



Royal Navy

The **Royal Navy (RN)** is the United Kingdom's principal naval warfare force. Tracing its origins to the 16th century, it is the oldest service and is known as the **Senior Service**. From the end of the 17th century until well into the 20th century it was the most powerful navy in the world, playing a key part in establishing the British Empire as the dominant world power. Due to this historical prominence, it is usual – even among non-Britons – to refer to it as "The Royal Navy" without qualification.

The Royal Navy is part of Her Majesty's Naval Service, which also includes the Royal Marines. The professional head of the Naval Service is the First Sea Lord, an admiral and member of the Defence Council of the United Kingdom. The Defence Council delegates management of the Naval Service to the Admiralty Board, chaired by the Secretary of State for Defence. The Royal Navy currently operates three bases in the United Kingdom where commissioned ships are based; Portsmouth, Clyde and Devonport, Plymouth, the last being the largest operational naval base in Western Europe.

The end of the 19th century saw structural changes brought about by the First Sea Lord Jackie Fisher who retired, scrapped, or placed into reserve many of the older vessels, making funds and manpower available for newer ships. He also oversaw the development of HMS *Dreadnought*, launched in 1905. Its speed and firepower rendered all existing battleships obsolete.

1914–1945 The industrial and economic development of Germany had, by this time, overtaken Britain, enabling the Imperial German Navy to attempt to outpace British construction of dreadnoughts. Britain emerged triumphant from the ensuing arms race.

Reforms were also gradually introduced in the conditions for enlisted men with the abolition of military flogging in 1879, amongst others.

During the two World Wars, the Royal Navy played a vital role in protecting the flow of food, munitions and raw materials to Britain by defeating the German campaigns of unrestricted submarine warfare in the first and second battles of the Atlantic.

During the First World War, most of the Royal Navy's strength was deployed at home in the Grand Fleet, confronting the German High Seas Fleet across the North Sea. A few inconclusive clashes took place between them, chiefly the Battle of Jutland in 1916. These exposed the deficiencies of a British approach to capital ship design, which prioritized speed and firepower, as against the German emphasis on resilience, as well as the inadequacies of Britain's hastily assembled munitions industry. However, the Germans were repeatedly outmanoeuvred and the British numerical advantage proved insurmountable, leading the High Seas Fleet to abandon any attempt to challenge British dominance.

Upon entering the First World War, the British immediately established a blockade of Germany. The Navy's Northern Patrol closed off access to the North Sea, while the Dover Patrol closed off access to the English Channel. The Navy also mined the North Sea. As well as closing off the Imperial German Navy's access to the Atlantic, the blockade largely blocked neutral merchant shipping heading to or from Germany. The blockade was maintained eight months after the war had ended to force Germany to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

The most serious menace faced by the Navy came from the attacks on merchant shipping mounted by German U-boats. For much of the war this submarine campaign was restricted by prize rules requiring merchant ships to be warned and evacuated before sinking. In 1915, the Germans renounced these restrictions and began to sink merchant ships on sight, but later returned to the previous rules of engagement to placate neutral opinion. A resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 raised the prospect of Britain and its allies being starved into submission. The Navy's response to this new form of warfare had proved inadequate due to its refusal to adopt a convoy system for merchant shipping, despite the demonstrated effectiveness of the technique in protecting troop ships. The belated introduction of convoys sharply reduced losses and brought the U-boat threat under control.