

# STATEMENT BY FIRST LORD OF ADMIRALTY.

*HC Deb 24 June 1919 vol 117 cc31-4 31*

§ Mr. LAMBERT

(by Private Notice) asked the First Lord of the Admiralty why precautions were not taken by the Admiralty to prevent the Germans from scuttling their warships at Scapa?

§ The FIRST LORD of the ADMIRALTY (Mr. Long)

I have received private notice of questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Commander Viscount Curzon) and other hon. Gentlemen, and I think the best plan would be for me to answer them all together. I do not think that I can add much, if anything, of import, to what has already appeared in the public Press. The Admiralty took steps as soon as this affair occurred to give the fullest possible information to the newspapers, who have availed themselves of it, and, so far as I know, all the main facts have been disclosed, but there are certain definite questions to which I will reply. Full and detailed reports of the sinking of the German ships have not yet been received at the Admiralty. Of course, I called for a report from the Commander-in-Chief, and I imagine that it is on its way.

Admiral von Reuter stated verbally that he personally had given orders for the ships to be sunk, being under the impression that the Armistice had ceased at noon on Saturday. There would have been no difficulty in the German admiral circulating these orders, since he was allowed to visit his own ships for the purpose of maintaining discipline therein, and when doing so he was conveyed in a British boat. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It was obvious that he was not to be allowed to go in one of his own.

The present position of the ships is as follows: 10 battleships sunk, 1 afloat; 5 battle cruisers sunk, 5 light cruisers sunk, 3 beached; 30 destroyers sunk, 2 afloat, 18 beached.

Salvage experts are now making an examination, and until their report is received it is impossible to say whether the sunken ships can be salvaged, or to what extent they will interfere with the anchorage or channel.

The question of reparation for the sinking of these ships is now under consideration by the Allies in Paris.

32 The statement which has appeared that the crews have been changed periodically, is incorrect. Sick men, etc., had been exchanged as circumstances arose. The total numbers of the care and maintenance party had been reduced from 4,700 to approximately 1,800.

As regards the question why precautions were not taken by the Admiralty to prevent the Germans from scuttling their ships, the answer is that this was impossible as the ships were interned, not surrendered; and the Admiralty had therefore no power to place guards upon them. It is not correct that the naval advisers of the Admiralty recommended internment; their views were clearly and definitely expressed at the time. But the decision of the heads of the

Allied Governments was in favour of internment, and this has, of course, controlled the situation ever since, and made the prevention of the scuttling impossible.

I desire to deprecate, as strongly as I can, the attacks which have been made in certain quarters upon Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, for which there is not the slightest justification.

§ Mr. LAMBERT

May we take it then that under the terms of surrender—[HON. MEMBERS: "They were not surrendered!"]—under the terms of internment of these ships the Admiralty had no power at all to prevent the sinking of them by the German crews?

§ Mr. LONG

Yes, Sir, that was the effect of adopting internment instead of surrender. Had they been surrendered they would have passed into the control of the country in whose port they were interned, and that country would have been responsible, through its officers, for their safety, but, being only interned, it was the right of the Germans to have their own guards. They were responsible for the discipline and for the care of the ships, and His Majesty's Admiralty had no right whatever, even of access to the ships, except in a formal way, and no right to place guards upon them. The act of sinking is a very simple one in itself, involving only the opening of the sea cocks, and it could have been performed at any time. Consequently it was quite impossible for the Commander-in-Chief of the squadron in charge of the ships at Scapa to prevent this being done or to know that it was about to be done.

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§ Mr. LAMBERT

May I ask whether this internment took place contrary to the advice of the naval experts expressed at the time of the Armistice?

§ Mr. LONG

I said in my answer that at the time this was under discussion the naval experts recommended as strongly as they could surrender and not internment, but their advice was not accepted. So far as the naval experts are concerned they are in no sense responsible for the course adopted or for what has happened.

§ Mr. HOGGE

Is it not the fact that since the scuttling at Scapa all the other interned German warships have been scuttled similarly?

§ Mr. LONG

I am not in a position to state, but it is so reported in some newspapers. The Government are unable to give any confirmation of it.

§ Commander BELLAIRS

May we assume that the British Government backed up with all energy the recommendation of their experts, that these ships should be surrendered, seeing that the naval admirals afloat insisted in the strongest possible terms that the ships should be surrendered, and that Marshal Foch got all that he asked for?

§ Mr. LONG

I regret the distinction which the hon. and gallant Member has drawn between the admirals afloat and those ashore. The advice of the admirals, whether afloat or ashore, was identical. As to the action of the Government I have said as much as I am entitled to say—that the admiral's advice was not accepted.

§ Sir FORTESCUE FLANNERY

Is it not the fact that if British guards had been put on board these ships that would have been regarded by the Allies as a breach of faith, and of the understanding on which they were interned in this country?

§ Mr. LONG

How it would have been regarded I cannot say, but it would unquestionably have been a breach of the terms of the Armistice. We acted in this matter, as I am thankful to say we have acted on every other matter in this War—we have adhered to the terms of the Armistice and we have obeyed the laws of war and the laws of humanity.

§ Mr. BOTTOMLEY

May I ask whether or not it is the fact that the British Prime 34 Minister earnestly and strongly pleaded for the surrender of the ships, and that he was overruled by Mr. Wilson?

§ Mr. LONG

I do not think it is for me to make any statement further than that I have already made. I would respectfully ask the House not to press me at this time, speaking as I am only entitled to do for the Board of Admiralty as to what took place at that time? May I also venture respectfully to remind the House that we must bear in mind that our Allies who stood by us in this War and since have their own views and their own differences, and it is impossible to form an accurate judgment in a case like this unless you have the whole of the circumstances that led up to the discussion.

§ Commander BELLAIRS

In view of the position of the Admiralty, will they welcome a public inquiry by court-martial so that the whole episode may be inquired into and the responsibility for the German ships being interned set at rest?

§ Mr. LONG

I think the hon. and gallant Gentleman knows there is one thing necessary previously to holding a court-martial, and that is some one to try?

§ Commander BELLAIRS

I beg to give notice that on the Adjournment of the House to-morrow I will draw attention to the whole question.