

3,505 Brave Sailors who would never see home again...

Written by Andy Owen



There are many stories from WWII that are front-of-mind for me.

This one has always been right up there...

It is an incredibly tragic - and enormously sad - tale of two iconic ships and a momentous sea battle...

...resulting in a horrific loss of life.

It took place in the early summer of 1941, in the vast, windswept waters of the North Atlantic.

Two great, iconic ships collided, in what has become one of the most dramatic sea battles in history.

The British battlecruiser HMS Hood and the German battleship Bismarck clashed in an engagement that would be remembered for the sheer scale of human tragedy it left in its wake.

HMS Hood was the pride of the Royal Navy.

Launched in 1918 and commissioned in 1920 at the end of the First World War, Hood was the 'poster boy' of British naval power.

For over two decades, HMS Hood served as a floating fortress, projecting British influence across the seas.

She was over 860 feet in length, with a displacement of more than 42,000 tons – and her impressive size, sleek lines and formidable armament, made her both a source of national pride and a deterrent to Britain's enemies.

She was a symbol of British maritime dominance and imperial power.



HMS Hood

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Hood was tasked with hunting German surface raiders she and carried with her, the weight of not only the Royal Navy's expectations, but the hopes of a nation under siege.

Despite her grandeur, however, Hood was not without her weaknesses. Her design, conceived at the end of the previous war, favoured speed and firepower at the expense of armour.

This left her vulnerable to the more modern, heavily armed battleships that emerged in the years leading up to World War II.

Her thinly armoured decks, a consequence of design compromises, were particularly vulnerable to plunging fire from long-range, high-trajectory shells.

It was a flaw that would later prove catastrophic.

By the early 1940's, many within the Royal Navy were aware that Hood was no longer invincible, but she remained a critical asset due to Britain's need for large, powerful ships to defend the Empire.

On the other side of the impending clash, stood the Bismarck, a fearsome symbol of Nazi Germany's naval ambitions.

Launched in 1939, Bismarck was one of the largest battleships ever constructed, rivalling even the Hood in size and power.

With a main battery of eight 15-inch guns and state-of-the-art armour, Bismarck was an incredible fighting machine.

Her design emphasised protection and lethality, making her a fearsome adversary for any Navy.



Bismarck

By 1941, the Third Reich was seeking to cut off Britain from the vital supplies coming from the United States. Bismarck was given orders to raid Allied shipping in the Atlantic, together with the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen.

The Royal Navy, could not allow such a threat to go unchallenged. They were determined to stop Bismarck's breakout into the Atlantic.

It was not just a battle of ships, but of national wills.

The stakes were enormous. If Bismarck succeeded in its mission and got free in the Atlantic, it would reign supreme - and cause total mayhem and massive loss of life.

It would, without doubt, disrupt critical supply lines and tilt the balance of power in the Atlantic, in Germany's favour.

As reports of Bismarck's departure reached London, the Admiralty scrambled HMS Hood, along with the battleship HMS Prince of Wales, to engage Bismarck and the accompanying heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen.

Other ships were ordered into the fray, too.

The Admiralty's decision to deploy Hood despite her known vulnerabilities, underlined the desperation of the situation. Britain needed a decisive victory to maintain morale and control of the seas, because, let's face it, in 1941, we were on our knees.

Britain stood alone, battered by nearly two years of defeats since the start of the war in 1939. Bad news followed bad, every single day.

The fall of France, the disaster of Dunkirk and the relentless bombing of the Blitz, had left our nation on the brink of defeat. A German invasion after Dunkirk seemed imminent - and would have undoubtedly succeeded, but for the Battle of Britain.

We still owe those boys so much. To this day...

One of the key elements in our survival, was the Atlantic supply lines.

Hood's mission was as much about preserving this supply line, as it was about military strategy and victory. She represented a symbol of defiance, against overwhelming odds.

The Prince of Wales was smaller than Hood, but far more advanced.

But she was a very new ship, which inevitably meant teething problems and breakdowns. In fact, she was so recently out of build that she had only been accepted into the Fleet the day before she deployed with Hood.

And, because of this, she had over 90 shipyard workers on board who were trying to sort out problems with her main armament.

They sailed with her. I'm sure they wouldn't have been too happy...



