Father of the Battleship

(He was Admiral on the Fleet, Lord Fisher of Kilverstone.)

By Charles Livingston McCain

Jackie Fisher, as he was known to his contemporaries, was First Sea Lord of the British Admiralty from 1904 to 1910 and in that position he was responsible for the construction of the world’s first modern battleship. Indeed, historians can rightfully bestow the title of “Father of the Battleship” on Jackie Fisher.

Like many men of vision Fisher ruffled feathers and made enemies. A sympathetic biographer described him as “volatile, egocentric, overbearing, belligerent and bellicose.” One of Fisher’s good friends, Lord Esher, wrote this of him. “He elbowed his way through love and war with a directness and self confidence that never blanched at any obstacle...Jackie was a Maccabean - a true believer in the God of Battles, in the Jahveh of the ancient Hebrew. His Bible was the Old Testament, which he knew by heart, without a dash of New in his disposition.” While these descriptions of Fisher by his friends seem somewhat bereft of compliments his enemies gave him none at all. When Fisher announced his resignation as First Sea Lord in 1910, Admiral Charles Beresford, one of Fisher’s most ardent enemies, suggested this toast: “to the death of fraud, espionage, intimidation, corruption, tyranny and self interest which have been a nightmare over the finest service in the world for the last four years.”

Fisher was a complex and driven man, intensely patriotic and very loyal to the Navy. He fiercely loathed the Germans, loved to waltz and once danced a hornpipe for the Tsar of Russia. He was admired by many and thought to be a genius by some. Yet in 1915 he was again forced from the Admiralty by his enemies, the second time by Winston Churchill, who sought to make Fisher the scapegoat for the failure of Churchill’s disastrous Gallipoli campaign. Fisher was hounded in defeat and forgotten in victory for when the German High Seas Fleet sailed into the British naval base at Scapa Flow to surrender, Jackie Fisher had not even been invited to watch. And yet it was Jackie Fisher who was most responsible for Britain’s maritime supremacy in the First World War. In 1904 Fisher had taken the complacent and sleepy British Navy and had shaken it to its keel through reform and modernization and in so doing he invigorated the British Navy enabling it to maintain Britannia’s rule over the waves throughout the war.

John Arbuthnot Fisher was commissioned into the Royal Navy in 1854 at the age of thirteen. The first ship he served on was HMS Victory, Lord Nelson’s flag-ship at the Battle of Trafalgar, forty nine years earlier. Indeed, as if to remind Fisher that the Navy had not changed since Nelson’s time he witnessed eight men being flogged for petty offenses on his first day aboard. And if Nelson’s memory did not sufficiently suffuse through Fisher while on the Victory it did when he dined ashore with the Commander in Chief at Plymouth, Sir Charles Parker, last serving officer of Lord Nelson’s famous “Band of Brothers.” Later Fisher served on other sailing “battleships” during the Crimean War and he participated in the Royal Navy’s somewhat inglorious bombardment of Alexandria, Egypt in 1882.

In 1901, the year Queen Victoria died and Edward VII came to the throne, Fisher was Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet with headquarters at Malta. When Lord Selborne, then First Lord of the Admiralty, visited the Mediterranean Fleet in that year he was so impressed with Fisher and Fisher’s ideas on modernizing the navy that he resolved to bring Fisher back to England and allow him to put some of his ideas in practice throughout
the fleet. And Fisher returned to England at the end of 1901 to become Second Sea Lord, a position which put him in charge of personnel and training. In the two years he was Second Sea Lord, Fisher reworked the entire training scheme of the Navy and told those who opposed him to “get on or get out.” Fisher, as the Navy began to discover, not only had original ideas but he had the tenacity to carry them out. His first changes came in officer training. Heretofore the Navy had trained its officer cadets by having them spend 14 months on board HMS Britannia, a wooden vessel anchored off Dartmouth. After their term on the old Britannia the cadets were sent for a further four months training on the cruiser HMS Isis. They were then dispatched to the fleet, being, it was hoped, the correct mixture of officer and gentleman.

