

# Foreword to Special Feature

## The First World War Centenary Issue

**Surg Lt Cdr J G Penn-Barwell,  
Assistant Editor**

The eruption of the Great War in 1914 had long been anticipated in other European capitals, but was largely a surprise to Britain's Admirals and Generals, despite the efforts of First Sea Lord Sir John "Jackie" Fisher to improve Britain's naval capability (1), (2). The totality of industrialised warfare shocked a country convinced of its invulnerability, and thus the Great War fundamentally changed Britain and her place in the world.

The century after the battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo was a period of British hegemony. The maritime dominance of the Royal Navy (RN) was universally recognised and conferred a huge trading advantage to Britain, which enjoyed a dramatic rise in standards of living and life expectancy. In return, nearly a quarter of government spending went on the Admiralty (1).

The Great War was the first time that the RN was engaged in all elements of the battle space, as it has been in every conflict since: on land, at sea, under the sea and in the air (3).

The Royal Naval Division (RND) was formed in August 1914 at the order of the First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill, "In order to make the best possible use of the surplus naval reservists..." according to his first minute on the Division. The RND, comprised of both sailors and Royal Marines, first deployed in August 1914 to occupy Ostend and patrol the surrounding area. It was solely responsible for the Defence of Antwerp engagement, 6-9 October 1914 (4, Appendix A).

Subsequently the RND was deployed as the vanguard of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) to Gallipoli in 1915 and returned, as 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, to join the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France and Belgium in June 1916. It remained engaged on the Western Front until the Armistice, sustaining more than 40% of naval casualties in WW1.

While the decisive sea battle longed for by the public never happened, the RN surface fleet fought engagements all over the world, ensured the safety of the British Isles and maintained the economic blockade of Germany, at the same time engaging in combat against the German submarine

campaign which aimed to starve Britain into submission.

The RN's submarine fleet became operationally effective in the Great War and was in action in the Atlantic, Baltic and Dardanelles. Five of the RN's fourteen Victoria Crosses awarded during the war were won by the Submarine Service, a reflection of the special risks involved in service aboard these early boats.

The Naval Wing of the Royal Flying Corps formally became the Royal Naval Air Service, administered by the Air Department of the Admiralty, on 1 July 1914. This development established how fundamental naval air power would be to maritime conflict in the future, a lesson sadly neglected in the period leading up to the Second World War, when the Fleet Air Arm was under RAF control.

This Journal was established as the world's second military medical journal in 1915. It was founded largely as a means of educating recently-commissioned medical officers on the peculiarities of practicing medicine at sea, at war and in tropical climates.

That medicine advances rapidly in time of war is often remarked upon. It is one of the very few positive outcomes from the wounds and illness resulting from the organised violence between large numbers of men and women. The pace of this advance across the various specialties of surgery and medicine is shown in the variety of articles that were printed over the war years, full listings of which are available on this journal's website ([www.JRNMS.com](http://www.JRNMS.com)).

In recognition of the huge significance of the First World War to our Nation, Service and Branch we have reprinted some of the more interesting or significant articles from the war years, across a range of subjects, each accompanied by a contemporary expert's commentary on how the wisdom of the day compares with our own 100 years later. It also gives us an opportunity to salute the professionalism and dedication of our forebears and to remember those of our service who made the ultimate sacrifice or survived wounded in body or mind.

**References**

1. Hastings M. Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War 1914. London: William Collins; 2013.
  2. National Museum of the Royal Navy. Racing to War: the Royal Navy and 1914. Portsmouth: NMRN, 2014.
  3. Redford D, Grove PD, eds. The Royal Navy: a History since 1900. London: I. B. Tauris; 2014.
  4. Jerrold D. The Royal Naval Division. London: Hutchinson; 1923. [repr. Uckfield: Naval and Military Press; 2009].
- 

**Author**

Surgeon Lieutenant Commander J G Penn-Barwell, Specialist Registrar in Trauma and Orthopaedics, Institute of Naval Medicine, Crescent Road, Alverstoke, Gosport.

**Correspondence**

Jowanpb@me.com