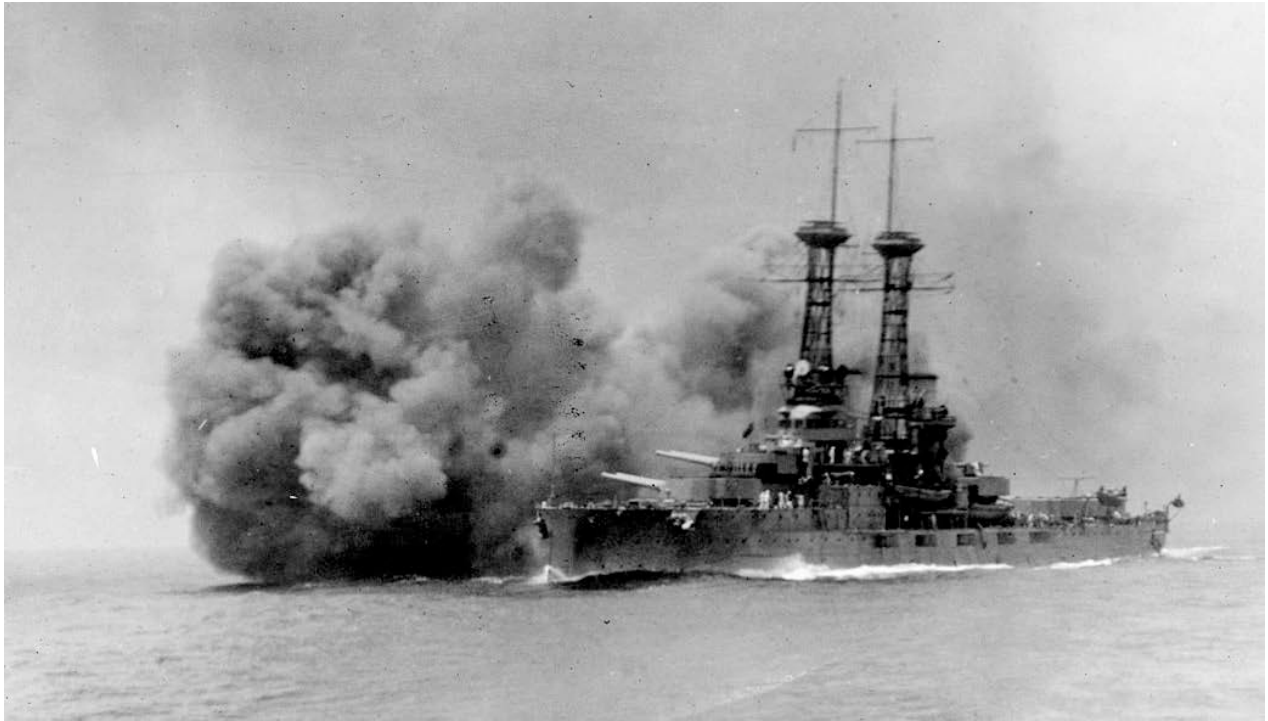


Uncle Sam's Bloody Nose

Action at Cleaver Bank, 14 June 1918



U.S.S. Delaware. U.S. Naval Historical Center.

This fictional action takes place during the latter months of the First World War, after battleships from the United States had joined the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet and began to take part in operations in the North Sea to keep the German High Seas Fleet blockaded in port. In this action, five American battleships are supported by light cruisers and destroyers of the Royal Navy.

On June 14, 1918 the Sixth Battle Squadron, consisting of five American battleships under the command of Rear Admiral Hugh Rodman, encountered a force of six German battleships and battle cruisers probing the British defenses in the middle of the North Sea near Cleaver Bank. British signals intelligence, that had been so successful for most of the war in tracking German naval movements, had missed Vice Admiral Friedrich Boedicker's sortie the day before, allowing him to catch the Americans off guard and without nearby support.

This battle was gamed using [*Steam and Iron: The Great War at Sea*](#) by Naval Warfare Simulations.

