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IN THIS ISSUE

FIRST REPORT - SCOPING THE SOLUTION
SPACE FOR THE GENREAL PURPOSE FRIGATE

TRIDENT - IS IT KEEPING US SAFE?

HMS HOWE 1942-1958: PART ONE

AUTOMATIC CANNON INTO THE 21st
CENTURY

OPERATION SNOWDROP

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N.J. FJORD

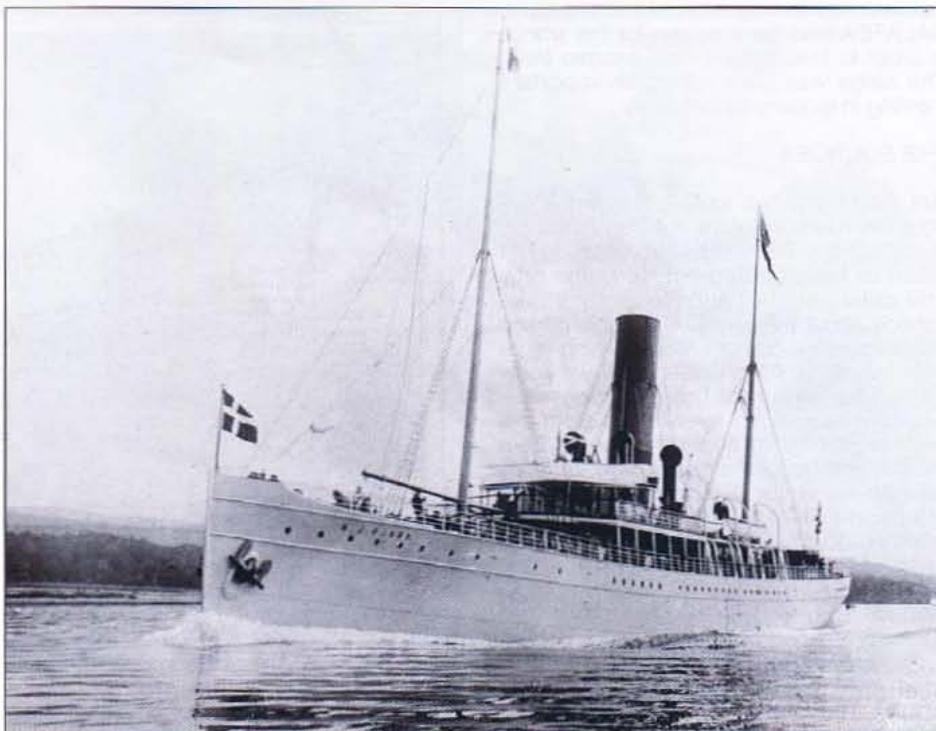
HOW A SMALL DANISH STEAMSHIP INFLUENCED WORLD HISTORY

SØREN NØRBY

Among the world's many significant naval battles the Battle of Jutland is central, as the best and perhaps most important naval battle of modern times. On 31 May 1916 mighty fleets met in the North Sea off Denmark and fought a huge sea battle. 8,500 British and Germans lost their lives in the battle. It ended with a British victory which maintained the status quo in the North Sea, but it had the German High Seas Fleet engaged to defeat the British Grand Fleet. First World War could have had a very different outcome.

What many people do not know is that the battle might not have happened if not for a small Danish steamer named N.J. FJORD, which on 31 May 1916 was in the North Sea, on its way from England to Denmark with a cargo of coal.

At 1400 this day the lookout on board the N.J. FJORD saw on the horizon two ships, which as they came closer, turned out to be two large German torpedo boats. They signalled that N.J. FJORD should stop for inspection of ship and cargo. Since N.J. FJORD was a steamer, it had to blow steam from the boilers before the ship could stop. This meant that the smoke from the ship's funnel was replaced by a tall white column of steam and it was this which gave N.J. FJORD its small but important part in the Battle of Jutland.



