Brave Ships
—of—
World War II

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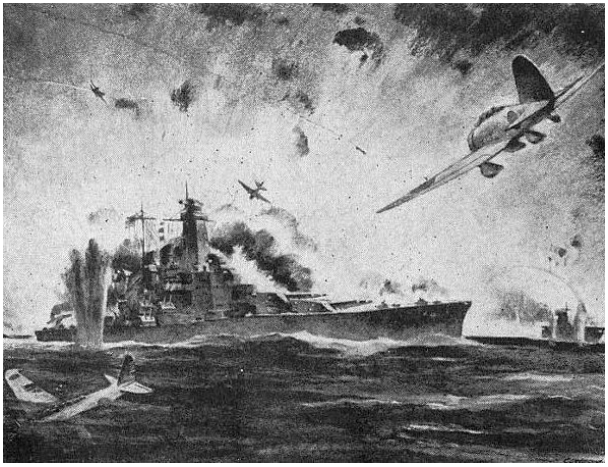
BRAVE SHIPS OF WORLD WAR II

BY
JOSEPH LEEMING



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By the Same Author
BRAVE SHIPS OF ENGLAND AND AMERICA

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

DEDICATED TO
THE OFFICERS AND MEN
OF THE
TWO ENGLISH-SPEAKING NAVIES

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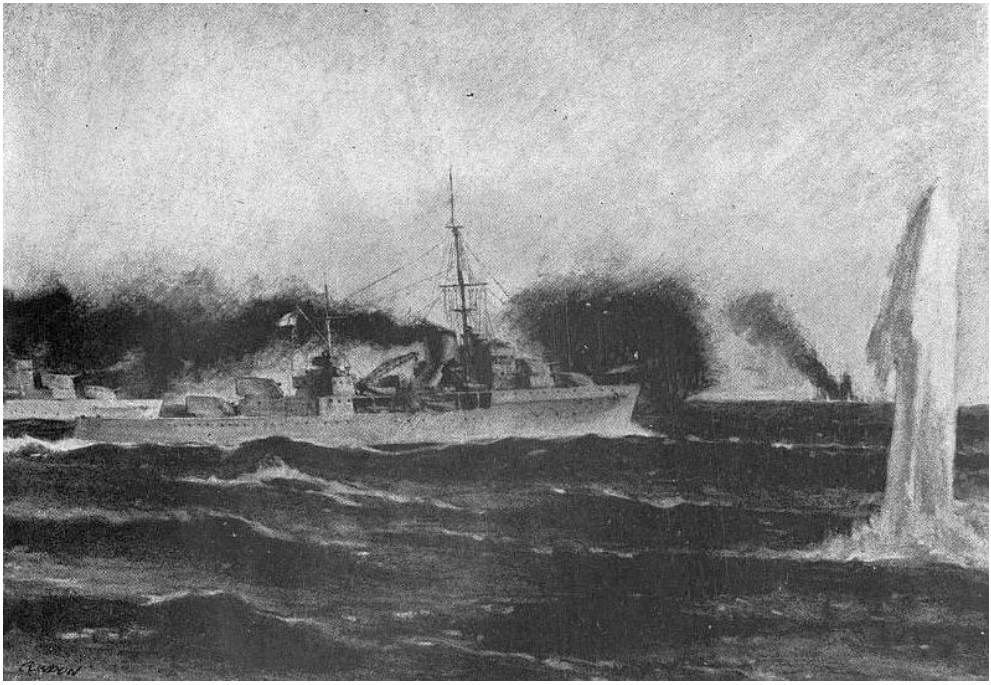


The *Ajax* and *Achilles* in Hot Pursuit of the *Graf Spee*

1. THE *AJAX*, *ACHILLES* AND *EXETER*

December 13, 1939

When World War II was brought to an unwilling world by the German lust for conquest and domination, the British Navy's task was vastly more difficult than it had been in World War I. The Navy, like the British people and their armies, faced the combined strength of the Axis practically alone. In the earlier war the navies of France, Italy, Japan, and later the United States, were ranged alongside the British against the Germans. In World War II Italy sided with the enemy, the French fleet became almost powerless to help, and in December, 1941, the Japanese threw in their lot with the predatory nations bent on aggrandizement no matter what the cost.

For many months the burden that the Navy carried—unaided except by a few Dutch, Polish and Norwegian men-of-war—was in all probability the greatest that it had been called upon to shoulder in any war.

The moment that the die was cast and Britain went to war, its gray-clad ships went into action. Cruisers and destroyers were dispatched to the ends of the earth—Bombay, Calcutta, Rio de Janeiro, Capetown, Dakar, Gibraltar, Halifax and elsewhere—to escort convoys of merchantmen bound for Great

Britain loaded with the sinews of war. Mine layers mined the entrances of German harbors and naval bases. The dread blockade was put into effect; enemy merchant ships were seized by British cruisers or chased into neutral harbors to keep them from delivering foodstuff and raw materials at their home ports. Heavy cruisers and destroyers and armed passenger liners converted into auxiliary cruisers patroled the North Sea and the Western Approaches, searching for enemy blockade runners, submarines and raiders. In the background, shrouded in the mists of Scapa Flow, the battleships lay with steam up, ready to put to sea at an instant's notice, should the enemy's heavy craft attempt a raid on North Sea shipping or the English coast.

Despite the vigilance of the Navy, several German raiders managed to slip through the blockading lines, aided by the heavy fogs and low visibility of the tossing seas to the north of the British Isles. One of these was the pocket battleship *Deutschland*, later re-named the *Lützow*, which for a brief season prowled the North Atlantic. A second raider was reported to be the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*, but as later events proved, was a sister ship, the *Admiral Graf Spee*. She took the South Atlantic for her hunting grounds. There was rumor, too, that one of the Germans' swift light cruisers, the *Emden*, was out.

The *Deutschland*, roaming the seas across which passed the important convoys between the United States and Great Britain, seemed hesitant to attack. She showed little of the spirit that could have been expected from a ship of her size and gunpower. Hundreds of plodding merchantmen, but lightly protected in these early days of the war, passed through her chosen hunting field, and reached their destinations unharmed.

By October 5 the *Deutschland* had steamed to a position about 1000 miles off the southern coast of the United States. Here she sank a British freighter, the *Stonegate*. Four days later and a good many miles to the north, she seized the American steamer *City of Flint*, put the *Stonegate's* men aboard her with a prize crew in charge, and directed her to proceed around the north of the British Isles and so presumably to Germany. At Tromso, Norway, the *City of Flint* put in for water and landed the British prisoners. Then, for some unknown reason, the prize crew ordered her north to Murmansk, in Russia. Here she stayed for a short time and then was taken to Haugesund in Norway. The Norwegians promptly interned the prize crew and sent the *City of Flint* on her way.

Meanwhile the *Deutschland* had run close in to the Grand Banks and sunk a Norwegian ship; then, vanishing for a time, had reappeared on November 7 off the Azores. From there she apparently headed to the northward, intending to return to Germany.

Patroling between Iceland and the Orkneys at this time was the auxiliary cruiser *Rawalpindi*, a 17,000-ton P. & O. luxury liner, lightly armed and pressed into service to free the Navy's regular cruisers for other work. She was commanded by Captain E. C. Kennedy, who had served in World War I. On the afternoon of November 23, already nearly dark at three-thirty in those latitudes, Captain Kennedy sighted a battleship through the murk off his starboard beam. It was the *Deutschland*, running through the northern seas for home.

Captain Kennedy gave the order "Full speed ahead," and turned his starboard quarter to the enemy, at the same time radioing for assistance. The *Deutschland* flashed the signal "Stop," then, without waiting, sent a shell across the *Rawalpindi's* bow. On the British ship the White Ensign was sent aloft in defiance.

The *Deutschland* quickly settled down to her work of destruction in deadly earnest. Lights flashed along her side and a salvo from her 11-inch guns thundered over the *Rawalpindi*. Another salvo followed, but fell short. Steering a twisting course to confuse the raider's spotters, the *Rawalpindi* returned the fire with her 6-inch guns. But now, on her port side, another ship was sighted. She had two funnels and proved to be the cruiser *Emden*. Captain Kennedy ordered his port guns to open fire at this new enemy.

The *Deutschland's* third salvo, rumbling across six miles of water, struck the British ship a hammer blow. All lights were put out, and the ammunition hoists would no longer work. Ammunition was passed by hand and the guns continued firing. Closing in rapidly, the *Deutschland* hit again, and a third and fourth time. The *Rawalpindi* was set on fire, her guns were silenced, and her engines stopped. Forty-three men, the survivors of her company, launched three lifeboats and started to pull away.

Steaming in at slow speed, the *Deutschland*, aided by the glow from the flaming *Rawalpindi*, removed the men from two of the boats. Then, as she waited for the third, she took alarm. With the *Emden* in close company, she gathered speed, turned to the eastward, and sped off into the darkness. In a few minutes a British warship plunged past the third lifeboat, tossing mountains of spray from her bows. Summoned, she had arrived, but too late to save the *Rawalpindi* and her gallant men. In the darkness and the mist the *Deutschland* made good her escape.

Far to the south, on a calm star-spangled tropic sea, the *Graf Spee* was taking on oil fuel from the German tanker *Altmark*, on the night that marked the end of the *Rawalpindi*. The raider, commanded by Captain Hans Langsdorff, was at this time near the island of Tristan da Cunha, in the South Atlantic.

She had done better on her cruise than her sister ship, the *Deutschland*. She had slipped out of Wilhelmshaven in August, 1939, nearly a month before the German attack on Poland and Britain's entry into the war, certain evidence of Germany's intent to plunge the world into war. Following the usual course taken by German ships trying to elude the British blockading cordons, she had gone far to the north of the Faroe Islands and Iceland and had reached the North Atlantic undetected. Then, speeding south through Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland, she had reached the North Atlantic.

Well to the south of the Azores she fueled from a tanker on August 28. Within a few days Captain Langsdorff knew there would be war and, in accordance with long-laid plans, he was ready for it. But during early September, when he was free to strike, he either was unable to find victims or hesitated to come close to the great sea lanes leading to South America. For a week or more he cruised between Brazil and Africa without an encounter. Then he came in close to Cape San Roque, the easternmost tip of Brazil, and lay in wait for vessels proceeding along the coast.

Near Pernambuco on September 30, the *Graf Spee* sank the Booth Line steamer *Clement*. Directing the crew to get in the lifeboats, Langsdorff broadcast their position, so they could be picked up. Then, to throw off pursuers, he steamed at full speed, 26 knots, toward the coast of Africa to attack the shipping on the important route to the Cape.

On October 5 the *Graf Spee* surprised and sank the freighter *Newton Beech* and two days later sank the *Ashlea*. The crews of both ships were taken aboard the *Graf Spee*. A few days later the freighter *Huntsman* was sunk and her crew added to the other prisoners. Then, meeting the tanker *Altmark* by arrangement in mid-Atlantic, Langsdorff transferred the British seamen to her, keeping the officers with him.

The fine ship *Trevannion* was sunk near Tristan da Cunha on October 22. Langsdorff then shifted his hunting ground, steaming south at forced draft around the Cape of Good Hope and into the Indian Ocean. His plan, apparently, was to draw British warships looking for him to this area, and then to double back to the South Atlantic which, he hoped, would by then be free of British cruisers.

To carry out this ruse, he sank the small tanker *Africa Shell* and sent her crew ashore in their boats, after telling them that he was the *Admiral Scheer*. Hoping that he had convinced the world that he was in the Indian Ocean, he returned to Tristan da Cunha and fueled once again from the *Altmark*.

On December 2, near the spot where the *Trevannion* had been sunk, the *Graf Spee* sighted the big Blue Star liner *Doric Star*, bound for England with a cargo of Argentine frozen meat. Langsdorff ordered her to stop, but the British ship put on full speed and ran for it, meanwhile jamming the air with an appeal for help. The *Graf Spee's* 11-inch guns swung into position and loosed a salvo, and the *Doric Star* was soon holed and in a sinking condition.

Langsdorff's first thought was to getaway as rapidly as possible from the scene of the sinking, which had been broadcast to the world. His decision was to make for the River Plate. Straight and swift he steamed southwestward toward the coast of Argentina—and his doom.

On his course through the South Atlantic he met and sank two ships, the *Tairoa* and the *Streonshaln*. Coming southward down the coast of Uruguay before dawn of December 13, the *Graf Spee* sighted the French steamer *Formose* heading in for Montevideo. Turning up to full speed and throbbing under the drive of her powerful engines, she started in pursuit.

A little after dawn on the same morning, three British cruisers were steaming down the coast toward the River Plate. The British, needing their cruisers in every part of the world at once, had only a light force off the South American coast. Much of this squadron's strength was represented by these three ships, the two light cruisers *Ajax* and *Achilles*, each armed with eight 6-inch guns, and the heavy cruiser *Exeter*, whose main battery consisted of six 8-inch guns. No one of these ships was a match for the *Graf Spee* with her six 11-inch turret guns. These could hit at 30,000 yards, a greater distance than any of the British guns could shoot. Well handled, the raider, by keeping out of range of the British cruisers' guns, could hammer all three of them to pieces without being touched herself.

The day dawned bright and fair, with a clear sky and a fresh breeze that flecked the blue water with white caps. Shortly after sunrise, at about half-past six, the lookouts on the German ship sighted the mast of the *Exeter* over the horizon to the southeast. It could be but one type of ship in those waters —a British cruiser. Nothing to fear, really, from one of them. Langsdorff undoubtedly was confident of an easy victory.

But every precaution was taken, and taken quickly, to be ready for battle. The raider's sirens howled, ordering her men to their battle stations. Officers hurried to the conning tower, to fire control stations and to the inside of the turrets. Snapping in the breeze, the swastika flag went to the masthead. Deep below in the engine room the men checked and rechecked the humming Diesels, already giving of their best. The ammunition hoists were set in

motion, and the six great turret guns were loaded and swung out over the port side.

Now the German lookouts made out smoke on the eastern horizon and soon were able to see the low, lean hulls and broad funnels of the *Ajax* and *Achilles*, lightly armored *Leander* class 6-inch gun cruisers. Well, they too should be easy to batter to pieces. Captain Langsdorff and his officers were not disturbed. At her full speed of 26 knots, the *Graf Spee* charged on to the south, prepared to handle all three of the British ships.

To do this her three forward turret guns were aimed at the *Exeter*, which was about 10 miles ahead and a little on her port bow. The after turret was revolved until its guns trained forward over the port side and were directed toward the *Ajax* and *Achilles*. These two ships were now plunging along on a course roughly parallel to that of the *Graf Spee* some 12 miles off her port beam.

At 6:18 A.M., four minutes after sighting the British ships, the raider's forward guns thundered a salvo at the *Exeter*. The range was 20,000 yards. Two minutes later the *Exeter* roared a reply and then the *Ajax* and *Achilles*, with guns swung out to starboard, took up their part in the battle.

The first German salvo fell short of the *Exeter*, the next was over. The third straddled the target and splinters from the shells tore through the funnels and damaged the fire control communication system. Again the *Graf Spee* thundered and two of her 700-pound shells crashed into the *Exeter*, striking a turret and killing a number of men on the bridge. But the *Exeter* was now finding the target and shooting magnificently. One of her shells ripped through the *Graf Spee's* control tower, the nerve center of her fire control system. Others tore holes in her sides and exploded inside her hull, filling the ship with acrid cordite fumes.

Meanwhile, the *Ajax* and *Achilles* were firing their main batteries as fast as the guns could be loaded. Their shells were hitting the mark, some of them driving through the raider's armor, others exploding against her sides and superstructure. Langsdorff was getting more than he had bargained for. For a time the ship's communication system was knocked out of commission. The air seemed filled with shell fragments and splinters and wounded men were being taken below to the surgery in steadily increasing numbers.

Langsdorff now concentrated all six of his turret guns on the *Exeter*, 8 miles distant, in an effort to put her out of the battle. At the same time, he ordered the secondary battery of 5.9's to deal with the smaller cruisers. The

Graf Spee's sides were now lit by a constant series of angry flashes as she poured out all the metal of which she was capable.

Her turret guns, riveted to the *Exeter*, thundered again and again, and the British ship staggered beneath the powerful blows. Two shells crashed into her forward turrets and put four of her six big guns out of action. Fires were started inside the turrets and the gun crews struggled to smother them before they could reach the magazines. The *Exeter's* decks were a shambles. All voice tubes and electric signals were smashed. Her captain was maneuvering the ship from the stern conning position, sending his orders by messengers who groped their way through blinding smoke and clambered over the twisted wreckage of her deckhouses.

The battle had now lasted for fifteen minutes. Seeing that the *Exeter* was badly damaged, Langsdorff ordered one 11-inch turret to fire at the *Ajax* and *Achilles* alternately. But the fire control was poor, and the two cruisers traveling at 32 knots were not hit. Firing with deadly precision and great rapidity they continued to pour in a galling stream of shells, starting fires, killing and wounding men, and tearing jagged holes in the raider's hull and superstructure. In a few minutes Langsdorff had had enough. Laying down a smoke screen, the *Graf Spee* veered off and disappeared behind it. This first phase of the battle concluded at 6:38 A.M. and left the *Exeter* considerably damaged, the *Ajax* and *Achilles* unharmed.

Plunging through the smoke, the British cruisers again sighted the fleeing *Graf Spee*. The *Exeter* closed in and blazed away with her two remaining guns. But the Germans once more concentrated the full fury of their fire on her. Shells tore through the *Exeter's* hull below the waterline, letting in tons of water and slowing her down. Other shells at last crashed into her after turret and silenced it. The gallant ship dropped slowly astern, while her crew struggled with the fires on board and shored up her many strained and weakened bulkheads.

The raider now gave her full attention to the *Ajax* and *Achilles*. It was evident that she was trying to escape, but her 26-knot speed could not outdistance the British cruisers, which could travel at 32 knots. Commodore Harwood, on the *Ajax*, soon launched a plane to spot the fall of the British shells and signal corrections to the fire control officers. As the plane arrived over the *Graf Spee* its pilot saw the German ship let loose torpedoes. "Torpedoes approaching," he signaled. "They will pass ahead of you." But Commodore Harwood preferred to take no chances of being hit broadside on. He turned in toward the enemy, presenting a smaller target.

Shells from the *Graf Spee* were landing close. But once turned toward the raider Commodore Harwood determined to close in, despite the danger

of total destruction, so that his smaller guns could inflict greater damage. The two cruisers, dashing on through the spray raised by their tremendous speed, closed in to within 5 miles of the *Graf Spee*, at which distance they brought all their guns to bear.

It was now that the *Achilles* outdid herself in accurate shooting. An officer on the *Ajax* said later that "the *Achilles* was making magnificent shooting. She was straddling continuously, her spread was very small, and she was scoring hit after hit."

Sweeping on to the south at maximum speed, the three snarling ships poured out uninterrupted salvos of projectiles. At times, as the *Graf Spee's* shells struck the water, the British cruisers seemed to be racing through a cauldron of waterspouts. Then, some five minutes after she had turned toward the enemy, the *Ajax* was hit by an 11-inch shell. The blow shook the ship from bow to stern and knocked two turrets out of action. A minute later, a hail of shell splinters penetrated the *Achilles'* control tower, killing several men.

The British now resorted to a device that had many times been practiced in time of peace. The *Ajax* first laid down a thick smoke screen, hiding both ships from view. The *Achilles* then dashed through it, delivered a smashing broadside, and quickly dodged back into the smoke. It was then the *Achilles'* turn to pour out smoke, and for the *Ajax* to cut through it, fire and retire. Alternating in this way, the cruisers worked in to within 4 miles of their enemy and battered the *Graf Spee* till she was badly hurt. Their savage salvos went through the raider's hull and control tower, exploded about her decks, and killed and wounded many of her men. It was a miracle that the British ships were not hit. At 4 miles distance—almost point-blank range for an 11-inch gun—one or two successful German salvos would have meant total destruction.

By now the *Ajax* and *Achilles* were beginning to run short of ammunition. Commodore Harwood decided to cease firing and settle down to trail the *Graf Spee*. From the Falkland Islands, far to the south, the heavy cruiser *Cumberland* had been summoned by wireless. It was up to the *Ajax* and *Achilles* to keep contact with the enemy until the *Cumberland* could arrive, or until night, when there might be a chance to close in and use torpedoes at short range.

Dropping back fifteen miles, the British slowed their speed and kept a watchful eye on the battered pocket battleship. The German ship still tore on at full speed, laying smoke screens from time to time and occasionally thundering at her pursuers with her after turret guns. Through the rest of the morning and through the long afternoon the *Graf Spee* ran for Montevideo, a

neutral port of refuge. Astern, out of sight beyond the horizon, the wounded *Exeter* steamed slowly southward bound for the Falkland Islands for repairs.

Toward evening the *Ajax* and *Achilles* ran to shoreward of the raider and closed the range. Those on the *Graf Spee* could not see them against the dark outline of the coast, but the battleship was clearly visible in the yellow rays of the setting sun. Once again the cruisers opened fire and hit the target. The German ship fired back at the cruisers' gun flashes, but made no hits. As darkness settled down, the *Ajax* and *Achilles* worked to seaward in order to force the *Graf Spee* into the River Plate.

At ten o'clock the *Graf Spee* ran into the river and shortly after anchored off Montevideo. Outside, the weary British sailors took up their watch and prepared their ships for a renewal of the battle. The *Graf Spee* would be allowed a few days to make repairs, according to international law. Then she would have to leave port and the two British cruisers would have to take up the unequal fight again. Fortunately, however, they were reenforced the next day by the *Cumberland* which had made a record run under forced draft from the Falkland Islands.

The next day, Thursday, passed, and Friday and Saturday. While shipyard workers were repairing the twenty-seven holes in the raider's sides, Captain Langsdorff talked several times with Berlin by telephone. At Rio de Janeiro, a thousand miles to the north, the battle cruiser *Renown* and the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* put in for fuel. The whole world followed these events, fascinated. There were rumors of every description. The *Graf Spee* would refuse to face the British ships and would intern. She would fight her way out. Her sister ship, the *Deutschland*, was racing to her rescue.

On Sunday afternoon Langsdorff transferred most of his crew to the *Tacoma*, a German merchant vessel, and at five-thirty weighed anchor. Watched by thousands who lined the shore, she steamed out into the river and started toward the river mouth. Word of her departure was brought to the British cruisers, and the men went to their battle stations. Commodore Harwood, on the *Ajax*, signaled the *Achilles* and *Cumberland*:

"My object—destruction."

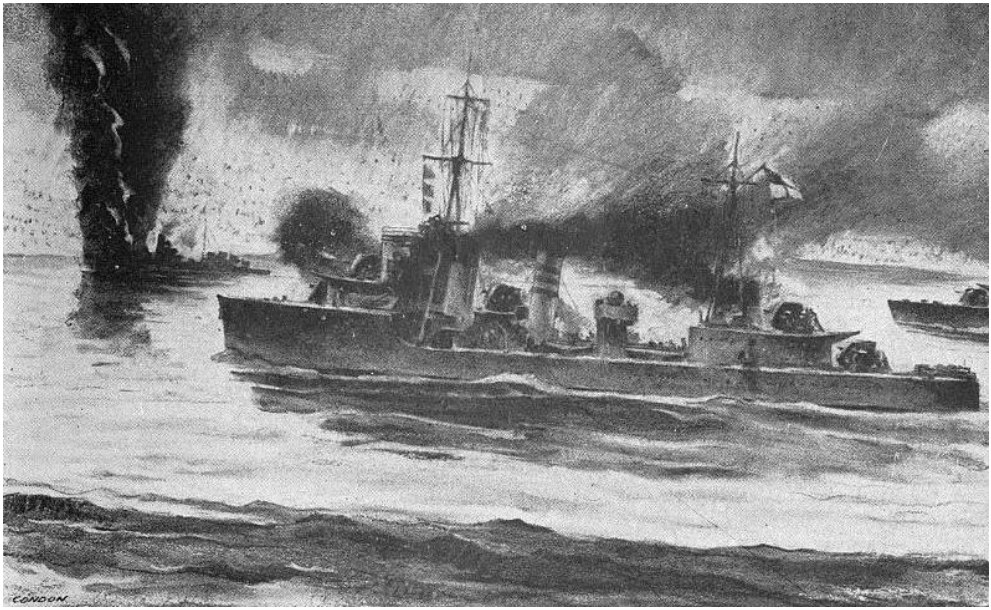
Grim and determined, the men aboard the cruisers loaded their guns and waited for the enemy to come in sight. To their astonishment and that of the entire world Langsdorff blew up his ship as soon as he had cleared the river mouth. Sheets of orange flame shot out from her hull, disappearing in vast columns of smoke, which merged into a dense and massive cloud. Her funnel fell forward, and her long deck buckled, throwing the great control

tower out of line. As the few men aboard her drew away in a ship's launch, she settled in the shallow river bottom, burning fiercely.

So, with the ignominious scuttling of the pocket battleship *Graf Spee*, ended the Battle of the River Plate. Even to this day, say British naval officers, they cannot figure out why the Germans did it.

The *Graf Spee's* epitaph was written by one Charlie Holmes, a stoker on the *Exeter*. In it the British seaman speaks with the same spirit as that of his great forbears who forged the traditions of the Royal Navy.

> "You've heard of British heroes, bold in air, on land or sea,
> But here's a tale will e'er be told, the fate of the *Admiral Spee*.
> Thirteenth of December was her unlucky date,
> Was then she met the *Exeter* hard by the River Plate.
> And though she was stronger in armaments, indeed,
> We'd speed aboard the *Exeter* and men of bulldog breed.
> We met as dawn was breaking, she raked us with her shell,
> But we put our trust in the turbine's thrust and our faith in Captain Bell."



The H.M.S. *Hardy* Lays a Smoke Screen at the First Battle of Narvik

2. THE BATTLE FOR NORWAY

April, 1940

Early in April, 1940, the Germans commenced their invasion of Norway, and Britain countered by sending an expeditionary force across the North Sea convoyed by the navy. Under terrific attacks by the German air force, the British and allied troops were landed, only to be forced to evacuate a month later, as the Germans threw increasing thousands of troops into the campaign.

During the early days of the battle for Norway, the Royal Navy saw furious action as it sought to interrupt the flow of German troops and supplies to Norwegian ports and to destroy the German warships on the coast. The story of this fiercely contested struggle starts on Sunday night, April 7. The British Home Fleet was at anchor in Scapa Flow, but three mine-laying squadrons were steaming through the darkness to lay mine fields in Norwegian waters. Somewhere to the north of them lay a strong British covering force, sent out to protect the mine layers until their work was completed.

During Sunday reconnaissance aircraft of the Royal Air Force reported that German battleships with a number of cruisers, destroyers and merchantmen of all types were at sea. Due to fog and dirty weather it was

very difficult to keep a close watch on the enemy or to identify individual warships. Actually, however, the German naval forces were divided into three principal squadrons.

The largest group included the battleship *Scharnhorst*, the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, three light cruisers and nine destroyers. It sailed from Wilhelmshaven and its ships were later to separate into three smaller groups for attack on Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik.

A second squadron sailed from Kiel and comprised the battleship *Gneisenau*, the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*, the light cruiser *Karlsruhe*, and a number of supporting destroyers and torpedo boats. Its mission was to force the surrender of the principal ports around the southern coast of Norway.

The third group, which also sailed from Kiel, was destined for the attack on Oslo, the Norwegian capital. It was led by the heavy cruiser *Blücher* as flagship, and included the pocket battleship *Lützow* (formerly named *Deutschland*), the light cruiser *Emden*, and an adequate number of smaller supporting craft. A smaller force detailed to capture Bergen, included the light cruiser *Köln* and *Königsberg*.

Merchantmen in great numbers, carrying troops, guns, ammunition, oil and every other needed kind of supplies, swarmed out of all the principal German ports and headed north toward specified Norwegian harbors. Heaving and tossing in the wind-lashed northern seas, obscured from searching planes and even from each other by banks of fog, and heavy, driving snowstorms, the German armada sprawled out over the sea for miles. It was one of the greatest maritime invasion forces that had ever been assembled up to that time.

Warned that the enemy was out in force and headed toward Norway, the British Home Fleet steamed silently out of Scapa Flow, led by Admiral Sir Charles Forbes on the battleship *Rodney*. Taking up cruising formation, the long lines of gray ships headed for the Norwegian coast, dipping their bows into the sullen, icy waters of the storm-lashed North Sea. South and east the main body of the fleet swept throughout the night, with the object of getting between the German ships and their home ports. Another, smaller force went to the northeast to cross the Arctic Circle and watch for German ships that might attempt to capture the great iron ore port of Narvik.

First contact with the enemy was made by submarines sent out in advance of the Fleet, early on the morning of Monday, April 8. At daybreak the Polish submarine *Orzel*, operating with the British, torpedoed the German supply ship *Rio de Janeiro*, as the latter was drawing in toward the

Norwegian coast. At about the same time a British submarine cruising off the entrance to Oslo Fjord, sent the supply ship *Kreta* to the bottom.