Scenario Setup

Date: 14 June 1918, midday.
Location: Vicinity of Cleaver bank in the North Sea.
Conditions: Clear skies with good visibility. Fresh breeze from the southeast

Order of Battle



British Grand Fleet

Sixth Battle Squadron:

BB *New York* (Flag), BB *Texas*, BB *Delaware*, BB *Florida*, BB *Wyoming*

Fourth Light Cruiser Squadron:

CL *Calliope* (Flag), CL *Caroline*, CL *Comus*, CL *Cordelia*, CL *Constance*

Thirteenth Destroyer Flotilla

DD *Valkyrie* (Flag), DD *Vectis*, DD *Vendetta*, DD *Vega*, DD *Vesper*



German High Seas Fleet

III. Battle Squadron

BB *König*, BB *Grosser Kurfürst*, BB *Kronprinz*, BB *Markgraf*

I. Scouting Group

BC *Hindenburg* (Flag), BC *Möltke*

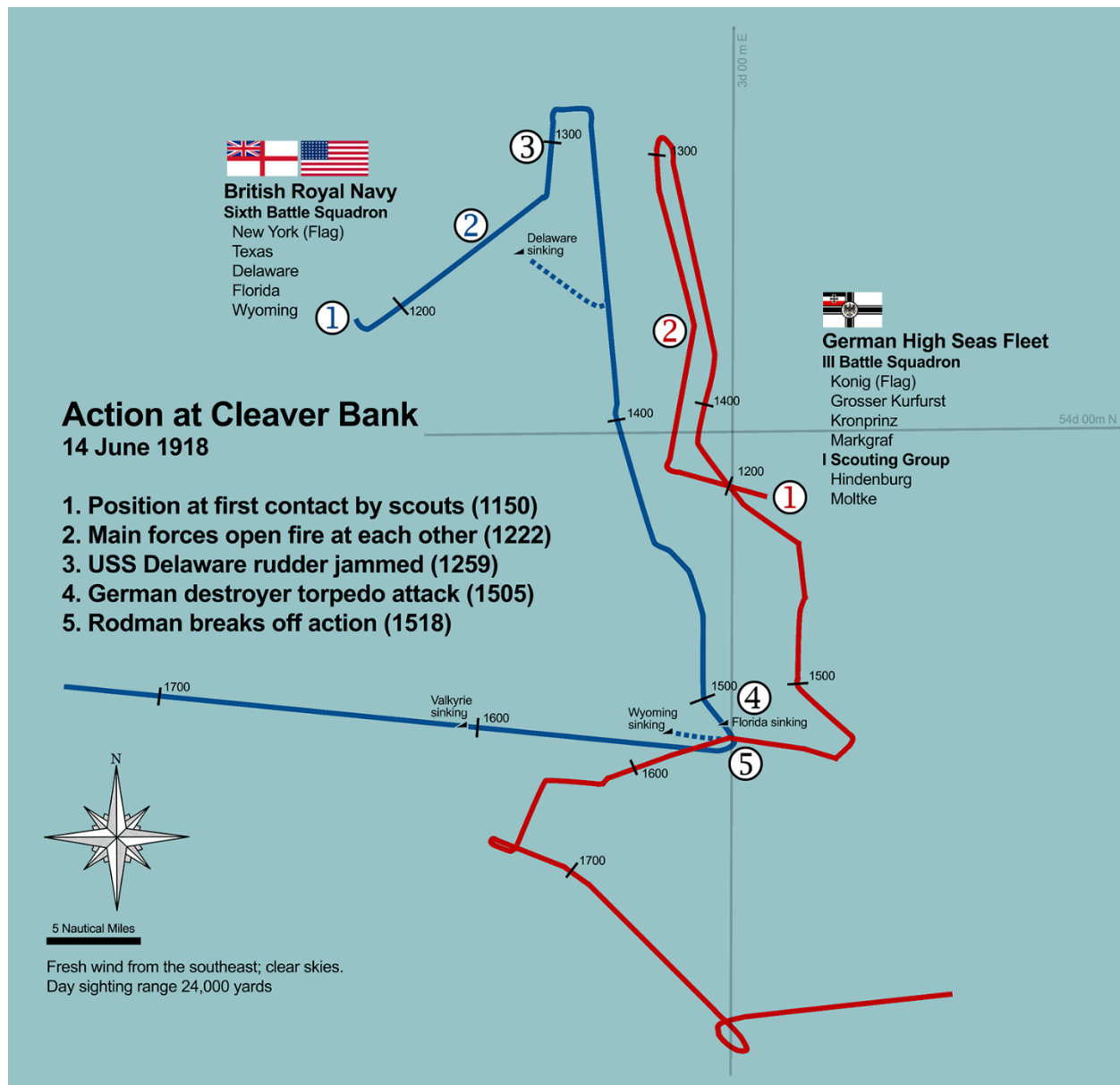
II. Scouting Group

CL *Königsburg* (Flag), CL *Karlsruhe*, CL *Nurnberg*, CL *Pillau*, CL *Graudenz*