In 1903 Fisher introduced a new system whereby boys of 13 (the previous age of cadets was 15) were sent to the newly established Naval College at Osborne from which, after several years of study, they transferred to the Senior Naval College at Dartmouth. The cadets were then to spend four years in training as contrasted with the previous term of one and a half years. Fisher sought to persuade the government to pay the cadet’s school fees, a scheme which was refused by the government and dubbed “socialistic” by King Edward.

Many thought Fisher had done enough damage to the Navy but his most revolutionary scheme was yet to come when he was promoted to First Sea Lord in 1904. Fisher persuaded the Admiralty to construct a new type of battleship, radical in both its design and conception. The new battleship displaced 18,000 tons, was armed with ten twelve inch guns and could move through the waves at 21 knots, driven thus by her specially built turbine engines, the first ever put into a British battleship. (By way of comparison the most modern battleship then in the British fleet, the King Edward VII, displaced 16,350 tons, was armed with four twelve inch guns, and had a speed of 18 knots.) Fisher named his new battleship HMS Dreadnought, after his personal motto; “Fear God and Dread Nought." HMS Dreadnought immediately rendered every other battleship in the world obsolete. Tradition minded officers of the Royal Navy condemned the ship but when Dreadnought passed her sea trials without incident her critics were silenced.

Admiral Fisher was not content simply to launch HMS Dreadnought. Fearing God and dreading nought he plowed forward to rebuild the entire Royal Navy. Fisher divided the now partially obsolescent navy into sheep, goats, and llamas. Sheep were battle-worthy ships that would be kept. Goats were ships that were broken up or sold. Llamas were ships whose fate was undecided. At the bottom of a list of 157 of the Royal Navy’s most venerable warships Fisher wrote, “scrap the lot." Fisher’s drive to build was so great that by the end of 1912 nineteen battleships had been built and twelve were a building.

Fisher had but one more holy writ of the Royal Navy’s to change. Its strategy, before Fisher’s tenure at the Admiralty, had traditionally been to scatter the Royal Navy in small squadrons around the vast British Empire. The mission of these squadrons was to protect trade and guard the King’s “dominions across the seas,” but Fisher knew that Britain’s most likely enemy was not the King of the Zulus or the Chief of the Pathans but King Edward’s nephew, Wilhem II, King of Prussia and German Emperor. Fisher insisted, and events vindicated his position, that it was Germany that posed the greatest threat to Britain and therefore the Royal Navy should be concentrated around the British Isles to protect the island capitol of the Empire. And over the objections of his by now numerous critics (including the Prince of Wales, later George V), he called most of the fleet home from its exotic anchorages around the world and stationed them in the North Sea and the English Channel.

Fisher, in the course of his reforms made many enemies, the most vocal of whom was Lord Charles Beresford, Commander of the Channel Fleet. Beresford and Fisher quarreled so bitterly over naval reform that at a court levee, in front of the King and several Cabinet ministers, Beresford refused to shake Fisher’s proffered hand and then turned his back on Fisher, who was Beresford’s commanding officer. The King and several of the ministers were furious at this example of rudeness and insubordination but Beresford was popular in the country and the Prime Minister refused to allow his dismissal from the service. But Fisher never did anything to soothe his critics. Although a majority of the younger officers, who named themselves the Blue Water School, supported Fisher, many of the older admirals did not. And Fisher, rather than trying to win them over dismissed them as the Blue Funk School. Further Fisher referred to Lord Charles Beresford as the leader of the “Syndicate of Discontent.” Fisher simply broke the careers of the men who stood in his way unless they were politically powerful men like Lord Beresford.

At times it seemed to many that Fisher’s enemies must overwhelm him but Fisher had a secure anchor in his close friendship with the most important man in the Empire, King Edward VII. The King agreed with Fisher’s reforms and admired Fisher’s impetuosity although when Fisher urged the King to order a surprise attack on the German fleet the King had told him that he must be mad to contemplate such a thing. At one of numerous times when Fisher’s foes were howling for his resignation King
Edward told him: “You are the best hated man in the British Empire.”

“Perhaps I am,” Fisher admitted.

