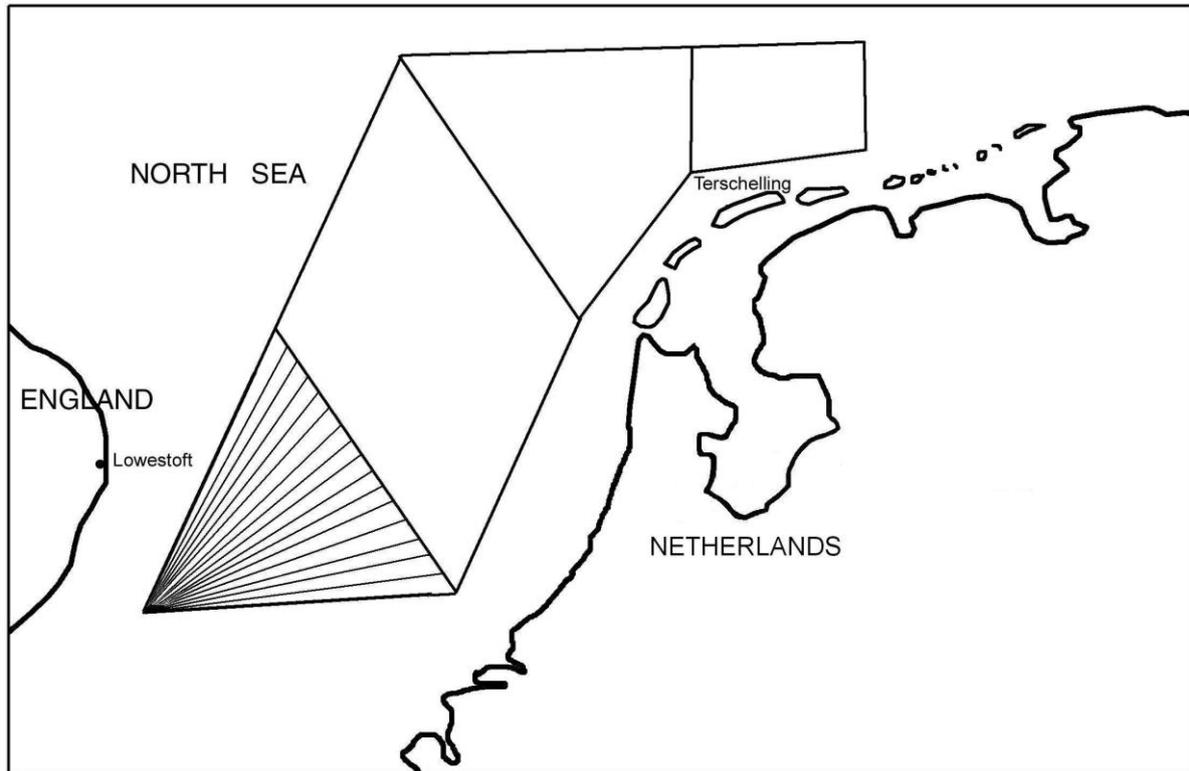


Fig. 2. Area of sweep as per Commodore (T)'s orders, 4th August 1914.

Since both units were available for the first sweep, the 1st Flotilla was supposed to deal with lines two to six; the 3rd Flotilla lines seven to ten.⁴⁵ However, even although a number of ships' logs are missing and the standard of record-keeping by some navigators left much to be desired, it is apparent that these orders were not carried out in this manner. Therefore, the War Orders as issued on August 4th must have been substantially revised.

The 3rd Flotilla approached the Outer Gabbard from the west. With the lightship on their starboard beams, at about a mile and half's distance, they fanned out on various bearings. From those that can be ascertained, overwhelmingly, these were between approximately E.N.E. and east, whilst some divisions, which included *Laertes* and *Laurel*, were on N17°E. *Amphion's* movements cannot be ascertained. It is not unlikely that the remaining destroyers were on courses in the arc between.

Lance had altered to N82°E. At 10.30 a 'suspicious ship' on a southeasterly course was seen, having read *Laurel's* signal fifteen minutes before and therefore primed. (From the operation order although not explicit there is an inference that 'enemy reports' were to be passed by wireless, in order that all individual commanders would be able to keep abreast of the tactical situation.) Immediately on this sighting *Lance* took off at full speed to intercept the suspect, along with *Landrail*.⁴⁶ (It is definitely known that *Louis* and the 1st Flotilla's *Jackal* close by also saw the minelayer at this time but they continued their planned sweeps.⁴⁷) Whether *Lance's* commanding officer, Commander Wion de Malpas Egerton, acted on his own initiative or was ordered by his flotilla captain is not apparent. But, *Lance* and *Landrail* were *not* ahead of the flotilla as maintained in the staff monograph and points to tactical confusion. Anyway, to the Germans these two destroyers would have appeared out of the rain *from* the southwest. (See figure 3.)