II. Torpedo Boat Flotilla

CL *Frankfurt* (Flag), DD *G103*, DD *G101*, DD *G104*, DD *G102*

The Action



Late on the morning of 14 June, Rear Admiral Hugh Rodman and the sixth Battle squadron of the British grand Fleet for steaming on a southeasterly course in moderate seas, and clear visibility. The five American battleships were in line ahead formation, led by *New York* (flag), with *Texas*, *Delaware*, *Florida*, and *Wyoming* following behind. Scouting force of British light cruisers was deployed ahead, on a search line at a right angle to the battleships' heading. At 1150, HMS *Calliope* spotted an unknown vessel ahead, and signaled to Rodman's like ship. Rodman, assuming the unidentified ship to be a German warship, immediately ordered a 90° turn

to port (i.e. to the northeast), to put his squadron between the unidentified target and British bases at Rosyth and Scapa. Four minutes after first spotting the strange vessel, *Calliope* identified the unknown vessel as a light cruiser, and the allied ships went to general quarters. At 1157, *Calliope* signaled that the strange vessel was of the German *Königsberg* class light cruiser, and over the next several minutes signaled more ships in sight to the southeast. By 1209, less than 20 minutes after the original sighting, a total of 10 vessels were in sight to the southeast, two of which were tentatively identified as either battleships or battle cruisers.

Rodman now knew he had a serious situation on his hands. Cranking their screw turns up to full speed, the five American battleships trained their turrets to starboard and began calculating firing angles and elevations. The fresh breeze from the southeast carried smoke from the German ships' funnels directly toward the Americans, making range finding more difficult. At 1209 the German ships opened fire on *Calliope*, and soon thereafter opened fire on the light cruiser *Caroline* as well. At 1214, *New York* opened fire with her main battery at one of the light cruisers in the German screen, followed a minute later by *Texas*. At 1222, *New York* shifted fire to one of the German battle cruisers, formally beginning the main action.

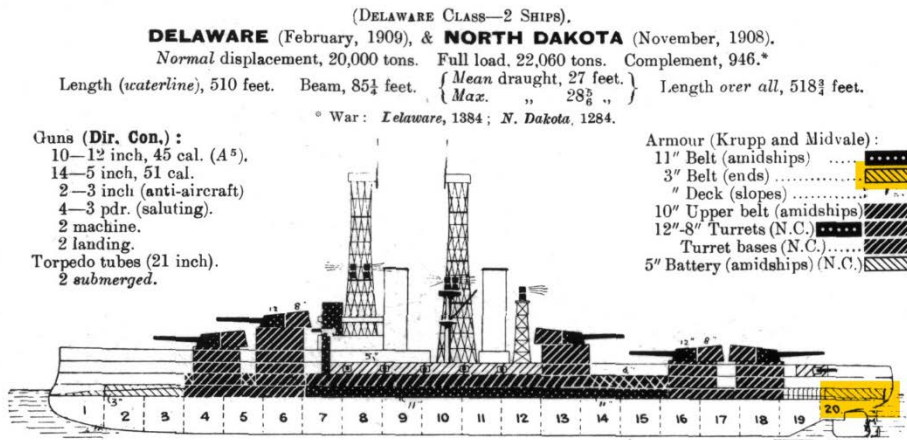
By this time the German battle line had turned north, so with the American squadron steaming northeast, the two forces were closing the range quickly. Rodman turned to the north at about 1240, to run parallel to the German ships with the distance between the two lines of about 12,000 yards (six nautical miles), a relatively short range for a big gun duel at this point in the war. Both sides had the range dialed in, and began scoring hits on the enemy's ships. *New York* was hit four times with 12 inch shells from the battle cruiser *Hindenburg*, one of which wrecked submerged torpedo flat on the starboard side, and another that struck the top of the tower it but did not penetrate. In return, *New York*'s 14 inch guns scored four hits on the battleship *König*. *Texas* was firing at *König*, too, chalking up three hits on the German battleship. In return, however, *Texas* was hit six times in less than half an hour by the heavy guns of the battle cruiser *Möltke* and the battleship *Grosser Kurfürst*. One hit disabled *Texas*' Number 4 turret.