HMS Hood & HMS Prince of Wales

As the British capital ships steamed north-west, heavy seas hampered the supporting destroyer screen, which gradually fell more than 50 miles behind the bigger ships, as they sailed through the Denmark Strait.

The two forces came into contact some 300 miles off the coast of Iceland just after dawn on 24th May.

At around 14 miles, Prinz Eugen opened fire, her second salvo hitting Hood's ready-use ammunition locker at the foot of her mainmast, killing a number of sailors.

At some point Hood is thought to have switched the aim of her eight 15-inch guns, housed in four twin turrets, from Prinz Eugen to Bismarck, having confused the two ships in the low light.

This critical mistake delayed an accurate response to the incoming fire, leaving Hood exposed to devastating salvos from her adversaries.

As Hood and Bismarck closed in on each other, the tension was palpable.

For the sailors aboard Hood, it was not only a fight for survival, but also a fight for their nation's honour. For the men on Bismarck, it was a chance to strike a blow against their most powerful adversary.

Both Hood and the Prince of Wales, directed their salvos at Bismarck.

But the tragedy that followed was swift and brutal.

At 6:01 a.m., barely 10 minutes after the first salvo, a shell from Bismarck struck Hood's lightly armoured deck, penetrated deep into the heart of the ship and ignited her ammunition magazines.

In an instant, a colossal explosion tore through Hood, splitting her in two. She sank in minutes, dragging 1,415 men to their deaths.



The moment HMS Hood Blew Up

Only three sailors survived: Ted Briggs, William Dundas and Robert Tilburn.

These three young men, clinging to a raft in the icy waters, watched in disbelief as their mighty ship vanished beneath the waves.

An image, I'm sure, that together with the cries of their dying chums and the suddenness of the awesome destruction, haunted them all for the rest of their lives.

It would be impossible to forget..

They were picked up more than three hours later, by destroyer HMS Electra, part of the escort force.

The Mighty Hood had been destroyed in literally an instant.

Just think about that. Seconds before the shell struck, over 1,400 sailors, all young men with their lives in front of them, were at the beginning of a vital sea battle.

Most of them were very scared, but full of adrenaline - and concentrating on the tasks they had been trained to perform.

Then, suddenly, 1,415 of them, were no more.

All gone.

A lot of them instantly vaporised. The remainder, burnt to death or drowned.

On Bismarck, the crew celebrated their stunning success.

The destruction of Hood in such a dramatic fashion, was seen as a vindication of Germany's investment in battleship technology and a massive morale boost for the crew.

Many of the men aboard had felt a mix of apprehension and determination going into the battle, knowing that the Hood was a formidable opponent.

When the British ship literally disintegrated and rapidly sank beneath the waves, the men were stunned by how quickly the battle was decided.

Cheers erupted across the deck, with many sailors embracing and congratulating one another.

Captain Ernst Lindemann, the commander of Bismarck, is said to have remarked, *"I sink with this ship,"* though he stood tall in the moment of triumph.

His gunners had also damaged the Prince of Wales.

Admiral Günther Lütjens, the fleet commander who was aboard Bismarck, was reportedly more restrained in his reaction.



Günther Lütjens



Ernst Lindemann

A veteran of the First World War, Lütjens knew that this victory, while significant, was just one battle in a much larger war.

He knew that the Bismarck was far from safe - and that the full might of the Royal Navy would soon bear down upon them, in retaliation for the loss of Hood.

Lütjens and Lindemann debated what to do next.

A key decision had to be made - whether to pursue the damaged Prince of Wales, or disengage.

Ultimately, Bismarck and Prinz Eugen, turned southward, away from the remaining British ships, continuing their mission to disrupt vital convoys in the Atlantic.

However, Bismarck had also sustained damage during the engagement.

A shell from Prince of Wales had struck her fuel tanks, causing a slow but steady leak of oil, limiting her range and mobility.

This damage would become a critical factor in the days to come.

When the news of Hood's sinking reached London, the shock was profound.

Hood had not just been a warship; she was a symbol of Britain's naval dominance, a name recognised and respected throughout the Empire.



The magnitude of the loss - over 1,400 men, including Vice-Admiral Lancelot-Holland, was staggering.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill, upon learning of the sinking, is said to have been visibly shaken by the news and immediately issued a decisive order: *'Sink the Bismarck.'*

This rallying cry became a national obsession.