“Do you know I am the only friend you have?” the King queried.

“Your Majesty is no doubt right,” Fisher replied, “but you have backed a winner.” The lengths to which Fisher was allowed to carry his friendship with the King is best illustrated by an exchange that took place at a dinner in the resort of Carlsbad. Admiral Fisher was having an intimate conversation with a young lady at the table when King Edward said, “You have better be careful of these sailors, you know the saying, they have a wife in every port.” Fisher made this retort to the King who was notorious for his philandering, “Wouldn’t you, Sir, have loved to be a sailor?” The stunned silence at the table was broken by a roar of laughter from King Edward.

Fisher was not ungrateful to King Edward for his friendship. He once told the King: “They would have eaten me but for your Majesty.” When Edward died in 1910 Fisher wrote “I can’t get over the personal great blank I feel in his death...there was something in the charm of his heart that still chains one to his memory.” Edward was not the only member of the Royal Family who liked Jackie Fisher. Edward’s wife, Queen Alexandra, was a devoted friend of Fisher’s and referred to him as “dear Admiral Jack.” Fisher, who shared Queen Alexandra’s hatred of the Germans called her, “blessed Queen Alexandra.” In one of his last acts of friendship, King Edward (who was to die on May 20, 1910) made Fisher a baron in November 1909. Fisher took the title of Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Edward had wanted to give Fisher a higher rank but Asquith, the Prime Minister, had pointed out to the king that not even Lord Nelson had been so rewarded after smashing Napoleon’s fleet at Aboukir Bay in 1798. Fisher was unaware of all this negotiating and he wrote in his journal that he was upset a being made “a common or garden peer like the man who makes linoleum or lends money for elections.” Fisher though he should have been made a viscount like a “successful brewer.”

In the end Fisher’s unpopularity was so great that not even King Edward could protect him. Rather than harm the government in the General Election of 1910, Fisher resigned in January of that year. He was recalled to the Admiralty at the onset of the First World War, by Winston Churchill, then First Lord or civil head of the Admiralty. In 1915 he resigned at Churchill’s instigation to take the blame for the defeat of Churchill’s assault at Gallipoli. It was forgotten by all at that time that Fisher had said, in 1908, that war would come in late summer of 1914 because the German shipbuilding program would be complete and they would have enough ships for war.

Fisher’s reforms had come in time, however. When the German navy ventured out to do battle they were met by the British Home Fleet at the Battle of Jutland. Although, technically the Germans won this epic sea battle (the only time in the history of naval warfare when modern battleships slugged it out in view of each other), they broke off the attack, and steamed home. The Kaiser refused, in spite of the pleadings of Admiral Tirpitz, Germany’s naval commander, to risk his fleet again and the proud German High Seas Fleet, built at such cost to the German treasure, sat out the rest of the war under the watchful eyes of the British blockade. Even Fisher’s old foe Churchill, later admitted Fisher had been right. Writing in 1923, Churchill said: “no doubt whatsoever that Fisher was right in nine tenths of what he fought for. His great reforms sustained the power of the Royal Navy at the most critical period in its history...It was Fisher who hoisted the storm signal and beat all hands to quarters.”

Fisher was a man of such extraordinary genius that just as he realized years ahead of his time the necessity for battleships, he also realized years ahead of his time that air power rendered battleships obsolete. Before his death in 1920 Fisher wrote: “to build battleships so long as cheaper craft can destroy them...is merely to breed Kilkenny cats unable to catch rats or mice...Why keep any of the present lot? All you want is the present naval side of the airforce.” But no one in the Royal Navy was listening anymore. The Navy, once they had embraced the concept of the battleship, refused to let it go. Fisher’s prophecy came back to haunt the British when the capital warships HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales were sent to the bottom off Singapore by Japanese airplanes.
He was a visionary in an era of limited sight, a revolutionary in a time of complacency, and one of the greatest sailors in a navy that had known many. It is Fisher, however, who best describes himself. “I entered the navy penniless, friendless, and forlorn. I have had to fight like hell and fighting like hell has made me what I am.”