N. J. FJORD
HOW A SMALL DANISH STEAMSHIP INFLUENCED WORLD HISTORY

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Along the world’s many significant naval battles the Battle of Jutland is central, as the est and perhaps most important naval battle of modern times. On 31 May 1916, mighty fleets met in the North Sea off the coast of Jutland. 8,500 ships and 200,000 men lost their lives in the battle. It ended with a British victory which maintained the status quo in the North Sea, and the German High Seas Fleet scattered to the northwest, where it fell into the hands of the British Grand Fleet. The Battle of Jutland could have been a very close victory. That many people do not know is that battle might not have happened if it had not been for a small Danish steamer named N.J. FJORD, which on 31 May 1916 was in the North Sea, on her way from England to mark the end of the Great War with a cargo of coal.

At 1400 this day the lookout on board the N.J. FJORD saw on the horizon two German warships, which as they came closer, were identified as two large German torpedo boats. They signalled that N.J. FJORD should stop for inspection of ship and crew. Since N.J. FJORD was a steamer, it was ordered to blow steam from the boilers before she 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 unusual sight that gave N.J. FJORD its small but vital role in the Battle of Jutland.

TITLE OF JUTLAND

In the First World War, the German High Seas Fleet was outnumbered by the Royal Navy, and it therefore spent most of its time “incarcerated” as a fleet in being based at Wilhelmshaven. The German fleet could be refuelled from certain bases, in particular Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, and the German ships were able to send a significant supply of coal 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 ensure a victory. That was the idea behind the plan that was carried out by 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 the Royal Navy into an ambush, where the British 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 battlecruisers, 27 light cruisers and 76 destroyers was already making its way 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 them. Like the Germans, the British fleet was divided into two squadrons, with the fast battlecruisers and battleships ahead, under Admiral Blemmy. In this way, the Royal Navy could manoeuvre to best advantage.

At around 1400 the German German battleships 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...
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 PHAEON, 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. FJORDB. 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 hailing of the N.J. FJORDB: "At 1810 hours a German destroyer signalled 'Stop' to the Danish ship and one of the starboard lifeboats lowered 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 ship's 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 PHAEON opened fire on the two German torpedo boats from a distance of approx. 15 km. 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 15 cm 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.

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. FJORDB 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 nor 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. FJORDB 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 battles. 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 8,994 man. The German losses amounted "only" to one pre-dreadnought 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 Brits since the British losses were not large enough to threaten the British control of the world's oceans.

THE FATE OF THE N.J. FJORDB

N.J. FJORDB ended its days as sea on April 1917, in the North Sea en route from Blyth to Odense with 365 tons of coal. A 2156 a shell suddenly detonated in the water about 250 feet from the ship's porthole. The crew was immediately ordered into the lifeboats, and while they were made ready, nine more shells were fired at the ship. The eight fell around the ship, with the last one hitting the ship's bridge. In haste one of the ship's four lifeboats was damaged, but fortunately there were roo for the 31 men on board in the three remaining boats.

It only took a few minutes to get the boat in the water, after which the crew hurriedly rowed away from N.J. FJORDB. A few minutes later, the British submarine UC-31 closed with one of the lifeboats, at the submarine's commander inquired after nationality, cargo and destination of the steamer. Then two of N.J. FJORDB's crew members were taken aboard the sub 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 cre from the submarine had looted the ship galley for, among other things, a box of cigarettes, cigars and other tobacco, as well as the ship's finest service and the brine for nautical charts and navigational equipment, they all left N.J. FJORDB and two Danish crew members were returned to the lifeboat. At midnight the crew in the lifeboat heard a series of explosions that signalled the ship's demise.

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