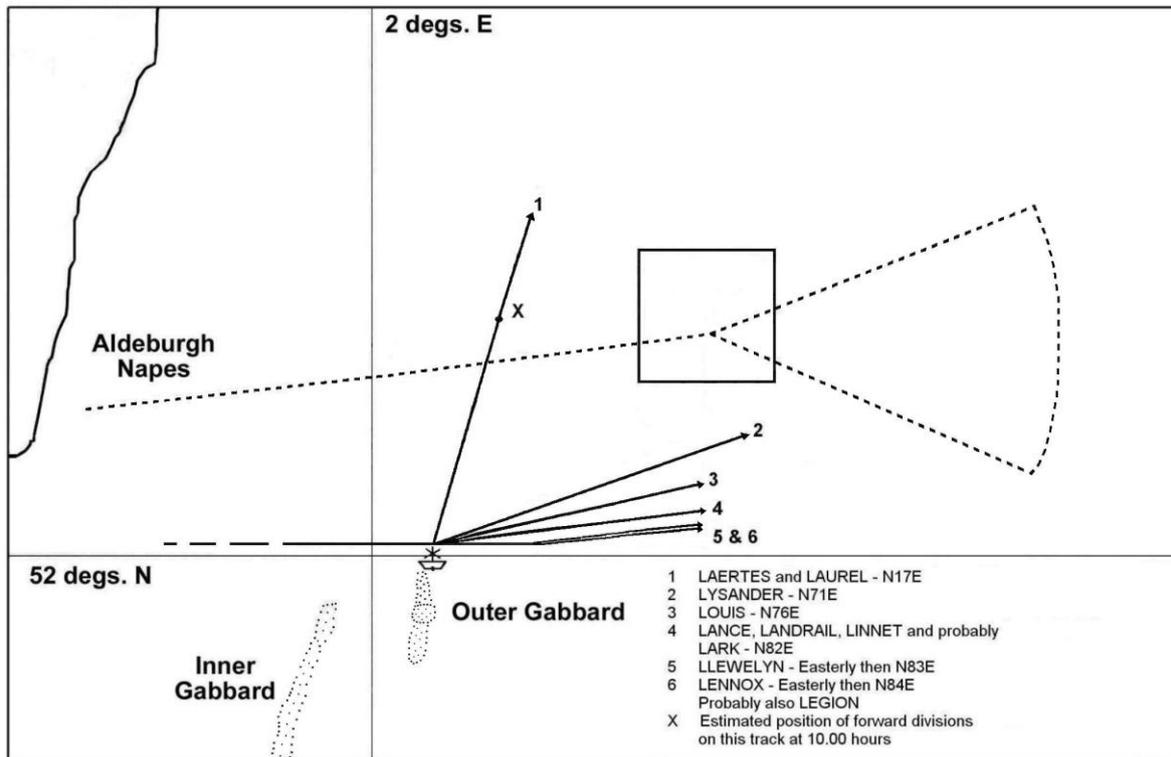


Fig. 3. Known tracks of the 3rd Flotilla units and advance until 10.30. Speeds are generally 12 knots but *Lysander's* was 15 knots.

Incidentally, elements of the 1st Flotilla were on similar sweeps fanning out from slightly east of the Outer Gabbard. This included a number on 'line one', the easterly course that had supposedly been abandoned in the operation order.⁴⁸ Complicating matters even further, at least one other destroyer of the 3rd Flotilla, *Lawford*, appears to have been involved in another activity: to the southeast of the patrol area.⁴⁹

The German version also presents problems of time and distance. When all known positions are plotted, even using her maximum speed of 21 knots, a far longer distance was travelled by the minelayer than times stated allow. This must mean that any sighting of the 3rd Flotilla, if indeed one took place, would have been *significantly earlier than admitted*. In Captain Cayley's interrogation report (of August 10th) 11 a.m. was mentioned as the time of the 'sighting'. If one presumes that the British officers did not convert this into G.M.T. then 10.00 for beginning the minelayer's east-south-easterly course works. Charting known British courses, it would seem that some divisions *may* have been directly west of *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* at 10.00. If so, the distance would not have been more than about six miles. (See figure 4.) The wind as logged during this forenoon by the destroyers was varied but mostly between southeast and southwest: force one or two. So, in all likelihood neither side would have *seen* the other at this earlier time.