The emotional impact on the British public was also immense.

Hood's destruction was not only a military disaster, but also a psychological blow, shaking the morale of a nation already enduring the grim trials of war.

In Berlin, the news of the Hood's destruction was met with euphoria.

The Nazi leadership, including Adolf Hitler, seized upon the victory as a major propaganda opportunity.

The German people were told that their Navy had struck a crushing blow to the British, sinking their most prestigious warship in a matter of minutes.

For Hitler and his military high command, this event provided a welcome distraction from the challenges facing Germany on other fronts, bolstering public confidence in the Kriegsmarine's capabilities.

The Nazi regime, always eager for symbols of national strength and superiority, framed the battle as proof of the Reich's growing dominance over its enemies.

However, Admiral Lütjens was far less celebratory in his communication with Berlin, cautioning that Bismarck was not out of danger and still faced considerable risk.

His warnings would soon prove prophetic.

Lütjens' unease stemmed from his understanding of the Royal Navy's resolve and the scale of resources it could muster for retribution.

He was correct. And, right on cue, The Royal Navy sprang into action.

Admiral Sir John Tovey, commander of the British Home Fleet, was tasked with co-ordinating the search for Bismarck.

Ships and aircraft from across the North Atlantic were scrambled in a desperate hunt to find the German battleship, before it could escape into the open ocean.

Everyone knew the stakes were incredibly high.

If Bismarck reached the shipping lanes of the Atlantic, it would devastate vital Allied convoys carrying food, arms, and materials from North America to Britain.

Despite the damage sustained during the battle, Prince of Wales was still operational and began shadowing Bismarck at a distance, sending back regular updates on her position.

This shadowing, although critical, was perilous.

The Admiralty knew that if the Bismarck decided to attack the Prince of Wales, they could be facing another disaster.

She was ill-prepared for sustained combat and her ability to withstand another serious direct encounter, was uncertain.

But, what she was doing, was crucial for the Royal Navy's pursuit, as maintaining contact with the Bismarck, allowed the British fleet to mobilise and converge.

However, this task was not easy - Bismarck, despite her damage, was still incredibly fast - and with the help of her escort, Prinz Eugen, she managed to shake off the shadowing British ships in heavy fog.

By using the dense weather conditions, Bismarck's crew demonstrated their tactical acumen, as they capitalised on the North Atlantic's unpredictability to evade detection.

Meanwhile, Admiral Tovey dispatched every available warship to intercept Bismarck.

The carrier HMS Victorious was ordered to launch an air attack, using her slow and outdated Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers.



These biplanes, relics from an earlier era of aviation, were no match for Bismarck's anti-aircraft defences. They were slow and predictable.

Yet, in a daring attack, the Swordfish pilots, braving the intense and frightening flak from Bismarck, managed to score a torpedo hit on her starboard side.



This strike, though not crippling, did damage to Bismarck. And it highlighted the Navy's determination to get her. What it also demonstrated, was the bravery of its aviators, who risked everything against an adversary that was clearly vastly superior.

After this engagement, Admiral Lütjens, knowing the situation was growing increasingly dangerous, decided to split his forces.

He ordered Prinz Eugen to break away and continue her mission of attacking convoys, while Bismarck would attempt to reach the safety of occupied France for repairs.

This decision, however, meant that Bismarck would now face the Royal Navy's pursuit alone.

The separation of forces was a calculated risk, underscoring Lütjens' prioritisation of strategic objectives over mutual protection.

More battleships were ordered to join the chase, including the famous battleships King George V and Rodney - and two aircraft carriers, more battleships and battlecruisers.



So important was the counterstrike, that Churchill had ordered all other warships in the vicinity to also close in.

These included cruisers Arethusa, Birmingham and Manchester, who patrolled the Denmark Strait in case the German battleship attempted to retrace his route back to base.

In excess of 20 ships, numerous planes and submarines all after one ship.

This has always painted a hell of a moving picture to me.

Yes, I know, it was an enemy ship – and one that was responsible for over 1,400 deaths, a few hours before.

And a ship that would have no hesitation at all, in sinking merchant ships and sending hundreds more men to their deaths.

I get that. I get all of it.

It had to be eliminated.

Of course it did.

But the thought of all these ships and planes frantically trying to corner one quarry, damaged and sailing alone...just seemed, well, unfair...

