

DE-RISKING ACTIONS

TAKEN BY THE BRITISH NAVY AHEAD OF THE BATTLE OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS (8 December 1914)



BACKGROUND

On 1 of November 1914, three months after the beginning of World War I, the German Pacific Squadron composed of five cruisers under Admiral von Spee inflicted a serious defeat to the British Navy at the Battle of Coronel, in which more than 1,600 British seaman perished. Immediately after this defeat, the Admiralty in London sent an overpowering force to the Southern Hemisphere under Admiral Sturdee with orders to annihilate the German squadron.

On 8 of December 1914, von Spee’s five cruisers were confronted off the Falkland Islands by Sturdee’s much stronger force of eight British cruisers (including two powerful battle cruisers). As a result of this encounter, the German Pacific Squadron was almost completely destroyed. The Germans lost four warships and more than 2,200 men.

HIGH RISKS FOR BRITAIN

The risk posed by the German Pacific Squadron after the Battle of Coronel had to be urgently addressed by the British. Not only the Royal Navy needed a revenge to recover its morale and retake the initiative, but the German ships could threaten the Allies’ vital sea lanes of communication. Eliminating von Spee’s forces was an essential prerequisite for the British to obtain command of the outer sea.

Moreover, if Admiral Sturdee had failed his mission, the British would have been obliged to allocate a significant number of naval assets to chase and eliminate the German threat. The Royal Navy would have lost its capacity to concentrate in the main theatre of operations in the North Sea, where all available naval forces were needed to protect the British Isles against the core of the German Navy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a naval historian and risk management practitioner with more than 25 years of experience. He is also a risk researcher and believes that naval history provides lessons of risk management that are replicable to modern-day business situations.

BATTLE OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS



© IWM Q 20895. Battle of the Falkland Islands. British Squadron leaving Port Stanley. Photo taken from maintop of HMS *Invincible* by Paymaster Sub. Lieutenant A. D. Duckworth, R. N.

DE-RISKING ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE BRITISH NAVY

STRATEGIC MITIGATIONS

- **An immediate reaction was triggered in Britain** after the defeat at Coronel. Without hesitation and delay in preparation, the Admiralty swiftly dispatched a squadron under Admiral Sturdee to the South Atlantic.
- **This squadron was composed of an overwhelming force** including the battle cruisers HMS *Invincible* and HMS *Inflexible* to ensure the obliteration of the enemy.
- **The departure of the battle cruisers was a calculated risk** which temporarily weakened the British fleet in home waters, giving the German Navy a counter-stroke opportunity in the North Sea. However, the plan was concealed to prevent a German attack in home waters and to maintain the surprise factor.

TACTICAL MITIGATIONS

- **Admiral Sturdee disregarded false reports** claiming that von Spee was heading to the Panama Canal or escaping to South Africa and sailed to the Falklands.
- **Immediate action was taken by Admiral Sturdee** as soon as the German ships were sighted off the Falklands. The British interrupted coaling procedures and set sail immediately to accomplish their mission.

The British Navy decisively overturned the threat posed by the German squadron by **reacting swiftly and without hesitation**. Such reaction was based on **solid judgement** and a **complete appreciation of the risks** incurred.