N.J. FJORD of Esbjerg, which was to play a small but pivotal role in one of history's greatest naval battles. The ship was named after Niels Johannes Fjord (1825-1891), one of the pioneers of the Danish dairy industry. It was built in 1896 at Löbnitz & Co. in Renfrew, Scotland, and was 79.5 metres long, 10.4 metres wide and had a displacement of 1,425 gross tons. The 2,000 horsepower engine gave it a top speed of 15 knots.

TITLE OF JUTLAND

During the First World War, the German High Seas Fleet was outnumbered by the Royal Navy, and it therefore spent most of the war "incarcerated" as a fleet in being in a base at Wilhelmshaven. The superior British fleet could from certain bases, in particular Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, prevent the German ships from moving into the Atlantic, where they could threaten the important supply routes to the UK. The German strategic solution to this problem was to try to lure the Royal Navy

into battle in situations where it would be possible for the Germans to create the numerical superiority that could enable a victory. That was the idea behind the plan that formed the basis of the German fleet sailing from Wilhelmshaven on the night of 30/31 May 1916. The German force consisted of 16 battleships, 6 pre-dreadnoughts, five battlecruisers, 11 light cruisers and 61 destroyers and large torpedo boats. The Germans hoped to lure a minor - and manageable - part of the

Royal Navy into an ambush, where the Germans could defeat them. Thanks to the decoding of the German radio code, the Royal Navy knew that the Germans were coming and when the German ships left Wilhelmshaven, a British armada consisting of 28 battleships, nine battle cruisers, eight heavy and 26 light cruisers and 78 destroyers was already putting to sea.

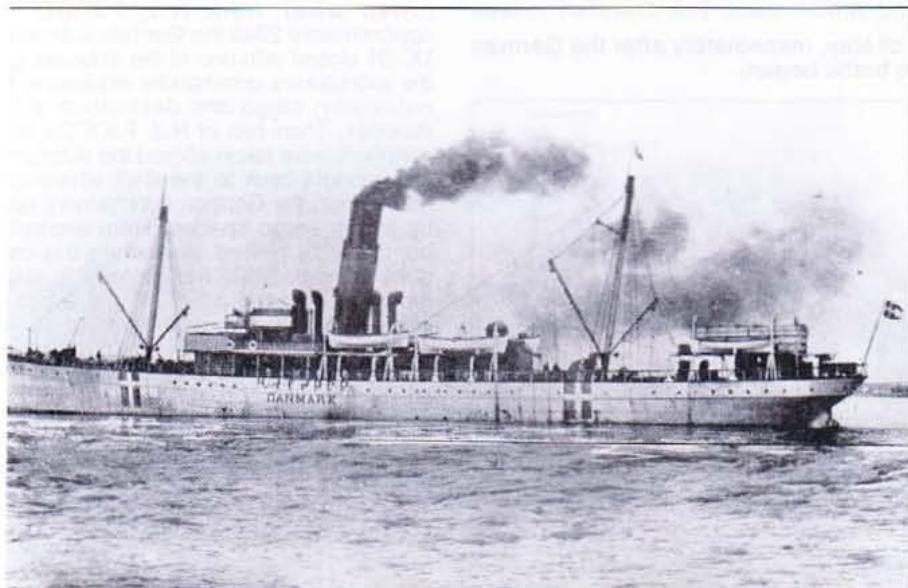
The German ships sailed north, with its battlecruisers under the command of Admiral Hipper in front followed by the main force of its battleships, led by Admiral Scheer, a few miles behind. On each side of the force the light cruisers, destroyers and torpedo boats kept an eye out for enemy ships.

The British fleet, under Admiral Jellicoe, knew that the German fleet was at sea, but the sea is huge and despite the large number of enemy ships, it was hard to find the enemy. Like the Germans, the British fleet was divided into two squadrons, with the fast battlecruisers and battleships ahead, under Admiral Betty, followed by the main force led by Admiral Jellicoe.

At around 1400 the German fleets passed the British, which was heading to the southeast. There were just 22 nautical miles between the two forces, but it was enough that they could have passed without observing each other. If it had not been for the Danish steamship.

At 1400 hours the smoke from N.J. FJORD had been observed from the German light cruiser ELBING, stationed on the port flank of the German battlecruiser squadron. It dispatched the torpedo boats

N.J. FJORD with Danish flags painted on the sides, signalling its neutrality.