The mobilisation of firepower demonstrated the unparalleled co-ordination of the Royal Navy during this high-stakes pursuit – and was a testament to its operational flexibility and strategic depth

They began to close in from various directions.

Simultaneously, British reconnaissance aircraft from Coastal Command were deployed to scour the vast ocean to monitor the fleeing German battleship.



At one point Bismarck turned to face three trailing ships and the German battleship exchanged salvos with Prince of Wales, but neither side scored a direct hit.

Turning back south, the German flagship resumed a course for France, and began to gradually pull away from his pursuers, despite the damage sustained on 24th May.

There were further air attacks from carrier HMS Victorious, but they did little damage - and Bismarck was soon far enough ahead of his pursuers that Lindemann could slow down to carry out running repairs.

This was before making exaggerated course changes to throw the British ships off the scent – and it worked, as the British cruisers lost contact.

British code-breakers and French resistance monitoring German air movements confirmed that Bismarck was heading for France and would soon be within the defensive screen provided by aircraft and U-boats.

Lindemann's evasive manoeuvres highlighted the crew's resilience and resourcefulness, as they took every opportunity to extend their lead and make it home.

But allied intelligence - both human and signals-based - was excellent and with this, together with skill and tenacity, they started to get closer.

However, right at the critical stage, Lady Luck decided to throw her hat into the ring.

And, as often happens, she made the difference.



A British Catalina flying boat from Coastal Command, piloted by Ensign Leonard Smith of the U.S. Navy (serving with the RAF), finally spotted the oil slick leaking from Bismarck – and by following it, located the ship.

Cruisers HMS Suffolk and Norfolk, along with the Prince of Wales, were guided towards the ships' location.

This sighting reinvigorated the chase, transforming the frustrating pursuit into a final act of determination.

His position report placed Bismarck 690 miles to the west-northwest of Brest and gave the pursuers less than 24 hours in which to intercept.

If not apprehended by then, then Bismarck would enjoy the friendly umbrella of protection afforded by the Luftwaffe - and ultimately the sanctuary of port.

Admiral Tovey's only hope was to slow her down with yet another air strike - and the only carrier within striking distance, was HMS Ark Royal coming up from the south.

By 19.00, Ark Royal began turning into the 50-knot wind, the last fifteen airworthy Swordfish, were ranged on deck and the aircrews began manning their planes.

The tension crackling through the cold evening air as the fifteen Swordfish sat ranged on the pitching flight deck must have been immense.



Their fragile, fabric-covered wings would have been trembling in the howling wind.

These legendary planes, known as 'Stringbags,' outdated even before the war began, would have seemed woefully inadequate against the formidable power of Germany's most advanced battleship.

The Bismarck's fire power was awesome - and I'm pretty sure the aircrew would have accepted that they would be shot down - and in the cold waters of the Atlantic, they also knew they would face almost certain death.

We can only imagine what those pilots must have gone through at that time, sitting in their flimsy planes on deck, knowing that there was little chance they would be coming back.

Spray lashed their faces as they huddled in their wool-lined flight suits, the dampness seeping through to their skin, but they prepared themselves.

Their faces set with grim determination, glanced one last time at the dark horizon where the Bismarck lurked, like a predator in the gloom.

On deck, ratings braced themselves against the wind, gripping the chocks that held each aircraft in place, their movements deliberate, yet trembling under the weight of what was to come.

At 1910, the Flight Deck Officer raised his green flag. For a heartbeat, there was stillness - then the first pilot released the brakes, his gloved hands gripping the controls as the Swordfish lurched forward, its Pegasus engine screaming against the elements.

The aircraft rolled down the heaving deck, the pilot fighting to keep it steady as it reached the edge - and it lifted into the storm-tossed night, vanishing into the black abyss.

One by one, the others followed, each departure a gamble with fate, as the tiny, slow biplanes set out to challenge a monstrous enemy.

The strong winds buffeted the planes, but the Swordfish pilots pressed on.

Diving to attack on Bismarck's starboard side, they found themselves subjected to the withering combined fire of her entire flak battery.



While this was transpiring, another plane reappeared ahead of Bismarck on her port bow and attacked alone.

