

The Naval Campaign

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“WE have upon the seas the strongest and most magnificent fleet which has ever been seen. We rely on it with the most absolute confidence, not only to guard our shores against the possibility of invasion, but to seal up the gigantic battle-ships of the enemy in the inglorious seclusion of their own ports. . . . It has hunted the German mercantile marine from the high seas, and it has kept open our sources of food supply.”—Mr. Asquith at the Guildhall.

If we would understand clearly the navy which has achieved this splendid victory we must go back to the “Naval Renaissance” about the year 1900, when Britain began to readjust her world naval policy, to carry into effect vast correlated schemes for the redistribution of the fleets at sea and the more rapid mobilisation of the ships in reserve, to reorganise the Admiralty and to train officers and men for the Naval Reserve. In the preamble to the German Navy Act of 1900 we find the following:

“It is not absolutely necessary that the German Battle Fleet should be as strong as that of the greatest naval power, for a great naval power will not, as a rule, be able to concentrate all its striking force against us. But even if it should succeed in meeting us with considerable superiority of strength, the defeat of a strong German fleet would so substantially weaken the enemy that, in spite of the victory, he might have obtained, his own position in the world would no longer be secured by an adequate fleet.”

The man who realised the sinister significance of this was Lord Selborne, then First Lord of the Admiralty, and happily for Britain he was able to lay his hand on the man to carry out the most gigantic task to which any governmental department had ever addressed itself. He succeeded in having Sir John Fisher, now Lord Fisher, made First Sea Lord. Instantly with the support of Lord Selborne and Mr. Balfour, then Prime Minister, the Naval Board began its work. Overseas squadrons which had no strategic purpose were disestablished, unimportant dockyards were dismantled, ships too weak to fight and too slow to run were recalled, a whole fleet of old iron-clads were scrapped, officers and men were transferred from the weak and obsolete ships or wrenched from comfortable employment ashore and made the nucleus of the crews guarding our new naval frontier. Furthermore, Lord Fisher, with