B109 and B110 to find out from where the smoke originated.

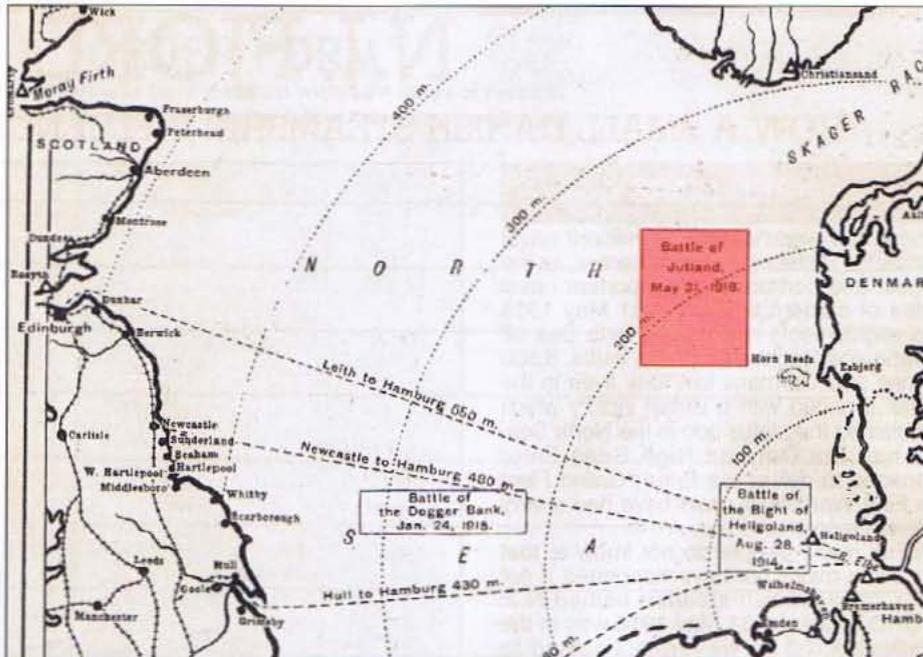
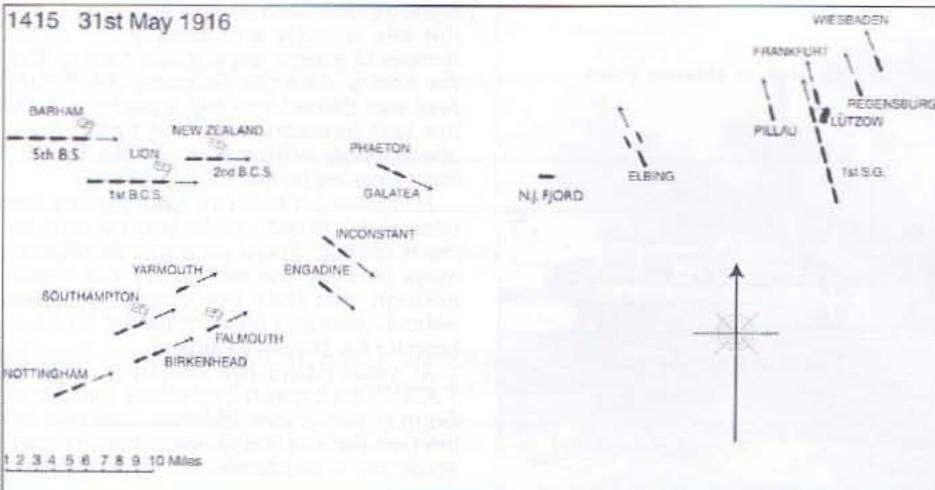
At approximately the same time the British light cruiser GALATEA, as part of the First Light Cruiser Squadron, on a sweep of the area, also observed the smoke. Followed by the light cruiser PHAETON, GALATEA also set a course for the smoke in order to investigate where it came from. The stage was thus set for an important meeting in modern naval history.

