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NEED A  
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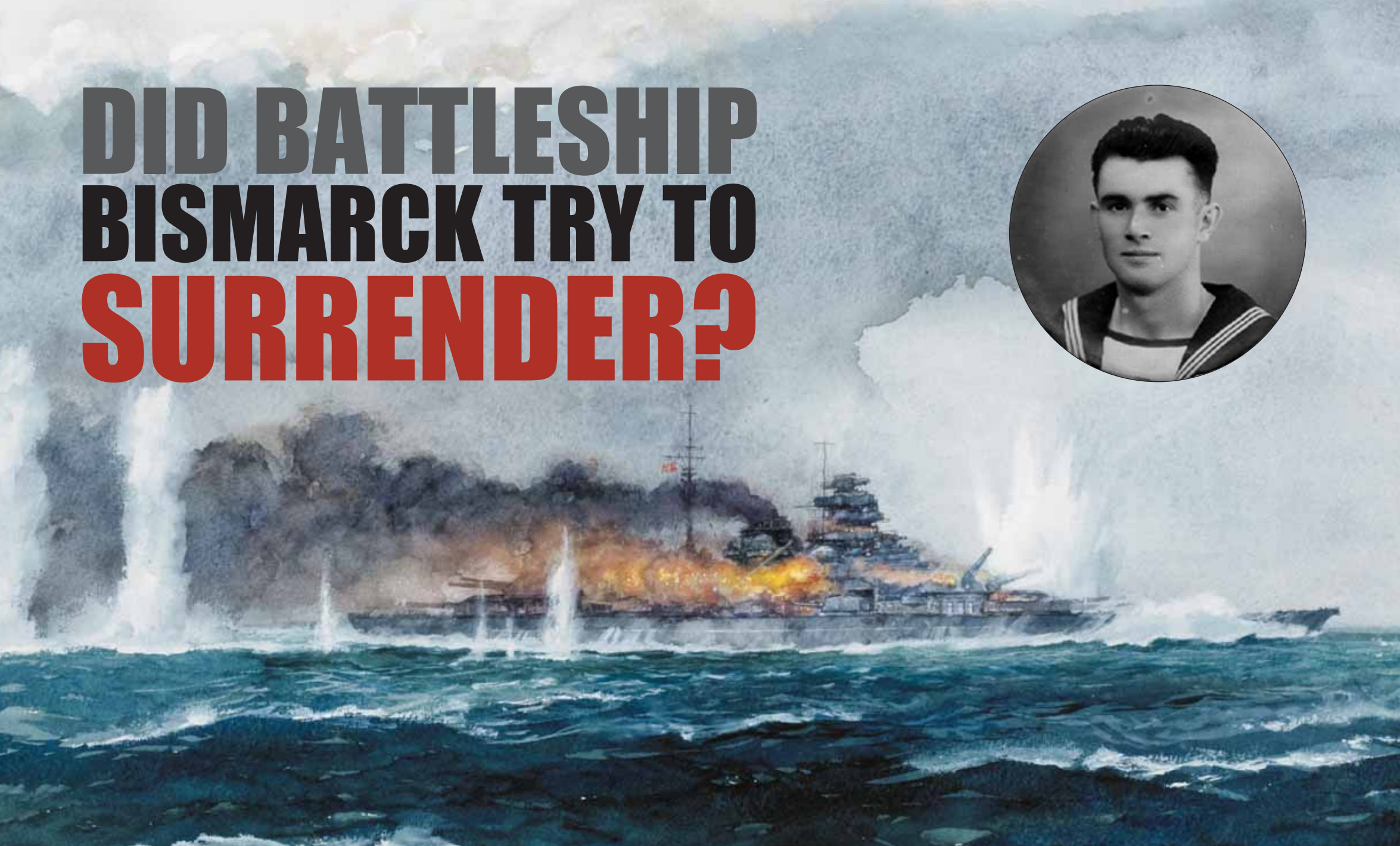
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# DID BATTLESHIP BISMARCK TRY TO SURRENDER?