Markgraf firing at Jutland, by Claus Bergen.

In this phase of the fight, the German battleship *Markgraf* suffered a severe pummeling. In the space of a little more than 20 minutes, *Markgraf* was hit by no fewer than thirteen 12-inch armor-piercing shells from Wyoming. Although these did considerable general damage, only one of them resulted in significant damage, disabling for a time the German battleship's midships turret.

At 1259 *Delaware* was hit by two 12-inch shells from the battleship *Kronprinz*. The first struck a turret top without penetrating the armor, but the second passed through the thin, 3-inch belt armor at *Delaware*'s stern and disabled her steering gear, and shifted the battleship's rudder into a hard right-hand turn. *Delaware* swung out of her position, third in the American battle line, and began turning to starboard toward the German battle line less than 6 miles away. *Delaware* steamed in two complete, 360° circles before her rudder gear could be cleared and the ship got under control again. *Delaware* moved into her new position at the end of the American battle line, aft of *Wyoming*.

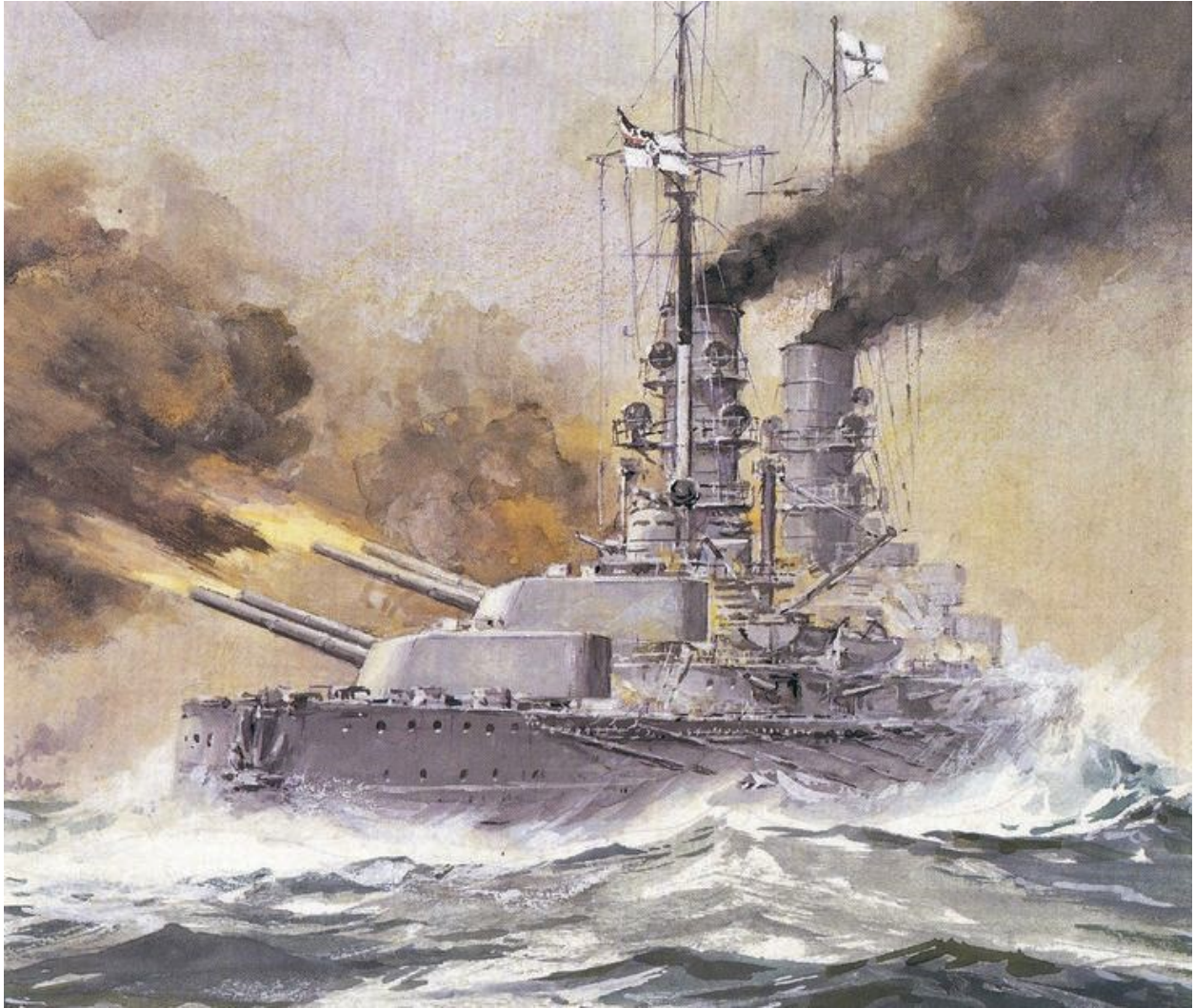


Contemporary diagram of Delaware's armor, showing (highlighted) the thin, 3-inch belt near her stern. A 12-inch shell from Kronprinz penetrated this armor and wrecked Delaware's steering gear.

Shortly after *Delaware* was hit and (temporarily) fell out of the American line, Boedicker ordered his own battle line to make a 180° turn starboard, to run almost due south. Rodman executed a similar turn with the American line, putting both forces on parallel, southerly courses that they would maintain for the next two hours. Distance between the two battle lines varied only a little, generally being between 9000 and 12,000 yards (4.5 to 6 nautical miles).