The position of *Amphion's* wreck, 52° 13' 03" N 2° 36' 03" E, is also rather inconvenient to the German argument. The remains of one of the two Danish merchantmen have also been tentatively identified as the *Maryland* and lie at 52° 7' 27" N 2° 23' 34" E.⁵⁰ This neutral freighter falls nearly within the block as claimed by the Germans as this minefield. But *Amphion's* position cannot be explained as part of the 'east-south-easterly' line. To reach the position of *Amphion's* mining *and* that of her own destruction, either more

speed or time to cover the relevant distance, would have been required. Anyway, sightings put the minelayer altering from southeast, through east and latterly northerly.⁵¹ To include the position of *Amphion*'s sinking in her final movements, after sighted on her approximate course of E.S.E. the minelayer would have had to have sharply altered to north and then to the east: which makes little sense. (See figure 4.)

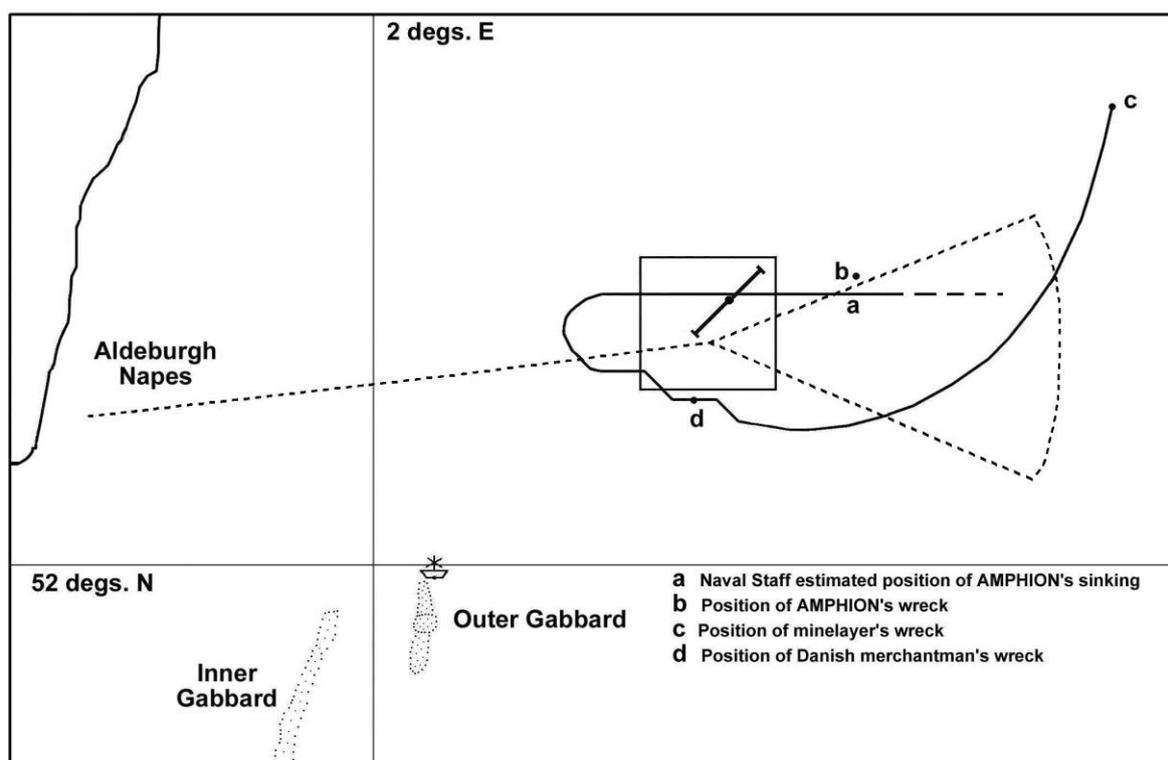


Fig. 4. Estimated track of *Hilfsstreuminendampfer B*.

