

Information sheet no 101

Attacks on the Tirpitz

The largest remaining German warship was the Tirpitz. After losing the Bismarck, Germany avoided bringing the ship into confrontation with enemy forces. Britain still considered it a major threat and spent much time planning its destruction in a variety of methods.

Operation Title - Chariot raid October 1942

One such attempt took place in October 1942 using 'human torpedoes' codenamed Operation Title. Two torpedoes – known as 'chariots' - were to be towed to Fottenfjord where Tirpitz was moored and then 'driven' underwater by two sailors to the target. The explosives would be detached and a delay fuse set to give the 'charioteers' time to escape. The plan encountered unforeseen problems including bad weather. Within ten miles of the target, the two 'chariots' were wrenched from the tow due to rough water and broke adrift. The attack had to be aborted and all except one of the crew members escaped to Sweden after scuttling the tow-boat.

Operation Source – X-craft raid – September 1943

Six midget submarines were involved in the attack. These submarines were 35 tons, and each had a crew of four men. Their only weapons were two detachable charges of two tons, with clockwork detonators, which were to be dropped below the ship. The midget submarines were towed by S and T class submarines, from Loch Cairnbawn in Scotland to a position 150 miles from Altenfjord. The midget submarine X9 was lost in transit, and X8 had to be scuttled. The four surviving submarines set off on the evening of the 20th September 1943, and entered Kaa Fjord on the 22nd.

At 8.12am on 22nd September 1943 Germany's biggest battleship, the 46,000 ton Tirpitz was blown up by the British midget submarines. The ship, moored in Altenfjord, northern Norway, was lifted several feet out the water, had three main engines disabled and left the ship listing at 15 degrees. The Tirpitz was out of action until April 1944.

Lieutenant Cameron in X6 lost his periscope and compass so had to attack the Tirpitz blind. He was sighted by the Germans but was too close to the Tirpitz to be attacked by anything other than small arms, and so was able to lay charges before scuttling his boat. The crew abandoned their submarine and were taken prisoner. Tirpitz then started to shift berth and Lieutenant Place in X7 laid charges under the ship, but X7 became caught in nets whilst trying to escape, although it was blown free by the explosion. X7 was damaged and had to be abandoned. Both commanders and four of the six crew members survived, but were taken prisoner. X5 disappeared and was believed to have been sunk. X10 commanded by Lieutenant Hudspeth, which had been sent to attack Scharnhorst which was nearby, lost its compass and periscope, and returned to sea, being recovered by one of the larger submarines, however it sank on the tow home. As it happened Scharnhorst had already sailed and was not in the fjord.

Lieutenants Cameron and Place were awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions, and gazetted on the 22nd February 1944.

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Operation Tungsten – FAA attack – April 1944

Following the successful X craft raid in 1943, another attempt at destroying the Tirpitz was planned before it resumed operational service.

The Fleet Air Arm attacked the battleship on 3 April 1944 at Kafjord in a surprise raid. The aircraft met little opposition and were able to hit the ship with fifteen bombs. The damage was not sufficient to sink the battleship but prolonged the amount of time out of service. Further attacks on the ship were carried out while under repair.

Finally, heavy Lancaster bombers of the Royal Air Force sank the Tirpitz with Tallboy bombs on 12 November 1944. With the loss of a major surface threat, Allied warships could now be diverted to other operations.