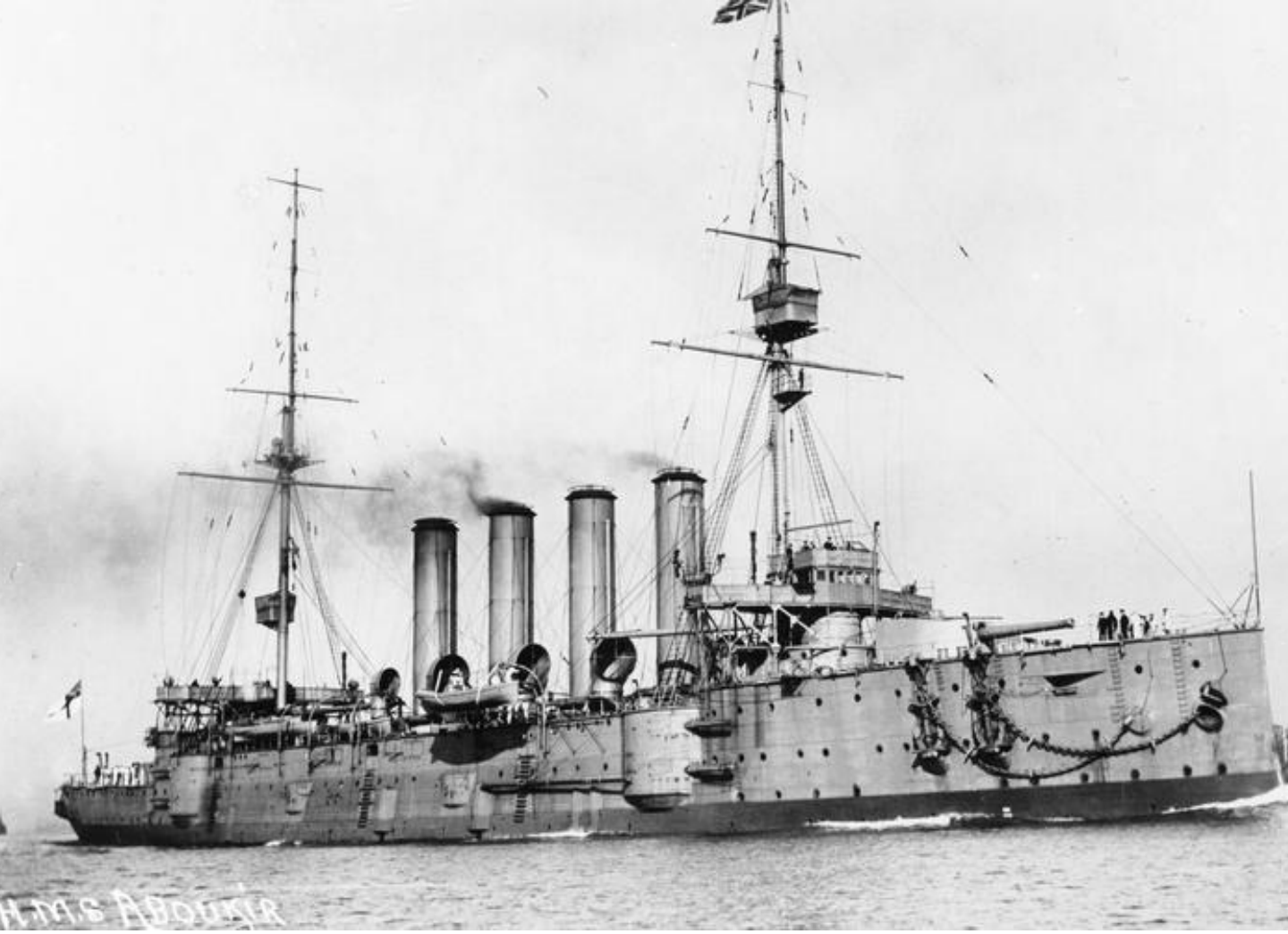

Resilience driven by situational awareness

The sinking of British cruisers HMS *Aboukir*, HMS *Hogue and* HMS *Cressy* by German submarine U-9 on 22 September 1914

MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH

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Introduction

Abstract

The years leading to World War I, saw a progressive development of submarine technology and an increased concern about the growing potential of this new capability. At the outbreak of the war in 1914, submarine warfare was a novel threat. Submarines were untested weapons for which no effective countermeasures existed.