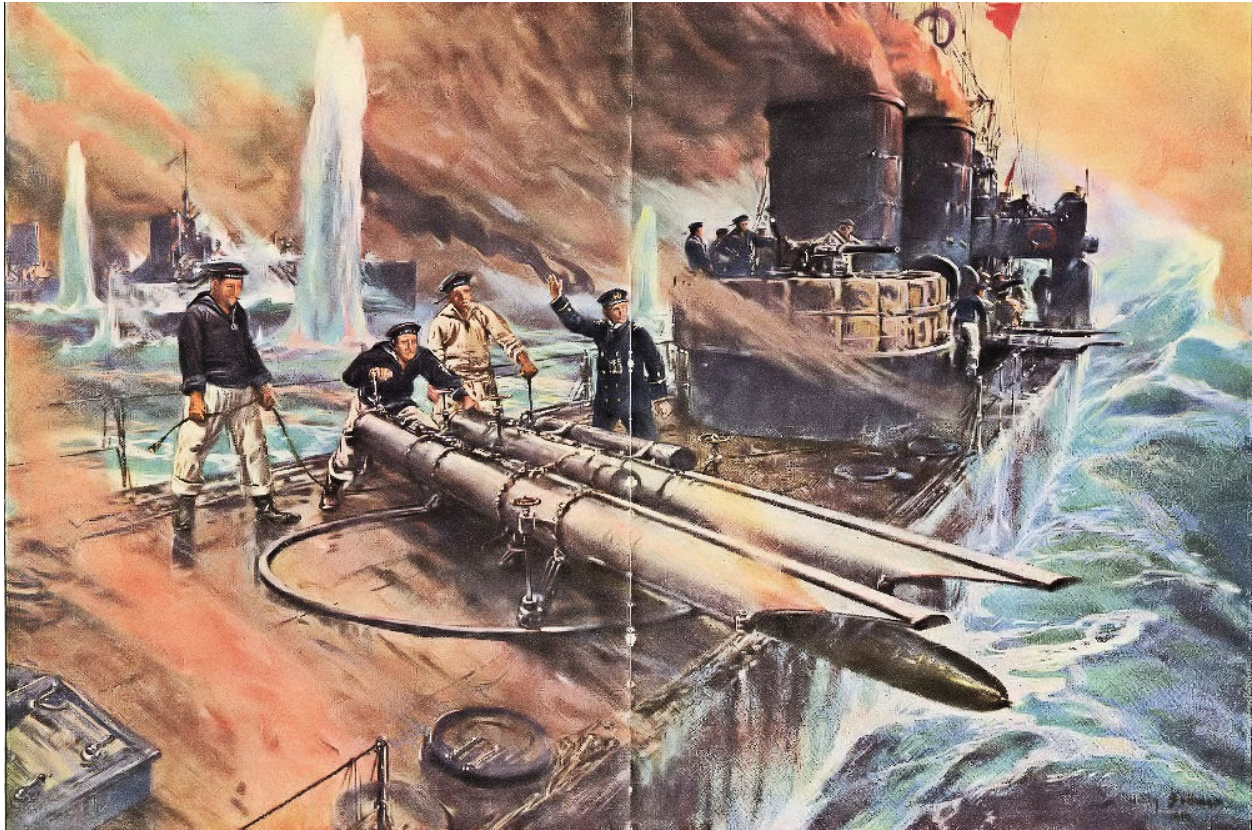
As the two battle lines steam southward, both found the range and began inflicting heavy damage on the opposing line. The Americans, perhaps in their inexperience, made one of the errors that the British had at Jutland, distributing their fire unevenly with two or more ships targeting a single German vessel the same time, while letting others avoid fire altogether. At 1328 a 12 inch shell from *Wyoming* penetrated *Kronprinz*'s armor and damaged the German ship's rudder, causing her to fall out of line and steam at an oblique angle toward the Americans, just five miles distant. Over the next several minutes, until she could be coaxed back into position, *Kronprinz* came under fire from *Wyoming*, *New York*, and *Texas*. A shell from *Wyoming* disabled one turret at 1328, and another at 1340 penetrated the top of tour it Anton, setting off a flash fire in the gun house, killing the men there and in the shell-handling room directly below it. At this range, the Americans' secondary batteries were able to engage as well in the German battleship was hit numerous times with high explosive shells that tore into the superstructure. At 1343, a 12-inch shell from *Delaware* passed through the top of *Kronprinz*'s aftermost turret, Emil, followed two minutes later by a 14-inch shell from *Texas* that destroyed the midships turret, Cesar. With most of her firepower knocked out and fire burning out of control,