It was six years ago, while I was gathering primary research material for my previous book, that I came across an eyewitness account in the archives of the, now disbanded, HMS Rodney Association. Only a few dozen people in any British battleship's complement of more than 1,000 could actually see the action, and the majority of those would be using high-powered optical instruments as part of their jobs, either controlling the guns, controlling the ship herself or watching out for air attack. Lieutenant Donald Campbell was HMS Rodney's Air Defence Officer, enclosed with his team of sailors in a lightly armoured box perched right at the top of the battleship's command tower. His account of the Bismarck Action makes a gripping read, conveying the dark majesty and horror of the final battle on May 27, 1941. As I read it I came across a passage in which he described mysterious

**WARSHIPS IFR EDITOR IAIN BALLANTYNE EXPLAINS HOW HE DISCOVERED EYEWITNESS EVIDENCE THAT, WHILE OTHER GERMANS FOUGHT ON, SOME SAILORS IN THE FAMED BATTLESHIP BISMARCK MAY HAVE BEEN TRYING TO SURRENDER DURING COMBAT WITH THE ROYAL NAVY ON MAY 27, 1941. DISCUSSING ASSOCIATED ISSUES RAISED IN HIS NEW BOOK 'KILLING THE BISMARCK' (SEE REVIEW, ON P45) HE ALSO PONDERES THE HORRIFIC REALITY OF WAR, AND IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE BRITISH PAUSING IN THEIR ATTACK ON BISMARCK.**

indications that somebody in Bismarck was trying to surrender. Lt Campbell spotted a white light sending a Morse code signal from Bismarck's main mast. He wondered: 'was it surrender?' A heavy shell fired by a British warship cut short the message, according to Campbell sending 'the whole ponderous stalk [light signal mast]... spinning in the air to crash over the side.' This was intriguing

but a bit tenuous - not enough to build a whole theory on. However, in the course of further research for that book ('HMS Rodney', published in 2008) I got in touch with Kevin Byers whose dad, Tommy, was a junior rating in the battleship's main gunnery control position. Byers also used high-powered optics, to spot the fall of shot during the final fight between the Royal Navy and Bismarck.

Tommy died some years ago, but Kevin had interviewed his dad about his life in the navy and the transcripts of those interviews yielded more evidence relating to the possibility that Bismarck, or at least some of her sailors, were trying to surrender. I have heard a recording of an interview between Kevin and his dad and there is no doubt in my mind about the reliability of Tommy's account. He had noticed men jumping overboard and then spotted something curious - a black flag flying from Bismarck's main yardarm, the accepted nautical signal calling for 'Parley', or talks, about surrender. The black flag is used to signify a plea for surrender, because a white flag still looks like a battle ensign from a distance. German U-boats surrendering to the British at the end of WW2 flew the black flag. Tommy Byers also noticed a man waving semaphore flags. Was he trying to ask for a

ceasefire? The Irish sailor said that he saw Bismarck 'flashing her signalling lights, sending us a Morse message.' Byers scanned Bismarck through his optics, finding the man waving the semaphore flags again, only to see him 'blown into the air by a 16-inch shell.' Byers felt very sad for enemy, but conceded 'it was them or us.'

THE widely accepted perception of the 'invincible Bismarck' is based on the myth of an impregnable warship that was so heavily protected that neither British shells nor torpedoes actually sank her. According to this school of thought the Germans scuttled their ship and were therefore responsible for sinking her, rather than the British. For nearly 70 years a debate has raged, with shipwreck hunters who have found what remains of Bismarck also arguing about whether it was the British weapons or scuttling charges that took her

down. However, isn't it all a futile discourse? Anyone with even a modicum of insight understands that a ship is only as good as her crew, so the fact that sailors in the forward part of the ship wanted to surrender even while men operating turrets in the stern section fought on, surely destroys the idea of the 'invincible Bismarck'. It rather makes the whole debate over what exactly sank her pointless. Not only was she utterly shattered by the British bombardment - from two battleships and two heavy cruisers at close range, including numerous torpedo hits - it appears a portion of her ship's company wanted to give up. Surely it was obvious that at least some of the men in a ship so mercilessly pounded would try and surrender? And this brings us to the second reason why the book that ultimately became 'Killing the Bismarck', following more than two years of further research and

writing, alters perspective, and is therefore potentially controversial. Having found the surrender angle I asked myself what else had gone untold?

