

Sinking of Bismarck, Mightiest Battleship, Retold

(Editor's note: Twenty-two years ago the greatest sea chase of modern naval history was nearing an end in the Atlantic. A solitary German battleship, the mightiest the world had ever seen, was challenging the supremacy of the British Royal Navy. Before the drama was over, two famous ships and 3,000 men died, and the lifeline of Britain had been between the scissors.)

By JOHN G. WARNER
United Press International
The dark ship slid down an eerie hall of ice and fog, disappearing now and again in wandering patches of mist. The curl and slap of the frigid sea on her bows was lost in the smothering silence of the Arctic. She was His Majesty's Cruiser Suffolk, patrolling the Denmark Strait on the bleak evening of May 23, 1941.

It was a bleak evening everywhere for beleaguered Britain. The elite of the Wehrmacht was winning Crete; another Dunkirk appeared imminent. The Luftwaffe was hurling its last great onslaught at London, and the battle of the Atlantic was at its peak. Depth charges were stacked on the stern of HMS Suffolk as she raced through the Arctic twilight, but she was not looking for submarines.

The cruiser hugged close to a wall of fog as she ran the southward leg of her patrol. Behind her fog were the minefields off Iceland. On the other side, dimly visible through flurries of snow, lay the great icecap, and beyond that, the mountains of Greenland.

All Eyes North
On the bridge, the eyes of the watch strained astern, to the north.

It was Newell, the starboard after lookout, who cried: "Ship bearing green, 140 degrees!"

Pounding down from the north, nearly nine miles away and barely visible through snow and mist, was the mighty German battleship Bismarck, sprinting for the Atlantic to prey upon the convoys that kept Britain alive.

The Bismarck was the world's most powerful vessel. She displaced 56,000 tons fully equipped and oiled; she could steam 8,000 miles before refueling and her eight 15-inch guns, equipped with radar range-finders, could strike an enemy 18 miles away.

She was to venture alone, but for the cruiser Prinz Eugen, into the ocean that British ships had ruled for centuries.

On the 20th of May, Bismarck and her consort steamed through the Kattegat for Bergen, Norway, under Vice Adm. Gunter Lutjens.

Her passage did not escape British agents. By the next

day, Adm. Sir John Tovey, commander in chief, Home Fleet, knew the Bismarck lay in Grimstad Fiord, south of Bergen.

Alerts Fleet
Tovey flashed the word to Suffolk and her sister ship, Norfolk, on the Denmark Strait patrol, the favorite route for German ships breaking into the Atlantic. He alerted the Home Fleet to be ready to steam from Scapa Flow.

But Tovey, flying his flag aboard King George V, could not take the fleet out without further word of the Bismarck. If he left too soon, he might run out of fuel before he could find her; if he left too late, she might gain such a lead he could never find her.

The weather closed in over Norway. The R.A.F. sent in flight after flight, with bombers and torpedo planes ready to follow, but the fog was so bad most of the pilots couldn't even find the coast.

At 9 p.m. on May 21 Tovey ordered Vice Adm. L. E. Holland, aboard the battleship Hood, to take the battleship Prince of Wales and a squadron of destroyers and shape a course toward Iceland. It was seven hours since the last news of the Bismarck.

The weather was even worse on the morning of the 22d.

Late that afternoon, a crew took off from the R.A.F. station near Kirkwall in the Orkneys and crossed to Norway. They had luck. They found Bergen and raced through the flak at rooftop height toward their objective.

Bismarck Loose
To Tovey at Scapa Flow crackled the news he had waited for: Grimstad Fiord was empty; the Bismarck was loose.

"Two ships bearing green, 140 degrees," cried Newell aboard the Suffolk as the Bismarck and her consort hove down upon them. The Suffolk slid hastily into the protective mist. Her job was to shadow the German squadron as it raced toward the Atlantic shipping lanes, and move the British battleships in for the kill.

The Bismarck would blow the Suffolk out of the water, given half a chance. So the Suffolk waited in the fog until the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen had passed.

The radio sent out enemy sighting messages in a constant flow through the half light of the bitter arctic night. A few miles away, HMS Norfolk picked up the trail, too.

The chase was on. It went on through six days of rain, snow and Atlantic gales during which the hunters and the hunted never glimpsed the sun and, before it was over, 3,000 miles from where it started, thousands of men were dead in its wake.

The signals from the shadowing cruisers were picked up by the Hood and the Prince of Wales south of Iceland. On Hood, Vice Adm. Holland ordered high speed.

Hood Said Match
Confidence reigned. Hood was the biggest warship in the Royal Navy, and practically every man in the Admiralty had served aboard her. If anything afloat was a match for the Bismarck, it was Hood.

Prince of Wales, 22 years the Hood's junior, was so raw that some of her main turrets were not in working order and she steamed on such short notice that workmen from the shipbuilders were still aboard.