THE SOURCES

Not many sources exist telling the story from the viewpoint of the men on board the N.J. FJORD. The ship's record does not seem to have been preserved, and only one crew member subsequently spoke publicly about the event. About this person we furthermore do not know anything more than his name, Allan Larsen, and we know not where on board the ship he was - whether he was an eyewitness from the deck or just heard about the events from other members of the ship's crew. In 1929 he has, however, a short article in the magazine "Viking", where he has the following description of the German halting of the N.J. FJORD: "At 1810 hours a German destroyer signalled "Stop" to the Danish ship and one of the starboard lifeboats manned by the first mate and five of the crew rowed over to the destroyer, which lay stopped in the "Fjords" immediate vicinity. The German plan to examine the ships papers, which the first mate brought along, was however cancelled, when shortly after the first mate had boarded the German destroyer, three British Destroyers appeared in the Southwest and approached at high speed towards the German torpedo boats. Immediately our first mate was almost thrown back into the life boat, and moments later a battle broke out around us."

At 1428 hours the GALATEA and PHAETON opened fire on the two German torpedo boats from a distance of approx. 15km. While the two German boats quickly retreated back east, ELBING came in range and soon scored the first hit of the battle, when one of its 15cm shells hit GALATEA, luckily for the British without detonating. Meanwhile both the English cruisers and the German torpedo boats signalled to the rest of their respective fleets that they had found the enemy. The Battle of Jutland could thus begin.

This map shows the situation at 1415 on 31 of May, immediately after the German and British ships spotted each other and the battle began.



The Battle of Jutland took place mainly in the red marked area in the North Sea.

In Allan Larsen's description the time of the incident is off by some hours, but it otherwise sounds like a realistic description of the German reaction to the sighting of the British cruisers. Allan Larsen continues his account with a little contradictory descriptions that mentions both that they were now witnessing the battle and that the captain of N.J. FJORD immediately gave orders for the highest possible speed to get away from the area. Allan Larsen also includes both submarines and Zeppelins in the description of the battle, something that cannot be correct since neither submarines or Zeppelins participated in the Battle of Jutland.

If we are to believe Allan Larsen's description - and in the absence of other kinds of source material, it is hard to resist - N.J. FJORD left the battle and steered north towards Skagen, which was rounded at midnight. Only then did the captain dare to slow down to normal speed again.

Meanwhile the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet fought one of history's greatest naval battle. At dawn on 2 June 1916 the losses could be tallied up: The Royal Navy had lost three battle cruisers, three cruisers, eight destroyers and 6,094 men. The German losses

amounted "only" to one pre-dreadnought one battlecruiser, four light cruisers, five destroyers and 2,551 men. The battle was a tactical victory for the Germans, since they inflicted more losses on the British than they themselves received, but it was at the same time a strategic victory for the British since the British losses were not large enough to threaten the British control over the world's oceans.

THE FATE OF THE N.J. FJORD

N.J. FJORD ended its days at sea on April 1917, in the North Sea en route for Blyth to Odense with 665 tons of coal. At 2156 a shell suddenly detonated in the water about 250 feet from the ship's port side. The crew was immediately ordered into the lifeboats, and while they were making ready, nine more shells were fired at the ship. The eight fell around the ship, while the last one hit the ship's bridge. In the haste one of the ship's four lifeboats was damaged, but fortunately there were room for the 31 men on board in the three remaining boats.

It only took a few minutes to get the boats in the water, after which the crew hurriedly rowed away from N.J. FJORD. At approximately 2245 the German submarine UC-31 closed with one of the lifeboats, and the submarine's commander inquired to the nationality, cargo and destination of the steamer. Then two of N.J. FJORD's crew members were taken aboard the submarine and brought back to the ship, where they had to help the German submariners open up to the cargo spaces. Here explosive bombs were placed, and when the crew from the submarine had looted the ship's galley for, among other things, a box of whiskey, cigars and other tobacco, as well as the ship's finest service and the bridge for nautical charts and navigational equipment, they all left N.J. FJORD and the two Danish crew members were returned to the lifeboat. At midnight the crew in the lifeboats heard a series of explosions that signalled the ship's demise.

Fortunately, they only had to spend one day at sea before they were rescued by British vessels.