There are also other elements that are not entirely believable. Whether a face-saving device or not, there is something of a paranoid quality in the German writing. Even before *Hilfsstreuminendampfer B* left her home waters it was claimed that her cover might have been blown to the British by the merchantmen detained at Brokdorf, but released. This in itself I find highly unconvincing since most British merchantmen seized were not released and I am unaware of any on the Elbe *after* August 3rd: as they were being turned back at Cuxhaven.⁵² Korvettenkapitän Biermann is also known to have been less than confident in regards to the disguise. And, not only for the above reason, the 'wireless jamming' incident also begs question. Even although a significant percentage of German merchantmen carried wireless, British shipowners had a very different opinion of this new technology, or rather its cost implications. Comparatively few British deep-ocean vessels were fitted and I know of *no* short-sea or coastal merchantmen then so equipped. Secondly, transmissions from German Telefunken wireless-sets had a distinctively different tone from those of the Marconi sets that the British used and although direction-finding at sea was not then entirely practical, the relative signal strength would have alerted one side of the other as an enemy unit close by.⁵³ Without the signal logs it is not possible to absolutely prove that wireless traffic had been emanating from the 3rd Flotilla. It is known that 'short distance' wireless telegraphy was used at this time within the Grand Fleet, for the passing of *all tactical signals* also made visually.⁵⁴ I have not been able to determine whether this practice was also employed on flotilla-craft. But, poor visibility would have rendered visual signalling less practical and wireless

telegraphy may well have been seen as the best way of keeping control: certainly from 09.00 when the Gabbard light-vessel was passed by the first divisions. So, did the 'jamming incident' really happen? Or, did British transmissions alert Biermann to close proximity of British warships?

Similarly, the German speculation that the pursuing destroyers probably evaded their 'defence' mines due to their shallow draft cannot necessarily be regarded as realistic. Theoretically British L-class destroyers drew approximately 12 feet 6 ½ inches, the minelayer around only two inches more.⁵⁵ I have little doubt that Biermann and indeed Groos, the German official naval historian would have been aware of this in general terms, even if the readership of *Der Krieg zur See* was not.

Tactically, this mission was ill conceived. At first sight it cannot be regarded in terms of 'equalisation', although apparently it was. Anticipating the British imposing close blockade, the *Admiralstab* expected heavy units of the Grand Fleet to operate from the Thames.⁵⁶ However, mining the King's Channel cannot be seen as being decisive in any way. Although causing difficulties, other channels would have been utilized as northern entry and exit points of the Thames. It is known that at least one German naval staff officer acknowledged these particular limitations.⁵⁷

Time was obviously of the essence, since it would have been perfectly within the capabilities of German shipyards to disguise vessels suitably (including interned British steamers). But, *Der Krieg zur See* states openly that success depended on surprise,⁵⁸ so it can be assumed that some kind of 'action' was desired by the *Kaiserliche Marine*. One should note that the minelayer's conversion and operational plans were drawn up *before* the British regarded their own entry into the war as inevitable, plus German official claims of the mining as an 'honourable' task.⁵⁹ Even with an established naval policy of the 'strategic defensive',⁶⁰ this along with other minor operations (such as the *guerre de course* abroad) can be seen as maintaining the 'offensive' (with no risk to the *Hochseeflotte*) while the Imperial Armies were storming across Western Europe.

Not being privy to what was originally discussed by von Ingenohl and Biermann, it is simply not possible to confirm whether 'equalisation' was the only criteria. Biermann's orders according to the official version were extremely vague:-

'Proceed at utmost speed in the direction of the Thames. Lay your mines as near as possible to the English coast. Do not lay mines off neutral coasts, or further north than 53°.⁶¹

The seaway between latitudes 52° and 53° north cannot be legitimately regarded as within the Thames Estuary. And, the time of laying is also interesting. High tide off Aldeburgh Napes had been at 10.34 on August 5th and this could be regarded as beneficial to laying.⁶² Allowing for transit time and the slight difference in latitude, mining the King's Channel would have been on a falling tide, although this need not have been risky until later in the afternoon.

Arguably mining further out to sea could prove easier along with benefits of perhaps temporarily disrupting north-south communications militarily, whilst not putting the minelayer to considerable risk in the Harwich area. But, without a major operation elsewhere, a short-term cutting of a line of communication would have made such an act pointless. General fear produced by such mining in British and neutral mercantile interests may well have been regarded as of far greater importance though and I believe this could have had a direct bearing on the matter.