Kronprinz detached from Boedicker's battle line a second time and gradually drifted out of the fight.



S.M.S. Kronprinz.

On to the south the two lines steamed, each pounding the other heavily. Just moments after firing the shell that destroyed *Kronprinz*'s after turret, *Delaware* was hit by two torpedoes — one fired by the German torpedo boat *G102*, and the other believed fired from the battle cruiser *Hindenburg*. Flooding from the two torpedo strikes quickly got out of control, and *Delaware* broke from the American line again and, with her engines throttled back to reduce flooding began steaming away to the northwest, out of the action. Flooding continued, however, and it was soon clear the ship was doomed.



Contemporary depiction of a German torpedo boat in action.

After almost two hours of this running fight, Boedicker recognized that Rodman's squadron was not going to fall back, even though he was now reduced to four battleships against three German battleships and to battle cruisers. (*Delaware* and *Kronprinz* were both effectively out of the fight at this point.) Although both sides had been badly pounded and suffered numerous casualties, neither was willing to break off the action. Boedicker then signaled his torpedo boat squadron commander, Theo Ortlieb, and ordered a risky daytime torpedo attack on the American line. The German torpedo boats began their run in just after 1500, and released a barrage of torpedoes primarily at the trailing ships of the American line. At 1510 and again at 1512, torpedo struck the port side of *Wyoming*, unleashing heavy flooding through the ship. *Wyoming* broke out of line at 1525, and was soon dead in the water. The third torpedo struck *Wyoming* at 1549, and as a motionless target she came under concentrated fire from the battleships *König* and *Markgraf*, and the battle cruiser *Hindenburg*.

At 1511, *Florida* was struck by the first of two torpedoes. *Florida* flooded faster than either of her consorts, and began to settle in the water almost immediately. Like *Wyoming*, the sinking *Florida* came under heavy fire from both the primary and secondary batteries of the German capital ships. In

both cases, most of the loss of life aboard these American battleships happened after the fatal torpedo damage, as the crew made efforts initially to fight the fires and, later, evacuate the sinking hulls.