The *Glowworm*, one of the destroyers protecting the British mine-laying vessels, made the first contact with the German warships. She had lost a man overboard on Sunday afternoon. A heavy sea was running and the rescue work took so long that she was left behind by the other British ships. Hurrying to rejoin her squadron, the *Glowworm* sighted at 8 A.M. Monday, first one, then two German destroyers. Plunging through the steep seas, she wheeled to a parallel course and opened fire, at the same moment reporting her contact with the enemy to the Admiralty in London. Minute by minute she described the progress of the action.

Suddenly she reported a large unknown German ship ahead, driving toward her through the storm. Her last message ended in mid-sentence. The unknown ship was the 8-inch gun cruiser *Admiral Hipper* which, with a few salvos, had smashed and broken the small destroyer. The *Admiral Hipper* did, however, pick up a few survivors before rejoining the rest of her squadron, which was on its way to hammer defenseless Narvik into submission.

Meanwhile, the British Home Fleet was sweeping up the Norwegian coast from the south. It was blowing a gale and heavy seas combined with fog reduced the visibility to a very small area around the ships. No German vessels were sighted throughout the morning and afternoon of Monday. Early Tuesday morning, when the fleet was off the harbor of Bergen, the Germans launched a furious dive-bombing attack. Scores of Stukas screamed down to within a few feet of the British battleships and were met with an inferno of antiaircraft shells from the warships' multiple pom-poms. The attack was a failure. One 1,000-pound bomb hit the *Rodney*, but her heavy deck plating stood the test and she was undamaged. Two cruisers were slightly damaged by bomb splinters.

On the same morning another furious action was being carried out far to the north off the entrance to the Vestfjord, on which Narvik is situated. Early in the morning the big 32,000-ton battle cruiser *Renown*, pounding through heavy seas and snow squalls, sighted two German ships—the *Scharnhorst*, one of Germany's two 26,000-ton battleships, and the 10,000-ton heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. These ships had just completed escorting a squadron of destroyers to the entrance of the fjord, up which they were to proceed to blast Narvik, and were on the point of running south to meet the *Gneisenau* and *Admiral Scheer*.

The *Renown*, laboring in the violent seas and with snow blurring her range-finders, opened fire at 14,000 yards, about 7 sea miles. For three

minutes her great 15-inch forward guns thundered, and then the *Scharnhorst* replied and simultaneously turned away to escape. After six minutes more of firing, those on the *Renown* saw their shells strike the enemy's control tower. This destroyed the *Scharnhorst's* director system of fire control. A moment later, a British shell crashed into one of the German ship's turrets, silencing one of the guns. The *Scharnhorst* then stopped firing, but a minute or two later resumed again with her after turret, the fire being directed by local control.

At top speed the *Scharnhorst* fled, while after her at 24 knots plunged the *Renown*, enormous seas breaking over her forward deck. Her escorting destroyers, pitching into the steep seas, could not maintain their speed and soon were left behind. During the chase a German 11-inch shell passed clear through the *Renown's* hull above the waterline without exploding. Despite the low visibility and constant snow squalls, the British were shooting well. A few minutes later a tall column of smoke rose from the *Scharnhorst*, indicating that she had been hit a third time.

The *Scharnhorst* was now widening the distance between herself and the pursuing British battle cruiser. It was difficult for those on the *Renown* to keep her in sight or to observe the fall of their shells. Then, at high speed, the *Admiral Hipper* came hurtling out of the snow and steamed across the wake of the flying German battleship, laying a smoke screen. The *Renown* continued firing, but the swifter enemy craft were able to draw ahead and finally disappeared in the murk to the westward.

The other German warships, meanwhile, had been carrying out their assigned missions against the principal Norwegian ports. They had met with varying degrees of success.

The pocket battleship *Lützow*, with the cruisers *Blücher* and *Emden*, had entered Oslofjord early Tuesday morning and had soon been fired on by Norwegian warships. The *Emden* was so seriously damaged that she was forced to stay in Oslo harbor for six weeks undergoing repairs before she could return to Germany. Shore batteries hammered the *Blücher*, exploded her magazine, and sent her to the bottom with nearly all her own men and the troops that she was carrying. The *Lützow* retreated down the fjord and was not damaged.

At Kristiansand, near the southern tip of Norway, the attack was led by the light cruiser *Karlsruhe*. She encountered a blaze of fire from the shore batteries, which damaged her seriously, and for the time being she was saved only by the fact that a thick fog rolled in from the sea and hid her from sight. But she was not to escape. Late in the afternoon, when she was trying to leave the harbor, the British submarine *Truant*, lying in wait off the entrance,

sent two torpedoes into her. For a few hours the *Karlsruhe* stayed afloat while her crew worked desperately to save her. But their efforts were unsuccessful and the cruiser sank shortly after nightfall.

Farther up the North Sea coast of Norway, a force led by the cruisers *Köln* and *Königsberg* launched the attack on the important harbor of Bergen. Although the *Königsberg* was hit and damaged by shore batteries, the landing was carried out and the port was in German hands by midday. During the afternoon the *Köln* left the harbor, but the *Königsberg* remained. On the following morning, Wednesday, April 10, British bombers spotted the German ship and attacked. One bomb, at least, found the target and started a fire below decks. This soon got out of control and, as the flames rose a hundred feet above the doomed ship, she slowly capsized and sank.

Meanwhile the ten German destroyers escorted to the entrance of the Vestfjord by the *Scharnhorst* and *Admiral Hipper* had steamed up the fjord and captured Narvik. They were resisted by the Norwegian coast defense ships *Eidsvold* and *Norge*, but were able to sink both of these vessels.

The British were determined to do all that they could to drive the Germans out of Narvik or to render the harbor and the iron ore loading docks useless to them. From their available forces five destroyers, the *Hardy*, *Havock*, *Hostile*, *Hotspur* and *Hunter*, were detailed to attack the port and do what they could to hamper the Germans.

They arrived off the entrance to the fjord on Tuesday afternoon and their commander, Captain Bernard A. W. Warburton-Lee, in the *Hardy*, called at the pilot station to find out what he could of the strength of the German forces. The Norwegian pilot, after looking over the small British destroyers, told him, “I wouldn’t go up there unless I had three times your force.” Warburton-Lee radioed to the Admiralty, reporting the situation, and asked, “Shall I go in?” The Admiralty replied that he should use his own best judgment. Very well. He would attack, despite the odds. The *Hardy’s* radio crackled out the message:

“Going into action!”

Under cover of darkness, the British destroyers entered the fjord on Tuesday night and by four the following morning were close to the harbor of Narvik. Captain Warburton-Lee took the *Hardy* in alone to see what German ships were about, leaving the four other destroyers outside the harbor. Peering through the dim pre-dawn light, the British saw a group of merchantmen with German destroyers alongside. The *Hardy* gathered speed, dashed in, and aimed a torpedo at a German destroyer, the *Wilhelm Heidkamp*. The torpedo struck home, crashing into and exploding the enemy

vessel's magazine. Killed by the explosion were Commodore Bonte, the commander of the German force, twelve officers and sixty-eight men.

The Germans, taken completely by surprise, thought that they were being bombed from the air. The harbor was still shrouded in semidarkness and the *Hardy* had not been seen. The remaining German destroyers, instead of firing at her, immediately began to send up a hail of antiaircraft fire.

As the roar of the guns filled the harbor and re-echoed from its rocky sides, the *Hardy* ran past the German destroyers and supply ships, firing her guns and loosing torpedoes as fast as she was able. Then, without reducing speed, she swept around and dashed clear of the harbor to rejoin her four sister ships.

Captain Warburton-Lee now ordered the other British destroyers to enter the harbor and attack. Slicing the water with their keen knife-like bows, the *Havock*, *Hostile*, *Hotspur* and *Hunter* hurtled toward the enemy ships with their bow guns stabbing the darkness with flame. Two of the German destroyers, the *Anton Schmitt* and *Dieter von Röder*, met them with a heavy fire, to which was added a barrage of shells from field guns mounted on the shore. The harbor became an inferno, the roar of the many guns rising to a deafening crescendo, and the deep thunder of explosions on stricken ships rumbling out above the din of the warship's artillery.

The *Hardy* followed the other destroyers in, and the five ships, crashing ahead in a welter of foam and spray, blazed away furiously at every enemy vessel they could see. A British torpedo hit the *Anton Schmitt*, breaking her in two and sending her to the bottom. Salvos from two or more of the British destroyers smashed into the *Dieter von Röder* and destroyed her engines. About ten of the supply ships in the harbor were either sunk or disabled and several of the shore guns were silenced by the time the British ships completed their wild charge around the harbor.

As soon as they reached the quiet waters outside the entrance to the harbor, the destroyers swung around and prepared to start another attack. But before they could do so, they were themselves brought under a tremendous fire from other German destroyers that had been patroling in different parts of the fjord. Three of these enemy craft came down the fjord from the northeast, while two others came plunging through the murk to the southwest. At this time it was snowing heavily and it was difficult to tell friend from foe.

Between the two groups, the British were caught in a violent crossfire. Temporary escape appeared the wisest course and the *Hardy*, leading the British flotilla, laid a smoke screen to blanket off her four consorts. The

Hardy herself, however, was in full view and was soon receiving a merciless fire from the enemy destroyers. Shells carried away the bridge and wheelhouse, demolished the gunnery transmitting station, and finally slashed through the main steam pipe. Captain Warburton-Lee was mortally wounded, and many of the officers and men were killed. Under the impetus of the speed at which she was traveling when her steam pipe was hit, she plunged ahead still making over 30 knots and, with her rudder jammed over to port, finally ran herself ashore. Captain Warburton-Lee was lashed to a stretcher and floated to the beach, but died within a few minutes.

Even after she was hard and fast aground, the *Hardy* continued to fire her guns that were still in action. As her gunners peered through the heavy snow, they saw the flashes of the *Hunter's* guns as she hammered away at her pursuers. Suddenly there was a larger, brighter flash. The *Hunter* had been hit squarely by a full salvo of German shells. Torn apart, she sank in less than a minute.

By this time the *Hotspur* had been hit a number of times and was seriously damaged, and the *Hostile* had also received a number of hits. The *Havock*, fortunately, had escaped practically unharmed. The Germans had also suffered, two of their destroyers having been hit a number of times, and the remaining three having been slightly damaged. While they could have continued the battle, they drew away for some reason best known to themselves, thus allowing the three British destroyers to make their way down the fjord to the open sea. As they approached the entrance they encountered the German munitions ships *Ravenfels* and promptly sent it to the bottom.

This action, in which many gallant British lives were lost, ended the first battle of Narvik.

The British were still determined to try to drive the Germans out of Narvik and on Saturday, April 13, three days after the onslaught of Captain Warburton-Lee's flotilla, a strong British force, consisting of the battleship *Warspite* and nine destroyers, was sent to the port to destroy the shore batteries set up by the Germans and sink the remaining German destroyers. When these tasks had been accomplished, the British planned to land troops and to occupy the town.

With destroyers acting as a screen, the *Warspite's* planes flying out ahead and the destroyer *Icarus* leading the van, the squadron started up the fjord at noon. The first contact was made at 12:26 P.M. when the German destroyer *Erich Kühne* steamed out of the mist on the south side of the fjord. The *Icarus*, *Bedouin*, *Cossack* and *Punjabi* opened fire at once, but the enemy turned away and was soon lost to sight in a snow squall.

At 12:45 P.M. another German destroyer, the *Wolfgang Zenker*, loomed out of the mist, to be followed five minutes later by the *Hans Lüdemann*. The British destroyers attacked both of them, and a few minutes later the *Warspite* opened fire on them with her secondary battery of 6-inch guns. As the squadron moved on, firing continuously at the two Germans, a British plane reported that another German destroyer was lying motionless some distance to starboard. She was soon sighted and the *Icarus*, *Bedouin*, *Punjabi* and *Eskimo* closed in to attack her. They expected her to gather speed and attempt to escape, but she proved to be the *Erich Köllner*, which had been heavily hit in the battle three days before and was now lying aground in shallow water. In eight minutes the rain of British shells set her afire in three places, but she kept on firing with a single gun until a withering salvo from the *Warspite* silenced her.

The squadron had by now come abreast of the spot at which the *Hardy* had been run aground and her survivors, still camping on the beach, could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the huge bulk of the *Warspite* coming up the fjord. It was a brave sight for these weary and wounded men, and the wind bore their wild cheering over the water to their friends on board the British warships.

Meanwhile, three more German destroyers, the *Bernd von Arnim*, *Erich Giese* and *Georg Thiele*, came boiling down the fjord from the direction of Narvik. The *Warspite*, with the *Cossack*, *Punjabi* and *Foxhound*, steamed on to shell the land batteries, while the six remaining British destroyers engaged the enemy in a spectacular running fight. The British were firing fast and well, and the fury of their attack drove the German craft before them up the fjord. Soon the *Giese* was dealt a mortal blow, several shells plunging into her engine room and disabling her completely. Then, one after the other, each of the German ships was hit and each was set on fire. From some of them, columns of smoke burst upwards from explosions. Past Narvik, toward the inner reaches of the fjord, they ran for their lives, beaten and pounded by the grim gunners on the British ships. Flames from the *Kühne's* fires spread over her from stem to stern and she staggered crazily toward the shore, running aground out of control, a doomed ship.

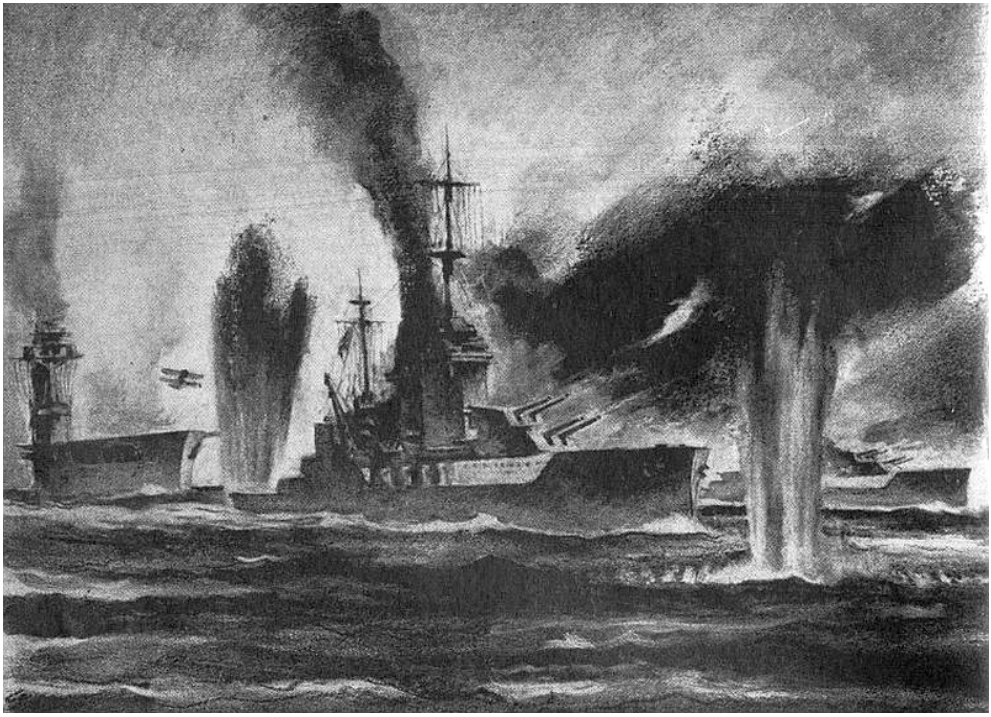
The four remaining German destroyers then fled into Rombaksfjord, a narrow stretch of water branching off from the main part of the Vestfjord. After them in hot pursuit stormed the British. When halfway up the 10-mile long Rombaksfjord, the *Georg Thiele* sheered around and fired her last torpedo at the *Eskimo*, the leading British destroyer. The *Eskimo's* bow was hit and damaged, but a moment later the *Thiele*, already consumed by flames, was run ashore and abandoned, her crew escaping into the hills.

By this time the three remaining German destroyers had reached the inner end of Rombaksfjord and had poured out clouds of smoke to hide them from their pursuers. But the wind blew the smoke to one side and, when the British arrived, they saw one ship blazing furiously, another run aground, and the third apparently undamaged. Their fire was concentrated on the undamaged destroyer, but she made no reply and the British drew in to board her. Before they could do so, she turned over and sank. Her crew had abandoned her, but before going ashore, had opened the sea cocks. The two other enemy craft were already done for. It was a clean sweep. All six of the German destroyers that had come out to fight had been destroyed.

The British destroyers made their way back to Narvik harbor, where they found that the *Warspite* had completed her work, and was ready to depart. Every German merchant vessel and warship that had been in Narvik harbor had been sunk and the shore batteries had been demolished. Three of the British destroyers had been hit, but none was lost. As the late afternoon sun sank slowly toward the western horizon, the squadron threaded its way down the fjord to the open sea and made good its return to England.

The Navy's work at Narvik paved the way for a successful landing by Allied troops a few weeks later, and for a short period the port was under Allied control. Early in June, however, the German successes in Holland, Belgium and France led the Allies to the decision to abandon Norway and the garrison at Narvik was withdrawn.

The naval battle for Norway had, however, cost the Germans a number of warships and merchantmen that they could ill afford to lose. It was a prelude to further battles that were to play an important part in weakening Germany and her ally, Italy, on the seas.



The Battleship *Malaya* and Aircraft Carrier *Eagle* Were Behind the *Warspite*

3. THE BATTLE OF CALABRIA

July 9, 1940

With Italy's entry into the war on June 10, 1940, the task of the British Navy was multiplied a hundredfold. It was now faced in the Mediterranean with the potentially very dangerous Italian fleet and with Italian land-based planes. It was necessary to guard the vital convoys passing through the Mediterranean between Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, and guard them strongly because of the presence of Italian battleships. Ships were needed to blast the African harbors used by the Italians for supplying their forces in North Africa, and to hunt down and sink the Italian supply ships running to these ports. Battleships were required to attempt to destroy the Italian battleships if a fleet action could be maneuvered.

Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham, Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet was well aware that trying times lay ahead. But, as in times before, Britain had the right man for the job. When he was a twelve-year-old boy at school, his father decided that the time had come to decide his future career. He sent him a telegram:

Straightway young Cunningham wired back:

"YES. WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO BE AN ADMIRAL."

His ambition was fulfilled by 1940, and in the three difficult years that followed before Italy finally surrendered, he proved himself a worthy holder of that ancient title.

In her home waters Great Britain was forced to keep powerful units that could deal with the German heavy ships—the battleships *Bismarck*, *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, the two remaining pocket battleships *Deutschland* and *Admiral Scheer*, and the heavy cruisers of the *Admiral Hipper* class. Many of the British cruisers and destroyers were needed for convoy duty. But ships had to be found for the Mediterranean and they were called in from all the seven seas. The battle cruisers *Hood* and *Renown* were there together with the battleships *Warspite*, *Malaya* and *Resolution*. From Australia came the cruiser *Sydney*, and from the South Atlantic, the gallant *Ajax*. Other cruisers, heavy and light—the *Orion*, *Arethusa*, *Liverpool*, *Gloucester* and their sisters—steamed through the Straits of Gibraltar and took up their stations with the fleet. With them came the aircraft carriers *Ark Royal* and *Eagle*, the latter brought in from the China station, and a host of swift destroyers.

These ships, and others that joined them, fought through the perilous months when Britain was struggling for sea supremacy in the Mediterranean. So closely did they work together that it is impossible to single out any particular vessel as one whose exploits shine above the others. They were divided into two groups—the Western Fleet based on Gibraltar, and the Eastern Fleet, based on Malta and Alexandria.

Their strength was needed, for the Italian Navy was expected to fight and it included ships that, according to their design, were among the best possessed by any nation. Of battleships there were six, two of them, the new 35,000-tonners *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto*, each mounting nine 15-inch guns. Their British-made engines were capable of turning out a speed of more than 30 knots. The other four battleships were older, but had recently been almost completely rebuilt and rearmed. They were the *Andrea Doria*, *Caio Duilio*, *Conte di Cavour* and *Giulio Cesare*, each mounting ten 12.6-inch guns and having a speed of 27 knots.

Italy's cruisers were numerous and fast. She had seven 10,000-ton heavy cruisers armed with 8-inch guns—the *Trento*, *Trieste*, *Bolzano*, *Fiume*, *Gorizia*, *Pola* and *Zara*, the first three with the exceptional speed of 36

knots, the others 32-knotters. Of light 6-inch gun cruisers there were sixteen, chiefly of the vaunted *Condottieri* class. These were claimed to be the fastest ships of their type in the world, some of them having exceeded 40 knots. Italy's destroyers numbered sixty-five, her swift torpedo boats about fifty, and her submarines about one hundred. The latter were regarded as one of the most dangerous menaces to the security of the British warships in the Mediterranean.

June, 1940, was considered by many the blackest month of the war for Great Britain. It was the month of Dunkirk and the fall of France. And soon after the defeat of France the support of the French fleet was lost—up till that time the principal naval force in the Mediterranean and the one that Britain had depended upon to help her keep the Italian navy in check. Now, after the world-shaking events of June, Great Britain stood alone.

In North Africa, the Italian General, Graziani, was preparing for an eastward thrust into Egypt. This must be countered, and some of the hastily assembled British ships were called upon to help. At this time the French warships at Alexandria were not yet demilitarized, and the old French battleship *Lorraine* went with the first force to bombard the Italian's advance base at Bardia. The other ships of this expedition were the light cruisers *Sydney* and *Orion* and a group of destroyers. The shelling of Bardia —the "first British naval attack on Mussolini's Roman Empire"—was carried out on June 21 and was a successful beginning. A series of terrific explosions made it clear that a large ammunition dump had been blown up, and forts and harbor works were heavily damaged.

It was in early July that the first real test came between the main battle fleets of Great Britain and Italy. This was the decisive Battle of Calabria, fought on the afternoon of July 9.

During the first week in July an important convoy of men and military supplies arrived at Gibraltar, en route to the eastern Mediterranean. Owing to the possibility of an attack by Italian battleships, the British decided wisely to use their own heavy craft in the Mediterranean escort. The Western Fleet, under Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville, was assigned the task of taking the convoy as far as Sicily. There it would be met by units of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, which would shepherd it to Alexandria.

Leaving Gibraltar, the convoy had with it the battleships *Barham* and *Resolution*, the battle cruiser *Hood* and the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, in addition to a number of cruisers and destroyers.

All went well until July 8, when the ships were attacked by a large number of Italian bombers and fighting planes. Quickly the great *Ark Royal*

turned into the wind and launched her Blackburn fighters, while the convoy scattered to disperse the targets. Working up to full speed, the warships zigzagged and let loose with all the antiaircraft guns they had. Smoke from these guns, forming heavy clouds, helped in some measure to conceal the vessels from the attacking planes.

Few of the Italian planes got past the *Ark Royal's* fighters. Those that did concentrated their bombing chiefly upon the aircraft carrier and the *Hood*. Around these ships there rose for a time a virtual curtain of water geysers and rolling smoke, as bombs crashed down near by and the British gunners delivered a hail of upward-flying steel. According to the Italian report on this phase of the attack, "the sea and air offered an apocalyptic aspect, with the sea literally boiling with the explosion of bombs round the British ships."

Despite the earnestness of the attack, the *Ark Royal* and *Hood* were not hit. The only warship to suffer was the heavy cruiser *Gloucester*, which was hit by a bomb. Her injuries were not serious enough, however, to keep her from taking part in the naval battle that was waged the following day. Four Italian Savoia bombers were shot down, and seven more were driven from the fight, riddled with machine-gun bullets.

During the night that followed the convoy was taken along the darkened coast of Sicily to meet the waiting warships of the Eastern Fleet. Contact was made, despite the blackness of the night, and the many ships moved silently off to the eastward. The new escort included the battleship *Warspite*, flying Admiral Cunningham's flag, the battleship *Malaya*, the aircraft carrier *Eagle*, and a strong force of cruisers and destroyers.

By morning the escorting vessels had taken up their positions for the voyage. Far ahead, beyond the vision of the others, were the fast destroyers, on the lookout for enemy submarines and aircraft, and also for the possible approach of Italian surface vessels. Behind them at some distance were five light cruisers, steaming in line abreast. The *Warspite* followed, in advance of the long columns of plodding merchantmen.

Midday passed and in the early afternoon the ships were approaching Cape Spartivento, on the toe of the Italian boot, which rose from the sea far off on the port bow of the convoy. Suddenly lookouts on the British destroyers sighted the smoke of many ships, rising above the horizon on beyond the Cape. Soon, steaming at high speed, most of the main Italian battle fleet came into sight.

Two battleships were there—the *Conte di Cavour* and the *Giulio Cesare*. Screening them, ahead and on the flanks, were many of the Italian light

cruisers and the entire force of heavy cruisers—the *Bolzano*, *Fiume*, *Gorizia*, *Pola*, *Zara*, *Trento* and *Trieste*. Darting around the big ships were some twenty-five destroyers. It was a force of great striking power and one that heavily outnumbered the British.

On the British ships the blare of bugles sounded "Action Stations," and the men went quickly to their posts. In the van, the destroyers raced to close in on each other, closer to the enemy, while behind them the light cruisers took up a line-ahead formation. On all the ships there fell the strange silence that is the prelude to battle, each group of men intent upon its immediate task and oblivious to all else. One gun crew after the other grimly reported, "Ready." The first charge was in each gun. Both fleets held to their courses and within a few minutes, as the two groups neared each other at a combined speed of some sixty miles an hour, the awaited signal was given —"Open fire!"

The British and Italian cruisers commenced firing almost at the same instant, when at 3:00 P.M. the range had narrowed to about 20,000 yards. In the early stages of the battle, the British light cruisers, heavily outnumbered, bore the brunt of the fighting. Five of them were engaged with more than twice their number of the leading Italian cruisers, several of which were armed with 8-inch guns.

Almost at once the din of battle rose to deafening heights as nearly one hundred guns roared into action. With each second, the heavy thunder of battle grew in magnitude, the bright gun flashes increased in number. Clouds of smoke commenced to form about the ships, and wherever one looked tall geysers of water rose from the sea, erupting with terrific force and toppling slowly in white cascades of foam and spray.

The entire sea, from horizon to horizon, now seemed to be full of smoking, flashing ships. From near at hand to over the horizon stretched the long line of the Italian fleet, steaming furiously forward, apparently eager to engage in battle. Off their flanks, to starboard, as the British looked ahead, were the swift-moving British destroyers, now veering in, now turning away, as they sought to shell the Italian ships or to win a position from which they could launch torpedoes.

As the cruisers exchanged their rapid salvos, the deeper, more terrible rumble of heavy turret guns was heard. It was the Italian battleships opening fire. They were still some distance away, however, 28,000 yards, or 15 miles. The cruisers pressed on, firing whenever they had a clear glimpse of a target through the drifting wreaths of smoke.

Astern of the British cruisers the *Warspite* was now coming up rapidly, her giant armored hull crashing through the water at nearly 25 knots. In her fire control tower men at range-finders and with binoculars studied the distant Italian battleships, calling out the figures of range and bearing. The forward turrets were trained toward the enemy, and the loaded 15-inch guns pointed high into the air, ready to thunder out the moment the word was given.

The distance between the British and Italian cruisers was now about 14,000 yards, or 8 miles. Many of the Italian shells were falling close, raising high columns of water on every side of the savagely firing little ships. Some of the British salvos were hitting home. A burst of orange flame and clouds of black smoke, accompanied by the deafening roar of an explosion, rose from one of the Italian cruisers, indicating that she was badly hit.

Now the *Warspite* was in position and opened fire, the tremendous roar of her turret guns blotting out momentarily the crashing broadsides of the cruisers. Her shells arched high into the air, passing over both the British and Italian cruisers, seeking out the leading Italian battleships. The sound of their swift flight was a rumbling, thunderous roll that could be distinctly heard. As they struck the sea near the Italian ships, they sent up huge fountains of water that rose a hundred feet into the air.

Other columns of water, accompanied by the noise of explosions, were seen among the British destroyers ahead of the main fleet. The *Stuart* and *Voyager* were depth-bombing an Italian submarine and were meeting with success. Watchers on the British ships saw the submarine's stern rise slowly upward as water poured in forward, dragging her bow down. In a minute or two the submarine was almost vertical. Then she plunged swiftly to the bottom.

Shortly after this action another Italian submarine was sunk. This one was destroyed by the British submarine *Parthian*, which was operating to eastward of the fleet. She sighted the Italian craft running on the surface at top speed, hurrying toward the battle. Submerged and at close range, the *Parthian* sent a torpedo into her, which caused her to explode and sink stern first.

The order was now given for the British light cruisers to close in, taking the risk of damage in the hope of sinking or disabling some of the enemy craft. In line-ahead formation, each ship turned to port, thus swinging into line abreast. Continuing their fire with their forward guns, they raced directly toward the Italian cruiser line.

