Preparating for War

The Royal Navy was well prepared for the First World War. During a lengthy arms race in the preceding decades, Britain had built the largest fleet in the world. By August 1914, the Royal Navy had 28 modern capital ships and 41 older Victorian-era battleships that, although obsolete, still represented an impressive maritime force. Facing this, the Imperial German Navy could only field 10 modern capital ships and 22 older battleships.

Early in the war Britain established a distant blockade of Germany's ports. Britain controlled both shores of the Dover Straits and the strong presence of the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow prevented the German High Seas fleet from breaking out of the North Sea and into the Atlantic.

For two years, both sides attempted to force a battle on their own terms and deliver a crushing victory that could end the war. In 1916, both fleets met at Jutland, but although Britain's Grand Fleet inflicted heavy losses on the Royal Navy they were unable to break the blockade.

Britain Under Siege

With their surface fleet trapped in the North Sea, Germany turned to a newer form of war — submarine warfare. Once they achieved their own blockade of Britain, throughout the war, their U-boats slipped past the Grand Fleet and through the Dover Strait to attack Britain's lifeline — the merchant fleet in the Atlantic and English Channel.

The U-boats inflicted severe losses on Allied shipping and even came close to starving Britain out of the war in 1917. However, as the war dragged on, the Royal Navy's ability to sink U-boats increased, and by the end of the war, Germany was forced to end unlimited submarine warfare.