In looking at already published accounts of the Bismarck Action I realised that, while they covered the final battle - some quite vividly - none of them, in my opinion, quite conveyed the full horror. When Tommy Byers wrote to Baron von Mullenheim-Rechberg, the senior surviving German officer, in the early 1990s to ask if any Bismarck survivors had seen signs of surrender attempts aboard their own ship, the Baron could not help. Nobody among those who could have revealed the truth had survived. The majority of survivors came from either deep inside the ship, within the armoured citadel, or were in some other well-protected area, such as the main armament turrets. Men outside those heavily protected zones, including the command team and hundreds of others, were subjected to a murderous hail of 16-inch, 14-inch, 8-inch, 5.25-inch and 6-inch shells. The four British ships fired nearly 2,000 shells in total, with around 400 hitting Bismarck, plus several torpedo strikes (by Rodney, with her 24.5-inch torpedoes, as well as Dorsetshire's 21-inch torpedoes). The people who therefore saw the full scale of that final battle - the enemy battleship being ripped apart - were sailors and marines in British battleships and cruisers firing those shells and torpedoes, staring at their gruesome handiwork through high-powered optics. During the course of my research Major John Ruffer, who in May 1941 was a Royal Marine junior officer in the gunnery control position of cruiser HMS Norfolk, sent me a first-person account of the battle. I also found a gripping account in the Imperial War Museum archives by A.E. Franklin, a junior rating in the cruiser HMS Dorsetshire. Both men described the Bismarck's death at the hands of the Royal Navy in searing terms, conveying the horrific spectacle of the encounter. Ruffer did not see any signs of surrender; Franklin indicates he might also have spotted the Morse signals. The surrender claim ties in with the morale of the Bismarck's crew, which it is widely known was shaky prior to the battle. In various previously published accounts there have been references to panic when the finality of the ship's predicament set in on the morning of the battle. It is also no secret that some of Bismarck's ordinary sailors regarded Admiral Günther Lütjens, the commander of Bismarck's raiding mission, as a Jonah. They were depressed and anxious about his presence aboard their ship even as she set sail from the Baltic, never

**Left, main image:** 'The End of the Bismarck' by leading UK maritime artist Paul Wright FSMA. © Paul Wright. For further information e-mail: p.wright1@btinternet.com

**Left, inset:** HMS Rodney's Tommy Byers, who saw signs that Bismarck sailors were trying to surrender.

*Photo: Byers Collection.*

mind by the time they had been chased and harassed by the Royal Navy for several days. On the day of battle it only took 40 minutes, or less, to reduce Bismarck to a floating hell. It was understandable that while some of the German battleship's crew fought on - being well protected - there were others, in the forward part of the ship (and outside the citadel), who decided they should try and give up. Tommy Byers did bring the fact that he had spotted light signals, semaphore attempts and the black flag, to the attention of the Rodney's gunnery officer, Lt Cdr William Crawford. I cannot believe that other officers in the British ships did not see the same things - or have them reported to them - but neither Admiral Tovey, the Home Fleet Commander in HMS King George V, or Captain Frederick Dalrymple-Hamilton, the captain of HMS Rodney wrote a detailed account containing anything as graphic as those I have uncovered from junior officers and ordinary sailors. On the bridge of Rodney, one of the ship's chaplains was so appalled that, in front of the other officers and men, he begged Captain Dalrymple-Hamilton to stop the bombardment. His plea received a coldly furious response, Dalrymple-Hamilton ordering him below decks with an admonition to 'mind his own business.'

Rodney's Commanding Officer had grown increasingly frustrated as his ship's broadsides slammed into Bismarck but did not produce the destruction of the vessel. Rodney had only Armour-Piercing shells, for she had offloaded her High Explosive 16-inch gun ammunition in the UK as she was about to go into a refit at Boston in the USA. The Rodney's heavy shells therefore cut through the less well-protected parts of Bismarck, like a hot knife through butter - one of the Rodney's junior ratings, G. Conning, describing them as fiery tennis balls, with some 'going through her bows and out the other side', bouncing and twirling into the distance until they splashed. A sailor in King George V, whom I interviewed some years ago, even before the 'Killing the Bismarck' book was mooted, said that his ship's High Explosive shells just bounced off Bismarck, so the Home Fleet flagship also switched to AP. Given Byers' clear sighting of

surrender signs in the fore part of Bismarck, and sightings by others, why didn't the British just stop firing and go alongside Bismarck to take survivors prisoner after mounting a boarding? Rodney's gunnery officer, who would rise to high rank in the Royal Navy post-war, was frank about the brutal, bloody business of destroying Bismarck being entirely necessary. In an account he gave to an Imperial War Museum interviewer, Crawford explained: 'We couldn't leave her floating about there, and go away. And of course we were in the very difficult position... both ourselves and King George V were running extremely short of fuel... some of the people who weren't actively doing [anything] had many more feelings than possibly I did, about whether we ought to be still firing at her. I had a job to do, which I had to get on with. I didn't really have enough time to think very much about the moral side of it.'