The Italians met them with what seemed an even heavier concentration of fire than before. Though they were hit by shell splinters and with decks deluged with water falling on them from near misses alongside, none of the British ships was damaged.

Describing this stage of the battle, an officer on one of the ships near the Australian cruiser *Sydney* said: "We saw the *Sydney* move in through the screen of the Italian shells. It seemed impossible that any ship could go through that wall of steel and come out again. We saw *Sydney's* bow nose in. She disappeared behind a wall of water thrown up by salvos of shells. It seemed many minutes before she came into view again, plunged out of the screen on the far side of the barrage, her guns still pouring concentrated hell at the Italians, completely undamaged."

The *Warspite* had also swung to port and was now alongside the cruisers, her turret guns still rearing up and pouring out flames, smoke and steel. Behind her, barely discernible through the smoke, were the battleship *Malaya* and the aircraft carrier *Eagle*. The latter had already launched her Swordfish torpedo bombers, which now were speeding in to attack. The full strength of the British force was being hurled into the battle, each unit within striking distance pressing directly toward the superior number of Italian ships. From the flank of the battle, the destroyers had been called in to drive home a torpedo attack. They were now dashing in ahead of the cruisers, which were firing over them.

This all-out assault was too much for the Italian fleet. Instead of bracing to meet it, the ships veered sharply off to starboard and, with turbines pounding to turn out the last ounce of speed, they raced off to the northwest. At the beginning of their flight, however, they were still within range of the British big guns and a 15-inch shell from the *Warspite* hit one of the Italian battleships. It up-ended one of her turrets and killed a number of men.

To cover the Italian retreat, a single small destroyer, the *Zeffiro*, turned about and, steaming at better than 35 knots, raced between the British and Italian ships to lay a smoke screen. Her action has been described as "in many respects one of the most courageous feats in the sea history of any nation." And so it was. Steaming between the two fleets, she was within close range of every British ship, and every ship she passed brought guns to bear on her.

Again and again she was hidden behind water thrown up by shells, but time after time she came into view again, racing along with thick black smoke pouring from her funnels. Her amazing luck held until she had nearly completed running the gauntlet of the entire British force. Then a shell made a direct hit in her magazine. One instant she was there in plain sight, a

heroic swift-moving ship. The next moment she was gone. There was a terrifying flash as she exploded, and a vast column of smoke and wreckage was hurled into the air. When, a moment later, the breeze blew the smoke clear of the spot, the sea was empty.

Her action had done much, however, to help save her sister ships. The smoke screen had given them the cover they needed to run out of range of the British guns. Then, with their great speed, they steadily widened the stretch of blue sea between them and their pursuers.

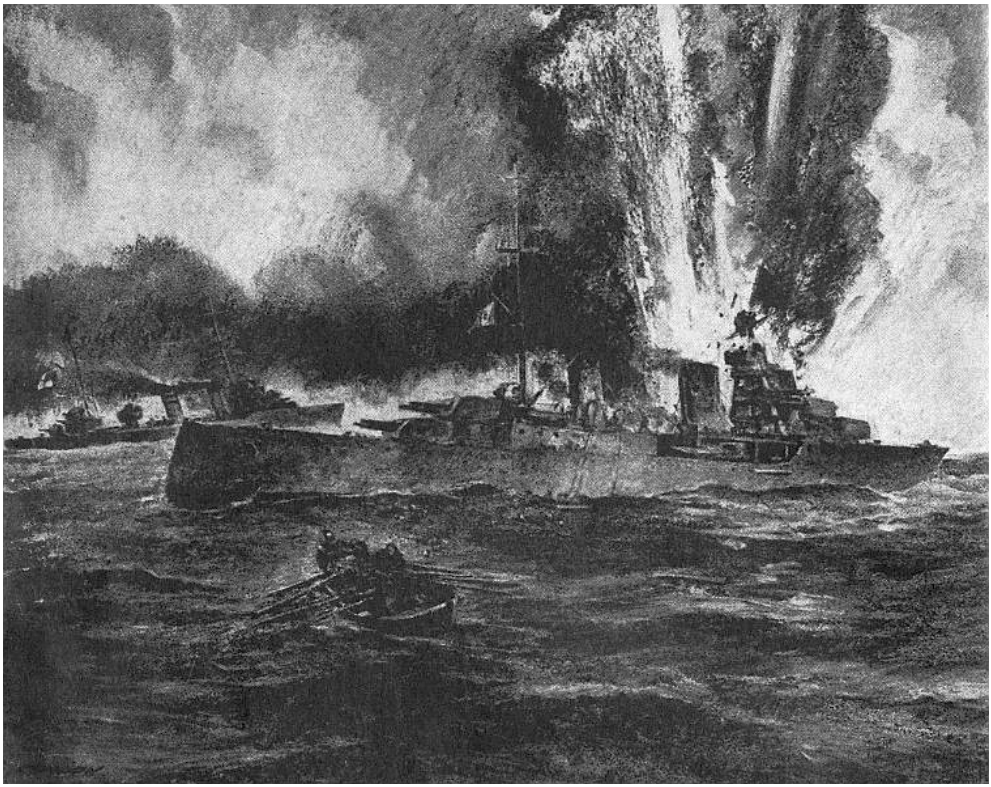
The only British units that could overtake them were the Swordfish torpedo bombers from the *Eagle*. Running in close to the water, as torpedo bombers must, they were met with a heavy fire, but delivered their missiles and all returned in safety. One torpedo hit an Italian light cruiser, but did not cause sufficient damage to bring her to a stop.

For a short while the British continued their pursuit, pounding along with all forward guns in action. But by about half-past four, an hour and a half after the opening of the battle, the Italians were close in to the shore of Sicily and the British were within range of the heavy coastal guns, which soon commenced to fire. At 4:34 P.M. Admiral Cunningham ordered the action broken off.

The *Eagle's* planes were launched once again and struck at the harbor of Port Augusta in Sicily. Here they succeeded in sinking a supply ship and the destroyer *Palestro*. By the time that they returned, the British warships had taken up their stations with the convoy and were on an easterly course, heading for Alexandria.

The Battle of Calabria—the biggest fleet action of World War II up to that time—was over. Though inconclusive in itself, it had several important results. The principal one was that it gave the Italian fleet an extremely healthy respect for the determination of the British to engage in close, destructive action, even though greatly outnumbered. Following the battle, the Italian ships stayed close to their bases, apparently reluctant to risk any further encounters with so resolute an enemy.

This did much to give the British greater freedom of movement in the Mediterranean, a freedom far greater than they had ever hoped to achieve. For General Wavell and the Army of the Nile, this was of incalculable value, for it permitted the passage of the vital convoys that brought them guns, ammunition, and every other type of equipment. Sea power had once again demonstrated its great ability to aid the armies of its mother country.



The Italian Crew Abandoning the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*

4. THE *SYDNEY'S* DUEL WITH THE *BARTOLOMEO COLLEONI*

July 19, 1940

While Italy's battleships, following the Battle of Calabria, remained in their harbors where they were secure against attack by British men-of-war, some of the Italian destroyers and light cruisers occasionally made swift dashes out into the Middle Sea. Their object was, in all probability, to seek for British submarines or unescorted merchant ships and at the same time to demonstrate the fact that they were able to leave port, and, to some extent at least, patrol their sea.

In an effort to seek out and destroy whatever Italian ships might be at sea, the British, as they were able to from time to time, sent cruisers to the areas in which the Italian vessels most frequently carried out their sorties. Thus it happened that ten days after the Battle of Calabria—on the morning of July 19—the light cruiser *Sydney* was patroling the waters between

Greece and the island of Crete, hoping that good fortune would bring her in contact with an Italian man-of-war. With her as a protective escort were the five destroyers *Havock*, *Hasty*, *Hero*, *Hyperion* and *Ilex*.

At daybreak of July 19 *Hasty*, *Hero*, *Hyperion* and *Ilex* were steaming to the eastward, line abreast, within sight of the northwestern shore of Crete and the high mountains of the island. It was a bright, clear morning, with a fresh breeze and a light sea into which the little destroyers clipped their bows as they moved along at three-quarter speed.

To the northeast and some fifty miles away, the *Sydney* and the *Havock* were steaming slowly westward. Well away from the destroyers, they waited in the hope that the latter would sight an enemy cruiser and, pretending to run from its superior fire power, would lead her to within range of the *Sydney's* guns. This is precisely what happened during the next sixty minutes.

It was at 7:20 A.M. that the destroyers sighted what they had been looking for—two *Condottieri* class light cruisers. They were about ten miles distant to the westward and were coming down from the north, heading toward Crete.

Commander Nicholson, of the *Hyperion*, immediately reported the discovery to Captain John A. Collins of the *Sydney*. His next step was to order the four destroyers to change course to the northeast. This started them on their way to join the *Sydney*.

On board the *Sydney*, Captain Collins rang for full speed, and the slim gray cruiser, trembling with the vibration from her turbines, set off for the scene of action. The *Havock* followed, wheeling about to the new course and taking up a position a little forward of the cruiser's beam. Rising and falling, as they raced ahead through the lightly rolling seas, the two ships threw up glittering sheets of spray as their sharp bows cleaved through the deep blue water.

Captain Collins estimated that it would take him almost an hour to reach the position given him by the *Hyperion*. He sent the men to breakfast and, gathering his officers on the bridge, laid out with them the plan to be followed in the impending battle.

The destroyers, meanwhile, were busy dodging Italian shells. The two cruisers, shortly identified as the *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and the *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*, at first refused to take up the chase. But they could easily outrange the destroyers' guns and at 7:26 A.M. they opened fire, the bright gun flashes from their rifles being clearly visible to the British. The destroyers lost no time in replying, but their 4.7-inch guns could not reach

the enemy. To avoid needless waste of ammunition, Commander Nicholson gave the order "Cease fire!" after a few salvos had been delivered.

The Italian shells were falling close and the little ships were kept busy dodging them. Constantly they tried to draw the cruisers off to the northeast, but the Italians kept heading in a general southeasterly direction toward the coast of Crete. Risking destruction, the destroyers several times closed in on a swift zigzag course and then, heeling far over under the impetus of their headlong speed, wheeled and darted away—always to the northeast.

Finally, just at eight o'clock, the cruisers took the bait. Turning swiftly, they steadied on a northeast course, their forward guns blazing. Now, in truth, the destroyers were in grave danger, for the Italian ships were not only more heavily armed but were several knots faster. They were able at will to close the range. The *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, which had made 40.9 knots on trial runs, was the fastest cruiser in any of the world's navies.

Nearly half an hour was to pass before the battle could be taken over by the *Sydney*, and to the men in the destroyers that half hour seemed interminable. The cruisers were firing, but fortunately their gunnery was not of the highest order, and none of the destroyers was hit. On they streaked, with eyes anxiously searching the horizon, their one hope being that the cruisers would not give up the chase before they had been led to their appointed destination.

It was at 8:26 A.M. that the lookouts on the *Sydney* made out the enemy. Thundering down from the north, she was ready for instant battle. Each man was at his station. Guns and torpedo tubes were loaded and the moment the Italian cruisers were sighted the range-finders went into action. Twenty thousand yards was the first reading. A minute went by and the range was 19,000 yards. It was 8:28 A.M. and the order was given, "Commence firing!"

The *Sydney* lurched as her guns delivered their first salvo, hurling 100-pound shells toward the two Italian ships. She was coming toward them on a slightly converging course, with her two forward turrets in good firing position and her two after turrets swung so their four guns pointed as far forward as possible. It was clear that she needed all her fire power, since her eight 6-inch guns were opposed by twice that number on the enemy cruisers.

Peering through his binoculars to note the fall of the *Sydney's* shells, Captain Collins saw the yellow flashes of the enemy's guns replying. The *Sydney's* first salvo straddled the target. A moment later, the Italian shells rumbled by and struck the sea astern of the two British ships and well to one side. Both range and deflection had been inaccurately gauged.

Despite his inferior gun power, Captain Collins drove the *Sydney* on at high speed to get within closer range. The black smoke rushed from her funnels and her hull quivered with the vibrations of the great speed as she pounded on.

The firing was immediately very fast and heavy on both sides. Italian shells were falling in great numbers uncomfortably close, but none was hitting. On the *Sydney* the guns thundered steadily, fed by sweating, cheering men, as salvo followed salvo. Below decks, in engine room and stokehold, and in the magazines, the men could hear the muffled roaring of the guns and feel the ship continually shuddering under the recoil of her cannon.

On her third salvo, the *Sydney* got a hit, probably on the *Bande Nere*. There was a brilliant orange flash on the cruiser's foredeck and a column of black smoke. The news spread throughout the British ship and cheers resounded wherever her men were gathered.

The *Sydney* was now firing with amazing rapidity. All eight guns were in action and each was pouring out shells at the rate of eight a minute. Every sixty seconds saw sixty-four projectiles hurtling toward the enemy ships. Her guns thundered in an increasing deafening roar and her hull, glimpsed through clouds of brownish smoke, was lit with continuous blinding gun flashes.

As she pressed on, the four destroyers up ahead, under Commander Nicholson, gathered speed, reversed their course, and started toward the enemy cruisers to deliver a torpedo attack. Working up to 35 knots, they plunged forward in a welter of spray, throwing up huge bow waves and leaving behind them turbulent wakes of glistening foam.

Another of the *Sydney's* shells struck home, crashing into the *Bande Nere* and starting a fire near her forward turret. A moment later the *Bartolomeo Colleoni* was hit. The battle had lasted no more than four or five minutes, but already the Italians were beginning to have enough. The two swiftly-speeding ships turned away to starboard to put more distance between themselves and the punishing salvos of the *Sydney* and to escape from the swiftly approaching destroyers.

For eight minutes more there was continuous firing at the same high speed as before, and frequently the Italian ships were almost completely hidden from view by shell splashes. Then, apparently fearful of hits that would destroy them, the two cruisers made an attempt to break off the action. Wheeling in a spectacular 90-degree turn, they practically reversed their original course and made off at terrific speed to the southward.

The *Sydney* followed, her guns continuing to blaze. But accurate firing was now more difficult, for the wind was from the south and blew the smoke from the Italian's funnels and guns toward the British ships, forming a murky screen.

The fire slackened on both sides, but one Italian shell found the mark and ripped through the *Sydney's* forward funnel, making a four-foot hole. Smoke streamed through this opening and through dozens of smaller holes pierced in both funnels by shell splinters, but the *Sydney* did not slacken speed. There was still a slight chance of dealing one or both of the enemy craft a mortal blow, and the Britishers pursued them relentlessly, firing whenever they could see a target through the thickening veils of smoke.

Suddenly those aboard the British cruiser saw a dazzling explosion flash in the midst of the smoke. One of the Italian ships had been hit. In another moment it could be seen that it was the one to port—the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*. With a violent sheer she turned to port and dashed out from under the smoke clouds, still traveling fast but evidently slowing down. She was an appalling sight. A column of flame and smoke poured upward from her control tower just forward of her funnels. Her slim bow was seen to be badly shattered, probably by the earlier hit. Though her guns still flashed, they were firing wildly, showing that her main fire control system had been destroyed.

Little by little, the *Colleoni's* speed slackened. Soon the watchers on the *Sydney* were certain of what had happened. Their last hit had wrecked the Italian vessel's engines. Her one chance of escape—the amazing speed which her builders had given her—was gone.

The *Sydney* pressed on, intent on destroying the enemy, her four forward guns firing steadily, each hurling eight shells a minute. As the range decreased, the British cruiser registered hit after hit. Her men could see the shells striking home, making glowing red-hot areas on the steel plates of the *Colleoni's* hull and superstructure. Fires commenced to spring up in every part of the stricken ship, and water poured in through holes below the waterline. Her bow sank lower and lower and she took a heavy list. Her end was very near.

Captain Collins signaled to the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* to close in and finish off the *Colleoni* with torpedoes. Then, with the *Havock*, *Hasty* and *Hero* steaming alongside, the *Sydney* set off after the fleeing *Bande Nere*, now flying westward along the coast of Crete.

Though damaged, the *Colleoni's* guns were still in working order, and she could have hurled a murderous fire at the two little destroyers as they

closed in for the kill. Instead, as one of the British officers reported later: "The Italian commander ordered the crew to abandon ship because they had started stripping themselves of clothing and flinging themselves overboard, then crying for us to save them."

The destroyers had but one duty—to sink the enemy. Each loosed a torpedo and the twin missiles sped toward the *Colleoni*, leaving white, bubbling wakes. The spectacle that followed was so staggering that the men aboard the destroyers watched it spellbound. There was a deafening roar and a column of flame and smoke shot upward from the exploding vessel. For a moment they had a glimpse of collapsing masts and then saw wreckage and debris, great and small, thrown high aloft. Slowly her stern lifted into the air, showing the propellers that had given her her speed. Then, rolling over and enveloped in great clouds of escaping steam, she sank.

As the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* prepared to lower boats to rescue the Italians in the water, they saw the *Havock* coming toward them. She signaled that Captain Collins had ordered her back to pick up survivors. Leaving her to this work, the other two destroyers made off at full speed to overtake the *Sydney* and join in the pursuit of the *Bande Nere*.

The *Havock* was quick to get her lifeboats overboard and picked up many of the Italians. But in the midst of the rescue work, the roar of airplane motors was heard overhead. It was a flight of six Italian Savoia bombers. Crossing and recrossing over the *Havock*, they "let loose everything they had," according to a British officer. "We carried on with our efforts to rescue the Italians," he added, "but the risk of destruction soon became too great." The *Havock* steamed away, taking with her 218 officers and men from the sunken cruiser.

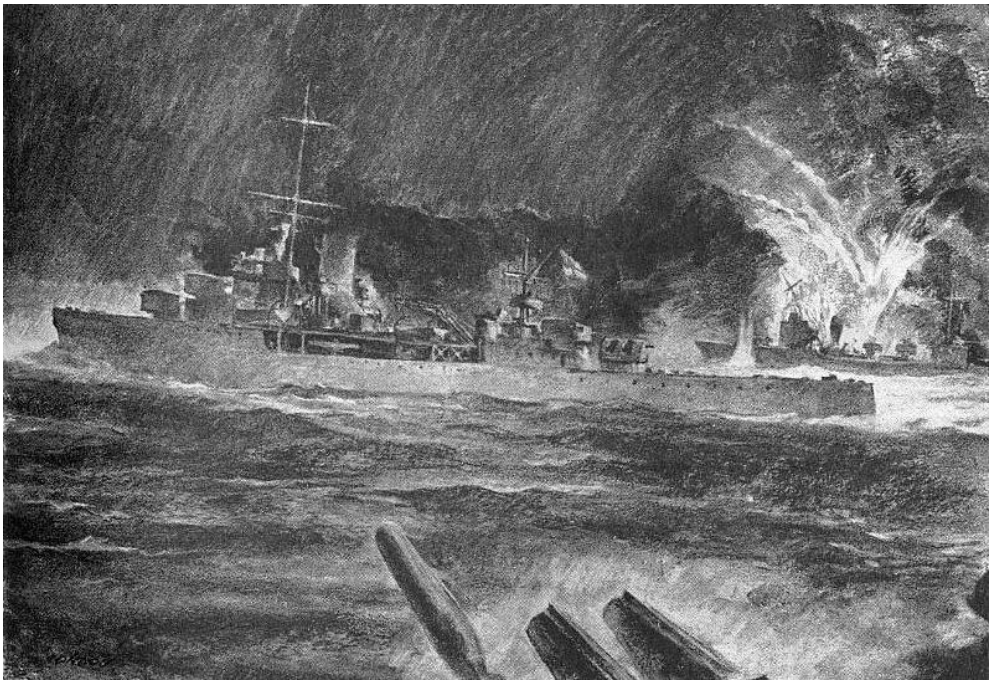
Meanwhile, the *Sydney* and her destroyers had been outdistanced by the fleet *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*. At 10:20 A.M., after two hours of almost constant firing, she gave up the chase. In the distance, tearing along like a thing possessed, the *Bande Nere*, still trailing flame and smoke from the fire on her foredeck, vanished from sight over the western horizon.

Turning back to the scene of the sinking of the *Colleoni*, the *Sydney* and her four destroyers succeeded in rescuing some more of the Italian survivors. All told, they and the *Havock* brought 550 of the cruiser's complement back to Alexandria.

At the Egyptian port the *Sydney* was welcomed as a returning hero when she entered the harbor and steamed down the line of anchored British and French warships. For Captain Collins, the greatest satisfaction was the

manner in which his crew, many of them reservists, had conducted themselves under the strain of hotly contested battle.

“They carried on so coolly that one would have thought it was a training exercise off the Australian coast,” he said later. “They sang and joked and generally behaved as if it were a picnic, but their gunnery was magnificent. Their courage was up to my expectations.”



The *Ajax* Runs the Gauntlet Off Sicily

5. NIGHT ACTION FOR THE *AJAX*

October 11-12, 1940

The *Ajax*, one of the three victors in the battle with the *Graf Spee*, was one of the first cruisers to be sent to reinforce Great Britain's Mediterranean fleets after Italy had declared war. She was destined to play a leading part in the principal engagements between the two opposing navies.

October, 1940, was a busy month for all the British ships patroling the Middle Sea. Late in that month, on October 28, the Italians were to commence their attack on Greece. Forewarning of this move had been obtained by the British Naval Intelligence, and it had been decided to make every effort to bring Italian men-of-war to battle. Every enemy ship sunk would mean that much Italian striking power destroyed, and might help to weaken the force of the blow against Greece.

Late in September, the British ships at Malta and Alexandria were told that a battle squadron would be formed for a sweep of the eastern Mediterranean. Cruisers and destroyers that were out on distant patrols were ordered back to join the other ships. The hope was that the Italian fleet

would be encountered or that it would leave its base at Taranto to seek an engagement.

All was ready by September 29, and on that day the British squadron sailed from Alexandria, led by the *Warspite* flying the flag of Admiral Cunningham. With aircraft overhead, searching for enemy submarines and mines, the long column of ships moved off toward the northwest.

A few hours out from port an Italian reconnaissance plane was sighted. It was many miles away, but close enough to shadow the ships and report their movements. Swiftly the aircraft carrier *Eagle* swung out of line, turned into the wind, and launched three of her fighter planes. Within ten minutes they overtook and shot down the Italian plane, which fell into the sea trailing a long plume of gray smoke.

But the alarm had been given before the plane was destroyed. The Italians now knew that the British were out in strength. From distant land bases they sent out Savoia bombers, intent on sinking or damaging as many as possible.

The first flight of bombers was sighted by British reconnaisance planes flying to the northward and well out of sight of those aboard the ships. Warned in good time, the *Eagle* once again ran up into the wind, while destroyers ran ahead of her to lay a smoke screen that would help to hide her from the air. Far to the northward the *Eagle's* fighter planes attacked the enemy formations.

The British planes did well. Only one Savoia got past them to attack the battle squadron. Sweeping in over the rear of the British line, this plane came very close to doing some damage. But as the waterspouts from its bombs were rising close alongside the ship chosen as a target, concentrated antiaircraft fire brought it down.

As the afternoon wore on, the ships still steamed steadily northwestward —toward Italy. Toward evening they were attacked again by bombers, and this time the target was the huge bulk of the *Warspite*. Her antiaircraft guns and those of the ships close by roared into a swift crescendo of fire. Then, as the bombs commenced to drop, the big ship was completely hidden by the columns of water that erupted on every side of her. No one could tell if she was hit or not. Clouds of smoke surrounded her, thrown off by her guns. For perhaps a minute the inferno lasted, while watchers aboard the other ships stood motionless, their hearts in their mouths. Then, bursting out from the curtain of smoke and water, the *Warspite's* bow appeared. The ship was just recovering from a heavy roll to port caused by the "near misses" along her starboard side. Unharmed, she plunged ahead, her momentary ordeal over.

The night passed without incident, but toward noon of the following day scouting planes from the *Eagle* sent in important news. They had sighted Italian battleships, escorted by a large number of cruisers and destroyers. The ships were some 85 miles away from the British squadron and were steaming toward the south Italian coast. At least, they were at sea, thought many among the British. There was a chance that they could be brought to action.

A minute or two later other Italian ships were sighted. This was an even stronger squadron than the first. Together, the two groups contained most of the surface strength of the entire Italian navy. The British, already fully prepared for action, drove in toward the coast, hoping....

But the Italians, on this day, chose not to fight. At 3:00 P.M. the two squadrons changed course and made off at high speed toward the safety of Taranto.

So ended the first October sweep. The British squadron returned to Alexandria, disappointed but determined to try again.

The second attempt to bring the Italian fleet to battle was commenced a week later, on October 9, when the British Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, reinforced by additional ships, once again set out from Alexandria. As before, Admiral Cunningham's flag flew on the *Warspite*. Among the cruisers present were the two heavies, *Liverpool* and *York*, and the 6-inch gun cruisers *Ajax*, *Orion* and *Sydney*. Of these, the *Ajax* was to have considerable action before many hours were past. She was under the command of Captain E. B. McCarthy, an old destroyer officer, well accustomed to the handling of small swift ships.

With other cruisers, the *Ajax* was sent forward on scouting duty far ahead of the main body of the fleet. No Italian warships were encountered on the run across to the coastline of Italy. It looked as though the Navy, warned by its reconnaissance planes, was determined to lie safe at anchor under the shadow of its coastal guns.

By the night of October 11, the British ships were close in to the Italian shore, spread out to a considerable extent to watch over a large area of water. The *Ajax* was to the southward, off the eastern coast of Sicily, steaming easily along through a gently heaving sea. Clouds were massed overhead and the night was dark. It was difficult to make out any object more than a half mile or so from the ship's side.

On the *Ajax's* decks her men slept at their action stations, fully clothed. Her decks were cleared of all loose gear, her rails already down, and shells lay ready to hand inside her turrets. It was well that nothing had been

overlooked; that the ship and her faithful company were ready for instant action.

She had been steaming to the southeast and by 2:30 A.M. was in the Sicilian Channel, about 70 miles southeast of the island. The night was quiet and the ship, with every light doused, moved through the water almost noiselessly. Only from the twin bow waves came a soft reiterated whisper as the cruiser's bow gently rose and fell.

Suddenly, materializing dimly from the enveloping darkness, swift-moving shapes were glimpsed rushing toward the ship. To the strident clamor of gongs, the *Ajax* awoke. Her men, sleeping at their posts, sprang to the guns. In a matter of seconds, the cruiser was ready to fight.

The enemy craft were torpedo boats, and there were three of them. Racing through the night at over 30 knots, two of them turned sharply to parallel the cruiser's course and loose torpedoes. The third dashed swiftly across her stern to box her in from the opposite side.

On the *Ajax's* bridge the engine-room telegraph jangled loudly to "Full ahead." At the same instant the helm was put over, and the ship, gathering speed, heeled over till her rails were nearly awash as she veered to one side to escape the surprise attack. Forward and aft, her turrets swung swiftly to bear on the enemy craft and, even as she commenced her swing, began to blaze through the night.

The range was practically point-blank and the British fired their guns without benefit of range-finding or usual fire control. It was a case of sink or be sunk and every turret strove to hit quick and hit hard. The Italian craft were now on both sides of the cruiser, moving at lightning speed, and revealing their presence by the flashes from their 3.9-inch guns. The *Ajax* fired at every flash, her turrets moving continuously in the effort to follow the fast-moving torpedo boats. They must be kept away. They could not be allowed to fire their torpedoes.

As the four ships hurtled onward, each stabbing the night with livid orange gun flashes, a bright moon drifted from behind the clouds, and shed a silvery light on the fiercely contested battle. The *Ajax's* men were now working their guns like demons and the tremendous roar of her guns echoed and re-echoed over the sea. Ten shells a minute were leaving each of her guns. She was fighting for her life.

Soon one of her shells reached the mark. The torpedo boat's hull glowed red where the projectile struck, and orange-yellow flames commenced to lick along her sides. These must have reached the ammunition piled on deck, for there was a sudden blinding flash that revealed the ship in every detail.

Wreckage was hurled into the air and the little ship, rapidly losing speed, commenced to heel over. The explosion had loosened some of her plates and she was taking water fast. Bright flames leaped upwards from her forward deck, and her metal turned cherry red from other fires that raged below decks. There was a dull explosion, a roar of steam escaping from burst pipes, and the torpedo boat slipped beneath the sea.

But the *Ajax* and the two remaining torpedo boats had already raced far from the scene. The *Ajax*, moreover, had been hit, an Italian shell having crashed into an unarmored compartment forward. The cruiser shifted her guns, concentrating all her turret guns on one enemy craft, and using her lighter guns to keep away the other. The Italians were firing rapidly and their guns, though small, could do real damage at such close range.

Again the *Ajax* shuddered as a second Italian shell tore through her hull, twisting heavy steel plates, and killing some of her men. Plates were sprung and the cruiser was taking water forward. Sink or be sunk. Her 6-inch guns blazed with redoubled fury, fed, aimed and fired by men who were determined that victory should be theirs.