In spite of the very intense and accurate fire, he launched his torpedo and was rewarded by an enormous column of smoke and water that rose up on the port side of Bismarck's deck, as it hit home.

By this point, all the Swordfish had managed at least one go at the target and almost beyond belief, 13 were on their way home.

This left two, still striving to get in close enough to make a reasonable drop.

However, as the remainder withdrew, they found themselves under extremely accurate flak at every turn, even when they lost sight of their quarry. Finally, both were forced to face the realisation that further attempts were simply suicidal and they too turned about, jettisoned their torpedoes, and headed home.

By 2125, the attack was over.

The German report radioed from Bismarck on 26th May, states that two torpedoes hit home, the first hitting the stern, though the side of the ship struck is not indicated. Subsequent survivor accounts seem to agree that both the torpedoes struck the port side.

At 23.00, the last of the strike planes was back home aboard the Ark Royal. It had been a nerve-racking recovery. The weather was still abominable and five of the attacking Swordfish had been riddled by AA fire.



One plane was found to be damaged beyond repair and was jettisoned.

Three others crashed on landing, but miraculously no one was hurt.

The pilots embraced one another emotionally and exchanged stories.

After the attack on Bismarck, only six of the Swordfish remained serviceable and, expecting the possibility that another attack would be necessary, they were re-armed and ranged for yet another strike.

So, amazingly, Bismarck did not shoot down any of the Swordfish, but damaged one severely enough that it was a write-off.

This, when you think about it, was astonishing, given that on paper, it was nowhere near a fair fight.

This outcome is often attributed to the Swordfish's low-speed performance, which ironically worked to their advantage.

The Bismarck's sophisticated fire control systems were designed to target faster aircraft - and the slow approach of the Swordfish would have disrupted the predictive aiming of the ship's anti-aircraft guns.

Additionally, the pilots flew at very low altitudes, making it difficult for the Bismarck's guns to depress sufficiently to target them effectively.

As the aircrews headed for the ready room for debriefing, armed with a sandwich and a mug of tea, a message came through from a Swordfish shadowing Bismarck.

The report just had everyone looking at each other. Bismarck had made two circles at slow speed and was staggering off to the north-north west.

This hardly believable news appeared to show, that the impossible had really occurred. Her rudder was damaged and Bismarck was forced to sail in circles, becoming a sitting duck for the fast-approaching British fleet.

Yes, at the eleventh hour, a group of gallant young airmen, the Fleet Air Arm's own dashing 'few', had actually crippled Germany's greatest battleship.

Admiral Lütjens, realising that his ship was now at the mercy of the British, sent a final message to Berlin, which read:

'Ship unable to manoeuvre. We will fight to the last shell. Long live the Führer.'

Illuminated by star shells and harried by destroyers through the night of 26th-27th May, Bismarck avoided major damage until the big guns – in the form of battleships Rodney and King George V, closed in.

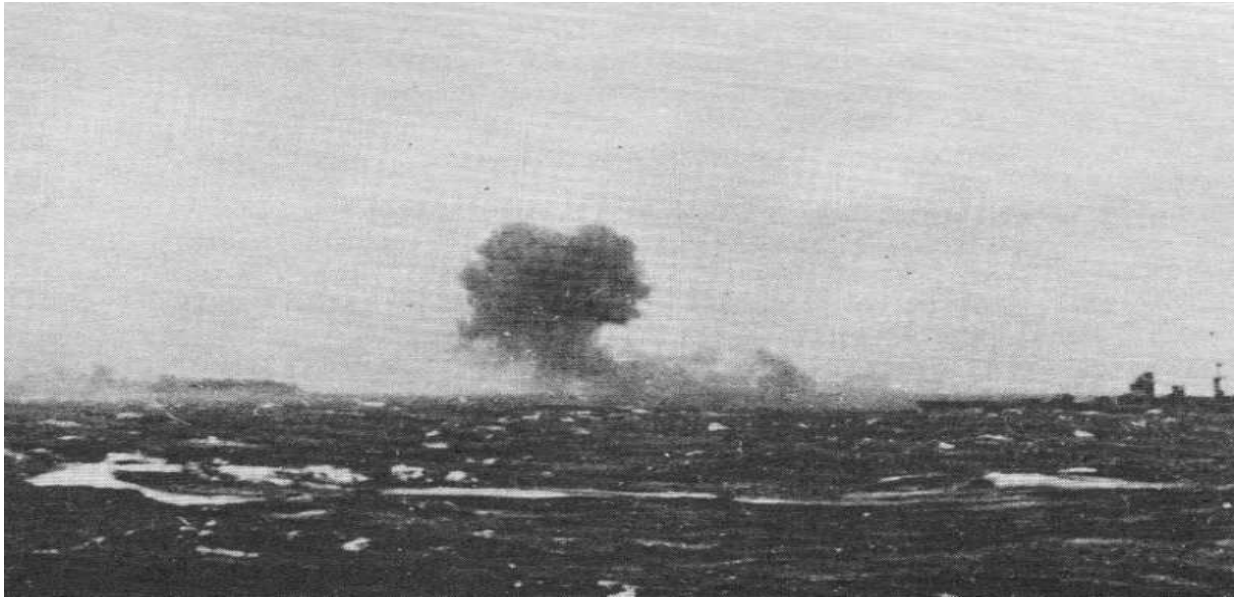
Their first salvos roared towards the stricken Bismarck around 08.45 on 27th May. At first, Bismarck returned fire, but the ship's erratic course and heavy seas, prevented her firing accurately.