THE late Antony Preston delivered a crushing verdict on Bismarck, by including her in his 2002 book, 'The World's Worst Warships'. Preston - a globally respected naval authority - explained that Bismarck was ordered very quickly after the Nazis came to power in 1933, her design actually based on the Bayern Class of 1914. In common with WWI-era designs Bismarck possessed a low armoured deck, leaving a lot of vital areas outside the citadel, including communications and electrical systems. Preston judged that, during the fight of May 27, 1941, British guns 'shredded everything except the main machinery.' Therefore, Bismarck could maintain

her momentum, but most of her vital systems were swiftly destroyed and with them hundreds of lives. So, were Germany's naval architects culpable? She was left defenceless with no means to co-ordinate her gunnery, failing to score a hit on any British ship during the final battle. She was tough, with lots of small compartments and longitudinal bulkheads - making her slow to sink - but further evidence of Bismarck's defective design was the fact that, as she turned turtle, her poorly constructed stern actually fell off. Despite Preston's assertions the 'invincible Bismarck' myth endures today. After WW2, when asked if the Bismarck had simply stopped firing - that is of her own volition, without her weaponry being knocked out by the British - would Rodney have followed suit, William Crawford replied: 'No, our job was to sink her. And our job was to sink her as quickly as possible.' Nobody liked the brutal business of war, least of all Crawford and Dalrymple-Hamilton, but it wasn't possible to stop until the enemy was utterly destroyed. Dedicated to doing his duty on behalf of a nation fighting for its survival, Dalrymple-Hamilton, a very humane officer, was also capable of great empathy for fellow mariners under a dreadful onslaught. It must have been a stomach churning experience and something that caused him great distress. Captain

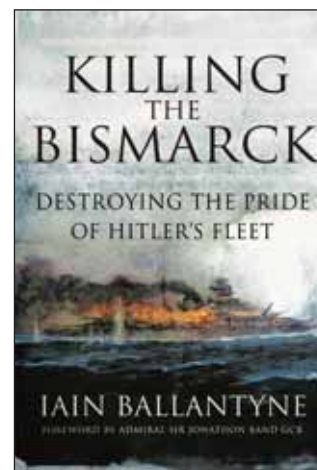
Dalrymple-Hamilton's son - North Dalrymple-Hamilton, a midshipman serving in King George V during the battle - many years later revealed his dad's feelings, during an interview with documentary filmmaker Rob McAuley for the latter's milestone series 'The Battleships'. 'We were awfully close, and everybody was expecting that she'd [Bismarck] would strike her flag,' said North Dalrymple-Hamilton. 'We could see the swastika flying very plainly from her main mast,

**'WE COULDN'T LEAVE HER FLOATING ABOUT THERE, AND GO AWAY. I HAD A JOB TO DO, WHICH I HAD TO GET ON WITH. I DIDN'T REALLY HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO THINK VERY MUCH ABOUT THE MORAL SIDE OF IT.'**

but she never did, and so... we just went on firing. I mean there was nothing else to do. My father was horrified by this, actually, he told me afterwards, but you see, until she struck her flag you just didn't know how badly she was damaged.' The task of killing the Bismarck was a horrific and disgusting business, which might explain why a number

of those on the British side decided not to make too much of it. Like any rational and right-thinking human beings, the individuals involved were possibly ashamed of what they were forced to do in order to ensure their nation's survival during its darkest hour - as it fought on alone against the Nazis. They did not wish to revisit those baser instincts, those acts of desperate necessity, in detail at a later date. However, to not reveal the full scale of the brutal business of war at sea is to help foster the illusion that it is a long-range, remote, almost bloodless, affair; a tale of machines rather than men.

The reality of war is that in the heat of battle, it is notoriously difficult for soldiers, sailors or airmen to surrender without being killed in the process. All manner of calculations enter into the equation. It is not as simple as waving a white flag. There is the confusion and chaos of battle, the sheer brutality and pace of events. Then there is fear that the enemy may be using 'surrender' as a ruse to achieve advantage. Above all, the commander must safeguard his own people in the face of threats from enemy forces who may not have capitulated. A battleship surrendering in the midst of combat was an event unheard of in war at sea since the days of fighting sail, when warships traded blows literally within shouting distance. The distance between British warships and the Bismarck was miles - even when the range was closed down to 'point-blank' in gunnery terms - and there was no realistic means of clarifying if any attempt to surrender came as a result of a decision by the Bismarck's command team to cease fighting, or was just a result of panic under fire in one part of the ship. Certainly, Bismarck's two aft turrets were determined to go on firing even in the absence of contact with the command team, which was probably wiped out very early in the final battle. It would have been folly for the British to hesitate, particularly with mass air attacks thought imminent - by up to 200 Luftwaffe bombers - and U-boats likely to make every effort to sink Royal Navy warships. And Bismarck could not be left to it, for she might have been salvaged and towed back to France, a very visible example of heroic Nazi endurance