Across the moonlit water there was the terrific crash of a salvo landing. The *Ajax's* turret guns had found their target. Staggering under the blow, the torpedo boat heeled far over, rolled drunkenly back. Her bow plunged under water, and a heaving sea broke over it. Then, with a series of thunderclap explosions, she broke apart and sank.

Now only one enemy ship remained. But she had had enough of the battle and was bent upon escape. Turning in a wide foaming circle, she raced off to the northwest toward Sicily, her funnel belching long plumes of dead black smoke. The *Ajax's* helm was put hard over. Around she went, heeling deep in the rushing waters. With screws beating up a mill race of foam and spray, she started in pursuit.

Slowly the Italian craft, with her slightly superior speed, drew ahead and widened the distance. To the *Ajax's* commander, Captain McCarthy, the possibility of catching her seemed remote and, to ease the strain on the cruiser's damaged plates, he ordered speed reduced. Lookouts were posted, while the exhausted members of the crew threw themselves on deck close beside their stations and sought the oblivion of sleep. Through the quiet night the British cruiser steamed slowly on toward the island of Sicily.

An hour or two went by and coffee was brought to the watchers on the bridge. Soon dawn would break and shortly afterwards the *Ajax* would join up with the main body of the fleet. But her night of battle was not yet over.

Shortly before dawn, as the sky began to lighten, her lookouts made out the dim shapes of several warships some miles ahead. That they were Italian there was no doubt, for the British fleet was still some distance to the north. Once again the alarm gongs clanged, starting the cruiser to life. With the roar and concussion of heavy gunfire still ringing in their ears, the *Ajax's* men hurried to their action stations.

In a few minutes it was possible to identify the five enemy ships as a heavy cruiser, probably the *Zara* or *Pola*, and four *Artiglieri* class destroyers —39-knotters armed with 4.7-inch guns.

Once again the *Ajax* was faced with a superior force that, properly handled, could have destroyed her. The 8-inch gun cruiser could keep her distance, if she chose, beyond the range of the *Ajax's* guns and pound the British ship to certain destruction. The four destroyers were more than the *Ajax* could easily handle at any one moment. One of them, at least, had the possibility of getting into position for a torpedo attack.

The *Ajax* steamed straight on, gradually increasing her speed. Her range-finders were at work and she was ready to open fire the moment the distance was favorable for her 6-inch guns. Captain McCarthy meanwhile radioed Admiral Cunningham, asking for a heavy cruiser to take on the Italian *Pola* class vessel. The heavy cruiser *York* and the Australian light cruiser *Sydney* gathered speed and set a course for the position given by the *Ajax*.

At 18,000 yards the *Ajax's* turret guns reared up and hurled their first salvo toward the enemy. It was close and with one of the closely following salvos she scored a hit. The shells tore into one of the Italian destroyers, damaging her hull and setting her on fire amidships.

The fire from the remaining Italian ships was heavy, but poorly directed. Shell splashes plumed the sea on every side of the British ship, but none of the salvos struck home. The *Ajax* kept closing in, her forward guns blazing. Despite the risk of destruction, one of the Italian destroyers steamed into position ahead of the burning ship and passed her a towline.

To fight or not to fight? The Italians decided in favor of escape. There was something terrifying about the way the *Ajax* kept steaming directly toward them, intent on pressing the contest to the bitter end. The Italians turned away, threw up dense smoke screens, and raced off toward the safety of a Sicilian harbor.

When the *York* and *Sydney* arrived shortly after sunup, the action was over. Even the damaged destroyer being towed by her sister ship was out of sight beyond the horizon.

Soon planes from the aircraft carrier *Eagle* came sweeping by overhead. In a few minutes they located the two destroyers and gave their position to the cruisers. All three steamed toward the position given. When they came in sight, the undamaged destroyer quickly slipped her towline and ran for safety ahead of a voluminous smoke screen.

Crippled and unable to move, the abandoned destroyer rolled helplessly in the trough of the short seas. She was soon identified as the *Artiglieri*. Leaving the *York* to attend to her, the *Ajax* and *Sydney* pressed on after the retreating destroyer. But they were soon outdistanced and obliged to give up the chase.

The *Artiglieri's* crew was now abandoning ship, and the *York* signaled that she would give them thirty minutes to get clear. When this time had passed, she opened fire with her 8-inch guns, and followed with a volley of torpedoes. Explosions tore the destroyer apart and she sank within a few minutes.

Steaming in among the Italian lifeboats and rafts, those aboard the *York* saw that there were not enough of these to take care of all the survivors. Accordingly, as she passed through, she dropped a number of her own rafts. No attempt was made to pick up Italian seamen, for enemy submarines were known to be close by, and in addition, the British remembered only too vividly how Italian planes had bombed the *Havock* while she was trying to rescue the crew of the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*.

The *York* did, however, make an effort to bring help to the *Artiglieri's* men. Using the Italian commercial wave length, she broadcast the destroyer's position. In Great Britain, when news of the *York's* action became known, there were many violent protests. But the thoughts of many others was expressed by the periodical, *The Navy*, which said:

> "His Majesty's ships in action do not make war with kid gloves. But nothing is going to stop British seamen from succoring other seamen in danger of drowning, even if they are enemies who have just been defeated, however these enemies might behave if the positions were reversed. It is not kid-glove fighting to refrain from massacring the helpless. We should be proud of our seamen for that they behave like men and not like savages, rather than urge them to imitate actions that all condemn."

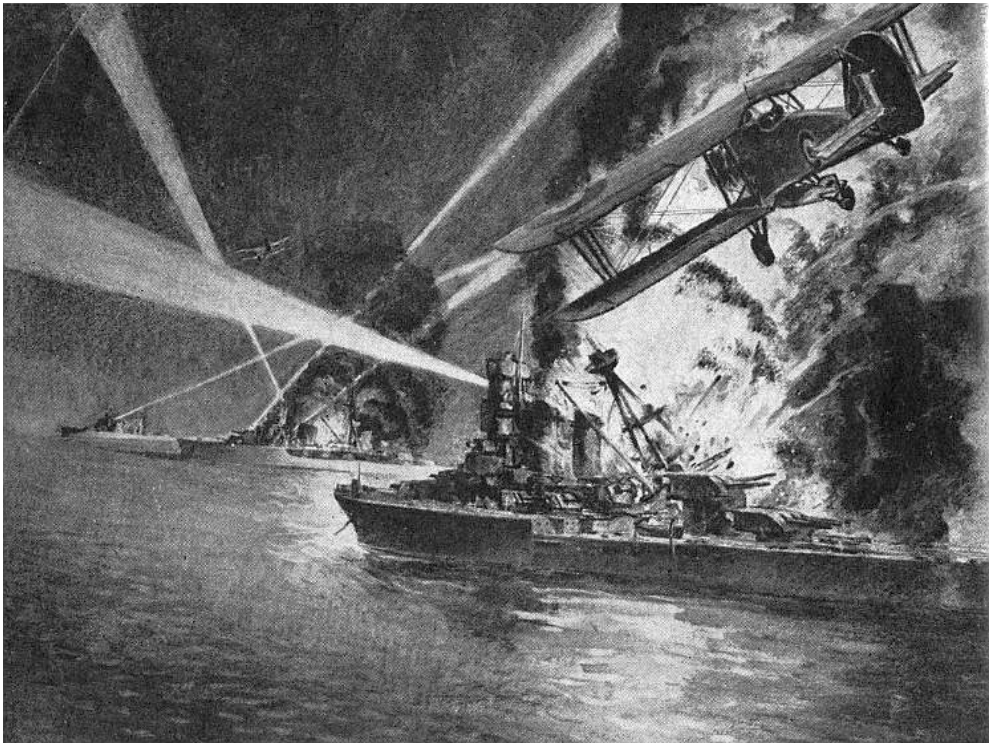
What actually happened was that a British patrol plane some hours later sighted the *Artiglieri's* men and directed an Italian hospital ship to their

position.

Meanwhile, the three cruisers had joined up with the main body of the fleet and shortly afterwards the Italian bombing squadrons had arrived on the scene. The *Ajax's* actions during her night of battle had roused the Italian airmen and they delivered a determined and dangerous attack that lasted for four hours. Despite the grim nature of the onslaught, only one British ship was damaged. This was the heavy cruiser *Liverpool*, which was hit by an aerial torpedo, but was able to reach port for repairs.

The sweep, of which these battles formed a part, ended at Alexandria on October 16. Like the *Sydney* a few months before, the *Ajax* was greeted with an ovation when she steamed into port with her sister cruisers.

Again it had been impossible to get to grips with the main strength of the Italian fleet. But the *Ajax* had caused the enemy losses, and once more had shown that seapower depends not alone upon a nation's ships but also, and to an even greater extent, upon the indomitable spirit of those who man them.



British Swordfish Torpedo Planes Bombing the Italian Fleet

6. THE RAID ON TARANTO

November 11, 1940

When Italy declared war on Greece late in October, 1940, those on board the British ships in the Mediterranean hoped that the Italian fleet would leave its bases and steam out to support the invasion. But nothing of the sort happened. Most of the Italian big ships remained quietly moored in the harbor of Taranto, in southern Italy, while the rest of the fleet kept to other harbors.

So, as one British officer said, if the mountain would not come to Mahomet, then Mahomet could very well go to the mountain.

In accordance with this plan, the British Eastern Mediterranean Fleet sailed from Alexandria on November 10. On board the *Warspite* a group of signal flags rose to the yardarm. Admiral Cunningham was signaling to all ships:

"It is my intention to act offensively in the Ionian Sea and seek an engagement with the enemy."

The Ionian Sea lies between the sole of the Italian boot and Greece. It is where Italian warships moving out of the naval base at Taranto would be found.

Steaming to the westward, the fleet passed Malta and went on to Pantelleria, the island stronghold with which the Italians had hoped to dominate the narrow convoy route between Sicily and Tunisia. No enemy ships were in evidence in these waters. The British ships swept around in a wide arc, reversing course to the eastward. Then, at steady speed, they skirted the southern coast of Sicily and bore up to the northeast, setting a course that would take them to the Gulf of Taranto and the anchored Italian fleet.

In Taranto harbor at the time lay the main Italian battle fleet, comprising the two new battleships *Littorio* and *Vittorio Veneto*, the four older battleships *Andrea Doria*, *Caio Duilio*, *Conte di Cavour* and *Giulio Cesare*, ten or more cruisers, nearly thirty destroyers, and a large number of small, swift torpedo boats.

The harbor, one of the most commodious in Europe, is divided into an inner and outer harbor, known as the *Mar Grande* or Big Sea, and the *Mar Piccolo* or Little Sea. In the outer harbor are the commercial docks used by the merchant vessels. The inner harbor, entered by a swing bridge, is the site of the big Italian naval base, and it was here that the warships were riding to their moorings. Overhead were dozens of barrage balloons, and on the shore were hundreds of antiaircraft guns. The fleet was well protected, of that there was no doubt.

As the British armada steamed on toward its goal during the afternoon of November 11, it was an impressive spectacle of the little northern island's sea power. For nearly fifty miles, the long column of ships stretched out over the sun-splashed blue water of the inland sea—battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers. Many of the vessels were dark gray, while others were painted with the bizarre designs of battle camouflage.

Late in the afternoon the ships reached the entrance of the Gulf of Taranto, and at this point Admiral Cunningham detached three of the light cruisers, the *Ajax*, *Orion* and *Sydney*, to carry out a special mission. They were to steam to the eastward and enter the Adriatic Sea, passing through the well-guarded Strait of Otranto. It was altogether likely that Italian destroyers and other light craft were in these waters, and one of the cruisers' objectives was to keep them from closing in on the main fleet while it was engaged in carrying out its attack on Taranto. In addition, the cruisers were to look for Italian convoys carrying men and munitions to Greece and do what they could to sink some of the ships.

Meanwhile, as darkness commenced to close down over sea and land, the vessels of the main fleet steamed into the Gulf, continuing on their course until they were almost within sight of the outer harbor of Taranto. Here operations were taken over by Rear Admiral Arthur Lyster, in command of the Fleet Air Arm, for planes from the carriers *Illustrious* and *Eagle* were the instruments chosen to drive home the attack.

It was now dark except for the fitful illumination shed by a clouded moon, and there was feverish activity on the two big carriers as their planes were readied to take off and the pilots were given their final instructions. As the wind was from the west, the *Illustrious* and *Eagle* turned their bows away from Taranto, so their planes would take off into the wind. Surrounding them on every side, ready to go into instant action against submarines, surface craft or planes, were all the destroyers that had come on the mission.

Soon all was ready and the planes roared into the air, circled, and flashed off toward their goal. First off was a squadron of Skua bombers, each carrying a 500-pound bomb and a large number of parachute flares. Close behind them followed their protectors, a group of Fairey Fulmar and Gloster Sea Gladiator fighters. Last came eleven Fairey Swordfish biplanes, each with a shining 18-inch torpedo slung beneath its fuselage.

As the planes took to the air and circled the fleet, the moon came out from behind the clouds. It glinted on the wings of the machines and illuminated the water far below. It was a good omen. The ships of the Italian fleet would now be plainly visible, and the possibility of hits more certain.

In silence, those on board the British warships waited, counting the minutes until they might see the flashes from the exploding bombs and the fires that they might set. On the *Warspite* and *Malaya* and the other heavy ships, the men stood at their stations, while lookouts scanned the waters in the direction of Taranto. It was quite possible that the Italian ships would make a dash for open water. If they should, the British were ready to fling themselves headlong into battle.

In a few minutes the planes were circling over Taranto harbor, picking out their targets. Below them, gleaming in the moonlight, the pilots could make out the sausage-like shapes of the many barrage balloons. Against the silvered water of the harbor, they could see the slim dark outlines of the Italian ships. Many of the cruisers and destroyers were moored bow to stern in long lines that made hits almost a certainty.

Scores of parachute flares dropped from the leading bombers and drifted swiftly downward, lighting up the harbor and revealing the ships more

clearly. Then, coming to life at last, the Italians switched on their searchlights and the long rods of light shot upward and moved restlessly to and fro, seeking the British planes. Antiaircraft fire followed, ringing the harbor with small bright flashes of flame.

Down through the barrage balloons went the Skua bombers, weaving between the wires to which the balloons were attached. As they screamed down, they released incendiary bombs which, setting fire to buildings on the shore, added the red glow of fire to the scene. Then when close upon their targets they let go their 500-pound bombs, aiming at the cruisers and destroyers.

Scarcely had the Skuas completed their onslaught when the Swordfish biplanes came in, gliding down from 5,000 feet to low over the water. Straightening out, they flew straight toward the huge sinister forms of the Italian battleships, which by now had manned their guns and were blazing away furiously into the night. One after another the planes dropped their torpedoes, weighing nearly a ton apiece, and then made rapid climbing turns to evade the blistering gun fire.

Coursing through the water at nearly fifty miles an hour, the torpedoes found their targets, setting off a series of terrific explosions that dwarfed the hellish roar and racket of the hundreds of antiaircraft guns. The battleships, moored and immobile, were unable to maneuver to avoid the projectiles, and every one without exception found its target.

"We caught them like sitting birds," said one of the British airmen.

Meanwhile, the *Ajax*, *Orion* and *Sydney* had been playing their parts in the night's action against the enemy. The men on the three cruisers had gone to their battle stations as the ships entered the Strait of Otranto. Under the silvery light of the moon that was shining down on Taranto harbor, they had swept swiftly on up the Adriatic Sea.

Soon, far away, the lookouts sighted a number of ships, unidentifiable except as small black specks against the moonlit water. The cruisers kept on and, when to the westward of the Albanian port of Valona, the strangers were identified as a convoy of four supply ships escorted by two destroyers.

At a range of about 10,000 yards, and almost at the same moment that the British planes were starting their attack on Taranto, the cruisers opened fire. As the Italian destroyers answered, the four supply ships scattered and ran for their lives, dropping smoke floats which sent up enormous clouds of smoke. Within a minute the sky was illuminated like a Fourth of July display, for the destroyers sent up star shells and some other type of illuminant that blazed with intense brightness.

“Great balls of brilliantly colored fire were curving up into the air,” one of the British sailors said afterwards. “They seemed to be coming from every direction and the sky was covered by weird tracks and patterns of flame in almost every conceivable color. For a few minutes we were bewildered. I suppose it was really a beautiful sight, but we were all too busy to appreciate it.”

The cruisers concentrated their fire on the two destroyers, and the latter soon turned away and dashed off, laying smoke screens to hide them from view. They did not escape entirely unscathed, however, for a shell from one of the cruisers struck one of them just abaft the bridge. There was a blinding sheet of flame, and then darkness. No trace of the destroyer was found, and it was not known if she sank or was able to make good her escape.

Switching their fire to the supply ships, the cruisers were soon hitting them right and left. The one that was farthest away was hit, but disappeared behind a smoke screen before she could be finished off. One of the others was deluged with shells, quickly became a mass of flames forward and soon sank, sending up clouds of hissing steam. A third ship met her end in the same way, first catching fire from bow to stem and then slipping gently beneath the waves. When the cruisers turned south to join the fleet, the remaining supply ship was burning fiercely and beginning to settle in the water.

At the same time that this raid was being carried out, other British ships were busily blasting the enemy in a number of other quarters of the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy was making it a night of gunfire and destruction that would be long remembered. To the westward, planes from the carrier *Ark Royal*, which had arrived in the Mediterranean in July, were bombing the airfields at Cagliari in Sardinia. To the east, a group of cruisers was shelling Sidi Barrani, an important Italian base in Libya. In the central Mediterranean, a British submarine attacked two Italian merchantmen escorted by a destroyer, sank one of the freighters and damaged the other with a torpedo.

Through the long moonlit hours British seapower carried the war to the enemy—on the surface, below the waves, and in the air.

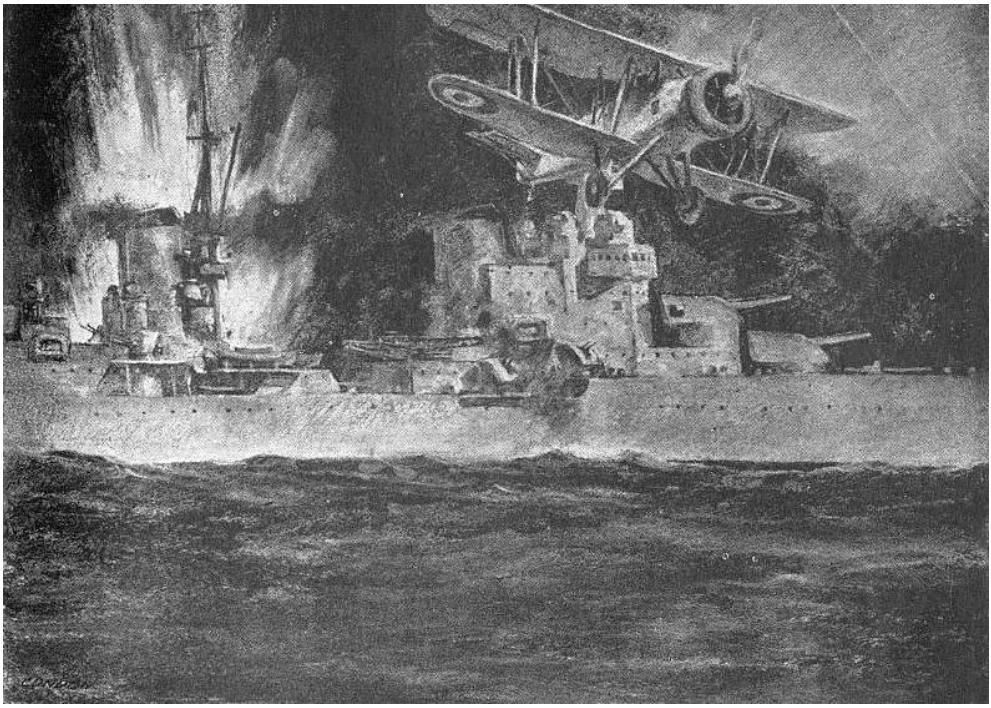
When dawn came the British main fleet was steaming slowly through the waters of the Gulf of Taranto. Throughout the night its men had remained on the alert, expecting that at any moment Italian ships would come out of Taranto harbor to give battle. But nothing had happened. The British had come as close in to the enemy as they could, exposing their vessels to the danger of heavy air attacks in the hope that the Italians would come out and fight. Once again they were disappointed.

Shortly after sunrise the big ships, the *Warspite*, *Malaya*, *Illustrious* and *Eagle*, withdrew to the south to gain greater space for maneuvering in the event of Italian bombers coming over. The cruisers, however, stayed inside the Gulf, still inviting attack. But there was no sign of activity from the direction of Taranto. It might have been a city of the dead. When night came the cruisers turned to the south and joined their bigger sisters. An easterly course was set and the fleet steamed back to Alexandria.

The results of the raid were soon made evident by the photographs taken by reconnaissance planes. Three Italian battleships had been seriously damaged. One of these was one of the new 35,000-tonners, the *Littorio*. The photographs showed that her forecastle was under water and that she had a heavy list to starboard. The *Conte di Cavour* had been beached and her stern was completely under water, while the *Caio Duilio* had also been run ashore and was lying heeled over to starboard with only the forward part of her superstructure out of water. Two *Trento* class heavy cruisers had settled to the bottom, and two fleet auxiliary vessels had sunk by the stern.

In many ways, the raid on Taranto was one of the most significant actions that took place during the year 1940. It gave the British a supremacy and freedom of movement in the Mediterranean far greater than even the most optimistic had dared to expect. For a considerable period the battleship strength of Italy was cut in half, and the cruiser strength reduced. The holing-up of the Italian fleet as a result of the raid gave the British an opportunity they badly needed to run convoys through the Mediterranean to build up their strength in Egypt, North Africa and the Middle East. Another important strategic result of the raid was that the British were able to release a number of light naval units from Mediterranean service to take over convoy duties, where every ship available was needed.

In all its results, direct and indirect, the raid was a success. It was of incalculable value to the British during those dark months of 1940 when they faced the combined forces of the Axis powers with stout hearts and unfaltering courage, but—alone.



The *Ark Royal's* Torpedo Bombers Attacking Italian Heavy Cruisers Through Smoke Screen

7. ACTION OFF SARDINIA

November 27, 1940

In the days that followed the successful raid on Taranto, it was quite clear to Admiral Cunningham, and the other British naval officers in the Mediterranean, that the Italian fleet would soon have to abandon the use of this harbor. The raid had demonstrated the damage that planes could do, and the port continued to be exposed to further attacks launched from aircraft carriers. At the same time, Italy's invasion of Greece had provided the RAF with near-by bases in Greece and Crete. It was a certainty that planes from these bases would attack the fleet in Taranto, as soon as opportunity permitted.

To the west and north lay the Italian naval bases at Naples and Spezia, and on the island of Sardinia there was a large and commodious base at Cagliari. All of these were out of range of the British bombers then in Greece and Crete. The prospect was, therefore, that the Italians would move what ships they could to one of these other, safer harbors whenever they

thought there was an opportunity of eluding the guns and planes of the British fleet.

With these thoughts in mind, Admiral Cunningham prepared a trap to catch the enemy off guard. It was certain that the Italians would never leave Taranto when British warships were nearby, hovering off the coast, watching and waiting for a chance to close in and engage. Accordingly, Admiral Cunningham withdrew the patroling cruisers and destroyers of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, so that Italian reconnaissance planes flying out over the blue Ionian Sea could report that all was clear.

At the same time, however, Cunningham ordered Admiral Somerville, in command of the Western Mediterranean Fleet to leave Gibraltar and move his ships up toward the central Mediterranean. With his flag in the battleship *Renown*, and accompanied by the *Ark Royal*, several cruisers, of which one was the *Berwick*, and a screening force of destroyers, Admiral Somerville steamed to the eastward toward the southern tip of Sardinia. It was a well-planned move. It was practically a certainty that the undamaged Italian ships would soon slip out of Taranto and, if the British succeeded in keeping their presence undetected, would come within reach of the waiting British ships.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, which up to this point had carried the burden of the fighting, was freed to do a number of other pressing jobs. Cruisers and destroyers were particularly needed for escorting convoys to Greece and other points, for many Italian submarines were still at sea. With the remaining ships, Admiral Cunningham carried the war to enemy bases in the Dodecanese Islands and in Libya. Aided by the Fleet Air Arm, heavy raids were launched on Leros, in the Dodecanese, and on the important harbor of Tripoli in North Africa. At Tripoli shells and bombs were poured into the docks, oil storage tanks and shipping, and when British vessels steamed away the enormous fires they had started were visible for sixty miles.

The Italians, seeing the British fleet engaged in these raids, decided that the time was opportune for leaving Taranto. Sometime during the night of November 26, the seaworthy ships silently left the harbor and slipped through the darkness on a southwesterly course. Left behind were the battleships *Littorio*, *Conte di Cavour* and *Caio Duilio*, the two *Trento* class cruisers that had been hit, and some other lighter craft that were undergoing repairs.

Even without these ships, the fleet that put to sea was still a powerful striking force. It contained the big 15-inch gun *Vittorio Veneto* and the *Giulio Cesare*, which were supported by several heavy cruisers, a squadron of *Condottieri* class light cruisers, and a large number of destroyers.

Upon reaching the "toe" of the Italian boot, the ships separated, some passing through the Strait of Messina, between Italy and Sicily, while the others kept on to the southward in order to round Sicily before turning north into the Tyrrhenian Sea. During the night of November 26, the two groups pressed steadily on. Their positions on the following morning seemed to indicate that they planned to meet to the westward of Sicily and, in all probability, put into the harbor of Cagliari.

It was at 10:00 A.M. on the morning of November 27 that Admiral Somerville received word of the Italian's location. Some of his scouting planes, far out ahead of the fleet, spotted the combined enemy force 75 miles to the northeast of the *Renown*.

Signal flags fluttered aloft on the flagship and the British ships increased their speed. Out in front were the destroyers and cruisers, rising and falling as they dipped through a lively sea. Behind them came the heavy ships, moving more ponderously but for all their size and weight clipping through the waves at a good 25 knots or more.

For two long hours the British drove on to the northeast, praying that they would get within gun range of the enemy ships before their presence was discovered. At noon they sighted the Italian ships. They were far off, hull down on the horizon, but a few minutes more of fast steaming should bring them within range. The British destroyers drew off to port and starboard, leaving the way clear for the cruisers to attack. Formed into line abreast, the cruisers trained their guns on the enemy and sped forward. Men at range-finders and peering through binoculars examined the enemy ships, checking the figures of range and bearing. Turret guns were loaded and elevated high into the air. Inside the turrets, the crews stood waiting for the first salvo, ready to swing into instant activity the moment the guns were fired.

By twenty minutes after twelve the range had been narrowed to 18,000 yards, or about 10 miles, and a minute later the British cruisers opened fire. The second salvos followed an instant later, and the blue Tyrrhenian Sea was clouded over with brown powder smoke, its quiet shattered by the devil's drumming of the guns.

As the two lines of ships maneuvered for position, the Italians returned an active and determined fire. They held their northwesterly course and showed no disposition to retire. Even though the British ships, now steaming at full speed and pouring out a steady stream of salvos, kept closing the range, the Italians held their ground and hammered back with every gun that could be brought to bear. And their shooting was not to be despised. The

Berwick was hit twice by 8-inch shells that caused some damage, but did not check her speed or gunfire.

In a few minutes the explanation of the Italian cruiser's resoluteness became apparent, when for the first time the British sighted the Italian battleships. Coming up swiftly from behind, the *Vittorio Veneto* and *Giulio Cesare* brought their big guns into play, firing at extreme range. From behind the battleships came a group of cruisers that surged ahead, eager to join the battle. For a few minutes it looked as though the Italians intended to fight it out.

Unwilling to run in closer under the 15-inch guns of the *Vittorio Veneto*, the British cruisers turned away, firing furiously with their after turrets as they widened the distance. At the same time they set a course that would lead them, and possibly the pursuing Italians, to within range of the *Renown's* turret guns.

The British fire was now fast and increasingly accurate, and the Italian cruisers found themselves plunging forward through a sea lashed and torn by British shells. Salvos from two of the British cruisers landed with hammer blows on the Italian heavy cruiser *Fiume*. Flashes and explosions ripped her quarterdeck and she turned away, dropping out of the action. As she steamed off to safety, her entire after section was wreathed in flame and smoke.

A minute later British shells found the destroyer *Lanciere*, drove through her thin unarmored hull and jammed her steering gear. The little ship lunged around in circles, careening wildly and hopelessly out of control, surrounded by the geyser-like splashes of British salvos. Another destroyer was hit, erupted a black and orange cloud of smoke and flame, and came to a halt, rolling helplessly.

Up until now the Italian cruisers had fought fiercely and well. But suddenly, without a moment's warning, they turned away and foamed off to the northward. Italian aircraft, flying far up over the smoke of battle, had sighted the British heavy ships coming up from astern and had radioed their findings to the surface ships.