At 15 minutes past midnight, Adm. Holland ordered the battle-ensigns hoisted. The men on the Hood and the Prince of Wales went to action stations. At 5:35 a.m. on the 24th, lookouts aboard Hood made out two ships off the starboard beam. They were Bismarck and her cruiser.

With the Hood in the lead, the British men of war turned to close the Germans. Adm. Holland ordered a course that closed the gap quickly, but it also prevented the after turrets of both ships from bearing on the enemy, while still showing the big guns of the Bismarck most of the length of the British ships.

British Open Fire
At 8:49 a.m., Holland gave the signal to open fire. The range was 25,000 yards. Bismarck and Prinz Eugen opened fire immediately, and it was accurate. A fire broke out by the Hood's mainmast, but was quickly brought under control. The angry orange

flashes from the big guns of four ships searched the grey sky and the splashes of their shells rose hundreds of feet in the air.

Adm. Holland ordered a turn to bring the Hood's broadside to bear on Bismarck.

The ponderous Hood heeled into the turn, her guns blazing, and suddenly she disappeared in a mighty eruption of flame. A dazzling ball of fire soared a thousand feet into the air. The Hood was gone, smashed beneath the sea as if by a gigantic hammer blow.

A radioman aboard the Norfolk, standing off to watch the battle of giants, gazed in shocked silence at the message he had to send to the admiralty.

"Hood has blown up," At Chequers on that Saturday morning, Sir Winston Churchill was awakened to be told of the disaster.

He was saddened, but not disheartened. Surely the Prince of Wales and the other ships converging on the scene could handle the situation.

He told his guest, Averell Harriman, "Hood has blown up, but we have got the Bismarck for certain."

An hour and a half later, he knew the truth. His secretary appeared with a strained look. "Have we got her?" the Prime Minister asked.

"No," replied the secretary, "and the Prince of Wales has broken off the action."

Prince of Wales had to sheer sharply to miss the pall of smoke that hung over the Hood's grave, and the murderous fire of the Bismarck fell promptly upon the battleship.

A 15-inch shell crashed into the bridge, killing or wounding every man on it but the captain and a singleman. Blood dripped through the voicepipe into the plotting room below.

Seven hits racked the Prince of Wales in moments. Staggering, most of her guns malfunctioning, she reeled away from the battle.

The Bismarck had, with six salvos, blown to bits one of the most powerful vessels afloat, and with another dozen driven away a second battleship. Dismally, the cruisers and the battered battleship picked up the trail and began shadowing the Bismarck southward.

Three Men Survive
On their way, they picked up the only three men who survived the sinking of the Hood. More than 1,500 hands went down with the old battleship.

In London, the admiralty moved swiftly. From Gibraltar, Force H, consisting of the battleship Renown, the carrier Ark Royal, and a cruiser, was ordered northward to intercept the Bismarck. Other ships from all over the Atlantic were ordered into the gigantic hunt.

At sea, Sir John Tovey, leading his squadron aboard King George V, set a course which he hoped would bring him upon the Germans a few hours after dawn on the next day, the 25th.

Within six hours of the loss of the Hood, four battleships, two battlecruisers, two carriers and dozens of cruisers and destroyers were on the Bismarck's trail.

Sir John was concerned that the Bismarck might put

on a quick burst of speed and lose the cruisers shadowing her. To try to prevent that, he ordered the carrier Victorious to take a cruiser screen and steam to within range to launch her planes.

On the night of the 24th, she flew her planes off in a storm without mishap. They found the Bismarck - after nearly setting upon a U. S. Coast Guard cutter that blundered into the drama - and launched the attack.

Score A Hit
They scored a hit, and returned, landing on the heaving deck without the loss of a single plane. It was the first time many of them had landed on a carrier.

It was also the first time carrier-launched planes had ever attacked a battleship at sea, sounding the first toll of the battleship's death knell.

The torpedo that caught the Bismarck was little more than a mosquito bite to her armor. But all was not well aboard the German raider. She had suffered only two hits in the battle that morning, but one of them burst into an oil tank, losing much of her fuel and contaminating more with sea water. She needed repairs.

Later that night, the Prinz Eugen slipped away unseen. The mighty battleship Bismarck was on her own.

Everything seemed set for a showdown on the morning of the 25th. But about 3 a.m., the Suffolk, zig-zagging to ward off submarines, lost contact with her quarry on the outer leg. She turned back on the inner leg, but failed to regain contact as usual. She cast about frantically with her radar.

Bismarck Gone
The Bismarck was gone, disappeared in the vast Atlantic. Consternation and fear swept Britain.

The battle of Crete was at its height, requiring most of Churchill's attention. "Nevertheless," he wrote afterwards, "only one scene riveted my background thoughts:

"This tremendous Bismarck... perhaps almost invulnerable to gunfire, rusting southward towards our convoys."