It is in this context, that three British armoured cruisers patrolling in the North Sea – HMS *Aboukir*, HMS *Hogue* and HMS *Cressy* – were sunk by a German submarine on 22 September 1914. The tragic loss of the ships caused the death of 1,459 men and proved the lethality of submarines.

This paper examines the circumstances of the sinking of the armoured cruisers through a resilience lens. It argues that this disaster was not only due to the novelty of the submarine threat, or to British tactical missteps prior and during the encounter on 22 September. These factors contributed to the tragedy, but **the overall disregard of the situational awareness played a critical role by allowing the exposure of the ships in dangerous waters. Risks and early warning signals available in advance were ignored.** This historical event highlights the importance of maintaining a strong situational awareness to anticipate emerging risks.

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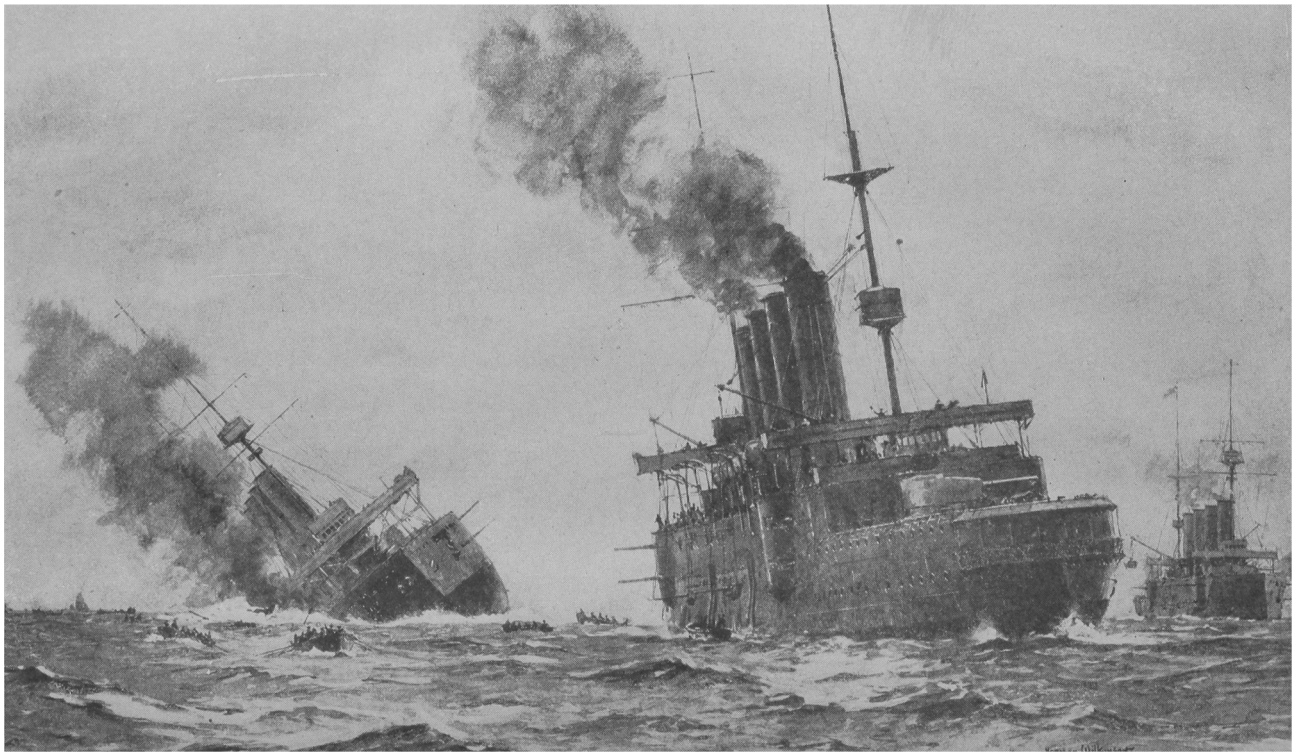


"Three British Cruisers sunk by a German submarine", from *Thrilling stories of the Great War on land and sea, in the air, under the water*, page 285 (1915).