With all this in mind and also bringing up the point of the trawler's sighting sometime during the forenoon watch, I would suggest that *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* while on a

westerly course began laying a string of mines further to the east than was publicly admitted. Whether this was by original design or immediacy, I cannot tell. Still hidden by rain, perhaps the signal-strength of the British warships' wireless transmissions was becoming so strong that at 10.00 the minelayer turned southeasterly in an effort to continue laying her mines and also retreat. Accurate knowledge of her speed would allow for more accurate estimations, but even without this it is safe to conclude that she was at full-speed on this southeasterly track. The slightly 'staggered' course may be regarded as 'defensive' if the minelayer's command reckoned that British units were to the west. With the rain clearing broadly from the south at 10.30 it seems the British destroyers actually saw the German first. Shortly after *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* fled from the threat in the only directions open to her: *ceasing* minelaying at around 10.40. Since some other destroyers were apparently nearer, it would seem that *Amphion* could still not see the action at 11.30 when *Lark* and *Linnet* were ordered to aid *Lance* and *Landrail*. Others also increasingly joined the chase.⁶³ These included some from the 1st Flotilla, most of which were obviously further to the south and were too late.⁶⁴ Those that *did* manage to close on the German opened fire from around midday. (See figure 4.)

The above scenario raises one pertinent question. If two lines of mines were laid, then why did the British minesweeping forces only find some from the second? While it is well known that large numbers of mines, both British and German, broke free in bad weather, this cannot alone answer this. However, there was a difference in the tidal streams from 'eighteen miles north-eastward of the Outer Gabbard light-vessel'.⁶⁵ If I am correct the first line of miles would have been to the north of this, while wreck of the Danish merchantman shows the second 'staggered' line to be slightly south of it.

Anyway, with the failure of this operation German conclusions were less than optimistic. British destroyer screens were seen as impenetrable, certainly in daylight and in the short moonlit nights. According to one source, minelayer and destroyer attacks on transports in the English Channel were also regarded as unrealistic.⁶⁶ (Since there never was a prolonged and systematic effort to specifically disrupt the British Expeditionary Force's sea communications in the English Channel, I am far from convinced that this was seen as a serious option within the *Admiralstab*.) Instead, near the end of August on a dark night (there being a new moon) specialist fast-minelayers mounted two more operations. Again the targets can only be regarded as partly military in nature, especially that of the Humber.⁶⁷ The implication need hardly be made however. The German Government had already made its intention graphically public on August 7th when it maintained that the '*routes to British ports would be closed by German mines*'.⁶⁸

After *Amphion* sank, initially picked up by *Lawford*, the injured Captain Fox was transferred to *Llewelyn* before being landed. For those not hospitalised, or buried, the cruiser's late crew went to Devonport, whilst Fox remained at Shotley.⁶⁹ As already noted, investigations had been made culminating in the report of August 13th. Senior officers at the Admiralty saw this three to four days later, when the question of court martial under Article 666 of King's Regulations was mentioned. This subject was to be brought up separately at the highest level and no further comments are attached to this documentation.⁷⁰

On August 29th there was a Court of Enquiry held at H.M. Navigation School, Portsmouth. The emphasis of the questioning was technical, 'particularly as regards the effect (if any) of the detonation of the mine on oil fuel carried in double bottoms...'. If the recorded minutes are accurate, Cecil Fox was given an easy time. A separate but linked investigation at *Vernon*, confirmed that oil fuel did not contribute to *Amphion*'s loss.⁷¹

Four days before the Court of Enquiry Captain Fox had *already* commissioned *Faulkner*, a newly-completed Flotilla Leader (built for Chile) along with some of *Amphion*'s officers.⁷² On October 17th, he commanded in an action off Terschelling, once again as Captain of the 3rd Flotilla: onboard the light-cruiser *Undaunted*. A confused affair, this foiled another mining raid on the Thames.⁷³ Even so, he was he soon brought ashore and remained there. He retired as a Rear-Admiral in 1922, never having had another sea command.⁷⁴

Of course there had been no court martial after *Amphion*'s sinking. This is not to say that Captain Fox's actions had not come under scrutiny though. His report of August 13th was less than excellent. It is interesting to note tidal factors were not mentioned in this document. I have found no evidence in logs of destroyers skirting the area immediately previously occupied by the minelayer. Therefore, it *may* well be that at least some of these crossed the 'mine barrier' and it was only the high state of the tide that saved them. Alternatively, the action of *Lance* and *Landrail* staying off the minelayer's quarter can be seen as prudent: even *if* mining had ceased by this time. The state of the tide was also important during the 3rd Flotilla's return sweep during the morning watch of August 6th. At 06.30 *Amphion* struck the first mine - low tide at Aldeburgh Napes had been just over two hours before at 04.24. The waters that had been comparatively safe the afternoon before had become positively lethal.

