

Information sheet no 068

Loss of HMS *Hood* and KM *Bismarck*

In April 1941, the most feared German ship, KM *Bismarck* and heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* were preparing to escape from the Baltic and join forces with the pocket battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the Atlantic. Together, these ships would pose a powerful threat to British shipping in the Atlantic. The *Bismarck* was modern, fast and well-armed. Aware of Admiral Raeder's plan, Admiral John Tovey ordered a close watch on the Denmark Strait between Greenland and Iceland by the Battle Cruiser Squadron of the Home Fleet. The Squadron was commanded by Vice Admiral Holland from his flagship, HMS *Hood*, the pride of the Royal Navy. The other ships consisted of the recently completed battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*, two heavy cruisers, HMSs *Suffolk* and *Norfolk* and six destroyers, HMSs *Achates*, *Antelope*, *Anthony*, *Echo*, *Electra* and *Icarus*.

On 22 May 1941, reports were received that *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* had left Bergen indicating an escape was imminent. At 19.45, Admiral Tovey on his flagship HMS *King George V* led the rest of the Home Fleet towards the Denmark Strait. A day later, the German ships were sighted by HMS *Suffolk* at 19.22, seven miles ahead in the Strait.

At 03.00 on 24 May, HMSs *Hood* and *Prince of Wales* were 35 miles ahead of the German ships and by 05.35 the distance was only 17 miles. At 05.52 when *Bismarck* was within 25,000 yards, *Hood* opened fire and was quickly followed by *Prince of Wales*. *Bismarck* immediately returned fire, straddling the *Hood* with her second or third salvo. The magazine was hit and a fire broke out and quickly spread. At 06.00 just after the *Bismarck* fired her fifth salvo, a huge explosion split *Hood* in two and within a few minutes she had sunk. *Prince of Wales* sent the signal 'Hood sunk' that was received by the destroyer HMS *Electra* at 06.00. Instantly *Electra* and the rest of the escorting ships went in search of survivors. The damaged HMS *Prince of Wales* withdrew under cover of smoke but continued to shadow the German ship. *Bismarck* had also been hit and was leaking fuel. The German ship headed for St Nazaire.

Tovey with HMSs *King George V*, *Repulse* and *Victorious* were still 300 miles away but intent on intercepting the *Bismarck*. The Admiralty diverted various ships to come under Tovey's temporary command to seek out and destroy the German battleship. These included HMSs *Ark Royal*, *Rodney* and *Ramillies*. Late on 24 May, torpedo reconnaissance bombers from HMS *Victorious* found the *Bismarck* and attacked it, scoring a hit. *Bismarck* managed to escape yet again but sustained further damage. Due to the shortage of fuel in his ships, Tovey knew that if the *Bismarck* had not been slowed down by midnight on 26 May, he would be compelled to break off the chase.

At 20.47 on 26 May, in deteriorating weather conditions, aircraft from HMS *Ark Royal* launched a torpedo attack. They scored a hit that damaged *Bismarck*'s propellers, jamming the rudder and effectively stopped the ship. *Bismarck* began to turn helplessly in circles and trailed oil. Just before midnight, the Commanding Officer, Admiral Lutjens sent a message saying "*Ship incapable of manoeuvring. Will fight to the last shell. Long live the Fuhrer*"



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At 08.00 on 27 May 1941, *Bismarck*, already floundering helplessly, faced the combined fire of HMSs *King George V* and *Rodney* and within an hour, sustained further heavy damage. Despite this, *Bismarck* still was able to continue to return fire. Tovey ordered that the ship be sunk and HMS *Dorsetshire* fired torpedoes into the stricken ship. It still took two hours before the German battleship sank below the sea a few hundred miles off Brest.

110 men out of 2,200 of the *Bismarck*'s crew were later picked up. Only 3 men out of the 1,421 crew of HMS *Hood* survived - Able Seaman Ted Briggs, Able Seaman Robert Tilburn and Midshipman William Dundas. Vice Admiral Holland had gone down with his flagship.

The loss of the ship was a bitter blow to the Admiralty, but in reality, she had been overtaken by technology and was not the "mighty" ship everyone had thought. This was summed up by Admiral Chatfield in *The Times*: *Hood* 'was destroyed because she had to fight a ship 22 years more modern than herself. This was not the fault of the British seamen. It was the direct responsibility of those who opposed the rebuilding of the British Battle Fleet until 1937, two years before the Second Great War started.'