In another minute the British cruisers turned, listing heavily under the impetus of their great speed, and then plunged forward in pursuit, burying their sharp bows in tossed-up clouds of spray. Not so far behind them now came the *Renown*, pounding through the waves at utmost speed and hurling her 15-inch shells over the cruisers into the midst of the enemy fleet.

To port, the crippled *Lanciere* was being towed toward the Sardinian coast by another destroyer, both ships sending out clouds of protective

smoke. The remaining Italian ships were making for Cagliari, a little further on up the island's shore.

With their superior speed the fleeing Italians had widened the distance between themselves and their pursuers. Because of the distance and the clouds of smoke that rolled over the water from funnels and gunfire, the effect of the *Renown's* salvos could not be made out. But at this moment the *Ark Royal's* torpedo bombers came flying up from behind, passed over the British cruisers, and sped forward to launch their attacks.

Diving down, the planes leveled out close to the water and disappeared from view in the heavy smoke screen laid down by the Italian destroyers. Once through the screen, they quickly found their targets and let go their torpedoes. A heavy cruiser was hit and set on fire, and torpedoes ripped into two destroyers, before the pilots banked their machines and circled away, climbing up once again to the clear sky above the smoking ships.

A second flight of torpedo bombers followed and directed their attack at the two Italian battleships. Pilots reported that one torpedo struck the *Vittorio Veneto*, but the big ship hurtled on, apparently not seriously damaged.

The heavy cruisers were then brought under attack by a third group of planes. The smoke was so thick that the pilots could not be certain of results, but a blinding flash was seen on one cruiser and, at the head of the Italian line, a *Bolzano*-class cruiser suddenly came to a stop, throwing the ships behind her into confusion.

A few seconds after this torpedo attack, Skua dive bombers from the *Ark Royal* screamed down on the *Condottieri*-class light cruisers. Bomb splashes sprang up around the swiftly-moving vessels and when they subsided one of the cruisers was seen to be on fire, the flames swirling angrily upward between her two funnels.

Shortly after 1:00 P.M. Admiral Somerville decided that his ships were getting in too close to the Sardinian coastal batteries and land-based aircraft. At the same time, the superior speed of the Italian ships had carried them nearly out of range of the *Renown*, and further pursuit appeared futile. He gave the order to break off the chase, and set his ships on an easterly course that would widen the distance between them and the island.

For an hour and a half the British ships steamed on in peace, their men welcoming the opportunity to rest after the fast-moving action between the two fleets. At about 2:30 P.M., however, a squadron of ten Italian bombers was sighted, coming out from Sardinia, and the gongs shattered the silence

of the quiet afternoon as they clanged to summon the crews to battle stations.

From the flight deck of the *Ark Royal* fighters roared into the air and swiftly circled upward to intercept the attack. The Italian planes were driven apart and harried until their aim was spoiled. They dropped their bombs but none of them found a target.

Two hours later, as the afternoon was drawing to a close, three groups of five bombers each came out of the west, and again the *Ark Royal's* fighters rose to drive them off. Some of the bombers broke through, however, and came very close to damaging the big carrier. She "disappeared from sight behind the splashes of about thirty bombs falling close to her," and watchers on the other British ships held their breath and waited through seconds that seemed eternities. Then, as the welter of splashes subsided, a feeling of relief and exultation flashed through the fleet. The *Ark Royal* was safe. Surging ahead at over 30 knots, she "emerged from the spray with all guns firing furiously, having sustained neither damage nor casualties."

High above the line of lean gray ships, while the British and Italian planes were fiercely engaged, a civilian plane came humming down from the north, evidently coming from France. For the pilot, it would have been a simple matter to turn to one side or the other and thus avoid the aerial battle, but instead he flew straight on, directly into the midst of the rapidly circling planes.

With machine-gun bullets ripping the air in every direction, the plane was hit within a few seconds of its appearance. Frantically, the pilot sent out a message: "We are being machine-gunned. Plane on fire. SOS." Then, a moment later, the plane dropped down toward the sea, trailing a long plume of black smoke. Crashing into the water, it disappeared.

The single passenger in the plane was Jean Chiappe, who was on his way to the Middle East to serve as High Commissioner of Syria and Lebanon for the Petain government. At the time, his identity was unknown to the British, and there is no question that his plane was shot down because it had blundered into a fight where pilots on both sides had but one choice—to kill or be killed. It is probable, however, that the British problems in Syria were made a good deal easier by reason of the fact that Chiappe never reached his destination.

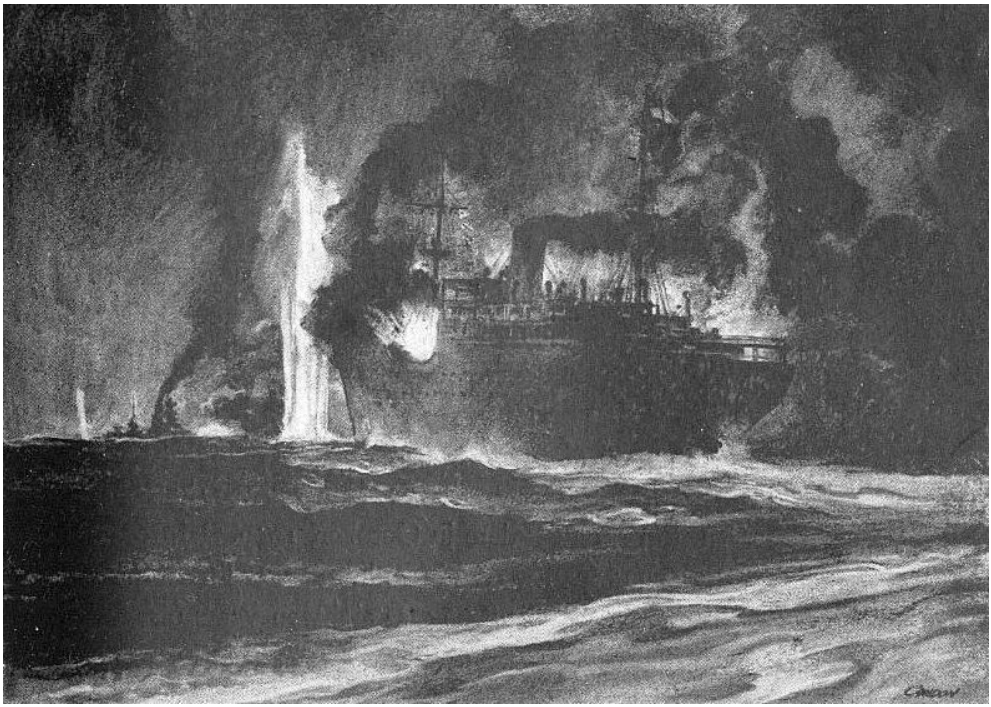
As a result of the raid on Taranto and the action off Sardinia, the Italian fleet was seldom seen or heard of until the following spring, when it was once again engaged by the British at the Battle of Cape Matapan. The *Littorio* and *Caio Duilio* were both undergoing repairs at Taranto during

most of the winter, while the *Vittorio Veneto*, hit at least once during the Sardinian action, stayed in the harbor of Naples. During a Royal Air Force raid on January 8, 1941, pilots reported hitting her with bombs. The *Giulio Cesare* and *Andrea Doria* remained safely in home waters, going to sea only to move from Cagliari to Naples and back again. The *Conte di Cavour* had been abandoned at Taranto and no attempt was made at the time to put her into service.

To the British, still fighting alone against the combined power of the Axis, the freedom of movement gained by these battles was of incalculable value. Convoy after convoy moved safely through the Mediterranean to Malta, Greece and Egypt, reinforcing and strengthening the British armies that stood alone between the democracies and world disaster.

In December, General Wavell was able to launch his first drive against the Italian armies threatening Egypt and drive them back into Libya. In January, 1941, the British forces were strong enough to invade the Italian colony of Eritrea on the Red Sea, and in the following month the North African armies captured the important Libyan base of Benghazi. In March, a British and Empire force of sixty thousand men landed in Greece to attempt to stem the onrushing tide of Axis invasion forces.

All of these moves were possible only because of the heroic and determined aggressiveness of the men of the British Mediterranean Fleets. Storm-tossed and continually overworked, they had sought by all means in their power to seek out, engage and destroy the enemy. By reason of their success, and the bravery of the men they convoyed to the threatened points of danger, the plans of the enemy were effectively frustrated and it is not too much to say the world was saved from domination by the Axis.



The *Jervis Bay* Headed Straight for the Attacking Raider

8. THE *JERVIS BAY*

November 5, 1940

Many fiercely stirring naval battles have been fought in World War II, but one that stands out among them all for the courage displayed against overwhelming odds is the battle of the armed merchant cruiser *Jervis Bay* against one of the Germans' commerce raiding warships—either a pocket battleship or one of the *Admiral Hipper*-class heavy cruisers.

The *Jervis Bay* did not win her passage at arms against a more powerful foe, but she did win a battle of the human spirit. Doomed to defeat, her captain and crew fought an unequal battle to the last and gave their lives to save those of the men on the ships the *Jervis Bay* had been charged to protect.

One could look far to find another such sea encounter. Perhaps its closest parallel is the battle of the *Revenge* against the massed might of the Spanish fleet—the immortal fight of "the one against fifty-three." But one is reminded, too, of the three small British cruisers that harried the *Graf Spee* to her doom.

There were men of bulldog breed on board those ships and the same type of men were on the *Jervis Bay* when she sailed from a Canadian port on a day late in October, 1940. Before the war she had been a combination freight and passenger liner plying between England and Australia. She was eighteen years old and in the normal course of events would shortly have been relegated to the scrap heap. When war broke out, however, she was fitted with six 6-inch guns, some antiaircraft guns and Lewis machine guns and manned by a Royal Navy crew. The British Navy, desperately short of cruisers to protect the convoys carrying food and war supplies from overseas, needed as many auxiliary cruisers of the *Jervis Bay* type as it could secure. To be sure, such ships were totally incapable of taking on enemy battleships or heavy cruisers, but they could provide some measure of defense against submarines, and protecting convoys against submarines was their principal job.

Under the protection of the *Jervis Bay*, as she steamed eastward across the north Atlantic, was a convoy of thirty-eight merchant ships. Among them were tankers loaded with oil and gasoline, refrigerated cargo vessels carrying beef and other foodstuffs, and other freighters deep with cargoes of airplanes, army trucks, ammunition and thousands of tons of other urgently needed war supplies for Britain. The value of these cargoes ran into the millions of dollars, but even greater than their monetary worth was their value to the support and defense of the United Kingdom, at that time fighting alone for its life.

That the *Jervis Bay* was the sole protection that Britain could afford to give the convoy during the first part of its voyage is ample evidence of the strain that was at that time being put upon the Royal Navy.

For a week or more the convoy proceeded on its way without any untoward occurrence. Out in front, surging heavily through the long, foam-capped North Atlantic swells, the *Jervis Bay* served as a spearhead for the following ships. Since the first day out her lookouts had kept a constant and vigilant watch for enemy craft of any kind. Their orders were ironclad and had been given to them directly by the *Jervis Bay's* captain, Commander Edward Stephen Fogarty Fegen, R.N., himself the son of a British rear admiral and a distinguished destroyer commander in World War I. No one knew better than he the need of a constant watch against surprises when fighting the Hun, and the crew of his ship was thoroughly trained and disciplined in its wartime duties. Commander Fegen, it is interesting to know, had been specially commended while commanding the cruiser *Suffolk* a few years before the war, for rescuing the crew of the German motorship *Hedwig* after the vessel grounded in a storm in the China Sea.

The afternoon of November 5 passed quietly, as had all the previous days of the voyage. The short late autumn day was drawing to an early close, and all arrangements for steaming through the coming night were being completed, when a distant noise, as of an explosion, was heard by those aboard the *Jervis Bay*. It was to the northward and all eyes turned in that direction. Commander Fegen was just raising his binoculars to his eyes when he heard the whine of shells whistling through the air. The next moment three huge geysers of water rose into the air as the shells plunged into the sea. They fell close beside the big two-funneled *Rangitiki*, a passenger liner previously on the Canada-Australia run.

At once the *Rangitiki's* wireless operator sent out his message: "Being gunned by enemy ship of *Graf Spee* class, Lat. 52-45 N., Long. 32-13 W." The convoy was then in mid-Atlantic and it was possible that some British battleship or cruiser might be within reach. The wireless sets of the other ships went into action, too. "Convoy being shelled by German raider," they flashed. "Convoy being shelled." Listeners in all parts of the world grew tense as they picked up the ominous messages, telling of danger to Britain's lifeline.

Commander Fegen sized up the situation rapidly. Far to the north he could see through his binoculars the fighting-top of the raider, lit by the yellow rays of the setting sun. Her hull was obscured by the distance and the gathering darkness, but at regular intervals there glowed through the gloom the white-hot flames of her turret guns. She was a big ship, there was no doubt of that. More than a match for the *Jervis Bay*. The geysers thrown aloft by her shells showed that her guns were at least 8-inch, possibly 11-inch. She could be one of the two remaining pocket battleships, the *Admiral Scheer* or *Lützow*, or she might be one of the *Admiral Hipper*-class heavy cruisers. At the time, the ships in the convoy were convinced that the raider was a pocket battleship, but the later view of the Admiralty seemed to incline to the belief that she was a heavy cruiser.

It did not really matter. The *Jervis Bay* could do little harm to either class of ship, and her own rusty unarmored sides offered no protection whatever against the raider's heavy guns.

Within a few moments, as darkness settled down over the calm sea, Commander Fegen planned his course of action. The *Jervis Bay's* wireless crackled shrilly as he ordered the convoy: "Scatter and get away in the darkness. I will engage the enemy!"

Great clouds of smoke poured from the *Jervis Bay's* single funnel as she gathered speed. At the same time she dropped dozens of smoke floats to hide the merchantmen from the enemy. The *Rangitiki* had now been hit and

was on fire, and shells were falling around the other ships. Suddenly the *Jervis Bay*, now plunging ahead at her utmost speed, turned sharply to port and headed straight for the attacking raider.

"I think everybody aboard was proud as our ship turned to the enemy," said one of her surviving officers. "Our captain knew just what we were going to get, but it didn't matter."

The *Jervis Bay's* guns now came into play and repeated the flashes of the enemy, lighting up the darkness with orange-red bursts of flame. The raider's fire control officers studied this unexpected antagonist through their glasses and shifted their fire. She fired one ranging salvo, and then another, and had the *Jervis Bay* bracketed. The third salvo crashed aboard the British ship with terrible effect, smashing up one of the forward guns and killing nearly all of its crew.

The *Jervis Bay* shuddered under the impact, righted herself and plunged doggedly on. Then she was hit again, this time squarely amidships. One of the shells hit the bridge and turned it into a shambles of twisted wreckage, some of which catapulted down on Commander Fegen, shattering his right arm. Other shells destroyed the steering mechanism and the fire control instruments.

"I saw the *Jervis Bay* flaming after the first few shots," said one of the merchant ship captains. And Lieutenant Sargeant, a survivor, reported: "The German fired two salvos which missed us, but the third hit a bit for'ard, carrying away one gun. I was told the bridge had been blown away. Then the *Jervis Bay* took a direct hit, completely destroying the control room. Within the first fifteen minutes we were completely disabled and for another half-hour we were being hit. It was just firing practice for them."

With her main steering gear wrecked, her boats shot away, her bridge and deckhouses a shambles of twisted steel and afire in a dozen places, the old ship staggered on, firing whatever guns could be brought to bear on the raider. A shell carried away her White Ensign, but a seaman clambered aloft and lashed another to her mainmast.

Commander Fegen, his mangled arm hanging helplessly, made his way aft across the shell-torn decks to the hand steering wheel to con the ship and handle her so that as many guns as possible could be kept directed toward the enemy. As he went he ordered the gun crews to control their fire separately, and sent a messenger below to the engine room to ask for more steam. A moment after he reached his new post near the stern of the ship, a German 11-inch shell blasted away the hand steering gear. The *Jervis Bay*, already badly hurt, was rendered nearly helpless by this disaster.

About this time George Crowson, one of the ship's stokers, whose battle station was in the forward magazine, climbed up to the deck to see why he was getting no response from the man to whom he had been delivering ammunition.

"I went up to see about it," Crowson said. "I found most of the gun crew dead. The forward gun had gone first. By this time there were only about twenty of us left alive in the fore part of the ship. Another twenty were being attended to by the doctor on the deck, a little farther aft. A shell came over and I guess it finished them."

Another salvo of shells tore into the ship and one of them knocked out the third and last of the forward guns. Headed toward the raider the ship could not fire at her, and Commander Fegen decided to turn her on the opposite course by using the twin propellers, so the after guns could be brought to bear. The order was given to the engine room and the ship commenced to turn slowly away. But a moment after the movement had commenced she was hit by a staggering burst of shells. They tore away the after bridge and started raging fires near the stern.

Leaving the after part of the ship, Commander Fegen made his way forward along the blazing deck on which lay his wounded and dying men. It was a sorrowful journey. At last he reached the wrecked main bridge and from here, by relaying orders from one man to another to the engine room, he completed the turning maneuver and brought the stern guns into play.

Soon it was evident that the ship would shortly be a blazing inferno from stem to stern, and the stokers were ordered to come on deck. "When I went up," said Stoker Beaman after his rescue, "the forward part of the ship was a shambles. Dead and wounded were lying around and the ship was afire. But there was not a sign of panic."

Badly holed below the waterline and filling rapidly, it was evident that the *Jervis Bay* would soon have to be abandoned. While the water poured in below and the hot fires raged ever more fiercely, the British gunners kept on firing. Soon there was the muffled rumble of an internal explosion. Either a magazine had blown up or water had reached the hissing boilers. The ship settled lower in the water until the main deck was awash. Only one gun was still able to fire and it continued to pour out 6-inch shells.

As the water washed about the feet of the surviving crew members Commander Fegen gave the order to abandon ship. Sixty-eight men, all that were left of a crew of some four hundred, responded to the order. The one remaining boat and four rafts were put over the side as another salvo crashed aboard, ripping and tearing the *Jervis Bay's* remaining steelwork. Just before

she took her final plunge, with her colors still lashed to the mast and illuminated by the lurid flames, the boat and rafts got clear and drifted away into the darkness.

Commander Fegen, clinging to a stanchion with his one good arm, went down with his ship.

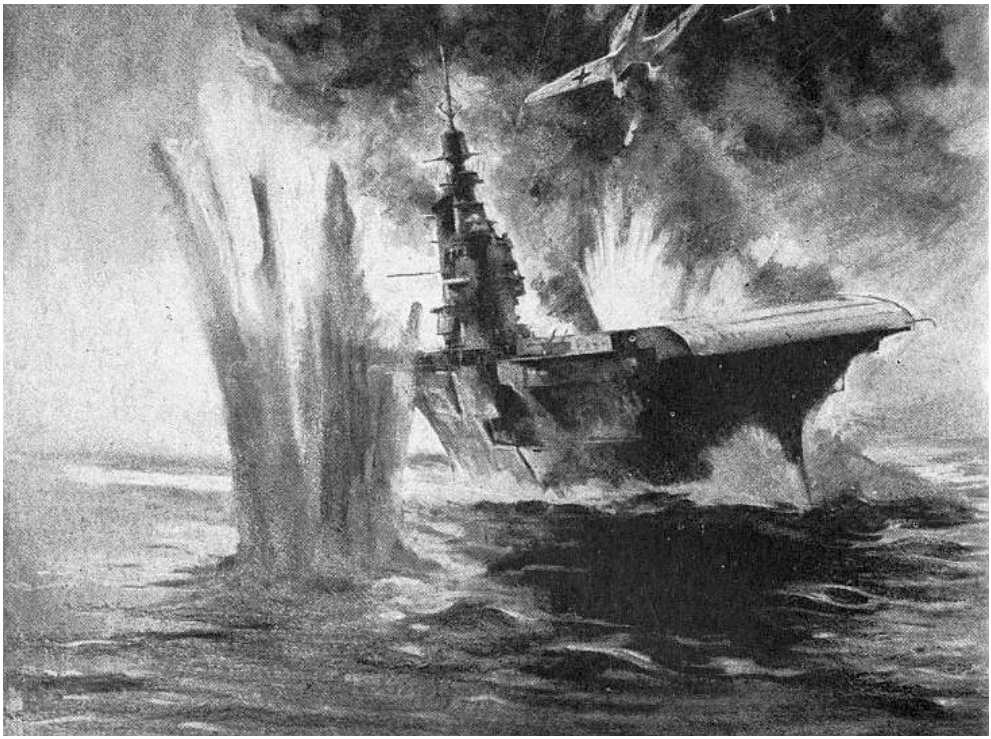
"After we abandoned ship I did see figures on the bridge," said one survivor. "I guess they were dead. When the ship started her last plunge I could see some of them dropping off into the sea. I was on the boat deck. I jumped from there, about forty feet. So long as we have men like the Captain and the brave lads that went down, Jerry can never lick us."

Stoker Stevens, swimming resolutely, was overlooked by those in the lifeboat, but found a wooden hatch cover to which he clung for ten hours. "The old *Jervis Bay*," he said, "went down while I was only a hundred yards away. Gosh, I was proud of her!"

As the cold north Atlantic waves swirled over the sinking ship, extinguishing her fires, the raider hastened to search for the other ships of the convoy, sending up star shells to help discover them. But by that time they had scattered far and wide. The *Jervis Bay* had done her work well. Only four of the merchantmen were sunk by the raider. Another failed to reach port and may have been sunk by a submarine.

The thirty-four surviving ships steamed safely into British ports, together with their precious cargoes. One of these, the Swedish vessel *Stureholm*, came in later than the others after she had been given up for lost. Deeply moved by the heroism of those on board the *Jervis Bay*, the *Stureholm's* master, Captain Sven Olander, had turned back, and creeping along beneath the raider's glowing star shells, had found and rescued the *Jervis Bay's* survivors. "They did so well for us," said Captain Olander, "I did not like to leave them. I shall never forget the gallantry of the British captain sailing forward to meet the enemy. It was glorious."

So runs the story of a British captain and crew who doomed themselves to die to save the ships they guarded. Those aboard the *Jervis Bay* knew that they had no chance. Their first thought was for the others. They accomplished their mission and died in sacrificial glory amidst the flames of a defeat that was a victory. Such losses are Britain's gain. Each one strengthens a tradition which becomes invincible.



The *Illustrious'* Guns Flamed Defiance at the Stuka Bombers

9. SAGA OF THE *ILLUSTRIOUS*

January 10, 1941

The part that the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* had played in hammering the Italian fleet at Taranto had made her a marked ship. Italian submarines and planes were ordered to do their utmost to damage or destroy her, and when the German Luftwaffe established itself in force on the airfields of Sicily, the *Illustrious* was promptly designated as a target that should be sunk at any cost.

With the Italian fleet nursing its wounds and staying carefully in its harbors, the Axis onslaught against British shipping was carried forward chiefly by the German dive bombers based in great numbers on Sicily. It was up to them to try to prevent the British from sending convoys through the narrow Sicilian Channel, the bottleneck of the Mediterranean which lies between Sicily and Tunisia.

It was in this channel on January 10, 1941, that the German air force found the *Illustrious* and delivered the most terrible air attack on naval

forces in the history of sea war up to that time.

During the first half of January the British had several large convoys entering the Mediterranean at Gibraltar, to take planes and arms to Greece and Egypt. At dawn on January 10 one of these convoys had reached the western approach to the Sicilian Channel. Scouting far out ahead were the lean gray destroyers, while flanking the supply ships were several cruisers, including the 6-inch gun *Southampton*, the Australian cruiser *Perth*, and the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*.

As the first streaks of light commenced to drive away the darkness of night, lookouts on the British destroyers saw a star shell burst in a brilliant flash to the westward. It meant but one thing—danger. Fired by the *Southampton*, it was a signal that enemy forces had been sighted. Turning in a lather of foam and working up to fullest speed, the destroyers raced back toward the convoy.

As they drew near orange gun flashes rippled along the *Southampton's* side as the cruiser opened fire. The enemy force was small but dangerous—two *Spica* class torpedo boats, the *Vega* and *Cigno*. For a few minutes it looked as though they might brave the guns and attempt to torpedo some of the merchant ships. But as the British destroyers came up they turned tail and dashed to the northward, heading for Sicily.

One of the Southampton's shells made a direct hit on the *Cigno*. It exploded with a brilliant flash, but apparently hit no vital spot, for the little ship tore on with undiminished speed. In a few minutes more she disappeared in the dawn mist that still hovered over the water. Later in the day, however, the *Cigno* was bombed by RAF planes and was run ashore to prevent her sinking.

The pursuing British ships were now within range of the Sicilian shore batteries, which opened a heavy fire. While the destroyers and other vessels attempted to silence the coastal guns, the *Southampton* concentrated her fire on the *Vega*. Blocked off from the island and exposed to the fury of the British guns, the little ship fought gallantly, using both her speed and gun power to defend herself against the superior force.

Twisting and turning, she maneuvered at high speed for nearly an hour before the end came. Shell fire had set her superstructure ablaze and she was in sore straits. Then, foaming in at nearly 40 knots, a British destroyer let go two torpedoes. One of them struck squarely, crashing through to the torpedo boat's boiler room. Steam and smoke rushed from the mangled pipes and within fifteen seconds the game little *Vega* disappeared.

The convoy steamed on steadily to the eastward.

By 11:00 A.M. the ships were abreast of the island of Pantelleria, set squarely in the middle of the Sicilian Channel. At this point, Italian planes were sighted coming down from the north and the *Illustrious* sent up a squadron of fighters to drive them off. The Italians offered no resistance, but circled about and made off toward Sicily. Apparently they had not been sent out to deliver an attack, but to determine the position of the British ships.

On all the British warships the men remained at action stations, tense and quiet, prepared for any eventuality. There was a feeling that danger was at hand. Thousands of eyes scanned the skies to the northward, watching for what might come. Aloft, planes from the *Illustrious* circled over the ships, their pilots always looking toward the north.

At noon a group of enemy planes was sighted—Italian torpedo bombers. Coming in fast directly out of the sun, they drilled in toward the *Illustrious* against a heavy barrage of fire. One plane gave up and turned away without launching its torpedo. Others were driven off by British fighters. A few got close enough to launch torpedoes, but none of the missiles struck the carrier.

The first attack, a routine enough affair, was over. Fifteen minutes later, at 12:30 P.M., the battle began in deadly earnest.

At a height of 18,000 feet, German Stuka dive bombers appeared, flying in perfect formation. There were about thirty of them, and their mission was to destroy the *Illustrious*. As they drew near, the British ships opened up with pom-poms and heavier guns, filling the sky with the black clouds of exploding shells.

Arrived at the correct position, and not a moment before, the Stukas commenced their dives, plummeting down almost vertically. One after the other they came in groups of three and the next moment the *Illustrious* was completely hidden from view behind hundred-foot high white waterspouts. As the splashes subsided the *Illustrious* emerged, every gun roaring furiously. She was steaming fast, but had been hit in a vital spot—the elevator near the stern which brought planes from the hangar to the flight deck. This made it impossible to put more planes into the air to beat off the attacks that were yet to come.

The near misses of the Stuka's 1000-pound bombs had tossed the carrier's big 750-foot hull about like a small boat in a hurricane. Their power was unbelievable. Shrapnel from these bombs had ripped through unarmored portions of the ship's sides and had sprayed across her deck.

Several of the Stukas were shot down but, as the survivors sped away, a second group of thirty-five came in to the attack. They were as resolute and accurate as the first. Hurtling down, they laid their bombs close to the

carrier, throwing her almost on her beam-ends. Clinging to their guns, the crews continued to fire, still sending up a tremendous barrage of fire.

The ship shook from stem to stern and men were flung to the deck as a bomb landed near the center of the flight deck, penetrated through three inches of steel to the hangar deck and exploded, Scores of planes were tossed about like leaves and fires burst out, started by the ignition of the gasoline in their tanks. Flames rushed through the shattered deck to the compartments below, and the smoke was carried through the draft intakes to the ship's boiler room, choking and blinding the men on duty there. With wet rags tied across their noses and mouths they carried on, as the ship lurched and plunged, thrown about by the bombs roaring into the sea along her sides.

The other warships did what they could to protect the *Illustrious*, powdering the sky with exploding antiaircraft shells, their guns joining those of the big carrier in a deafening crescendo of fire. Watchers on these ships could see that the *Illustrious* was taking deadly punishment and were fearful for her survival, once the fires began to take good hold and send up billowing columns of smoke. From time to time the carrier was completely hidden from view by the enormous bomb splashes and the smoke from bursting bombs, but each time that she again came into view, her guns were flaming defiance at the screaming Stukas.