From events in the following months it is apparent that there was a lamentable lack of understanding of the realities of mines within the Royal Navy: not only by flotilla craft, but also by minesweeping forces.⁷⁵ But, there had been enough relevant information available to naval officers through reports made on the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 to regard mines and minelayers as inherently dangerous.⁷⁶ And, Cecil Fox had been in ideal positions to develop suitable tactics in dealing with mining incursions. A very experienced 'destroyer man', as was frequently mentioned in excerpts of confidential reports kept in the First Lord's Private Office, he had been highly regarded in destroyer work prior to the war.⁷⁷ Apart from this, he had attended an early 'travelling' War Course, at Devonport in 1906 where he gained a first-class certificate; studied at the Military Staff College at Camberley in 1911; and also headed the minor War College, devoted to war gaming, at Chatham in 1912-13.⁷⁸ In light of this, his early re-appointment ashore in October 1914 (less than ten days after the action off the Dutch coast) is intriguing. There was no apparent criticism within the papers on this second action.⁷⁹ However, there were comparatively few confidential reports from then on either and none that were glowing. Far from this, Admiral the Honourable Sir Alexander Edward Bethell was less than complimentary on Cecil Fox's 'power of organisation and initiative' as a staff officer in 1918.⁸⁰

The events off Aldeburgh on these first two days of hostilities caused significant reassessments in British tactics in regards to mines and flotilla work. With no *real* idea of the full extent of German mining an area was designated as dangerous. Apart from a narrow strip along the coast, this stretched between 52° and 52° 30' North and out into the North Sea to 3° East. Deep-draught warships were banned, until the area was swept. British merchantmen were intercepted at sea; those in the English Channel were 'warned not to enter the North Sea, but to call for orders at south coast ports'. Apparently this had the effect of 'deflecting shipping into a channel to shoreward of the danger'.⁸¹ No details of the danger area were published.

With two other potential mining incidents to investigate at Flamborough Head and Usan (near Montrose) the very limited peacetime organisation for dealing with such events away from naval ports failed. This led directly to major expansion of the Royal Naval Reserve's Trawler Section, around the gunboat *Halycon*, at Lowestoft.⁸² By the end of August the coastal channel had been swept and buoyed, by trawlers.⁸³ Drifters had also been acquired for minesweeping, using their normal nets. These were active within the danger

area, but were withdrawn in order to deal with the new German laid field off the Humber late in August.⁸⁴ At some unknown date the decision was taken to leave the Southwold minefield (as those laid on August 5th came to be known) intact as a 'mine defence'.

The role of flotilla-craft was also significantly altered and it is obvious that within the Admiralty it was acknowledged that the interception of *Hilfstreuminendampfer B* had largely been by chance. As early as August 6th the Admiral of Patrols, Commodore 1st-class George Alexander Ballard, was ordered 'instead of keeping his vessels concentrated in divisions to repel raids, he was to patrol the coast day and night to prevent a repetition of the recent enemy operation'. This system proved to be very wearing on flotilla-craft and crews.⁸⁵ On the last day of the month another scheme of patrolling was introduced. Destroyers were then allocated ten-mile stretches of coast. As of September 7th navigational aids began to be removed and more organizational changes ensued to deal with further incursions.⁸⁶

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Others who have confirmed details I thank, but the following have aided *materially* in the writing of this paper. Martin Käser; Lieut-Cdr. Nelson McEachan R.N. and Adrian Webb, U.K. Hydrographic Office; Brian Thynne, National Maritime Museum; and Jennifer Wraight, Admiralty Library.