on the high seas, having delivered a body blow to the world's most powerful fleet - by sinking Hood - and got away with it. The impact on British morale, and global prestige, would have been immense. Fighting a fascist military machine that has mercilessly waged war on millions of innocent people, caring little for the rules of war, the British dare not give any quarter. The Norfolk's John Ruffer said of Bismarck's final moments: 'she was silenced, but still looked an impregnable fortress, despite the hammering she had had. Then started the most fantastic phase of all, which made the most bloodthirsty feel rather sick. We simply could not sink her, and we expected large scale air attack at any moment.' Despite the efforts of two battleships and two cruisers, 'pumping all they had into her', she would 'neither sink nor surrender'. In short, as John Ruffer summed it up: 'It was quite appalling.' Appalling, yes, but as everyone acknowledged, entirely necessary. What the Bismarck Action and the fate of Hood and Bismarck, both destroyed within a space of a week at the cost of around three and a half thousand lives, teaches us today is that mass casualties are an inevitable consequence of major war at sea between states. Should China go to war with India, or America, at a future date, the death toll as the great fleets they already possess, or are busy building, fight it out will be enormous. There are no glorious deaths at sea, as the revelation that men in the so-called 'invincible Bismarck' tried to surrender proves. A ship is nothing without her men having the will to fight or the means to survive destruction.

• *Some elements of this article adapted from 'Killing the Bismarck' by Iain Ballantyne. See review, right.*

• *'Killing the Bismarck' is available from Pen & Sword Books. Web site: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk Tel: 00 44 (0)1226 734555*

## A NEW VIEW OF A FAMILIAR STORY LONG OVERDUE HOW BRITAIN'S FIGHTING SAILORS KILLED BISMARCK

**by Gerry Northwood**  
When the German battleship Bismarck broke out into the North Atlantic in May 1941, events unfolded which became increasingly personal; for the men of the Home Fleet who were out to avenge lost comrades and personal to the Royal Navy, which had to prove that, despite insufficient and obsolescent equipment, it could maintain a tradition of victory and keep Britain in the war.

In 'Killing the Bismarck' (Pen & Sword Maritime, £25.00, hardback) Iain Ballantyne examines the story via the lens of the Royal Navy, a specific narrative treatment that inevitably leaves much out, but criticism of it for that would miss the point. 'Killing the Bismarck' allows the men who were actually there on the British side to drive the narrative. It is their story and one that is long overdue some exposure. It is sometimes said that the Army equips the man, while the Navy mans the equipment. This is no more than semantics. Navies do actually equip the man, and for this reason the essence of a navy is its people. No matter how sentimental we might feel about a ship, especially when we see our old steamer sat forlornly rusting away on the trots at Portsmouth, the truth is that our depth of feeling is for what that ship once was. We remember the days when she was a vibrant, living community populated by a ship's company. It is flesh, not steel, that makes a warship a special living entity. The battle-cruiser HMS Hood was one such vessel - beloved of many men serving across the Royal Navy who had once considered her their home, or knew people serving in her, had visited the 'Mighty Hood' in some capacity or had been inspired by her glamour status in newsreels, on cigarette cards and in the newspapers and magazines of the interwar era. Under any circumstances the sinking of Hood by Bismarck would have been a shock. In fact, in the strategic context of 1941, a failure to sink Bismarck would have had far-reaching consequences. But for the men of the FN's Home Fleet, what Bismarck did to Hood was personal - more than 1,400 of their mates went down with her, and Ballantyne's new book adroitly describes why Bismarck had to die. It is a tale of men under extreme adversity. Not only were they battling the enemy, but they had also to endure atrocious weather while struggling to get the best from their less-than-brilliant equipment. That they succeeded first of all in slowing the Bismarck before finally cornering her and bringing the German giant to her knees was by no means a foregone conclusion. On paper the battle to sink the Bismarck