By now the ship's communication systems had been shattered and orders had to be transmitted by messengers, who groped their way through blinding smoke. The ammunition conveyor had also been put out of action and members of the gun crews had to run across the flight deck, with killing fragments of steel flying in every direction, to get fresh ammunition for their guns.

On the scarred flight deck stretcher parties, directed by the ship's officers, worked with unflagging determination to bring the wounded to the ship's medical stations. Men were dragged from ripped and twisted steel, still glowing with the heat of bomb or shrapnel hits. Time and again they were bombarded with whizzing flights of jagged steel splinters and often their work was interrupted by the solid sheets of water flung across the deck by near misses. Still they carried on.

Down below, damage repair crews and hundreds of helpers were making superhuman efforts to put out the fires and subdue the scalding steam that was hissing from scores of broken pipes. With but one object in mind—to save the ship—they manned the fire-fighting apparatus and, tossed about by the concussion of the terrific explosions, struggled against the flames like

men possessed. When the electric generating system was disabled and all the lights went out, they carried on by the light of the fires.

To add to the chaos in the interior of the ship, bombs that exploded below her waterline buckled some of the hull plating and let in streams of sea water. Struggling in water that swirled around their waists, the men dragged a heavy collision mat into place and succeeded in rigging it over the largest hole.

All the men below decks battled in an inferno of flame and steam, with no thought of self, to bring the *Illustrious* through her hour of trial. And in the end they succeeded.

During the seemingly endless fight against the fires and the encroaching water, the men could hear at all times through the ship's loud speakers the calm unhurried voice of the chaplain, who was giving a running account of the battle. Throughout the day he stood in an exposed position on the bridge, imperturbably telling the men below decks what was going on, assuring them that their ship still had a fighting chance. It was the first time in naval warfare that this had been done, and the gallant chaplain was afterwards awarded the Distinguished Service Order.

Throughout the afternoon Axis planes hovered around the convoy, but a third attack was not delivered until 4:00 P.M. Then a group of twenty Stukas came over and peeled off, in a determined effort to finish off the wounded ship. A direct hit on one of the "Chicago pianos" or multiple pom-poms killed all the gun crew, and several members of the crew of the next gun. An instant later a big bomb crashed through the forward part of the flight deck and exploded below. Fresh gasoline fires were started, which soon raged so fiercely that the compartments in which they were located had to be flooded.

On deck it was once again plain hell. With smoke blackened faces the gun crews put up their endless ring of fire, but could not drive off the Stukas that hurtled down with the speed and fury of thunderbolts. Some of the planes, diving to the level of the flight deck, roared along the full length of the ship. Though hit by some of the thousands of shells and bullets fired at them, they machine-gunned the gun crews and succeeded in killing a number of men.

Those who watched this attack from the other ships were appalled at the dreadful punishment the *Illustrious* was getting. Many believed that she was done for. Despite this, it is probable that they did not realize the full extent of the damage that the ship had suffered. In addition to the direct hits on the carrier's flight deck, a number of near misses had buckled her plates, causing leaks, and piercing her sides with steel splinters. More than a

thousand such jagged fragments, some making holes large enough for a man to crawl through, had penetrated the ship's hull. A bomb hit on the stern had put the steering gear out of commission, forcing her to steer with her engines, that is, by the alternate use of her propellers.

At half-past five, as the afternoon was drawing to a close, the Germans returned to make their last attack. About thirty-five Stukas circled around to the west and came in with the glare of the sun directly behind them. Though everything seemed in their favor, they delivered a comparatively ineffectual attack. Antiaircraft fire from the *Illustrious* and near-by ships was fierce and well directed, and succeeded in spoiling the German pilots' aim. One bomb struck a glancing blow on the port side forward and exploded in the water close alongside, making a large hole in the hull. Water poured in rapidly, but the watertight bulkheads closing off the damaged compartment were sealed and the ship's speed and trim were not affected.

When this group of Stukas sped away, darkness was commencing to close in, shrouding the *Illustrious* in its protective gloom. The agonizing hours during which she had endured the most savage air attacks pressed home on any ship up to that time were at an end.

The damage was formidable. There were four huge holes in the flight deck, the hangar deck was burned out with all its planes, and the funnel and island superstructures were riddled with hundreds of shrapnel holes. Steam pipes, railing stanchions, ladders, and all the other metal work above decks were bent and twisted into tangled wreckage. Below decks, the engine room was in a chaotic condition and the steering gear was partially destroyed. When the men were assembled for roll call, it was found that fourteen officers and 107 men had been killed and more than four hundred wounded. In retaliation at least twelve of the German aircraft had been shot down by antiaircraft fire or fighting planes.

Throughout the afternoon, while the convoy had scattered, some of the escorting warships had stayed to help protect the *Illustrious*. One of these, the cruiser *Southampton*, had been seriously damaged. Holes had been torn in her sides and flames were ravaging her shattered decks. Toward the end of the afternoon, it was realized that she could never hope to reach port. Her bow was almost under water and she was listing so heavily that she was practically on her beam-ends. Despite the heroic efforts of her men the fires could not be subdued. In the early evening destroyers came alongside to take off her crew and the ship was then sent to the bottom by British guns.

The *Illustrious*, though still able to proceed under her own power, was too badly damaged to continue the voyage to Alexandria. Accordingly, under cover of the friendly darkness, she made her way to Malta, some 150

miles distant from the scene of the attack. Early the following morning, she crept into the harbor of Valetta, and was immediately taken in hand by the repair crews at the naval dockyard.

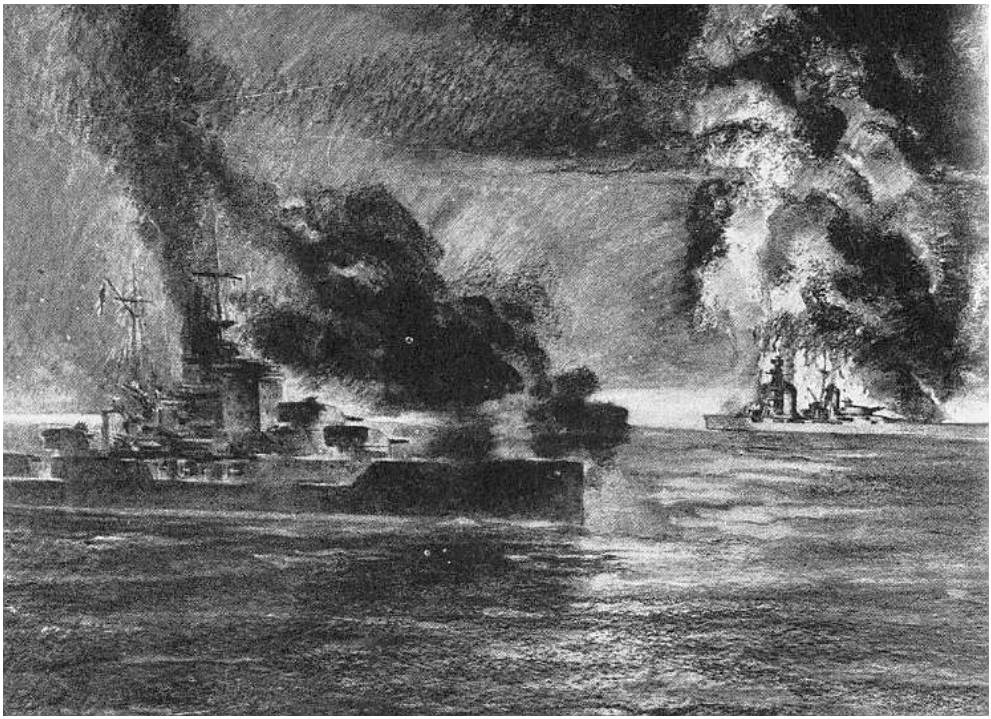
Work was getting fairly under way, when the air-raid alarms screamed their warning. German Stukas, having searched the Sicilian Channel without results, had flown to Malta and discovered their intended victim there. Within ten minutes bombs had fallen on the dock, the near-by sheds, and on the *Illustrious* herself. Splinters from the bomb that hit the dock did some damage, but a moment later a large bomb plunged down the carrier's after elevator, exploded with a detonation that shook the ship like an earthquake, and spread further destruction throughout the after part of the hangar deck.

Undaunted, the ship's crew and the dockyard workmen proceeded to repair with all possible speed the worst of the damage. They were not to be left in peace, however, for the Germans came over four times more during the following two weeks. Ignoring the bombs, the crews worked night and day, riveting steel plates over the holes in the ship's sides, putting the steering gear in order, and repairing the hundreds of broken steam pipes and electric cables.

One morning, to the surprise of the people of Valetta, the dockyard was empty. Surrounded by absolute secrecy, the *Illustrious* had slipped quietly out of the harbor during the night. So long as she remained at Malta, she was in mortal danger. The only choice was to make for Alexandria as soon as she had been patched up sufficiently to undertake the 1,000-mile voyage.

Late in January the big ship reached Alexandria in safety, and further emergency repairs were carried out. Then, fairly seaworthy, she made the 14,000-mile voyage around Africa and across the Atlantic to Norfolk, Virginia. Here she remained for the rest of the year being entirely rebuilt.

The epic battle of the *Illustrious* had shown the British that they could take convoys through the Sicilian Channel in spite of the German Stukas based on Sicily, provided they were willing to pay the price. The route was avoided, however, except at such times as it was absolutely necessary to deliver reinforcements and supplies to beleaguered Malta. The battle also tended to show that even aircraft carriers, very lightly armored ships, stand some chance of surviving heavy bomb hits. If the Germans had used torpedo planes it is probable that the *Illustrious* would have been sent to the bottom.



The Guns of the *Warspite* Deal the *Fiume* the Final Blow

10. THE BATTLE OF CAPE MATAPAN

March 28, 1941

Throughout the winter of 1940-41, the Italian Fleet remained close to its bases. The damage sustained at Taranto and in the battle off Sardinia was being repaired, and the ships that had not been damaged seemed indisposed to take to the open sea and seek an encounter with the British.

About the middle of March, however, there were signs that the Italian ships might soon leave port. Reconnaissance planes reported unusual activity in the harbors sheltering units of the fleet, and it was evident that a move of some kind was in preparation.

At last, after many days of watching, aircraft of the British Fleet Air Arm spotted an Italian combat force of considerable strength at noon on March 27. The ships were off Cape Passero, the southeastern tip of Sicily, and were steaming eastward. At the time the main body of Admiral Cunningham's Eastern Mediterranean Fleet was in the harbor of Alexandria.

Many guesses were made at the time as to why the Italians had decided to leave their harbors and risk exposing their ships to the dogged gunfire of

the British. The move, apparently, was dictated by the Germans, who gave the commanders of the Italian Fleet no choice whatever as to their course of action.

In Libya, the Italian armies under Marshal Graziani had been driven far to the westward by General Wavell. There was little hope that they could successfully resume the attack designed to capture Egypt and the Suez Canal, the Middle East and the gateway to India for the Axis.

Still flushed with their early victories, the Germans had decided to take over the North African campaign, and had sent General Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Corps to Libya. In March it was essential to send Rommel heavy reinforcements, involving the dispatch of a steady stream of supply ships from Sicily to Tripoli. The Italian warships that were steaming eastward on March 27 had been sent out to attract the attention of Admiral Cunningham's forces, while German troops, tanks and guns were being rushed to General Rommel.

It is probable that the Italian ships were intended to act merely as decoys. They were to let their whereabouts be detected and were to steam sufficiently far to the east to make certain of drawing the British ships out of Alexandria. Then with their superior speed they were to maneuver or, it might be said, retreat so as to escape without hurt. If this was the plan, it was as one British observer put it "a ghastly mistake." The Italian Fleet was to suffer a disaster even worse than that of Taranto.

Late in the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, the gray ships of the British Fleet steamed impressively out of Alexandria Harbor, and disappeared in the gathering darkness to the northwest. Admiral Cunningham now had at his disposal a stronger force than at any previous time. Its core consisted of three battleships of the *Queen Elizabeth* class—the *Warspite*, *Barham* and *Valiant*—each mounting eight 15-inch guns. With them was the new aircraft carrier *Formidable*, sister ship to the *Illustrious*, and sent to the Mediterranean to replace her, the cruisers *Ajax*, *Orion*, *Gloucester* and *Perth*, a strong force of destroyers including the *Greyhound*, *Havock*, *Jervis* and *Stuart*, and a few light ships of the Greek Navy.

Throughout the night the ships steamed on at full speed to the northwest with their men at action stations. Then as morning approached Admiral Cunningham divided his forces, with the aim of making certain that some of them would make contact with the enemy. The British cruisers were sent on ahead to a position south of Crete, where it was most likely that they would meet the Italian ships. The Greek light craft were dispatched far to the westward to get in the rear of the Italians, to attack them if they retreated and to prevent them from withdrawing into the Adriatic. The main battle

fleet followed at some distance behind the cruisers, its movements to be decided by the reports brought in by scouting planes.

As soon as dawn commenced to lighten the sky at about 6:00 A.M. on March 28, five planes rose from the *Formidable's* flight deck and flew off to the west to locate the enemy. For an hour or more the planes were silent. Then their messages came in, reporting that they had spotted the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, six cruisers and seven destroyers, 35 miles south of Crete and steaming southeast. As the pilots watched from a great height, they saw two more cruisers and several destroyers speed in from the west to join the Italian force.

At this time the British cruisers were about 45 miles to the southeast of the Italians, out of sight over the rim of the horizon. The main battle fleet was nearly a hundred miles farther away to the southeast.

A little later, the British planes sighted a second Italian force further to the north—two *Cavour* class battleships escorted by cruisers. These ships were steering to the northeast toward Greece.

The British cruisers, already steaming at full speed, pressed on to come within sight of the enemy and if possible trap them into a chase that would lead them to within range of the British battleships. A few minutes after 8:00 A.M., the *Orion*, commanded by Admiral Henry D. Pridham-Whipple, sighted the enemy cruisers. For a few minutes the *Orion* held her course, the *Ajax*, *Perth* and *Gloucester* following. Then as if alarmed, the British cruisers turned and dashed off to the eastward. The Italians followed in hot pursuit.

For nearly an hour the British cruisers plunged ahead at full speed. Then having outdistanced the enemy, they turned and once more steamed toward them, as if venturing to engage despite the Italians' superior force. For some time the Italian cruisers seemed to hesitate. Whether they suspected a trap is not known. But as the cruisers approached again with their turret guns reaching upward ready to fire, the Italians abruptly changed course, sweeping swiftly around and steaming off at high speed to the northwest. In all probability, they had decided to return to the *Vittorio Veneto*, which it was their mission to protect.

After them steamed the British cruisers, determined to keep them interested in their activities until the British battleships, now pounding westward at their utmost speed, could reach the scene. At two minutes to eleven the *Orion* sighted the long gray hull and upperworks of the *Vittorio Veneto* sixteen miles to the northward and immediately reported to Admiral Cunningham on the *Warspite*. For a half-hour more the little cruisers raced

toward the Italians. As they closed down the range, the *Vittorio Veneto* opened up with her after 15-inch turret guns. Great geysers of water leaped upward where the shells struck, but the *Orion*, out ahead of the other cruisers, pressed on unscathed. Again and again the big guns thundered; but the cruisers seemed to bear charmed lives and received no hits.

Now Admiral Cunningham, fearing that the Italians might at any moment start to withdraw, ordered the *Formidable* to unleash her torpedo planes. From the carrier's deck there rose a swarm of swift Swordfish bombers. Straight toward the *Vittorio Veneto* they charged, drove through an inferno of antiaircraft fire to within two hundred yards and loosed their deadly missiles. It was a miracle that any of the planes came through. The barrage through which they had to pass was thrown out by forty machine guns and twelve 3.5-inch antiaircraft guns on the Italian battleship and forty-eight guns on four escorting destroyers.

A torpedo from one of the planes smashed into the *Vittorio Veneto*, holing her below the waterline. At once the fight seemed to go out of the ship. She ceased firing, turned heavily about, and set off to the west. Around her clustered her supporting destroyers, belching forth smoke screens to hide her from the British planes.

Another flight of planes left the *Formidable* shortly after noon and succeeded in leveling out for their attack at a height of only a few feet above the water before they were discovered. Then one of the destroyers accompanying the battleship opened fire. The planes sped on, however, and delivered their torpedoes from a range of 200 yards. Two, and possibly three, of the torpedoes hit the *Vittorio Veneto*, crashing into her engine room and crippling her very seriously. Before the attack she was rushing through the water at 30 knots. When the British planes had finished their work, her speed was reduced to 10 or 12 knots at the most. Taking water through the gaping holes in her side, the wounded ship crept slowly westward.

The afternoon came to an end and shortly after 5:30 P.M., as darkness was gathering in, the *Formidable* sent off the group of planes that had carried out the first attack early in the morning. Coming up with the Italians, the planes waited until it was nearly completely dark before descending for their attack. At their first approach they were met by a terrific barrage laid down by the guns of the *Vittorio Veneto* and those of five cruisers and eleven destroyers that had gathered to protect the battleship. The planes turned away and then came in singly from a number of different directions.

The darkness and the clouds of smoke thrown out by the seventeen Italian ships made it impossible to tell what results had been achieved. One of the torpedoes, however, hit the crack 10,000-ton cruiser *Pola*, stopping

her dead in her tracks. Later, her commander reported that he "had never seen such courage as the plane which attacked me displayed. It came in only five feet above the water under a withering fire."

That further hits were made on the *Vittorio Veneto* seems probable, for half an hour after the attack a British reconnaissance plane sighted her drifting, rising and falling gently in the long swells, and glowing with reddish flames. Only a few destroyers stood by her. The cruisers and the other destroyers had left her to her fate.

Night had fallen, and the course of the main British fleet was still to the westward. It was possible that contact might be made with the Italian cruisers during the hours of darkness. Otherwise, the enemy might be brought to action the following morning. The men remained at their battle stations and the big ships rushed onward beneath the starlit Mediterranean skies.

The fleet was now steaming in close formation, the screening destroyers in the van being about two miles ahead of the battleships. Shortly after ten o'clock one of the destroyers signaled the *Warspite* that she had sighted the crippled *Pola*, rolling helplessly off her port bow. Admiral Cunningham immediately ordered the squadron to change course toward the damaged cruiser to send her to the bottom.

Suddenly other vessels were detected coming at high speed through the night off the starboard bow. Quickly the destroyer *Greyhound* snapped on her searchlight. There, silhouetted against the blackness and at incredibly short range, was the light cruiser *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*, leading the heavy cruisers *Zara* and *Fiume* across the bows of the British ships from starboard to port.

An instant later the 15-inch guns of the *Warspite* dealt the *Fiume* a terrible blow—seven shells, each weighing 1,920 pounds, crashing into her within the space of a few seconds. The *Fiume* seemed to explode in one enormous flash of blinding flame. Her 8-inch turrets were torn from their foundations and were hurled high aloft. Her hull was riven to pieces and she lay wrecked and helpless, partially submerged.

While the *Warspite* had been firing at the *Fiume*, the *Barham* and *Valiant* had concentrated on the *Zara*, middle ship of the Italian line. Their 15-inch guns flamed in the night and within forty seconds the *Zara* broke apart, demolished. Other British ships had hit the *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* heavily before she disappeared in the darkness.

For a moment there was silence. Then, hurtling through the night at 40 knots, came a desperate Italian destroyer attack. Closing in, they launched

their torpedoes, wheeled and dashed off into the night. Instantly the British battleships turned away to present as small a target as possible. The maneuver succeeded, and the torpedoes churned swiftly past without finding a target. At the same time, the British directed a heavy fire at the destroyers, sinking two of them, the *Vincenzo Gioberti* and *Maestrale*. During the heat of the action another destroyer, the *Vittorio Alfieri*, had also been sunk.

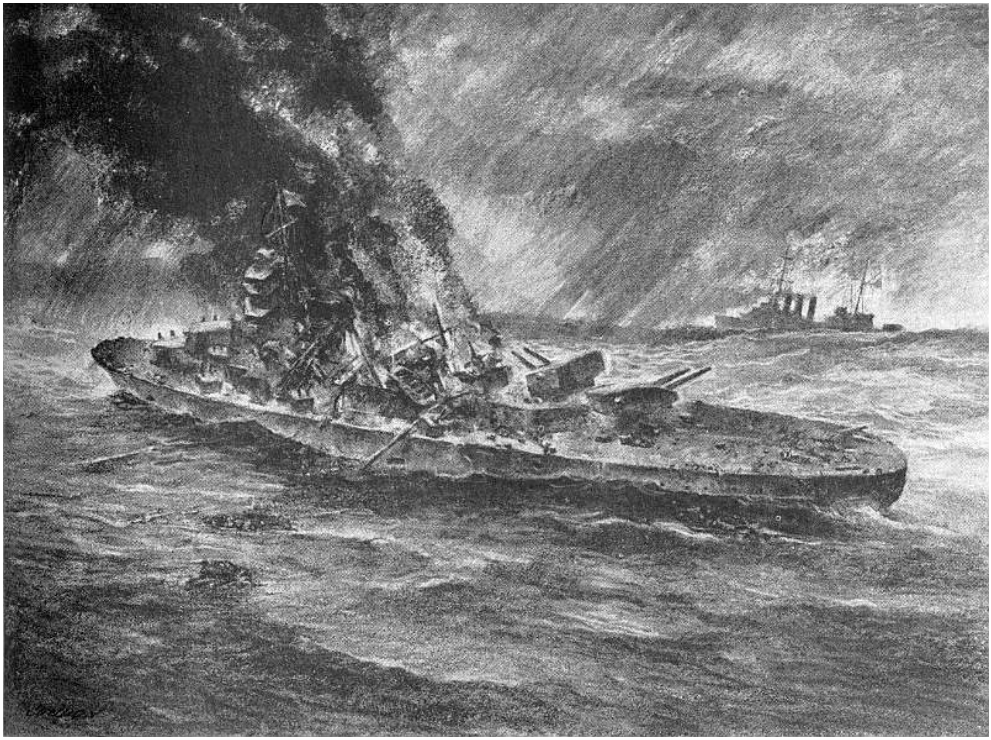
Meanwhile, the British destroyers *Greyhound*, *Havock* and *Stuart* had run in to finish off the crippled Italian cruisers. The *Havock* was first to reach the *Pola*. She had no torpedoes left and sent a message to the *Warspite*: "Am hanging on to the stern of the *Pola*. Shall I board her or blow off her stern with a depth charge?" Admiral Cunningham called the *Havock* back and sent in the destroyer *Jervis*, which still had some torpedoes left, to sink the Italian ship. Other destroyers finished off the *Zara* and *Fiume*. Nearly a thousand men were rescued from the destroyed Italian ships. More would have been picked up from the water if it had not been for attacks made on the British ships by German dive bombers. Admiral Cunningham set a course away from the scene to save his ship and radioed the chief of the Italian Naval Staff, giving the position of the survivors and suggesting that a hospital ship be dispatched at once. The Italian reply read: "Thank you for your communication. The hospital ship *Gradisca* has already left Taranto."

The British ships steamed east, having brought the most sensational naval battle of the war up to that time to a victorious conclusion. The British ships had not suffered a single casualty, as one observer put it, "no scratch even to their paintwork." The Italians had lost three of their best cruisers and three destroyers, while the *Vittorio Veneto* and *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* were heavily damaged. Total British losses were two of the *Formidable's* planes, shot down during the afternoon attacks.

"The action was a notable success," said Admiral Cunningham after the *Warspite's* arrival at Alexandria. "I am grateful to all in the fleet for their support on this and other occasions. Well done!"

"It was not a battle," said one of the Italian survivors rescued by a British warship. "It was an Italian disaster."

For the first time in the war the Admiralty almost immediately gave out the names of all the British ships that had taken part in the action. A turning point had been reached and secrecy was no longer needed. It no longer really mattered whether or not the Italians knew what British ships were operating in the Mediterranean. For to all intents and purposes, after the Battle of Cape Matapan, there was only one navy in the Inland Sea.



The Last Hour of the *Bismarck*

11. DESTRUCTION OF THE *BISMARCK*

May 27, 1941

Two months after the Battle of Cape Matapan, or during the last week of May, 1941, there took place the extraordinary pursuit and destruction of the powerful German battleship *Bismarck*. This vessel and her sister ship the *Tirpitz* were hailed by the Germans as the largest and most powerful warships afloat.

These ships measured a little over 800 feet in length and had the exceptional beam of 118 feet, making a hull that was an excellent and stable gun platform. Under the terms of the bilateral treaty of naval limitation made with Great Britain, their displacement was supposed to be 35,000 tons. Apparently, however, the Germans concluded the treaty only to disregard its terms and congratulate themselves upon their cleverness in hoodwinking those who signed in good faith. Those who saw the *Bismarck* estimated her displacement at 45,000 or possibly even 50,000 tons. She mounted eight 15-inch guns and a swarm of 4.1-inch dual purpose guns for use against either surface vessels or aircraft. Elaborate subdivisions of her hull into watertight

and explosion-proof compartments made her the most difficult ship to sink belonging to any navy. Her own crew were convinced that she was literally unsinkable.

The *Bismarck*, accompanied by the new 8-inch gun cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, was first sighted on May 21 in the harbor of Bergen, Norway, by reconnaissance planes of the British Coastal Command. It was evident that the two ships were intent on making their way to the Atlantic, probably by the favorite German route to the north of Iceland. Should they succeed, there could be no telling what havoc they would make of the vital North Atlantic convoys. It was imperative that they be intercepted and destroyed.

Acting with the utmost speed and decision, the Admiralty began at once to throw its naval net around the North Sea and the water through which the German ships would have to pass. The 8-inch gun cruisers *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, in blockade patrol near Iceland, were ordered to steam at full speed to Denmark Strait, which separates Iceland from Greenland. Another signal went out ordering the battle cruiser *Hood* and the new battleship *Prince of Wales* to set out for the same destination.

Powerful units of the British Home Fleet, led by Admiral Sir John C. Tovey on the flagship *King George V* and including the aircraft carrier *Victorious*, steamed out of the fleet's base in northern Scotland. Far out in the heaving wastes of the Atlantic the battleships *Rodney* and *Ramilles*, which were escorting convoys, detached themselves from the merchantmen and turned to the northward toward Denmark Strait. Part of the Western Mediterranean Fleet, with Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville's flag on the battle cruiser *Renown* and with the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, was heading northwest under forced draft from Gibraltar. At the same time British submarines were taking up positions at a number of points on the route that the German ships were expected to follow.

Late in the afternoon of Friday, May 23, Admiral W. F. Wake-Walker of the *Norfolk* flashed to the Admiralty the message that he had sighted the *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* steaming at high speed through Denmark Strait to the southwest. The Germans were only 6 miles distant when first sighted, but storms, snow, sleet and patches of fog reduced the visibility to about a mile. The two British cruisers closed in and followed the enemy, determined to keep in touch and guide the British battleships to their quarry.

Despite the low visibility, the *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* were able to keep within sight of the German ships throughout the night. Early on the following morning the *Hood* and *Prince of Wales* came up from the southeast, sighted the enemy, and started to close in on a parallel course. The German ships were still plunging ahead through heavy seas, pressing on at

highest speed, seeking the safety of the wide waters of the Atlantic. When the British had reduced the distance between themselves and the enemy to 13 miles, they opened fire and the *Bismarck* replied, the big guns blasting at each other across miles of heaving, storm-tossed water.

The German fire was amazingly accurate, the *Bismarck* getting the range of the *Hood* with her second or third salvo. The massive 15-inch shells tore through the lightly armored decks of the *Hood* and started a devastating fire amidships, either in the fuel tanks or one of the magazines. Watchers on the *Prince of Wales* saw the huge ship shudder under the impact of the blows and were dismayed when they saw the smoke pouring upward from the blaze below decks. Spreading rapidly, the flames started a series of explosions and in about three minutes the *Hood* was torn apart by a colossal explosion. There was a deafening roar and a vast sheet of blinding yellow flame. Pieces of debris and wreckage were hurled high aloft, some falling into the sea around the *Prince of Wales*, more than half a mile away. Within two minutes the shattered hull of the *Hood* dipped beneath the waves and sank from sight. Nearly every soul on board perished with the ship, only three survivors being picked up.

While the *Bismarck* had been concentrating her fire on the *Hood*, the *Prinz Eugen* had been blazing away rapidly though ineffectively at the *Prince of Wales*. As soon as the *Hood* had disappeared, the *Bismarck* trained her guns on the British battleship, and the *Prince of Wales* returned a thunderous fire from her 14-inch guns. Within a few minutes a British salvo struck home, hitting the *Bismarck's* bow and starting a fire. Seconds later a German shell crashed into the *Prince of Wales*. According to the Admiralty this hit caused "slight damage." In any event, the British ship broke off the action, and the *Bismarck*, turning away, steamed furiously on to the southward, followed by the *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*.

Throughout the daylight hours of Saturday the chase continued. In the afternoon British reconnaissance planes arrived and hovered over the German ships. From the reports made by their pilots it seemed possible that the *Prince of Wales'* hit had damaged the *Bismarck's* fuel tanks or engine room. Her speed was reduced from 28 to an estimated 22 knots and the planes reported that she was leaving a wake of oil.