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- ¹ Training & Naval Staff Duties: *Naval Staff Monograph: Home Waters from the Outbreak of War to 27th August 1914* volume X p.48; and O. Groos: *Der Krieg zur See 1914-1918: Der Krieg in der Nordsee* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1920) band I ss.64-65
- ² Please note that there were two vessels named the *Königin Luise*. This vessel newly built in 1913 which had a registered tonnage of 2,163 should not be confused with the fast mail steamer, owned by *Norddeutscher-Lloyd*. A far larger vessel at 10,785 tons, she survived the war.
- ³ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.65 & s.67.
N.B. The steamers mentioned were described as ‘feindlichen’ - hostile/enemy
- ⁴ *NSM* volume X p.49; and Groos: *Der Krieg* s.65
- ⁵ Luigi Albertini: *The Origins of the War of 1914* (London: OUP, 1957 - English translation by Isabella M. Massey) volume III pp.495-497 & p.499; Lloyd George: *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933) p.75; and *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsbeginn 1914. - Vollständige Sammlung der von Karl Kautsky zusammengestellten amtlichen Aktenstücke mit einigen Ergänzungen. Neue durchgesehene und vermehrte Ausgabe* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft fuer Politik und Geschichte MBH, 1927) band IV s.70 - telegram number 848
- ⁶ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.66 & s.67; and Naval Historical Branch: Konteradmiral a. D. Stoelzel (Compiler): *Ehrenrangliste der Kaiserlich Deutschen Marine 1914-18* (Berlin: Thormann & Goetsch, 1930) s.158
- ⁷ Groos: *Der Krieg* ss.67-68
- ⁸ Duncan Haws: *Merchant Fleets: Britain's Railway Steamers: Eastern & North Western Companies + Zeeland and Stena* (TCL Publications, 1993) p.37 & pp.49-52; Erich Gröner: *German Warships 1815-1945* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1991 - English language version) volume II p.171; and The National Archives: Public Record Office: Admiralty 137/56 p.557
- ⁹ *NSM* volume X pp.49-50
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.50
- ¹¹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 p.44; and *NSM* volume X p.50
- ¹² *NSM* volume X pp.50-51
- ¹³ TNA: PRO: ADM 186/604 - Training and Naval Staff Duties: *History of British Minesweeping in the War* (1920) p.9
- ¹⁴ Position supplied by the Wreck Officer, UK Hydrographic Office, Taunton
- ¹⁵ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.68
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* ss.68-69
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* ss.68-70 and *Karte 5 'Quadratkarte'* attached
- ¹⁸ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/52 p.413
- ¹⁹ *NSM* volume X p.51 footnote 3
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.* p.51
- ²² TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 pp.44-45
- ²³ I understand that the concept of ‘ballparks’ was not developed until after the First World War: the term Apparently being named after a Lieutenant U.S.N.
- ²⁴ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 p.45
- ²⁵ Captain Taprell Dorling D.S.O., R.N.: *Endless Story: Being an Account of the Work of the Destroyers, Flotilla-Leaders, Torpedo-Boats and Patrol Boats in the Great War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931) p.23
- ²⁶ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 pp.44-47; ADM 137/3107; and Gröner: *German Warships* volume II p.171
- ²⁷ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/52 p.499 and p.530
- ²⁸ ‘Navigation’ in *Lloyd's List* 7th August 1914 p.5; and again in ‘Navigation’ in *Lloyd's Weekly Index* 13th August 1914 p.5; and ‘The Mine Peril at Sea’ in the *Daily Sketch* 7th August 1914 p.3
- ²⁹ ‘War’ in *Lloyd's Weekly Index* 27th August 1914 p.5; ‘Danish Steamers Sunk’ in the *Shipping Gazette Weekly Summary* 28th August 1914 p.546; and ‘Sunk by Mines’ in the same latter publication p.552.
- ³⁰ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.69 footnote 1 & *Karte 5*; and *NSM* volume X p.51
- ³¹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 p.44; and ADM 53/45934
- ³² Not until the evening of 4th August 1914 did the Naval War Staff realize that fishing vessels were un-contactable at sea. TNA: PRO: ADM 137/51 p.832, p.864, p.874, p.883 & pp.889-890; and ADM 137/52 pp.20-21 & p.35
- ³³ Groos: *Der Krieg* ss.70-71
- ³⁴ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/53 pp.907-908
- ³⁵ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.70
- ³⁶ Reinhold Thiel: *Norddeutscher Lloyd Hamburg-Bremer-Afrika-Linie* (Bremen: Verlag H.M. Haushild