Cruisers HMS Norfolk and Dorsetshire moved in closer, while shells from Rodney destroyed Bismarck's bridge and fire control director, as well as damaging the two forward gun turrets.

The ship was being pounded and battered from all sides.

Within half an hour of the first salvo, the mighty Bismarck had been silenced and by 10.00 was unrecognisable – the battleship was a very sad sight, ablaze and listing.

The brave sailors on board, were trapped in this hell on earth – being blown to bits, burning to death in compartments or drowning in flooded spaces.



The final moments of The Bismarck

The two British battleships continued to pound the Bismarck.

They had fired over 700 shells from their main guns, many at close range, but still the bombardment continued, while the Germans continued to try and fight back.

After the two-hour action, the mighty Bismarck, once a fearsome symbol of Nazi naval power, now lay shattered and broken, her proud silhouette unrecognisable.

Over two hours of relentless bombardment had turned the once-mighty battleship into a twisted, burning wreck. A staggering 3,000 shells had rained down upon her, with more than 400 finding their mark.

Her superstructure was a mangled ruin, flames licking hungrily at the remains of the ship as thick black smoke spiralled skyward, blotting out the grey morning light.

She no longer fought back.

Her once-deafening guns, that had sunk The Hood and threatened to terrorise the Atlantic, were silent. Her decks, strewn with debris and the bodies of her brave crew, sloped dangerously, as seawater flooded her lower compartments.

Inside, trapped sailors faced the grim inevitability of their fate, some clinging desperately to hope, others silently resigned to their end.

From a distance, the British fleet looked on with a mixture of triumph and sorrow.

They had achieved their mission; the terror of the Atlantic had been neutralised.

But as they observed the burning hulk, they could not help but feel a pang of sadness.

The Bismarck had fought valiantly, her crew displaying courage in the face of impossible odds. Even now, as the ship drifted helplessly, her ensign still fluttered defiantly in the smoke-laden wind, a final act of resistance against the inevitable.

Finally, the coup de grâce was delivered.

HMS Dorsetshire moved in close and launched her torpedoes, the final, merciful strike that would send the battered giant to her grave.

The first torpedo struck, causing the ship to shudder violently, and moments later, a second found its mark.



As the Dorsetshire turned away, Bismarck began to list heavily to port, her stern dipping, as seawater rushed in.

In her final moments, there was an eerie stillness.

The fires crackled and the ocean hissed, as flames met waves, but the mighty guns of the British fleet had gone silent.

All eyes watched as the Bismarck gave one last groan, her keel breaking under the strain, before she slipped beneath the waves.

The sea that had borne her to war, now became her tomb, closing over her battered hull and swallowing her whole.

For the sailors aboard the British ships, victory tasted bittersweet.

They had avenged the Hood and eliminated a grave threat, but they had also witnessed the tragic deaths of over 2,000 men.

As the smoke dissipated and the waves reclaimed the battlefield, a solemn hush fell over the fleet.

The Bismarck was gone, but the human cost of war lingered heavily in the air, a haunting reminder of the courage and sacrifice on both sides.