By nightfall the *Prince of Wales* had made good her damage and overtaken the fleeing Germans again. When within range she opened fire and there was a short but inconclusive action. In the gathering dusk the German ships turned westward, and the British cruisers and the *Prince of Wales* swung around to follow. Orange flames flashed from the big turret guns and the rumble of their firing rolled out across the water. Then the

German ships turned to the southward and, as visibility decreased, the gunfire died away.

Night fell and the pursuit became more difficult. But other British forces were now rapidly approaching the scene of action. At about midnight the *Victorious*, steaming westward with the Home Fleet, sent off a few torpedo bombers, which were guided to the *Bismarck* by radio bearings flashed from the three ships following the German warship. One of the planes, roaring through the storm and darkness, found the *Bismarck* and struck her with a torpedo. This hit apparently did further damage to the battleship's engines, for at no time thereafter could she steam faster than 22 knots, and at times her speed was even lower.

Fleet Admiral Gunther Lütjens, aboard the *Bismarck*, must now have known that he was trapped and could escape only with extraordinary luck. By every device possible he tried to shake off the three grim British bulldogs that followed in his wake. The weather aided him, for it grew steadily worse during Saturday night. The lookouts on the British ships strained their eyes, but visibility diminished steadily owing to snow and fog.

At about 3:00 A.M. Admiral Wake-Walker in the *Norfolk* ordered his ship to draw ahead, closer to the *Bismarck*. As the dim shape of the cruiser slipped ahead she was seen by watchers on the wounded German ship. The *Bismarck* turned, swung out her sinister turret guns, and opened fire. The *Norfolk* veered sharply away to throw off the German range-finders. As she did so a heavy snow squall drove between her and the *Bismarck* and the German ship was lost to sight. The ships were then about 350 miles southeast of the southern tip of Greenland.

As she steamed on to the south, the *Prince of Wales* gave her position and the probable position of the *Bismarck* to the other British forces that the Admiralty had flung into the death hunt to avenge the *Hood*. The most important search of all, however, was in the air. Patrol planes from the British Coastal Command airports roared out over the sea, and other planes belonging to the Royal Canadian Air Force thundered eastward from Newfoundland. At the same time Fleet Air Arm planes launched from the *Victorious* and *Ark Royal* spread over the rolling North Atlantic in a ceaseless search.

Throughout Sunday and Sunday night these patrols met with no success. But at 10:30 A.M. on Monday, May 26, an American-built Consolidated PBY-S patrol bomber, called a "Catalina" by the British, broke through a layer of clouds and sighted the *Bismarck* 550 miles off Land's End, making for the French port of Brest.

“There was a 40-knot wind blowing and a heavy sea running,” said the Catalina’s captain, “and the ship was digging her nose right in. At first we were not sure she was the *Bismarck*. . . . the first we knew there were a couple of puffs of smoke near the cockpit window . . . then we were surrounded by brownish-black smoke as the *Bismarck* shot at us with everything she had. She looked just like one big flash.”

Radio flashes crackled from the Catalina to the rest of the hunters. Nearby was the Mediterranean squadron with the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, from whose deck there rose a swarm of planes. At 11:15 A.M. one of her flights sighted the *Bismarck*, which was alone and still ploughing eastward. The *Prinz Eugen* had evidently left her in order to make good her own escape. At this time the *King George V* and the *Rodney* were approaching the scene from the west, but were not sufficiently close to bring the enemy to action. The other ships of the vast British dragnet increased their speeds and commenced to close in.

From now on contact was never lost. Acting upon reports received from the *Ark Royal’s* planes, Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville on his flagship *Renown* ordered the cruiser *Sheffield*, one of the Mediterranean squadron, to race ahead, make contact with the *Bismarck* and shadow her. While the cruiser was plunging through the seas in pursuit the *Ark Royal’s* planes attempted a torpedo attack, but this was unsuccessful due to the wildness of the weather. When the planes returned from their mission they had the greatest difficulty in landing, for the high seas were causing the carrier’s flight deck to rise and fall as much as fifty feet. Somehow, however, every plane landed without mishap.

Shortly after 5:30 P.M. on Monday the *Sheffield* sighted the enemy, radioed her position, and proceeded to shadow her. Within twenty minutes after the receipt of the *Sheffield’s* signal, the *Ark Royal* launched another flight of planes. Swiftly they thundered toward the enemy, dove down to low level and delivered their attack in the teeth of the *Bismarck’s* savage antiaircraft barrage.

Two torpedoes found the mark. One hit the German ship on the port side amidships and the second struck her starboard quarter. This 18-inch torpedo doomed the *Bismarck*. It damaged her rudder and demolished her starboard propeller, throwing the giant ship out of control. Plunging wildly through the heavy seas, she careened off her course and made two complete circles. Her speed was very much reduced by these hits and now, wounded but still a savage snarling adversary, she struggled on to the end, while the converging forces of British fighting ships closed in for the kill.

After it had been dark for some hours, a group of British Tribal-class destroyers, accompanied by the Polish destroyer, *Piarun*, were sent in to deliver a torpedo attack. They were led by Captain Philip L. Vian in the *Cossack*. In daylight such an attack would have been foolhardy, for the *Bismarck's* guns were still able to fire and could have laid down a shattering barrage. But in the depth of night there was a good chance that the swift unarmored destroyers could run in close to the big ship without being observed, let go their torpedoes, and get away before the *Bismarck's* guns could find them.

Strung out in line ahead, they made for their target and the *Cossack*, *Zulu*, *Sikh* and *Maori* all delivered torpedoes at close range. The *Cossack* and *Maori* each hit with one torpedo. After the *Maori's* attack the *Bismarck* was seen to be on fire.

An hour after these attacks the shadowing destroyers reported that the *Bismarck* had stopped dead in the water. She then was about 400 miles due west of Brest and had been pursued by the British forces for more than 1,700 miles. She soon got under way again, but her speed was greatly reduced and her huge bulk moved forward at a speed of no more than 8 miles an hour, that of a worn-out tramp steamer.

But she was still dangerous. She still had plenty of guns that were undamaged. The *Zulu*, steaming in too close, received a savage fire that caused some damage and inflicted a few casualties.

Dawn broke at last on the morning that was to witness the death agony of the wounded monster. It was a gray day, with low fast-moving clouds driven by a boisterous northwest wind, and a heavy sea that frothed into white caps as far as the eye could reach. Rain squalls beat down, closing the visibility from 10 miles to less than 3. It was North Atlantic weather, to which the men on the rolling, pitching ships were well accustomed.

By now the bulk of the British pursuing force, separated to some extent during the long chase, was drawing close in to the quarry. Closest to the enemy was the cruiser *Sheffield*, which had faithfully kept contact since being sent to find the German ship the day before. The *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, which had lost contact two days previously, were now on hand; and the ships of the battle force, led by the *King George V* and *Rodney*, had drawn together and concentrated at a position a little to the northwest of that of the *Bismarck*. Close at hand was the *Ark Royal*, shepherded by the battle cruiser *Renown*, to help her fight off any German planes that might be sent out from Brest.

Vice-Admiral Somerville had planned to send the *Ark Royal's* planes in for an attack shortly after sunrise, but visibility and weather conditions were so bad that this operation could not be carried out. On the *King George V*, Admiral Tovey had also prepared to attack the *Bismarck* at dawn with the combined power of the British heavy ships, but the difficulty of shooting accurately under the existing conditions led to the postponement of this plan for a few hours.

These delays, however, were only temporary. Nothing on earth could stop the British from going into action now that their plans had reached fruition. As it happened, it was the cruiser *Norfolk*, one of the first ships to set out on the long pursuit, that first opened fire. At about 8:30 A.M. she opened up at long range with her 8-inch guns.

Soon afterward, at quarter to nine, the *Rodney* and *King George V* came within range and immediately opened a merciless fire with their 16-inch and 14-inch guns. The *Bismarck* promptly shifted her fire from the *Norfolk* to these new and more formidable antagonists, and a battle of the giants thundered into a fury of murderous gunfire.

The *Rodney's* nine 16-inch guns, the most powerful armament mounted on any battleship, were what the *Bismarck* had chiefly to fear. As she steamed down from the northwest, the *Rodney's* men were in no mood to deal gently with the enemy's floating fortress. She was a menace to all peace-loving nations and the sooner she was destroyed the better. The battleship's turret guns reared up and delivered terrific blows one after the other in quick succession, sliding back in recoil as the wind whipped away the smoke that poured from their gaping mouths.

Both the *Rodney* and *King George V* were soon making hits and the *Bismarck* was staggering under the repeated hammer blows. Under the terrible impact of the avenging battleships' broadsides all the *Bismarck's* turret guns were shortly silenced. Flames burst from her in a dozen places, jagged holes were torn in her sides and superstructure, and twisted steel and debris were hurled about her decks. Many members of her crew jumped overboard, convinced at last that their "unsinkable" ship was doomed.

Still, because of her extraordinarily strong construction, the German ship stayed afloat long after any other warship in existence would have been at the bottom. In a final effort to sink her by gunfire the *Rodney* closed in and steamed past at a distance of between 2 and 3 miles—point-blank range for her huge guns—and lashed the enemy with a storm of killing explosions. In addition, the *Rodney* launched 24.5-inch torpedoes, carrying the largest explosive charge of any such weapons. One of these hit and rocked the

Bismarck, but despite the cavernous hole it ripped in her hull, she still remained afloat.

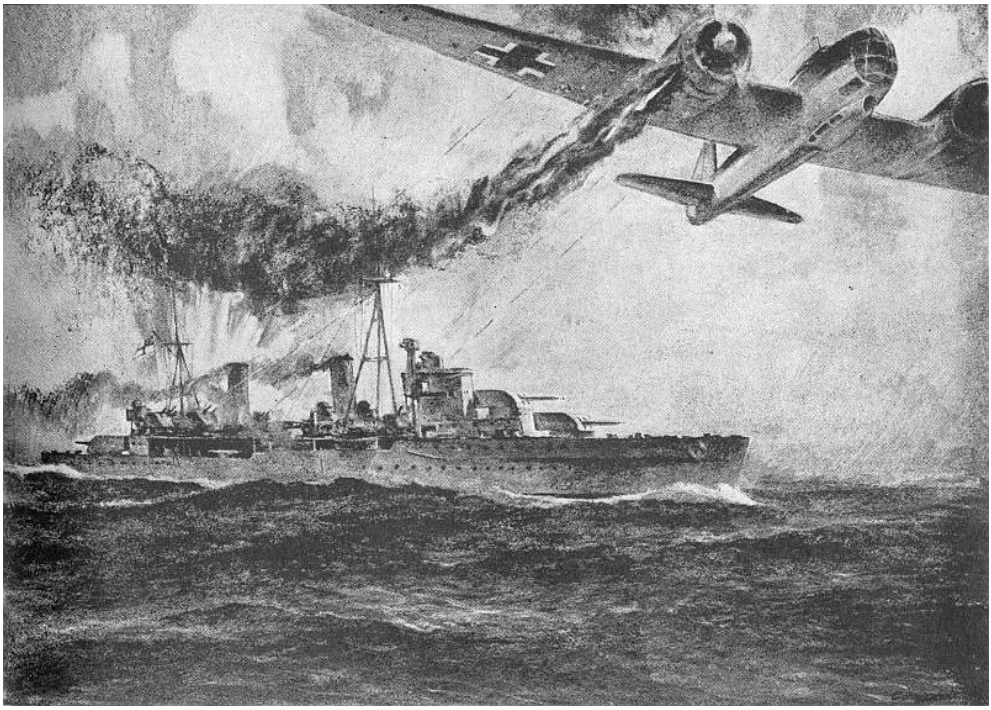
As the battleships completed their final attempt at annihilation and turned away, Admiral Tovey ordered the heavy cruiser *Dorsetshire* to close in and finish off the *Bismarck* with torpedoes. Rising and falling in the long gray-green Atlantic rollers, the three-stacked cruiser steamed slowly around the wallowing German battleship, sending 21-inch torpedoes into both her port and starboard sides.

At 10:28 A.M., the *Dorsetshire's* commander signaled to Admiral Tovey, "Enemy a smoking mass." The torpedo explosions had started new fires, and billowing clouds of smoke lit by the angry red of flames were rising from the *Bismarck's* battered hull. Slowly the big ship commenced to heel over to port, and hundreds of her men jumped overside into the water. Foot by foot her port side sank beneath the water until at the end of five minutes she was on her beam-ends, her deck nearly vertical, her control tower almost lying upon the surface of the sea. The irresistible forces pulling at her dragged her still farther and in a minute more she turned bottom up, her ensign and battle flags, symbolical of the ruthless destruction of the rights of free men and women everywhere, plunging into the sea and disappearing from sight forever.

For a few moments the capsized *Bismarck* remained immovable, with scores of her survivors clinging to the upturned keel. Then she gradually began to sink by the stern. A sudden inrush of water caused by the breaking down of sagging bulkheads pushed her stern down quickly and her bow rose quivering into the air. Up and up it went until it pointed vertically toward the sky. For a moment or two the *Bismarck* stayed in this position and then, in a welter of roaring and hissing steam, plunged swiftly beneath the waves.

The *Dorsetshire*, at 10:39 A.M. radioed to the Commander in Chief of the fleet the short historic message, "Enemy is sunk."

The long pursuit was over. The most powerful battleship in the world had been destroyed. The *Hood* had been avenged.



The H.M.S. *Penelope*, Making for Gibraltar, Is Bombed by JU-88's

12. "FORCE K" AND THE *PENELOPE*

October, 1941-April, 1942

During the summer of 1941, in the months that followed the British naval victory off Cape Matapan, there was a bitter struggle for mastery of strategic areas bordering the Mediterranean. Much of the fighting went against the British and in many respects it was a sombre period. Britain, blitzed and burned by the bombs of the German air force, still stood alone and fought against the Axis wherever and whenever it was possible to come to grips. But her forces were spread thin, and it was an uphill struggle with many black moments that would have plunged a less courageous people into despair.

The struggle for Greece began in March, when the British landed a force of sixty thousand men. Outnumbered by the Germans, this force fought gallantly, but late in April was forced to escape by sea to avoid annihilation. In May, British forces took over Iraq, where the Germans were striving to incite an anti-British revolt; and in the same month occurred the bloody battle for the island of Crete, which the Germans succeeded in capturing.

Malta was being battered nearly every day by the German bombers based on Sicily, and because of these planes very few convoys were being sent through the Mediterranean. Most of the supplies for General Wavell's armies had to be sent around the Cape of Good Hope, up the east coast of Africa, and through the Red Sea to Suez and Alexandria.

The battle for Crete had cost the British four of the cruisers attached to the Mediterranean Fleet—the *Calcutta*, *Fiji*, *Gloucester* and *York*—and a number of destroyers. Air attacks had proved far more dangerous than the gunfire of the Italian Fleet. While the fleet suffered heavily from aerial bombing, the island of Malta was the principal target of the German air force, and throughout the year 1941 Malta was the most heavily bombed target in the entire Mediterranean.

Despite this fact, the Admiralty decided late in the summer to base a small cruiser and destroyer force at Malta. This squadron, known as "Force K," was composed of the light cruisers *Penelope* and *Aurora* and the two destroyers *Lance* and *Lively*. Their mission was to escort the convoys bringing munitions and supplies to Malta, and in addition to do everything that lay within their power to harass the enemy's convoys taking supplies to their armies in Libya.

To many, it seemed that "Force K" was being sent to certain destruction. No ship could hope to survive the air attacks in great force that the Germans were making on Malta and on every British vessel within their range. But disregarding all this, the four little ships steamed down from Britain through the Bay of Biscay, passed Gibraltar and late in the month of October, 1941, slipped into the walled harbor of Valetta.

It was not long before "Force K" began to get into the thick of things. On the evening of November 8, shortly after its arrival, a British plane brought word that an enemy convoy of ten merchant ships escorted by five destroyers had been sighted a few miles off the coast of Sicily.

The four ships already had steam up and in a few minutes were under way. The walls and ramparts of Valetta's harbor were rapidly dropped below the horizon. Night fell and the ships steamed on to the northward, their men at action stations, on the alert to catch the first glimpse of the enemy.

Shortly after midnight the convoy was sighted dead ahead, the big black-painted hulls of the merchant ships showing up clearly against the pale moonlit waters. The British ships were painted with light colored camouflage that was ideal for such conditions. Swiftly and silently they closed in on the convoy and got to within 6,000 yards without being sighted.

This was close range and the order to fire was given, the *Aurora* opening up on one of the escorting destroyers. The *Penelope's* 6-inch guns flamed thirty seconds later, firing at another enemy destroyer. In a few minutes these two destroyers were put out of action, and the British force then ranged alongside the merchant ships and methodically and deliberately sank them one by one. The night was lurid with flames as one ship after another caught on fire. A tanker was covered with flames from end to end and an ammunition ship blew up with a terrifying explosion.

Within an hour all ten of the merchant vessels and two of the destroyers had been sunk. The three remaining destroyers were damaged, but managed to slip away in the darkness.

Deeply grateful for the first results obtained by "Force K," the Admiralty wirelessed to the Senior Officer:

> "THEIR LORDSHIPS SEND YOU AND ALL UNDER YOUR COMMAND THEIR CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR BRILLIANT AND SUCCESSFUL ACTION."

The satisfaction of the officers and men on board the ships of "Force K" itself was marred, however, by receipt of the news that the big aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* had been sunk in the western Mediterranean by a German U-boat on November 14. For two years the Germans had periodically announced that she had been destroyed, and as a matter of fact there were many who were influenced by these propaganda broadcasts. During her career the famous carrier had taken part in the hunt for the *Graf Spee*, the battles off the Norwegian coast, the action off Sardinia, and the pursuit of the *Bismarck*. Before she met her end she had shot down or seriously damaged over a hundred German and Italian aircraft.

"Force K's" first action was followed two weeks later by another successful attack on enemy supply ships. This time the convoy consisted of two merchant ships, apparently bound for Libya, and escorted by two destroyers and several planes. When contact was made, the *Penelope* was the nearest ship to the enemy, and as matters turned out she was able to deal with the situation by herself. Closing in rapidly, she drove the destroyers before her by firing first at one and then the other. Turning tail, the destroyers sped away from the hail of 6-inch shells and the *Penelope* then made short work of the two merchant ships. Both had cargoes of gasoline and probably ammunition, and were torn apart by explosions shortly after the cruiser's shells had set them on fire.

Once again the Admiralty wired its congratulations, and at the same time the Prime Minister sent the following heartwarming message:

"MANY CONGRATULATIONS FOR FINE WORK SINCE YOU ARRIVED AT MALTA, AND WILL YOU PLEASE TELL ALL RANKS AND RATINGS FROM ME THAT THE TWO EXPLOITS IN WHICH THEY HAVE BEEN ENGAGED, NAMELY: THE ANNIHILATIONS OF ENEMY'S CONVOYS ON 8TH NOVEMBER AND OF TWO OIL SHIPS ON MONDAY LAST, HAVE PLAYED A VERY VALUABLE PART IN THE GREAT BATTLE NOW RAGING IN LIBYA. THE WORK OF THE 'FORCE' HAS BEEN MOST FRUITFUL, AND ALL CONCERNED MAY BE PROUD TO HAVE BEEN A REAL HELP TO BRITAIN AND OUR CAUSE."

Early in December the "Force" was out again, sweeping the Mediterranean for signs of enemy shipping. Their luck held, for they soon encountered and sank a Libyan supply ship, and a few hours later sank a large tanker and the Italian destroyer *Alviso da Mosta*. This destroyer fought back very bravely against hopeless odds in an effort to allow the tanker to escape. Both the *Penelope* and *Aurora* engaged her, however, and after being hit by both ships almost simultaneously, she blew up and sank.

These attacks on the enemy's supply ships were, of course, but one-half Of "Force K's" job. The other half was to protect the Allied convoys bringing supplies from Alexandria or Gibraltar to beleaguered Malta. On these runs there was always plenty of excitement. Air attacks were inevitable and there was always the possibility of additional menace from enemy submarines and sometimes surface craft.

The first convoy voyage made by "Force K" was in December, 1941, and was typical of those that followed. How the ships got through at all is hard to understand. With enemy air bases on Sicily, Pantelleria, and Crete, and in Libya, the ships were forced to run a gauntlet of almost ceaseless onslaughts.

On the December voyage, the Malta-bound convoy was attacked by torpedo bombers shortly after the *Penelope* and *Aurora* had taken over its protection. One plane making a very determined attack came in toward the *Penelope* from astern, flying close to the surface of the water. Other ships added their fire to that of the cruiser and in the nick of time the plane was hit, burst into flames and crashed into the sea. More torpedo bombers pressed home their attacks immediately after this and it was only by the most rapid and skillful maneuvering that the *Penelope* avoided being hit. Once when she turned to present her stern to an oncoming torpedo the missile tore by along her port side missing her by a few feet.

As the convoy plodded on toward Malta it was attacked again and again by JU-88's, and one evening was shelled by enemy battleships or large cruisers. The British cruisers turned toward these opponents, but the enemy

did not wait for them. Turning tail, they made off at top speed to the northward and soon were lost to sight. The following day the convoy reached Malta safely.

Succeeding convoys followed much the same pattern. All were marked by incessant bombing and torpedo-bombing attacks that required all the alertness and skill of those aboard the cruisers to beat off.

While "Force K" had been fighting its way successfully through one savage attack after another, other British ships in the Mediterranean had not been so fortunate. On November 25 the battleship *Barham*, sister ship of the *Warspite*, had been torpedoed and sunk off Tobruk. In December the cruiser *Neptune* was destroyed by a mine, and in January the cruiser *Galatea*, a sister ship of the *Aurora* and *Penelope*, was torpedoed. The British had suffered another serious loss in December, when the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the cruiser *Repulse* were destroyed in the South China Sea by a Japanese air attack. On the other side of the world from "Force K," the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Then, to weaken further the Allied Navies, the British battleships *Queen Elizabeth* and *Valiant* were so severely damaged that they were forced to undergo extensive repairs.

Speaking of this difficult period at a much later date, A. V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty, said: "Thus within two months the American battle fleet covering the Pacific had been crippled, the British battle fleet covering Singapore and the Bay of Bengal been sunk, and the British battle fleet in the eastern Mediterranean had been crippled and that famous force had lost its invaluable aircraft carrier the *Ark Royal*. Fortunately, the enemy did not know of our precarious position. In the Mediterranean we had three cruisers left, yet our men fought on, working wonders." Two of these cruisers were the *Aurora* and *Penelope*, all that the Royal Navy could spare at that time.

On March 21, 1942, the *Penelope* left Malta with her other members of "Force K" to bring in her fifth, and, as it turned out, her last convoy. It proved to be the most difficult voyage of the lot.

The inbound convoy was sighted on the morning following "Force K's" departure from Malta and as was customary it was guarded by light cruisers and a number of destroyers, the entire escort force being commanded by Rear Admiral Philip N. Vian.

During the forenoon there were a number of attacks by torpedo bombers, but luckily no damage was done. Early in the afternoon, however, smoke was sighted to the northeast and in a few minutes Italian warships could be

made out on the horizon. Leaving an antiaircraft cruiser and several destroyers with the convoy, Admiral Vian led the rest of the British naval force at high speed toward the enemy. Shells from the hostile ships fell among the onrushing cruisers and destroyers, but none was hit.

The enemy ships were now pouring out thick clouds of black smoke as a screen, and could not be seen. When the British ships got within range, Admiral Vian changed course to northwest, the other vessels following him so all their guns would bear. But the Italians had no intention of fighting and by the time the British broke through the smoke screen they were disappearing over the horizon. The force included 8-inch gun cruisers, which would have had the range of the British light craft if they had chosen to fight it out.

The second round of the battle started about four-thirty in the afternoon. The enemy cruisers had made contact with a battleship of the *Littorio* class and a number of destroyers, and the entire force now came into sight to the northwest, directly in the path of the convoy, and between it and Malta. Once again Admiral Vian led the British ships at full speed toward the enemy, and as the Italians held their ground there was a spirited action. The British followed tactics that they had found useful before when opposed by superior firepower. All ships laid down a dense screen of smoke. Then when the enemy shells commenced to get the range uncomfortably close, they dodged back into the smoke. Time and again each ship fired a few salvos, then darted out of sight in the smoke, only to emerge a few minutes later and commence firing from her new position.

One of the enemy cruisers was hit just abaft the foremost funnel and was forced out of the battle. The British cruisers also hit the Italian battleship repeatedly and set her on fire, while the British destroyers attacked her with torpedoes, running in dangerously close and scoring at least one hit. The British did not escape undamaged, but their injuries consisted of minor damage to one cruiser and three of the destroyers.

On the following day the Luftwaffe made it plain that they were determined to succeed where the Italian Navy had failed. Attack after attack was pressed home, and the Germans did succeed in sinking one merchantman and damaging a destroyer. But the rest of the convoy reached Malta and delivered its much-needed cargoes of foodstuffs, ammunition, gasoline and other supplies.

This was the *Penelope's* last convoy job, but the worst of her experiences still lay ahead of her. The Luftwaffe, based on Sicily, commenced to bomb the harbor of Valetta in real earnest, seeking to destroy the supply ships that were at anchor there. The first really heavy raid developed on March 26,

1942. The German planes dived very low over the harbor, despite a heavy antiaircraft barrage, and by mid-afternoon a number of ships were on fire. Groups from the *Penelope* were here, there and everywhere helping to put out the flames. The cruiser herself was very nearly destroyed. Two bombs fell between her and the jetty to which she was moored; but as luck had it neither one of them exploded. Later in the day, however, another bomb landed between the ship and the jetty. It exploded and made a large hole in the *Penelope's* bottom. A good many of the lower compartments were flooded, but the ship still remained afloat.

This first raid was only a foretaste of what was to follow, for it soon became quite clear that the Luftwaffe was determined to destroy the *Penelope*. To those aboard her, it was obvious that they must leave Malta if they were to survive; but an immediate departure was impossible because of the gaping hole torn in her bottom. Every other ship in the harbor ran for safety as the fury of the air raids increased; but the *Penelope* had but one course open to her—to go into drydock to be repaired.

Work on her bottom plates was got under way, but the dockyard estimated that the repairs might take a month "provided that the raids got no worse." Those aboard the cruiser felt peculiarly helpless. They were not afraid of raids at sea where the ship could be maneuvered to avoid the bombs, but they felt exposed and powerless once the ship was in the drydock and obliged to stay there, an immovable target.

The air raids were now almost continuous, and those on the *Penelope* could do nothing except man their antiaircraft guns and strive to beat off the vicious and concentrated attacks for which their ship seemed usually to be the principal target. Several times near misses showered her with rocks and big pieces of masonry torn from the dock, some of which weighed a quarter of a ton. As a result, the quarterdeck was soon referred to as "The Rock Garden." Some of these near misses tore scores of holes in the cruiser's hull, while others damaged the drydock, permitting water to enter it. Several bombs landed on the ship herself, starting fires and wrecking all the officers' cabins. After one such hit a signal was sent to the Admiral in command at Malta, "*Penelope* O.K. More frightened than hurt."

Typical of the spirit of the cruiser's men was the pom-pom gunner who made it a practice to take his canary to action stations with him. He would put her on the deck beside the gun and she would sing with great gusto throughout the worst of the raids. Once, when rock fragments and splinters were showering about the gun deck, the gunner was overheard saying, "My cripes, sweetheart, they aren't half shoving it across us today!" Jumping

down from his gun he took his tin hat, covered the bird with it, sprang into his seat again and went on firing.

Another example of the irrepressible British humor that so often comes out and saves the day just when things look blackest, happened the following day, which was Easter Sunday. The Germans celebrated in their own manner by carrying out three vicious raids, one in the morning, one at noon, and one in the evening, each lasting about an hour. Church service was held after the first raid, but there was barely time for prayers and the singing of "Christ the Lord is risen today," before the midday raiders were heard approaching. *Penelope* signaled the Admiral, "We take a poor view of Hitler's eggs," to which the reply was, "I agree. They are not even like the Curate's."

Looking back on their experiences while lying almost helpless in the drydock, those on board the *Penelope* could not help but believe that they had been almost miraculously saved from destruction. On one occasion, for example, water had entered the drydock and risen rapidly to within six inches of the point at which it would have floated the cruiser off the blocks. In her unrepaired condition this would have been disastrous, but at the last moment the dock pump damaged by a bomb was repaired and the water brought down. But perhaps the most extraordinary fact of all was that the only two bombs which fell between the ship and the dockside both hit brows, or gangways. If either of these bombs had fallen directly into the bottom of the dock the *Penelope* would have been doomed, for they would have torn immense holes in her bottom plating. As it was, they exploded when they struck the brows and made only a number of small holes in the side plates.

There were many among the *Penelope's* complement that found a new meaning in the Psalmist's words, "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee."