Submarines: An emerging threat

The advent of a new form of warfare at sea

Submarines developed in the latter half of the XIX century and navies started to pay more and more attention to the potential of this weapon as technology advanced. Britain launched its first boat in 1901, whereas Germany followed in 1906. According to historian Robert Massie, by August 1914 there were approximately 400 submarines in service worldwide, 62 of which in Britain and 28 in Germany. Despite their growing numbers and enhanced capabilities, by 1914 submarines remained unproven in combat and fundamental questions persisted regarding their tactical employment and the means to counter them:

- **A new untested capability**: Submarines represented a threat to surface ships due to their invisibility and fire power. However, given the boats' relative limited speed and endurance, navies mainly envisioned their use in patrolling, reconnaissance, blockade and port defence missions. Coherent submarine warfare doctrines to exploit the full potential of this new weapon and use them offensively had yet to be developed.

- **Absence of effective countermeasures against submarines:** Neutralizing enemy submarines required both detection and attack capabilities that did not exist in 1914. Innovations such as underwater sound detection systems and depth charges were not sufficiently developed at the outbreak of World War I. It will take years for these technologies to mature and become effective.

Advancements in submarine technology in the years preceding World War I, underlined the potential of this class of vessels against which no defence yet existed. When a British squadron met a German submarine at sea on 22 September 1914, the deadliness of this new weapon brought tragic consequences.

Submarines' lethality was revealed during World War I

A German submarine at sea during World War I

IWM (Q 53010). German U-boat U-35 and a destroyer during a cruise in the Mediterranean, April-May 1917.

"

It's astounding to me, perfectly astounding, how the very best amongst us absolutely fail to realise the vast impending revolution in naval warfare and naval strategy that the submarine will accomplish!.... As I have not disguised my opinion in season and out of season as to the essential, imperative, immediate, vital, pressing, urgent, (I can't think of any more adjectives!) necessity for more submarines at once…

Admiral Sir John Fisher to Rear Admiral William May, 20 April 1904

The British squadron

The squadron is reduced to three armoured cruisers

In September 1914, a British squadron was ordered to patrol the south of the North Sea off the Dutch coast. The squadron was initially composed of four antiquated Bacchante class armoured cruisers escorted by destroyers providing a screen against torpedo attacks. Days before the encounter with German submarine U-9, the destroyers and one of the armoured cruisers returned to port, reducing the squadron to only three armoured cruisers:

- **Departure of all escorting destroyers**: On 17 September, due to adverse weather, the destroyers flotilla returned to port leaving the armoured cruisers without escort. Destroyers were smaller and faster ships than the armoured cruisers and their role was to provide a key layer of defence by scouting ahead of the squadron, to detect and engage enemy submarines or torpedo boats.

- **Departure of one armoured cruiser**: On 20 September, the squadron's flagship HMS *Euryales* had to return to port to coal and repair its wireless system damaged by severe weather. The ship carried the squadron's commander, Rear-Admiral Arthur Christian, who due to poor weather conditions could not transfer to another cruiser and had to return to port onboard HMS *Euryales*. As a consequence, by 22 September, the British force was reduced to three armoured cruisers and the flag officer responsible for the squadron was ashore. Command of the squadron at sea was temporary granted to Captain John Drummond, Commander of HMS *Aboukir*.

Despite being weakened by these departures, the squadron was ordered by the British Admiralty to continue its patrol in an exposed area. The ships were not put on a state of alert and the only precaution taken was to keep look-outs for submarines and keep one gun ready on each side of each ship.

The squadron will be confronted by one single submarine

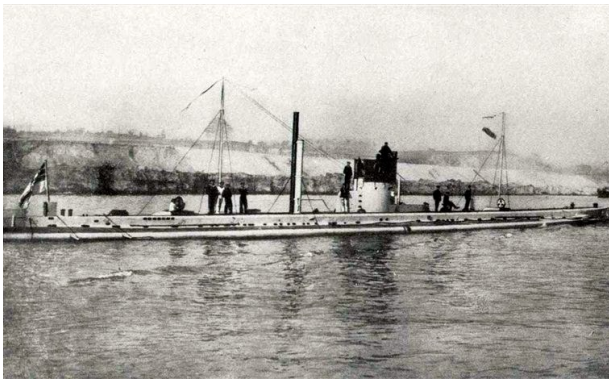
Three British armoured cruisers

Class: Sister ships of the Bacchante class
Year of launch: between 1899 and 1900
Tonnage: 12,000 tons each cruiser (total 26,000 tons)
Armament: 2 9.2-inch guns and 8 6-inch guns
Crew: 2,296 men in total