Bismarck had been in commission for just over nine months and, despite a fearsome reputation, only took part in one operation lasting just over a week – the operation that destroyed HMS Hood.

Of Bismarck's ship's company of over 2,200, just 110 were picked up, mainly by Dorsetshire and destroyer HMS Maori, before the alarm was raised that a U-boat had been spotted and the rescue was abandoned.



The Surviving Sailors of HMS Hood

Only three men survived the sinking of HMS Hood: Ted Briggs, William Dundas, and Robert Tilburn. Their accounts offer first-hand insight into the terrifying and tragic moments as the ship went down.



Ted Briggs

Ted Briggs, who was just 18 years old at the time of the battle, became one of the most well-known survivors.

His account is often cited as a deeply moving reminder of the tragedy. Briggs was one of the few to escape the ship before it broke in half. His recollections of the battle and the sinking, are filled with a sense of shock and disbelief:

"There was a huge sheet of flame and Hood just lifted. I was running, then there was a mighty roar and I found myself floating in the water. The ship had gone. I didn't see or hear anything of my mates. I just swam for my life."

Briggs described the moment when the ship was hit by the fatal shell from Bismarck and how quickly Hood was engulfed in flames:

"When the explosion happened, it was so fast, so violent, you had no time to think. In what seemed like seconds, it was over. One moment I was on deck, the next I was thrown into the sea."

His survival in the icy waters, like that of the other two men, was a miracle, as they were the only ones pulled from the frigid sea by HMS Electra.

William Dundas and Robert Tilburn

Tilburn was stationed near the aft of the ship when it was hit, and like Briggs and Dundas, he was thrown into the water and found himself with the other two who had survived.

While less vocal in the aftermath, both Dundas and Tilburn also shared brief accounts of their escape. Dundas is remembered for recounting the shock of finding himself alive after such a sudden and catastrophic event.

"We were tossed into the water like corks... The shock was unbelievable. There were just three of us left."

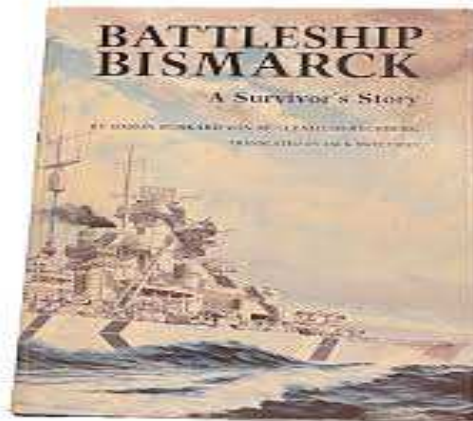
Robert Tilburn shared the emotional burden of survival:

"Nearly everyone we knew, every face we saw daily, was gone."

Bismarck's Survivors

Of over 2,200 crew members aboard Bismarck, only 110 survived.

One of the most well-known accounts comes from survivor Baron Burkard von Müllenheim-Rechberg, the highest-ranking survivor aboard the Bismarck.



His detailed memoir, *'Battleship Bismarck - A Survivor's Story'*, provides insight into both the battle and the days leading up to Bismarck's final confrontation.

He described the sinking of HMS Hood from the perspective of the German crew.

He recalled that after the battle, the mood on Bismarck was triumphant but also cautious, as they knew they would be pursued by the Royal Navy.

He later reflected on the human tragedy, recognising the loss of life on both sides:

"We had achieved a great victory, but at what cost? There was little joy in knowing that thousands of men had perished in the freezing waters."

As Bismarck met her fate, von Müllenheim-Rechberg described the horrifying scene as the British ships closed in:

"The mighty Bismarck was being pounded, yet the men fought bravely to the end. I knew the ship was doomed, but the courage of the crew as we faced the inevitable was extraordinary. We were fighting not just for survival, but for honour."

The German survivors were eventually rescued by British warships and they recounted the respect shown by their captors, despite the fierce battle that had just taken place.

The Story of Unsinkable Sam

One of the more peculiar and endearing stories from the Bismarck battle is that of a cat, known as '*Unsinkable Sam.*'



According to legend, this black-and-white cat was aboard Bismarck when it was sunk - and he survived by clinging to debris.

He was rescued by British sailors from HMS Cossack, which was one of the ships involved in the pursuit of Bismarck.