seems a little unfair. Fictive two German ships, the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen and battleship Bismarck set against the might of the Home Fleet. But the Home Fleet was badly stretched to meet all its commitments and failure against Bismarck could have resulted in Britain being knocked out of the war. Like Admiral Jellicoe in the North Sea during WW1, Home Fleet commander Admiral Tovey could afford to soak up some element of tactical defeat or reverse, in order to maintain overall ascendancy, but the strategic balance was actually much finer than two ships against a fleet. Tovey did not have a single unit that could hold its own against the Bismarck. Battleship HMS Rodney, with the 16-inch guns, could outgun Bismarck but had insufficient speed to close her for a gun engagement in the first place. The new King George V Class battleships, HMS King George V (Tovey's flagship) and HMS Prince of Wales, were out-gunned by Bismarck. Hood, while matching the German capital ship's 15-inch guns, lacked sufficient armour protection to withstand a slugging match. This was sadly and cruelly exposed in an engagement in the Denmark Strait lasting less than ten minutes. The Fleet Air Arm, in the carriers HMS Victorious and HMS Ark Royal, were ready and willing to do their bit, but their strength lay in the determination, courage and skill of their aircrews, and certainly not in the types of aircraft, which were all woefully out of date. Rudimentary radar gave the Royal Navy an edge in surveillance and this did tip the balance slightly in its favour. But the fact that the FN was able to find, fix and ultimately strike the killing blows is more a testament to the fighting spirit and tenacity of the commanders at sea and the men who made up their ship's companies. The battle was personal on many levels, as 'Killing the Bismarck' makes clear. There were the Polish midshipmen in King George V who were found in their mess deck sharpening swords and bayonets in anticipation of boarding Bismarck. For them it was about seeking retribution for what Germany had done to their homeland. The aviators, cruiser men, destroyer sailors and battleship ship's companies wanted to avenge Hood but the men of the Home Fleet were effectively fighting with an arm tied behind their backs due to the degree to which the Royal Navy had compromised capability to comply with Arms Control Treaties and budget constraints between the wars. This is brought home by the hybrid design of the KGV Class battleships. The complex 14-inch four-gun turrets in the KGVs were a direct result of these treaties. This was a novel and relatively high risk solution to

maximise firepower on a relatively small hull. Yet with the best will in the world, they did not have sufficient hitting power to take on the best protected ships of the time. Designed to protect Britain's naval superiority while mitigating the risk of a naval arms race, they in fact had the opposite effect. A naval arms race in the 1930s was never a real threat, yet Germany gave itself *carte blanche* to break treaty obligations and build battleships like the Bismarck and Tirpitz that effectively out-gunned and outmanoeuvred anything the Royal Navy possessed. In 'Killing the Bismarck' flaws of the King George V Class battleships' main armament, and the manner in which British politicians were duped by the Nazis prior to WW2 are covered in two chapters that act as precursors, scene-setters, for the drama at sea that follows. After his action-packed telling of the Bismarck Action, Iain Ballantyne gives an account of Prince of Wales carrying Churchill to Newfoundland for the British Prime Minister to sign the Atlantic Charter with President Roosevelt. To conclude his epic yarn the author delivers a sometimes harrowing coda on the fate of many British ships, including Prince of Wales, destroyer Cossack and cruiser Dorsetshire. They may have triumphed over Bismarck in May 1941, but were soon casualties of war themselves, with heavy loss of life in many cases. Iain Ballantyne's 'Killing the Bismarck' is both a well-written historical narrative and a gripping read. It tackles the excitement and pathos of the war at sea in equal measure and is above all a thoughtful tribute to the officers and men who served in the Home Fleet during those tense days when the Bismarck was on the loose in the North Atlantic. This is a story about fighting sailors and naval airmen, and Ballantyne draws out vivid eyewitness comment and testament to propel the story forward. And what a story it is. Of course, it is one we all know well, or at least think we do. Yet Iain Ballantyne has created something that anyone interested in the story of hunt for the Bismarck should read, for it delivers new insights.

• *Commander Gerry Northwood MA OBE Royal Navy commanded the Type 42 destroyer HMS Liverpool and most recently was on the staff of Commander Maritime Battlestaff conducting counter-piracy operations off Somalia. He currently works in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in the Directorate of Media and Communications. He has a lifelong interest in naval history. His naval hero is Admiral of the Fleet 'Jackie' Fisher, a man who believed in the value of deterrence.*

During the final battle of May 27, 1941, the battleship HMS Rodney fires on Bismarck.  
Illustration: Dennis Andrews.