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U9Submarine.jpg

One German submarine

Class: First boat of the U-9 class
Year of launch: 1910
Tonnage: 493 tons
Armament: 6 torpedoes (fired from 4 torpedo tubes)
Crew: 28 men



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U9Submarine.jpg

Tactical missteps

Serious tactical errors on 22 September

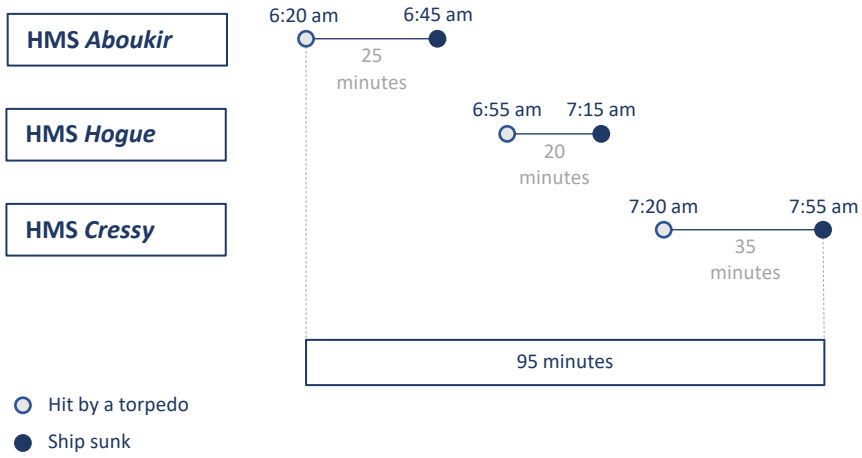
Early morning on 22 September during a periscope check, 32-year-old lieutenant Otto Weddigen, commander of submarine U-9 discovered the three British armoured cruisers 22 miles off the Dutch coast. He prepared the submarine to attack and at 6:20 am, HMS *Aboukir* was hit by a torpedo. Believing the explosion to be the result of a mine, Captain John Drummond ordered HMS *Hogue* and HMS *Cressy* to approach to rescue the crew. After stopping engines and lowering their boats, the two ships became motionless targets for U-9. The submarine continued the attack exploiting their immobility and by 7:55 am all three warships were sunk. On that morning, tactical factors contributed to the sinking of the three warships by one single submarine:

- **The cruisers were not manoeuvring to evade torpedo attacks**. The ships were not zig-zagging because it was believed that poor weather in previous days would prevent the deployment of enemy submarines at sea.
- **The squadron was cruising at a low speed** to save coal. The cruisers were sailing at only 10 knots because their worn-out engines would consume too much coal at a faster speed.
- **HMS *Hogue* and HMS *Cressy* became stationary targets** after they stopped to rescue HMS *Aboukir*'s crew. The misidentification of the initial torpedo strike as a mine facilitated the sinking of the two remaining ships.

These tactical missteps combined with the weakening of the squadron in previous days, significantly contributed to the tragic loss of the ships. However, a broader question arises on why the Admiralty deployed these ships in such a dangerous area. Were the risks involved assessed? Were early warning signals available?

Estimated timeline of events

The three armoured cruisers were sunk within 95 minutes



LC-B2- 3292-3, Lieutenant Otto von Weddigen

Were the risks assessed?

The ‘live bait squadron’

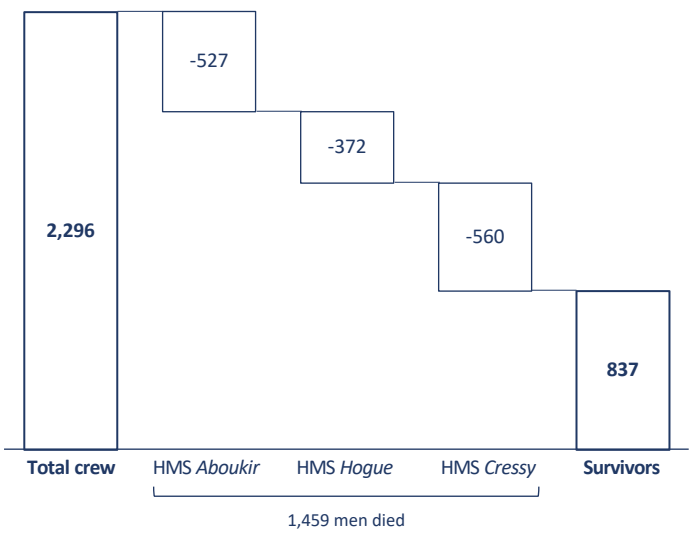
On 17 September, five days before the fatal encounter with U-9, Commodores Roger Keyes and Reginal Tyrwhitt warned Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, that the aging Bacchante class cruisers were dangerously vulnerable to German battlecruisers and submarines. The weaknesses of these ships were widely recognised across the fleet and they were known as ‘the live bait squadron.’ Churchill acknowledged the risk and requested their immediate removal from the Dutch coast. However, Admiral Sturdee, Chief of the War Staff, insisted they remain in station to protect transports for the British expeditionary force sent to France, despite the following concerns:

- **The three warships were obsolete**. The Armoured cruisers were slow, unwieldy and insufficiently protected. As observed by historian Julian Corbett, the three old cruisers were ‘ill-adapted for naval warfare in its recent developments’ and represented a vulnerable target for enemy surface ships and submarines.
- **The armoured cruisers were among the latest Royal Navy ships mobilized for war**. They were primarily manned by reservists with limited preparation for war and the ships’ guns had not been fired for years.
- **The squadron operated in a highly vulnerable position** near the continent, making it particularly susceptible to attack between the Dutch coast and a German mines field.

Despite full awareness of these risks, the Admiralty chose to prioritize the mission over the safety of the ships and their crews. The ships were not relieved from duty or replaced by smaller vessels, such as armed trawlers, an alternative later advocated by Admiral Sir John Fisher.

British casualties

1,459 men perished as a consequence of this tragedy



“

After a week I can't write or think temperately about that appalling— and I think — absolutely unnecessary sacrifice — for what?! God knows I had the cheek to write twice and ask a dozen times verbally what those "Bacchantes" were supposed to be doing.

———

Commodore Roger Keyes to Admiral de Robeck, 29 September 1914

Were early warning signals available?

Submarine operations at the outbreak of World War I

In the early months of the war, British warships experienced several encounters with German submarines in the North Sea. These incidents clearly demonstrated that submarines could operate far from their bases and carry out offensive actions against warships. The key encounters include:

1. **8 August 1914**
   U-15 attempted to torpedo the dreadnought HMS *Monarch* but the attack failed. This encounter proved that **submarines were able to approach the British Isles and operate at extended range.**

2. **9 August 1914**
   U-15 was rammed and sunk by the light cruiser HMS *Birmingham* after being found motionless on the surface of the sea (likely undergoing repairs). All 23 crew members were lost.

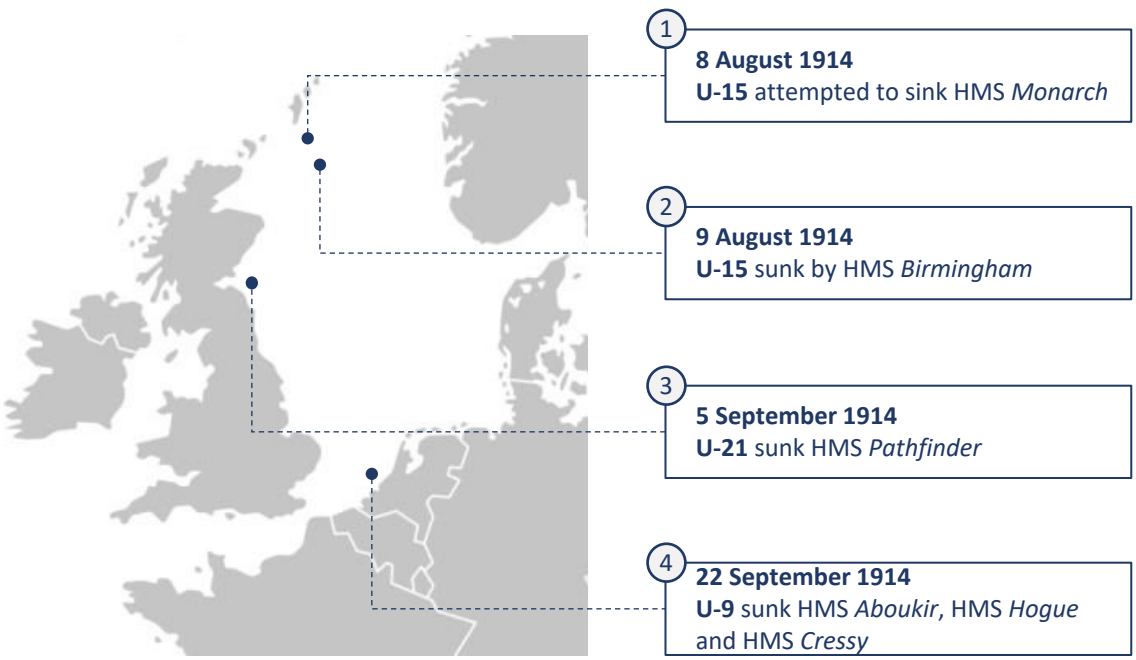
3. **5 September 1914**
   U-21 sunk the light cruiser HMS *Pathfinder*, which went down in 4 minutes. Of the 360 men onboard, 259 died. HMS *Pathfinder* was the **first warship sunk by a submarine in World War I, proving the submarines' offensive potential.**