Unbelievable as that story is, Sam would later survive another ship sinking when Cossack was torpedoed by a German submarine in October 1941.

After being rescued once again, Sam was transferred to the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal, which was sunk just weeks later.

Remarkably, Sam survived this sinking as well - and was eventually taken to Gibraltar, where he lived out his days as the ship's mascot.



There are no official records confirming Unsinkable Sam's service aboard Bismarck, Cossack or Ark Royal.

Or his subsequent adventures.

But his story has become a symbol of resilience and survival in the face of overwhelming tragedy.

What part of this story is fact or embellished legend, we will never know.

But Sam is remembered as an indomitable spirit who, like the surviving sailors and allied aircrew, beat impossible odds in the tragic saga of Hood and Bismarck.

Just as the sinking of Hood had caused despondence in Britain and celebrations in Germany, so the sinking of the talismanic Bismarck boosted morale for the Allies, severely denting German ambitions – and restored a measure of honour for the Royal Navy.

Bismarck's consort, Prinz Eugen, failed to trouble any Allied convoys that spring, as engine problems forced her to head to Brest for repairs before she could fire a further shot in anger.

That was just the start for her, as she endured a pretty tumultuous and inglorious role in the latter stages of World War II and beyond.

After a brief period in Brest, she executed the daring "Channel Dash" in February 1942, along with the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau,, successfully slipping through the heavily patrolled English Channel to return to Germany.

This operation, while tactically bold, highlighted the Kriegsmarine's struggle to safeguard its surface fleet in increasingly hostile waters.

Trouble followed soon after. Whilst en-route to Norway to join further operations, Prinz Eugen was torpedoed and severely damaged by the British submarine HMS Trident, off Trondheim.

The attack wrecked her stern, leaving the ship out of commission for nearly a year.

By the time she returned to service in early 1943, Germany's naval strategy had shifted and the Prinz Eugen found herself relegated to a secondary role as a training ship in the Baltic.

As the war turned against Germany, Prinz Eugen was pressed into action once more.

In 1944 and 1945, she provided shore bombardment along the Baltic coast, firing her heavy guns to slow the Soviet advance and cover the desperate evacuation of German refugees.

It was a sombre and grinding duty, a far cry from the bold Atlantic operations she had once undertaken. The Prinz Eugen, battered but still afloat, symbolised a Kriegsmarine in retreat.

In May 1945, with the war at an end, Prinz Eugen surrendered to the British at Copenhagen.

Soon after, she was handed over to the United States as part of post-war reparations. The Americans, intrigued by her advanced engineering, studied her briefly before sending her to the Pacific for a remarkable and grim chapter in her story.

In July 1946, Prinz Eugen was subjected to two nuclear bomb tests at Bikini Atoll.

Incredibly, the battle-scarred cruiser survived the atomic blasts, though she was heavily contaminated with radiation.

Towed to Kwajalein Atoll, the once-proud ship was left to her fate.

On December 22, 1946, Prinz Eugen capsized. Today, her wreck is still partially visible beneath the waves, a stark reminder of the destructive power of both conventional and nuclear warfare.



Though the great sea battle between Hood and Bismarck ended over eight decades ago, its tragic echoes have never faded, resonating through history like the mournful toll of a ship's bell.

As you are reading this now - in the Atlantic, where this tragedy unfolded - the cold winds still howl and the relentless waves crash over unseen graveyards.

In the vast, cold depths below, where the Hood and Bismarck rest, the haunting cries of fathers, brothers and sons seem to rise with the waves, a poignant reminder of their ultimate sacrifice.

They're not speaking of vengeance or anger but of an ache for the short lives that were cruelly taken from them - and for the warmth of home and the embrace of loved ones who they will never hold again.

Today, both Hood and Bismarck rest silently on the ocean floor, their wreckage embraced by the depths, preserved as eternal war graves.

Protected by international law, they stand as solemn monuments to the extraordinary courage of those who fought - and the unbearable cost paid in the pursuit of war.

The story of Hood and Bismarck, is a story of unimaginable loss, of sacrifice beyond measure - and of the fragile thread of human life extinguished cruelly amidst the chaos of conflict.

In just three days, 3,505 young lives were lost in the merciless waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

This tragic story first grabbed hold of me well over 60 years ago - and has always been with me.

It is a story I felt I simply had to write...

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