Rodman now bowed to the inevitable, and ordered a turn away from the ragged, irregular German line. He had not anticipated the German torpedo boat attack, and by the time he gave the orders to maneuver to avoid the threat, it was too late. *New York* and *Texas* set a course to the west, hoping to get out of the range of the Germans' guns and perhaps hoping as well that Boedicker has also had his fill of fighting. Boedicker turned to pursue the retreating American battleships but, after about 90 minutes gave up the chase and turned back to an easterly heading.

During this final phase of the battle, the British destroyer flotilla moved into screen the withdrawing American battleships. The destroyers' flotilla commander, Lieutenant Commander Cian Rhys-Craddock in *Valkyrie*, showed extreme aggressiveness in attempting to fend off pursuing German light cruisers and torpedo boats. In the process, *Valkyrie* was hit at least fifteen times by German shells, including once by the main, 11-inch battery of the battle cruiser *Möltke*. Rhys-Craddock and his executive officer were both killed, and all the other officers wounded.

The American and British casualties were grievous — almost 1000 dead, and almost 2000 more prisoners of the Germans. The toll might have been much worse, given that the seas were not rough, were relatively warm, and there were several hours of daylight remaining after the main action ended in which to conduct rescue operations. Although the German ships had been mauled, in particular *Kronprinz*, none of them were in immediate danger of sinking. The action at Cleaver Bank had been a decisive and undeniable victory for Vice Admiral Boedicker in the German High Seas Fleet.

Casualties: British Grand Fleet

Ship	Status	Crew	KIA	Wounded	Survivors
BB New York	Medium damage	1009	38	15	956
BB Texas	Heavy damage	967	54	25	888
BB Wyoming	Sunk	993	365	145	483
BB Florida	Sunk	909	233	228	447
BB Delaware	Sunk	881	222	65	594
CL Comus	Light damage	310	6	1	303
CL Cordelia	Light damage	331	2	2	326
CL Calliope	No damage	312	0	0	312
CL Caroline	No damage	318	0	0	318
CL Constance	No damage	296	0	0	296
DD Valkyrie	Sunk	115	24	22	69
DD Vectis	No damage	104	0	0	104
DD Vendetta	No damage	120	0	0	120
DD Vega	No damage	110	0	0	110
DD Vesper	No damage	102	0	0	102
Totals:		6,876	943	505	5,428

*Thirty-nine survivors of the sunken Delaware were picked up by Calliope; all the remaining survivors from that ship, Florida, Wyoming, and Valkyrie – 1,554 in total -- were picked up by the Germans and became prisoners of war.



German battle cruisers in action at Jutland, by Claus Bergen.

Casualties: German High Seas Fleet

Ship	Status	Crew	KIA	Wounded	Survivors
BB König	Heavy damage	1028	48	15	965
BB Kronprinz	Heavy damage	1153	186	103	864
BB Grosser Kurfürst	Medium damage	1115	46	23	1046
BB Markgraf	Medium damage	1142	26	27	1089
BC Hindenburg	Light damage	1414	12	6	1395
BC Moltke	No damage	983	0	0	983
CL Karlsruhe	Light damage	357	1	1	355
CL Königsberg	No damage	469	0	0	469
CL Nürnberg	No damage	473	0	0	473
CL Pillau	No damage	402	0	0	402
CL Graudenz	No damage	391	0	0	391
DD G103	Medium damage	104	5	2	98
DD G101	Medium damage	105	5	5	95
CL Frankfurt	Light damage	429	3	2	424
DD G104	No damage	105	0	0	105
DD G102	No damage	99	0	0	99
		9,768	331	183	9,253

Aftermath

The action at Cleaver bank effectively wiped out the American contingent of the British Grand Fleet. *New York* and *Texas* would be undergoing extensive repairs and refit into late August, and two additional battleships sent from the United States (*Nevada* and *Oklahoma*) did not arrive in the United Kingdom until July 25. These latter ships underwent an accelerated working up schedule after their arrival, as their predecessors had done, but were not considered ready for frontline duty in the North Sea until late September, just six weeks before the Armistice on November 11.

