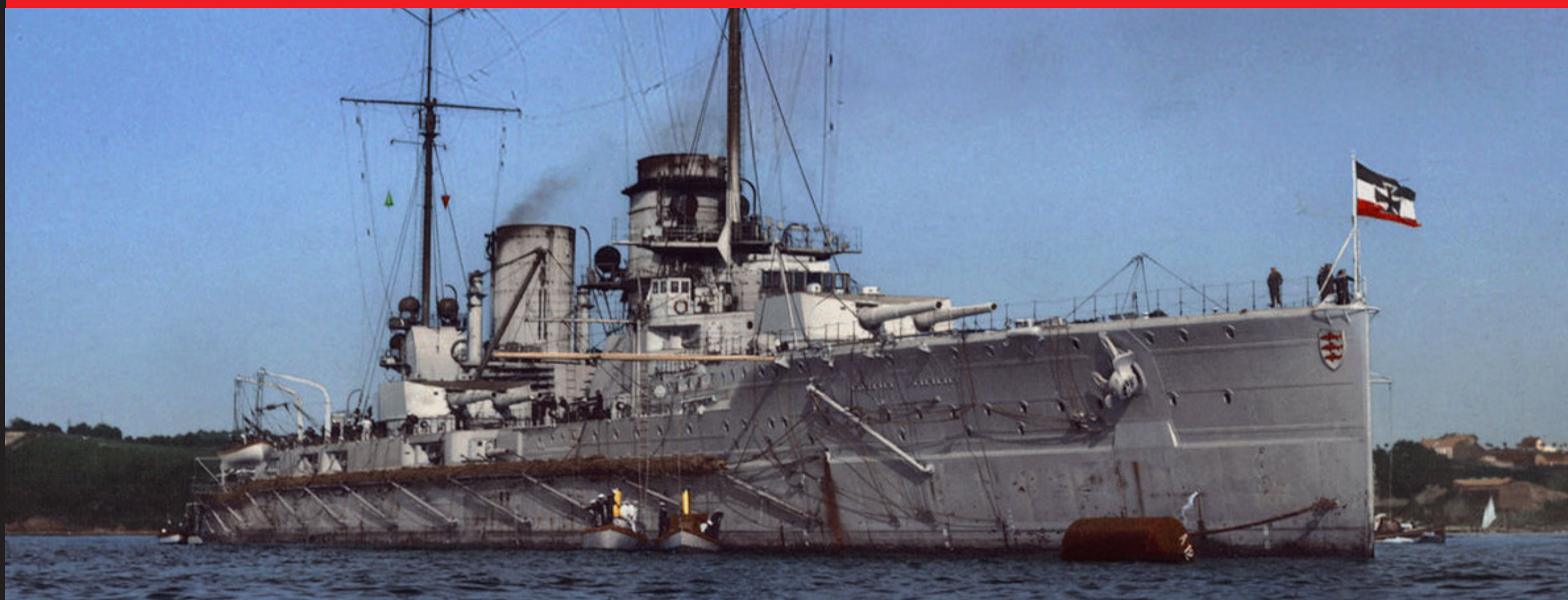


A colourised photograph of the SMS Seydlitz before the war. Seydlitz was the most advanced ship used in the raid on the Hartlepoons.



The Bombardment: Hartlepool's 9/11?

The German Raiders: Faithful Patriots or "Baby Killers"?

As World War One began German military land forces greatly outnumbered those of the British Army. On the sea however Britannia unequivocally ruled the waves, with the British Navy being of such power it could have easily overwhelmed the *Kaiserliche Marine*, its German equivalent. Fearful of losses in a direct fleet-to-fleet engagement, the German tactic was to find a way to force the British Admiralty to break up their ships into smaller groups that could be engaged more manageably. The method decided was to bombard populated targets, which they believed would cause panic and outrage amongst the British public and force the Admiralty to spread out its ships to seek revenge and provide close protection for towns all around the UK coast. After a partially successful but low-key raid on Great Yarmouth on 2nd November, Rear Admiral Franz Hipper, commander of the German battlecruiser squadron, supported by his superior Admiral Friedrich von Ingenohl, gained the Kaiser's permission to mount a larger attack. U-Boat U-17 was sent to investigate towns on Britain's east coast. The submarine reported little onshore defence, no mines within 12 miles of the shore and gaps in the minefield created for the steady stream of shipping using north east ports. Thus two taskforces, a smaller one commanded by Hipper that would perform the actual raid and a larger force commanded by von Ingenohl that would act as support, set out to attack several north east coastal towns on the morning of December 16th.