The Bismarck had to be found.

But Adm. Lutjens, aboard the Bismarck, didn't realize he had shaken off his shadowers. He submitted a long radio transmission to Germany.

British direction - finding stations picked up the signals. They plotted the signals wrong, making it appear the Bismarck had turned and was heading back for the North Sea.

Accordingly, Sir John Tovey ordered his hunters back to the North. They lost five hours steaming the wrong way before the talkative Bismarck made another radio transmission. This time they

were plotted right. The Bismarck was undoubtedly heading in a southerly direction. Sir John wheeled his ships back around.

Oil Running Out
The problem of fuel was growing more critical every hour. Sir John could do no more high speed steaming for he was running out of oil.

The night of the 25th passed dimly. On the morning of the 26th, coastal command planes found the Bismarck. She was making for an Atlantic port. And she was so far ahead of Sir John Tovey and his pack that, without some sort of miracle, they could never catch her.

The only British force within reach of her was Sir James Somerville's force H from Gibraltar. The only capital ship in Force H was the battlecruiser, Renown - no match for Bismarck.

The only hope - a slim one - was that a carrier strike from the Ark Royal would somehow slow the Bismarck enough for the battleships to overtake her before she came under the Luftwaffe's protection.

The battleship Rodney joined forces with King George V and the pursuit continued. The battered Prince of Wales, her fuel supply sagging, headed for port. Fuel supplies aboard King George V and Rodney were ebbing rapidly, but Churchill ordered Sir John to keep up the chase even if he had to be towed home.

They were in U-boat country. Summoned by German radio, wolfpacks were rushing to the scene to protect the Bismarck.

Storm Thickens
The storm around the Ark Royal was worsening rapidly. Nevertheless, a strike of Swordfish planes was lined up on the deck. Such was the heave of the sea that the end of the flight deck was rising and falling 56 feet. Planes had never been flown off in such weather.

At 3 p.m. on the 26th of May, the Ark Royal flew off her first strike. The pilots promptly mistook the cruiser Sheffield for the Bismarck and attacked her.

The torpedoes, fortunately, missed, and the dejected pilots returned to the Ark Royal. There was time for only one more attack. Then it would be too dark, and too stormy, for more, and in the morning, at the rate she was steaming, the Bismarck would be under German air cover.

Again they took off, and this time they found the Bismarck churning through the rain.

The Swordfish dived almost to the waves, flattened out and began their approach through the bursts of flak. One after another, they loosed their torpedoes. Most of them missed.

But one struck the Bismarck in her starboard quarter and it sealed her doom only a few hundred miles from safety. It wrecked her steering and forced her to turn into the wind - directly towards Sir John Tovey's battleships.

Shortly before midnight, Adm. Lutjens radioed Berlin: "Ship unmaneuverable. We shall fight to the last shell. Long live the Fuehrer."

Tovey had his miracle. He decided to wait until morning to close in, despite his flagging fuel supply. His destroyers forged ahead, and through the night they nipped and snapped at the hamstringing giant like wolves at a stag.

A gale was blowing out of the northwest when the 27th dawned and showed the Bismarck floundering in the waves. At 8:47 a.m., the Rodney opened fire, followed in a minute by the flagship. There was a pause, and the Bismarck's guns opened up.

On her third salvo, the Bismarck straddled Rodney, but then a British hit shredded her fire control center and off sharply.

Within half an hour, the

Bismarck was ablaze. Her guns were silent, sagging downward towards the waves or pointing like paralyzed fingers at the sky. The British battleships paraded back and forth, pouring tons of shells into her.

The Rodney even torpedoed her, the first and probably only instance of one battle ship torpedoing another.

But the Bismarck would not sink, and her battle ensign still flew. Tovey could stay no longer; it was already questionable whether he had enough fuel to reach home. He turned away, and told his cruisers to use up what torpedoes they had left on the apparently indestructible Bismarck.

But the end was at hand. The cruiser Dorsetshire slipped two torpedoes into the staggering hulk. The Bismarck shuddered, rolled over on her back and sank. Two thousand of her crew died with her.

In London, the prime minister rose in parliament and told the house that "I have just received news that the Bismarck is sunk."

The house, he observed, "seemed content."

They'll Do It Every Time By Jimmy Hato

HELLO - FLAPP MAPS? THIS IS DOZENS OF THE HIGHWAY COMMISSION AGAIN... WHAT ABOUT THAT TURN-OFF BETWEEN ZIPPER GAP AND CURTAIN FALLS?

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SHOWS HIS TIP-Hubert L. Russell, a Seattle, Wash., taxi driver, holds the 15 cent tip which he was given by an unknown man who had used his taxi, while a passenger, to rob the "drive-in" window of a Seattle bank. Russell was unaware that a robbery was in progress. The bandit took the bank for \$3,800. (UPI)

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