Rear Admiral Rodman was relieved of command on June 17, and a court of inquiry was held into his actions at Cleaver Bank. The court held that Rodman has exercised poor judgement in exposing his squadron to the German torpedo boat attack that sank *Florida* and *Wyoming*, but also that he had exhibited initiative and aggressiveness in taking on Boedicker's squadron, even though the American forces were outnumbered. The court took no further action against Rodman, who returned to the United States immediately after the conclusion of the proceedings. Rodman was assigned

to the staff of U.S. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, where he remained until being placed on the retired list in January 1919. It was said that, aside from a two-minute interview when Rodman arrived at the Navy Department in September, Daniels never spoke to that officer again.

The British posthumously awarded Lieutenant Commander Rhys-Craddock of *Valkyrie* the Victoria Cross, for his valorous defense of the withdrawing battleships *New York* and *Texas*, at the cost of his own ship and his life.

In Germany, the victory at Cleaver Bank seemed like divine intervention. Illuminated spectacles were held around the country, and the Kaiser traveled to Bremerhaven to present personally medals to the officers and crew's of all the ships involved, after having the American and British prisoners marched past his reviewing stand to a brass band thumping out *die Preußenmarsch*. After so many defeats and a few minor successes at sea, the action at Cleaver Bank represented an absolute and unqualified success for German arms. Even with the desperate shortage of raw materials in Germany after four years of hard war, sufficient metal was found to strike off commemorative medallions to celebrate the event, that were sold in the tens of thousands to raise funds for naval hospitals.

Unfortunately, the euphoria over Cleaver Bank in Germany was to be short-lived. Dramatic and decisive as it was, the German victory there had done nothing to change the basic calculus of the war, or the ultimate outcome of the conflict. The naval high command hoped to be able to use Cleaver Bank as a building block on which to base much larger sortie against the Royal Navy in October 1918, but growing dissatisfaction among seamen in the fleet ultimately led to mutiny, with the crews of many ships refusing to sail. Within a few weeks, the German war effort collapsed altogether.

Discussion

For the Americans, the loss of *Delaware* early in the action, after being hit by only three main battery German shells (only one of which caused critical damage) and two torpedoes, was especially galling. *Delaware's* damage control party's inability to control flooding after the torpedo hits underscored the American battleships' vulnerability to that weapon, as well as revealed weaknesses in crew organization and techniques to contain the flooding. Although *Delaware* remained afloat for an extended period after falling out of the battle line the second time, a fact that allowed a safe

evacuation of most of her crew, there was little that could be done effectively to save the ship and she finally sank at 1609, a little more than two hours after the torpedo strikes.

Despite having five capital ships to the Germans' six, the Americans were not significantly outgunned. To the contrary, while the American battleships mounted a total of 52 main battery guns in aggregate to the Germans' 58, all the American guns were equal to or more powerful than their opponents' weapons. Five of the six German ships mounted 12-inch guns, while the battle cruiser *Möltke* 11-inch rifles. By contrast, the three older American battleships all mounted 12-inch guns, while *New York* and *Texas* each carried ten 14-inch guns. The Americans entered the engagement firing a heavier total broadside of 25,200 kg in armor-piercing shells, against the Germans' 22,460 kg. The Americans' accuracy was also substantially better than that of the Germans. The five U.S. battleships fired, in aggregate, 3,132 main battery shells, scoring 84 hits, for a hit percentage of 2.68%. Boedicker's six ships together fired 3,550 rounds and tallied only 66 hits, for a hit percentage of 1.86%. That the Americans, inexperienced in combat and relatively new to the theater, performed well against the veterans of Jutland spoke highly of their gunnery training and fire control systems.

Nevertheless, despite having the weight of broadside and better gunnery to their advantage, the American ships failed to produce a decisive result through firepower. This was undoubtedly the result of the German ships being much better armored than those of the Americans. The newest best-armored ships in the American line, *New York* and *Texas*, had maximum belt armor of 12 inches, while the other three American ships had 11-inch belts. The four German battleships, by comparison, were equipped with 14-inch belts of Krupp armor, that provided much more effective protection against enemy fire at the range at which the Cleaver bank action was fought. It's telling that the most severely damaged of the German battleships, *Kronprinz*, lost three of her five turrets and was reduced to a mangled wreck above the waterline, but was never in danger of sinking due to flooding or internal damage by gunfire penetrations to the hull.