Three Ships A-Sailing...

The three German ships that bombarded Hartlepool under Hipper's command were the SMS (*Seiner Majestät Schiff* or His Majesty's Ship) Seydlitz, SMS Moltke and SMS Blücher (pictured above). Seydlitz and Moltke were battlecruisers with similar main batteries of ten 11 inch guns apiece. Having been launched in 1912 and 1911 respectively, these ships were more or less state of the art. The SMS Blücher, despite only dating to 1909, was an armoured cruiser, the last to be built by the Germans. Her main armament comprised of twelve far less potent 8.27 inch SK L/45 quick-firing guns. Designed to counter what German intelligence believed to be the specifications of a new class of British battlecruiser, it was soon discovered that their information was inaccurate but too late to stop construction. Upon commissioning the Blücher was already obsolete.



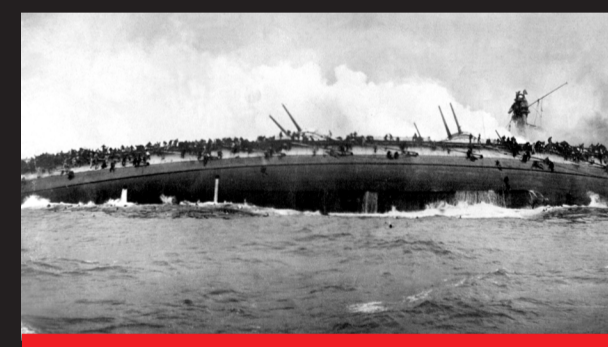
Manoeuvres in the Dark

Hipper's taskforce left the Jade River in northwestern Germany at 3am on 15th December and began to steam across the North Sea. As they did von Ingenohl's main body encountered British destroyers and, fearing the prospect of a nighttime torpedo attack, the Admiral ordered his ships to retreat. Hipper (above) was unaware of his superior's action, and so his force continued on to its targets. Upon reaching the British coast Hipper's vessels split into two groups, one heading for the Hartlepoons and one for Whitby and Scarborough. As Hartlepool was the only of the three towns with defensive guns it was this group that came under fire. Seydlitz was hit three times and Blücher was hit six times. The latter suffered minimal damage, but all the same nine men were killed and another three were wounded.



Medal of Dishonour

In the aftermath of the raid a medal was struck by the Germans commemorating it as a significant victory. News of this incensed the UK, especially those towns that had fallen victim, and British copies were made to be worn ironically as propaganda. The German original medal was round and finely finished, as were most copies, but soon another pattern of medal also emerged, one with solely British origins but mimicking the famed German Iron Cross medal. These first appeared from an unknown source, which some believe may have been Gordon Selfridge, founder of the famous department store. Their quality varied from example to example, some pressed from blackened metal and stamped, others roughly hewn and clearly hand made. Ironically, these are now often regarded as more collectible than the official German medal.



Second Time Unlucky

As the German ships fled from the north east coast they used the poor visibility to safely slip past their pursuers, helped by confusion with the signalling of orders on the British side. Buoyed by the success of the raid, a month later Admiral Hipper decided to attack the British fishing fleet, suspected of spying on German fleet movements. However, further decoded radio traffic revealed the plans for the mission on 23rd January 1915. British naval forces set out to intercept, meeting the Germans the next day exactly where expected. Surprised, the smaller and slower German squadron fled for home. After several hours of chasing, the British slowly caught up and engaged the enemy with long-range gunfire. SMS Blücher was disabled and, due to more signalling problems and perhaps with Hartlepool in mind, the remaining British ships broke off pursuit to sink her (above), allowing the main German squadron to escape.