-
- GmbH, 2000) s.24
- ³⁷ Gröner: *German Warships* vol. II p.171
- ³⁸ Not incomparable were those later in August 1914 by the fast minelayers *Stuttgart* and *Albatross*. See *NSM* volume X pp.102-103
- ³⁹ Admiralty Library: *Annual Report of the Torpedo School 1913* (CB.1043) Section VII p.73
- ⁴⁰ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/55 pp.885-886
- ⁴¹ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.68
- ⁴² TNA: PRO: ADM 186/604; and *NSM* volume X p.51
N.B. I am indebted to the late David K. Brown for providing further technical information on this subject. See 'Correspondence' in *The Mariner's Mirror* (November 2003) volume 89 number 4 p.477
- ⁴³ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1971 pp.348-351
- ⁴⁴ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/999 pp.21-27; and ADM 137/1034 chart 36
- ⁴⁵ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/999 p.23
- ⁴⁶ *NSM* volume X p.50 footnote 2; TNA: PRO: ADM 137/999 p.23; ADM 137/1002 p.31; and ADM 53/46046
- ⁴⁷ TNA: PRO: ADM 53/47322 and ADM 53/45191
- ⁴⁸ TNA: PRO: ADM 53/44562; ADM 53/46103; and ADM 53/63127
- ⁴⁹ TNA: PRO: ADM 53/46331
N.B. For the sake of brevity I have not included the above movements on figure 3.
- ⁵⁰ Positions supplied by the Wreck Officer, UK Hydrographic Office
- ⁵¹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 p.31 & p.44
- ⁵² TNA: PRO: FO 372/534 – 72505; and Collected Diplomatic Documents relating to the outbreak of the European War; 1914-16 Cmd. 7860, 108
- ⁵³ Keith Yates: *Graf Spee's Raiders: Challenge to the Royal Navy, 1914-1915* (London: Leo Cooper, 1995) p.11; Captain Barrie Kent R.N.: *Signal! - A History of Signalling in the Royal Navy* (Clanfield: Hyden House, 1993) p.39; and 'A wireless dodge' an item in 'Karlsruhe's Raids' in the *Shipping Gazette Weekly Summary* 6th November 1914 p.709
- ⁵⁴ Kent: *Signal!* p.43
- ⁵⁵ Edgar J. March: *British Destroyers: A History of Development 1892-1953* (London: Seeley Service, 1966) p.133; and Gröner: *German Warships* volume II p.170
- ⁵⁶ *NSM* volume X pp.20-23
- ⁵⁷ Wolfgang Wegener: *The Naval Strategy of the War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989) p.177
- ⁵⁸ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.67
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.* s.65
- ⁶⁰ For longer-term appraisals of German naval strategic and tactical thinking Paul M. Kennedy (Editor): *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979) pp.155-198
- ⁶¹ Groos: *Der Krieg* s.65. English translation taken from *NSM* volume X p.49
- ⁶² Tidal information supplied by the UK Hydrographic Office
- ⁶³ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 p.44; ADM 53/45934; ADM 53/46331; ADM 53/46441; ADM 53/46468; ADM 53/46808; ADM 53/46941; ADM 53/47322; ADM 53/47568 ;and ADM 53/57660
- ⁶⁴ TNA: PRO: ADM 53/34957; ADM 53/44562; ADM 53/45191; ADM 53/46103; ADM 53/46910; and ADM 53/63127
- ⁶⁵ NMM: Admiralty Hydrographic Department: *North Sea Pilot, Part III - Eighth Edition 1914* (London: 1914) pp.263-264
- ⁶⁶ NMM: RIC 2/1 'German Notes on Transport of B.E.F.' p.3
- ⁶⁷ *NSM* volume X pp.100-103
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.52
- ⁶⁹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 pp.47-48
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.48
- ⁷¹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/3107
- ⁷² *Navy List* 4th Quarter 1914
- ⁷³ Training and Staff Duties: *Naval Staff Monographs: Home Waters September - October 1914* (1924) volume XI pp.118-119
- ⁷⁴ Relevant editions of the *Navy List* 1914 until 1922
- ⁷⁵ Examples IWM: Memoirs of Cdr. B.W.L. Owen R.N, entry for 27th August 1914.; TNA: PRO: ADM 137/1002 pp.360-366; ADM 137/3108 pp.369-410; and ADM 186/604 p.14
- ⁷⁶ TNA: PRO: ADM 231/50 - Naval Intelligence Department: *The Russo-Japanese War - Reports from Naval Attaches &c.* (1907)
- ⁷⁷ TNA: PRO: ADM 196/89 p.123
- ⁷⁸ Relevant editions of the *Navy List* 1906 & 1911-13; TNA: PRO: ADM 196/89 p.123; and Julian S. Corbett:

Some Principles of Maritime Strategy (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988) p.xvii

⁷⁹ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/999 pp.289-343

⁸⁰ TNA: PRO: ADM 196/89 p.123

⁸¹ *NSM* volume X p.53

⁸² TNA: PRO: ADM 186/604 p.7; ADM 1/8376/111 M 12321 2nd July 1914; and *NSM* volume X p.53

⁸³ TNA: PRO: ADM 186/604 p.9

⁸⁴ TNA: PRO: ADM 137/971 p.443

⁸⁵ *NSM* volume X pp.53-54

⁸⁶ *NSM* volume XI pp.23-28