4. **22 September 1914**
   U-9 sunk HMS *Aboukir*, HMS *Hogue* and HMS *Cressy* off the Dutch coasts during a patrol mission conducted without escorts or anti-submarine precautions.

These encounters, in particular the attacks on HMS *Monarch* and the sinking of HMS *Pathfinder* should have served as early warning signals and contributed to an improved situational awareness. Yet, on 22 September, the three armoured cruisers were neither withdrawn from their mission nor placed on heightened alert.

Early warning signals in the North Sea

These encounters provided growing evidence of the operational range and lethality of submarines



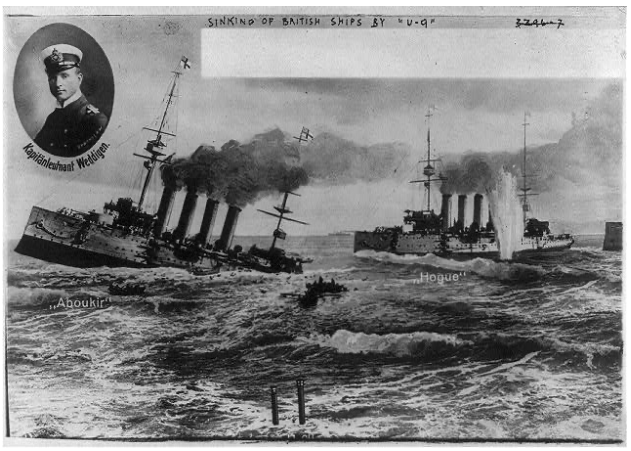
Conclusion

The disregard of the situational awareness played a key role in the tragedy of the British cruisers

The weakening of the squadron in the days before the encounter and British tactical missteps on 22 September, contributed directly to the sinking of three warships and the loss of 1,459 men. The absence of a destroyer screen, failure to execute evasive manoeuvres, and the decision to halt the remaining two ships after the initial attack on HMS *Aboukir* were critical operational errors.

Yet, the deeper causes of the tragedy lie in the decision to expose outdated vessels in a known high-risk area. This deployment occurred despite growing awareness of submarine threats and could have been avoided by better situational awareness, taking into considering the risks and the available early warning signals:

- **Risk assessment**: Despite the novelty of submarine threats, the potential of this new weapon was recognised and escalated to senior Royal Navy leadership. The fatal decision to prioritise mission objectives over force protection proved catastrophic.
- **Early warning signals**: The loss of the squadron is further compounded by prior incidents that were disregarded, although they confirmed the exposure and vulnerability of surface ships in the North Sea.



LOT 11274-1 Sinking of British ships, *Hogue* and *Aboukir*.

Ultimately, the disaster of 22 September 1914 was not solely the result of tactical failure, but reflected a broader lapse in strategic judgement and adaptative posture. **A rigorous approach to risk analysis grounded in situational awareness could have averted this tragedy. This historical event underscores not only the importance of maintaining high levels of vigilance, but the need to remain attuned to emerging threats and be ready to respond decisively to warning signals.**

"

…they won't realise that the disaster was to be expected. More men lost than by Lord Nelson in all his battles put together! Immense numbers of officers and men of inestimable value, sacrificed for what? Work that armed trawlers, supervised by armed wireless yachts of suitable dimensions, could do far better!"

———

Admiral Sir John Fisher to Admiral John Jellicoe
referring to the loss of the three cruisers, 26 December 1914

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a naval historian and risk management practitioner with more than 25 years of professional 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.

Cover photo: IWM (Q 75321) Armoured cruiser HMS *Aboukir*.
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