By the end of the first week in April the *Penelope's* gun barrels were very nearly worn out. They had been replaced just before she entered the dock, but since March 28 the ship had fired over 5,000 rounds from her 4-inch guns, and over 75,000 rounds from the smaller caliber pieces. The officers and men, too, were becoming worn out, and with good reason.

After carefully weighing all the factors involved, Captain Nicholl, Commander of the *Penelope*, decided on April 7 that the ship's only chance of escaping destruction was to leave the dock and make a final dash for safety, to get out of range of the Luftwaffe. He laid his plan before the officers who one and all agreed that he was right. It was decided that the

attempt to leave the harbor should be carried out under cover of darkness on the following night, April 8.

The next day was one of the worst of all, the Luftwaffe driving home seven vicious raids. Ammunition and stores had to be taken on board and the *Penelope* was obliged to leave the drydock in the afternoon to move to the oil fuel dock. During one of the raids the Gunnery Officer was killed by the premature explosion of one of the cruiser's overworked and worn-out guns. Two gunners were killed, and there were a number of other casualties, including Captain Nicholl, who received a painful flesh wound.

At the end of this hectic day the Admiral came down to the ship to suggest that the ship's company was perhaps too exhausted to take the ship to sea. Captain Nicholl replied that the *Penelope's* men were ready, and that they would infinitely prefer to take the ship to sea, where she would be in her own element, and to fight it out to a finish there.

Finally, at 11:00 P.M., everything was ready, and the *Penelope* slipped away from the jetty and steamed silently toward the harbor entrance. The story of her ordeal as she made her gallant run for safety has been so graphically told by one who heard the story from those on board that his account is given below. This was written by Norman Start, Gibraltar correspondent of the *Sunday Express*, and appeared in the issue of May 24, 1942.

THIS IS THE IMMORTAL STORY OF H.M.S. *Penelope*.

> And so they sailed. H.M.S. *Penelope* was an incredible sight. She was a shambles fore and aft. Debris littered the decks, the boats were splintered, there was no fresh water at the time and precious little sanitation.
>
> Not far from Malta, and cracking on every bit of speed they could, the Germans came back to attack again. Flares were dropped, but fortunately *Penelope* was not sighted. The ship was being steered from the after steering position because the forward position was flooded.
>
> Soon after dawn two enemy planes, nicknamed "Dick" and "Harry" by the ratings, began to shadow them.
>
> This day—Thursday, April 9—will live in the memory of every man in the ship. A succession of bombers of all kinds attacked them. A torpedo passed within six feet of the port side. A bomb fell six feet from the starboard side and lifted the ship bodily.

All the intercommunication telephones were useless, so that an officer had to stand and shout orders to the gunners in the only turret still functioning.

All sorts of orders which do not appear in Naval Regulations were given. The officer just stood there, pointed to a bomber, said, “There’s a bomber up there, open fire.” It worked quite well. They shot down two bombers for certain.

Again the ammunition was running low. Only sixty rounds were left and they were getting up star shells from the magazines. They were so near Gibraltar and safety that they would have shot broken bottles at the Germans if necessary.

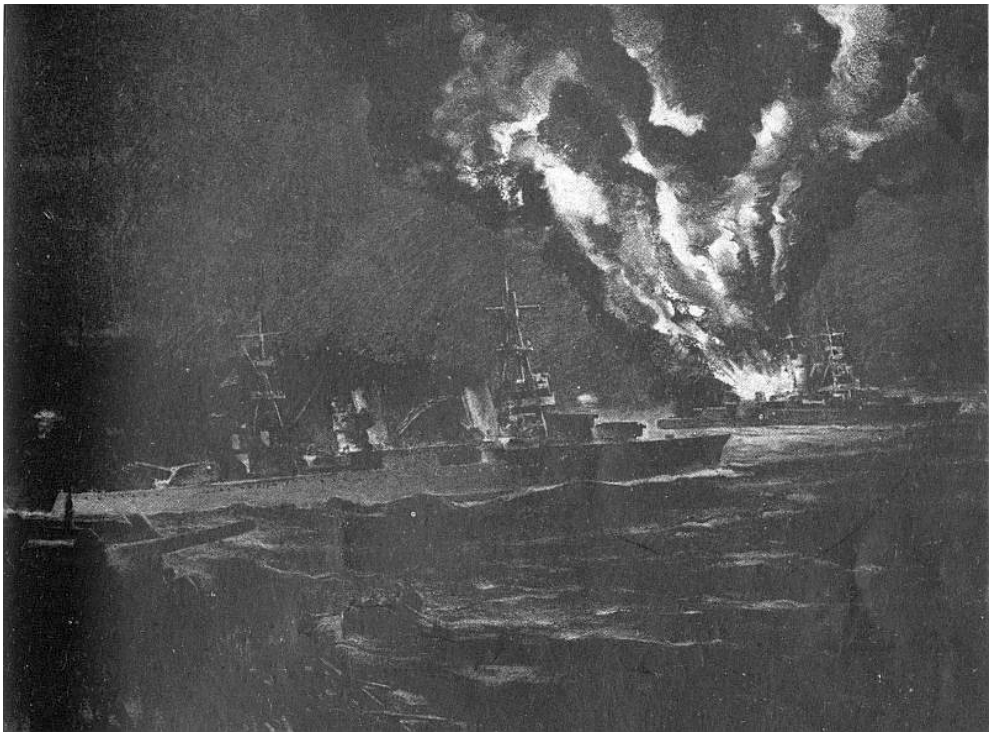
Late in the day, while the whole ship’s company were praying for darkness, the two snoopers suddenly turned for home, one stopping to deliver a vicious attack with a large bomb, which fortunately missed.

There were no further attacks, but there were still many problems to be faced. The mess-decks were flooded to a depth of six feet and sailors were bailing ceaselessly with buckets.

Small anchors, wire hawsers, ladders and all other top-weight was thrown over the side to keep the ship seaworthy. She was listing to starboard and going down by the head.

The last day of their agony was Friday, April 10, when they arrived at Gibraltar. They came in steering by the engines, the after steering position having become flooded.

Out of that solitary, battered ship came a great cheer when it was announced that Gibraltar was in sight. They had won through.



The Gallant *Houston* Carried on the Navy Tradition of the *Constitution*

13. THE BATTLE OF THE JAVA SEA

February 27, 1942

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and simultaneously began their campaign of conquest in the Orient, the Allied navies had only a handful of ships in Far Eastern waters.

The British had sent their two great battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore, but both of these were sunk by Japanese planes on December 9. Stationed at the Surabaya naval base, on the island of Java, the Dutch had the three light cruisers *DeRuyter*, *Java* and *Sumatra*, and a number of destroyers and submarines. The American ships in the area consisted principally of the cruisers *Marblehead* and *Houston*, together with thirteen destroyers and twenty-seven submarines.

These vessels were a small force, indeed, to oppose the vicious and powerful thrusts of the Japanese Navy. The time came, however, when they were called upon to pit themselves against a far superior force and this they did gallantly in several encounters.

Moving southward to the Philippines, the Japanese overcame the American and Philippine armies on Bataan and Corregidor, seized Hongkong, and at the last took Singapore by storm. While these campaigns had been in progress, the Japanese had assembled a large force at Davao on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. In January, 1942, this force embarked upon the conquest of the Netherlands East Indies.

The first objectives were the large islands of Borneo and Celebes, and against these the Japanese brought enormous convoys of transports guarded by cruisers and destroyers. Dutch and American aircraft and submarines made heroic efforts to sink these ships and did succeed in destroying a number of them. The Allied naval vessels were too few in number to offer serious opposition, but on at least one occasion they carried out as daring an action as any recorded throughout the war.

On January 23 Dutch planes discovered a large Japanese convoy steaming southward through Macassar Strait, which separates Borneo from Celebes. Their destination apparently was the important Borneo oil port of Balikpapan. The convoy was protected by an elaborate balloon barrage and, as the planes went in to attack, they were met by heavy antiaircraft fire. They succeeded in making a number of hits, however, and claimed the destruction of three cruisers, a destroyer, and four transports, with none of their own planes lost.

On the following day the planes attacked again and reported sinking a transport and damaging a destroyer and a troopship. That night the convoy reached Balikpapan and commenced to land troops and supplies. This work was interrupted the next day by American Flying Fortresses which scored hits on a cruiser and a transport.

During the early part of this day, January 25, the American cruiser *Marblehead*, and four destroyers, the *Paul Jones*, *John D. Ford*, *Parrott* and *Pope*, had steamed into Macassar Strait from the south and by late afternoon had reached a point due east of Balikpapan. Their plan was to make a night attack on the Japanese vessels. Before darkness fell, it was decided that the *Marblehead*, one of the few Allied cruisers in Indies waters, was too valuable to risk in a night engagement. She remained behind, accordingly, and when it was completely dark the gray lean four-stack destroyers under the command of Commander Paul H. Talbot, turned to the west and moved in to the attack.

Toward midnight those on the destroyers saw the glare of huge fires ahead and at the same time the air was filled with the smell of burning oil. The Dutch had fired the oil wells and storage tanks behind Balikpapan to keep them from falling intact into the hands of the Japanese.

The destroyers plowed silently ahead toward the enormous fires that lit the western sky. Intent upon the ships in the harbor, they were surprised at about 3:00 A.M. to see a division of Japanese destroyers come charging down from the north. When the destroyers had passed, the Americans to their amazement saw a huge convoy of transports heading toward them, bound apparently to pass Balikpapan and proceed to the capture of southern Borneo.

The convoy was arranged in two long columns, and even when first sighted was almost on top of the American destroyers. It took but an instant for Commander Talbot to make his decision. Quickly he ordered his little squadron to make full speed and run to the northward between the two enemy columns, firing torpedoes both to port and starboard.

Each destroyer carried twelve torpedo tubes in four triple mounts. Two mounts on each ship were trained to starboard and two to port as the ships swung to their new course and tore to the northward with throttles wide open and black smoke belching from their stacks. The guns were not to be used lest they give away the destroyers' position.

Up through the line they went, firing at nearly every ship that they passed. A munitions transport blew up, roared into flames and sank. Another ship caught fire and others were holed before the Americans had run their course. When the last ship had been passed, the destroyers made a 180-degree turn and once more ran down between the lines. Now they could see half a dozen Japanese ships on fire or sinking. More torpedoes were sent on their way and still more ships were hit. The convoy, unable to see the low-slung American destroyers, was thrown into the utmost confusion. Instead of scattering, the ships bunched together as if seeking protection from each other.

Arrived at the southern end of the course, Commander Talbot decided to make a second run to the north. This was successful and the destroyers once again reversed their course. By now the supply of torpedoes had been exhausted and Commander Talbot ordered the ships to use their 4-inch guns. When they opened fire, the gun flashes gave away their position and the Japanese were quick to open fire themselves. Commander Talbot, however, led his squadron to seaward of most of the convoy, so that the ships of the latter were silhouetted against the glow of the enormous fires at Balikpapan. By the time the Americans had completed their fourth and final run, only one destroyer had been hit. This was the *Ford* on which a handful of men were slightly wounded by a single shell.

Dawn had now commenced to lighten the eastern sky and the American destroyers, out of torpedoes, and no match in any event for the modern

heavily-armed Japanese destroyers guarding the convoy, made off to the southward. They had done a good night's work.

Early in February, 1942, following the first Japanese bombing raid on Surabaya, the naval command of the United Nations[1] decided to form a striking force which would combine all its best ships in Far Eastern waters. This was the only thing that could be done to provide the maximum possible defense against the vast number of Japanese ships gathering in Borneo and Celebes to attempt the seizure of Java.

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[1] Transcriber Note: The United Nations did not exist until October, 1945, a year after this book was first published. He probably meant 'Allies'.

Rear Admiral Doorman, of the Netherlands Navy, was placed in command. His force was to include the *Houston* and *Marblehead* and such of the thirteen American destroyers as were available, the Dutch cruisers *Tromp* and *DeRuyter* and three Dutch destroyers, the British cruisers *Danae*, *Dragon* and *Durban*, and the British destroyers *Electra*, *Encounter*, *Express*, *Jupiter* and *Vampire*. This force assembled on February 3 and set out to the northward at midnight to attack the Japanese ships at Balikpapan. The following morning, while it was crossing the Java Sea, it was spotted by Japanese reconnaissance planes, which summoned bombers to the attack.

The bombers droned over the horizon shortly after 10:00 A.M. and settled to their work. On their first run they landed a bomb within five feet of the *Houston's* side, showering her with shrapnel. The second run made only misses. But on the third run, made by a fresh flight of bombers, the *Marblehead* was seriously hurt. An 880-pound bomb hit her aft, smashing the steering gear and jamming the rudder in a hard-over position. The blow was so terrific that her commander, Captain Arthur G. Robinson, and all the men with him on the bridge were thrown violently to the deck. Crashing into a fuel tank, the bomb threw oil around the decks and started a large fire. At about the same time, the *Houston* was also hit by a big bomb that plunged through the deck near her after turret.

A few moments later, a bomb hit the *Marblehead* near the bow, springing plates and starting additional fires. More plates were sprung, letting more water into the ship, by a third bomb which landed close alongside.

Fortunately, the bombers disappeared after the third attack, and the ships of the Allied striking force turned to the southward to return to Java for repairs. The *Marblehead* was patched up, except for her rudder, and made her way across the Indian Ocean to Colombo, where her rudder was finally repaired. She then proceeded to Durban, South Africa, where she was dry-docked and repaired enough to enable her to steam across the Atlantic to her home port.

When she at last arrived the Navy announced: "Here is the story of a ship that was bombed to hell, and was brought right out of it again by a crew that does not know the meaning of the word 'abandon'."

As the days passed it became increasingly apparent that the Japanese were hurrying their preparations for falling upon Java—the heart and center of the Netherlands East Indies. On February 19 they occupied Bali, the island just east of Java. On the twenty-fifth a Japanese invasion fleet was reported steaming southward through the Strait of Macassar. The following day brought reports that two Japanese forces were leaving Macassar Strait and moving toward eastern Java. The time had come for the Allies to strike with whatever strength they could muster. Admiral Doorman was ordered to attack during the night of the twenty-sixth.

The Allied striking force sent on this mission, which, during the following two days was to fight the Battle of the Java Sea, was an assortment of vessels contributed by four of the Allied nations. It consisted of the Dutch light cruisers *DeRuyter* and *Java*, the American cruiser *Houston*, whose after turret was still out of commission from the bomb hit received three weeks before, the British heavy cruiser *Exeter* (one of the three that chased the *Graf Spee* off the River Plate), and the Australian light cruiser *Perth*. The destroyers in the force were the American *Alden*, *John D. Edwards*, *John D. Ford* and *Paul Jones*, the Dutch destroyers *Kortenaer* and *Witte de With*, and three British craft, the *Electra*, *Encounter* and *Jupiter*.

These ships were all that the Allies could gather to make a last stand in defense of Java. That they would be vastly outnumbered and outgunned, everyone knew. But there was no other choice. With the determination to do the best they could, no matter what force was sent against them, they went forth on their well-nigh hopeless mission.

During the night of February 26 they steamed eastward along the Java coast, but were unable to find the enemy. The following morning they turned back toward Surabaya and at about noon commenced to enter the mine fields protecting the harbor. When halfway through the fields they received a report from a patrol plane that a Japanese force of several cruisers and destroyers and a large number of transports had been sighted to the

northwest. Immediately all ships reversed course and stood back out of the mine fields. In open water, they at once worked up to full speed and set a course to intercept the Japanese armada.

Admiral Doorman took his flagship, the *DeRuyter*, to the head of the line and was followed by the *Exeter*, *Houston*, *Perth* and *Java*. The three British destroyers formed a screen ahead of the cruisers, while the four American destroyers brought up the rear and the two Dutch vessels of this type steamed along on the port side of the squadron.

For two hours the ships plowed on to the northwest across the calm deep blue of the Java Sea. "Occasionally a trailing Japanese plane would dart out of the clouds, drop a stick as our antiaircraft fire poured up at him," wrote Lieutenant Commander William P. Mack,[2] Gunnery Officer of the destroyer *Ford*. "We were tired and weary from almost two days and nights without sleep and with little food. Our crews had been at their battle stations during most of this period. They were dead on their feet, yet each man somehow became alert and ready as we made last minute preparations for the battle."

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[2] Mack, Lieut. Comdr. William P.: "The Battle of the Java Sea," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, August, 1943.

At 4:10 P.M. the battle started when the *Jupiter*, which was in the lead, sighted the Japanese force and both she and the *Electra* were fired on by a cruiser and a group of destroyers. The two main fleets were then some twenty miles apart. The *Jupiter* swirled around and raced back to report that the enemy force consisted of two heavy cruisers of the *Nati* class, followed by six light cruisers, and accompanied by several flotillas of destroyers.

Within a few minutes those aboard the Allied ships could see the mast-tops of the Japanese cruisers rising above the horizon. Range-finders went into action, the gun crews pushed home their shells, and the *Exeter* and *Houston* commenced the duel by opening fire at the extreme range of 24,000 yards. The enemy cruisers immediately shifted their fire from the destroyers to the main battle line. Their first salvos came close, and the next ones straddled the *Houston* and the *DeRuyter*.

In its earliest stages and throughout the battle, the Japanese possessed the great advantage of control of the air, which enabled them to keep spotting planes over the Allied ships. This helped them enormously in correcting their fire and obtaining hits. The Allied vessels were without this

aid and accuracy of fire was made extremely difficult for them because of the constant necessity of weaving and twisting to avoid the enemy's shells.

Swiftly and steadily the two fleets pressed on, decreasing the distance between them. Describing this stage of the battle Lieutenant Commander Mack wrote:

"Salvos of eight to fifteen shots were rising about our ships. In the distance I could see the tops of similar splashes temporarily blotting out the enemy. The formation of these splashes was impressive. They rose slowly, remained suspended for seconds, and then collapsed. Between them our ships drove without slowing, and apparently without injury.

"The *Houston* seemed to dominate our battle line. Her two forward turrets belched forth salvos without hesitation, but her after turret remained motionless and silent. . . . With only six guns, the *Houston* was still able to throw more steel in faster time than any of her opponents. Her silhouette was larger and higher than those of the Dutch and British ships, and she seemed to be a tower of strength in our battle line."

Gallant *Houston*! Firing as fast and furiously as had the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Constitution* before her, in the American naval tradition of heavy salvos rapidly delivered, she lived through the bright day of battle, only to be sunk in the blackness of the night that followed.

As the Allied battle line steamed on toward the west, the Japanese squadron gradually also turned to a westerly course, and the two fleets raced along on roughly parallel courses about 20,000 yards apart, each making about 25 knots. A furious exchange of salvos continued without interruption, and the ships of each side were surrounded by clouds of smoke from the belching funnels and enormous white plumed splashes from the shells.

The first of the Allied ships to be seriously hit was the *Exeter*. A shell burst in one of her boiler rooms and her headlong rush was stopped, while clouds of black smoke and white steam hid her superstructure and temporarily shrouded her enormous battle flags. Leaving her behind, the remaining Allied ships tore on, closing slightly with the enemy. One Japanese cruiser and a destroyer seemed to be hit, so at this stage of the battle the honors were nearly even, with a slight advantage in favor of the Allies.

Shortly after the damage to the *Exeter*, a second Japanese force appeared, coming rapidly over the horizon to the northwest. It consisted of one or two cruisers and several destroyers. Charging in at utmost speed, it joined with the destroyers from the main Japanese fleet, closed in, and delivered a torpedo attack. To continue on its course or close in toward the

enemy would have been suicidal for the Allied squadron. Quickly it turned away and paralleled the course of the torpedoes. The deadly missiles churned between the cruisers, but none of them was hit. The destroyer *Kortenaer* was not so fortunate. A torpedo struck her on the starboard quarter—this was at 5:14 P.M.—and she broke in two and sank in the incredibly short time of thirty seconds.

Admiral Doorman now ordered the Allied squadron to turn toward the enemy and to close in, firing with all forward guns. One of his objects was to allow the *Exeter*, escorted by the Dutch destroyer *Witte de With*, to make good her escape. The firing now rose to new heights of fury, which caused the Japanese to falter and give way to the north. Then, leaping ahead of the cruisers, the *Electra*, *Encounter* and *Jupiter* raced in and delivered a torpedo attack. This headlong onslaught caused great confusion among the Japanese ships and sank at least one Japanese destroyer, avenging the loss of the *Kortenaer*. But as the British destroyers retired under their own smoke screen, the *Jupiter* was sunk and the *Electra* was so badly damaged that she had to leave the battle and was subsequently sent to the bottom.

To avoid the torpedoes the Japanese ships turned away to the north and, keeping on turning, reversed their course from west to east. As soon as this movement was discovered the Allied ships followed suit and took an easterly course.

It was now the turn of the American destroyers, and they were ordered to attack. Turning directly toward the enemy, they closed at highest speed and when at close range veered sharply and let go twenty-four torpedoes, six from the port torpedo tubes of each ship. Dusk was gathering, the battle scene was shrouded in smoke, and under this cover the destroyers reversed their course and fired their starboard torpedoes. As they withdrew, they could see the flames on the already burning Japanese cruiser burst out with fresh fury, but it was by now too dark to tell what other hits had been made.

Under cover of the darkness Admiral Doorman now turned to a southerly course. His object was to withdraw from the Japanese battle line and then, hidden by the night, to locate the Japanese transports and sink as many of them as he could.

Having no reconnaissance planes, the Allied ships were forced to comb the seas as best they could in their effort to locate the transports. When clear of the Japanese cruisers, they turned to the north and while steaming on this course at about 7:30 P.M. a number of enemy cruisers were sighted to the northwest. The Allied ships immediately opened fire, the Japanese replied, and for a few minutes the night resounded with the booming thunder of the two fleets' turret guns. Soon, however, flashes of the kind made by the firing

of torpedoes were seen on the Japanese ships; Admiral Doorman ordered his ships to turn to the east to avoid the attack, and the two fleets lost contact.

Circling around, the Allied ships once again commenced their search for the vulnerable enemy transports. Before long, the four American destroyers and the one remaining British destroyer, the *Encounter*, were obliged to leave the force as they were running out of fuel. Alone now, with no destroyer protection whatever, the four remaining cruisers, the *DeRuyter*, *Java*, *Houston* and *Perth*, steamed on through the night. No enemy ships were sighted until 11:15 P.M., when a Japanese cruiser force was detected. Admiral Doorman immediately ordered an attack, signaling, "Target to port, four points." With the opening salvos of this encounter began the last engagement of the Battle of the Java Sea.

In the Japanese force were two heavy cruisers, and these began at once to pour out salvos at their greatest speed. Aiming by the Japanese gun flashes, the Allied cruisers returned equally as hot a fire and hits were made on at least one of the Japanese ships. For fifteen minutes the battle raged at a white-hot peak of fury. Then, Admiral Doorman, warned of a torpedo attack, ordered a 90-degree turn to starboard. The first three cruisers veered away, one following the other, but the *Java*, just as she was about to turn, was hit by either a shell or torpedo and immediately burst into flames. At almost the same instant, an 8-inch shell tore into the *DeRuyter*, the leading ship.

Vast rolling billows of flame and smoke now rose from the *Java*, and explosions caused by flames igniting her antiaircraft shells shook her every few moments. Then, just as the other cruisers seemed about to make good their escape, a torpedo crashed into the *DeRuyter*. Striking her oil fuel tanks, it turned the entire after part of the ship into an inferno. It was plain that both ships, which had fought so gallantly throughout the day, were doomed. Orders were given on each to abandon ship, and many of the men were able to escape the flames and drop overside to life rafts.

Under the flame-reddened sky, the *Houston* and the *Perth* steamed on. They were not powerful enough to stand against the Japanese force, so according to a prior plan they headed for the Javan port of Tankjong Priok. The Battle of the Java Sea, the Allies' stand against the southward-sweeping hosts of the Japanese, was over.

The *Houston* and the *Perth* reached Tankjong Priok in safety, and lay in harbor there throughout the following day. They were not safe, however, as Japanese bombers might find them at any time, or Japanese heavy cruisers might close in and pound them as they lay at anchor. Accordingly when night closed in they left the harbor, accompanied by the Dutch destroyer

Evertsen, and set a course to the westwards Their aim was to pass through the Sunda Straits at the westward end of Java, and then make for Australia.

Little is known of their passage on this fateful voyage. In silence they crept along the coast and it was not until 11:30 P.M. that a message was received from the *Perth*, "We are engaging the enemy." Again there was silence, and this time it was unbroken. Between midnight and dawn the three ships were destroyed, either by enemy surface ships or planes, or by the combined attack of both. All that is definitely known is that a large number of the *Houston's* men were taken prisoner by the Japanese.

And so, wracked and torn by shells and torpedoes, gutted by fires and rent by explosions, passed the brave ships that strove to save the Indies. Overwhelmed by superior numbers, they fought to the last and dealt savage blows before they met their ends.

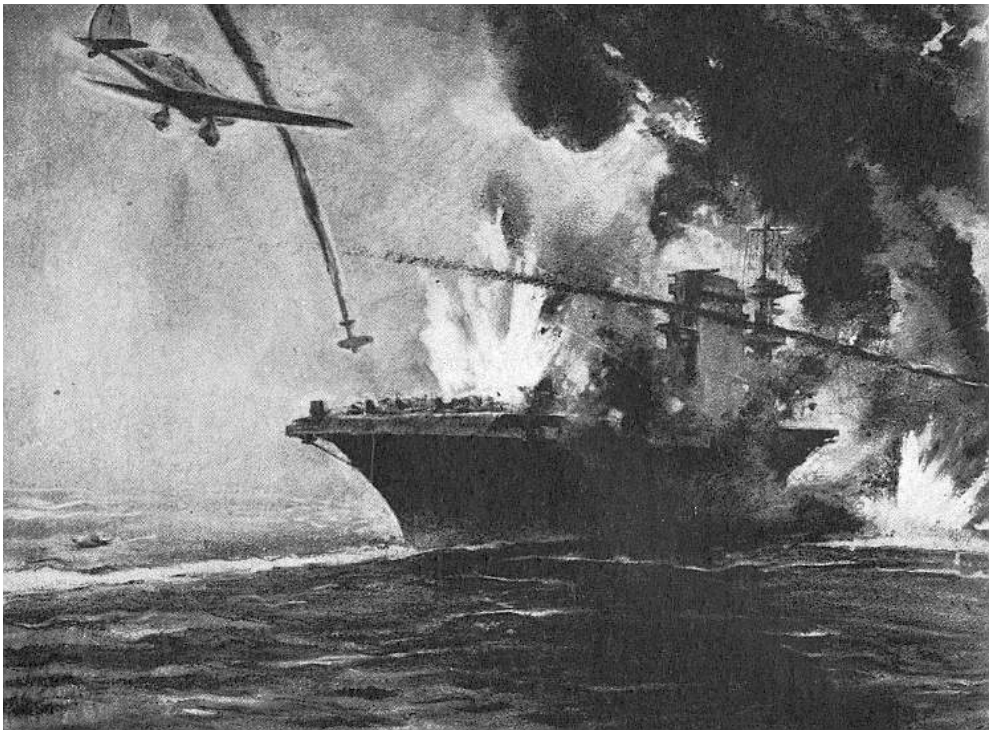
May their names be honored through the years to come.

On the Memorial Day following the battle, a solemn and impressive ceremony was held in the city of Houston, Texas, for which the American cruiser *Houston* had been named. The citizens had subscribed more than was needed to build a new cruiser *Houston* and more than a thousand men had volunteered to serve aboard the new ship. As these men stood to take the oath from Admiral Glassford, the Mayor of the city read the following message from President Roosevelt, who more than once had sailed aboard the old *Houston*:

> "On this Memorial Day all America joins with you who are gathered in proud tribute to a great ship and a gallant company of American officers and men. That fighting ship and those fighting Americans shall live forever in our hearts. I knew that ship and loved her. Her officers and men were my friends. When ship and men went down, still fighting, they did not go down to defeat. They had helped remove at least two cruisers and probably other vessels from the active lists of the enemy's ranks. The officers and men of the U.S.S. *Houston* were privileged to prove once again that free Americans consider no price too high to pay in defense of their freedom.
>
> "The officers and men of the U.S.S. *Houston* drove a hard bargain. They sold their liberty and their lives most dearly. The spirit of these officers and men is still alive. That is being proved today in all Houston, in all Texas, in all America. Not one of us

doubts that the thousand recruits sworn in today will carry on with the same determined spirit shown by the gallant men who have gone before them. Not one of us doubts that every true Texan and every true American will back up these new fighting men, and all our fighting men, with all our hearts and all our efforts.

"Our enemies have given us the chance to prove that there will be another U.S.S. *Houston*, and yet another U.S.S. *Houston* if that becomes necessary, and still another U.S.S. *Houston* as long as American ideals are in jeopardy. Our enemies have given us the chance to prove that an attack on peace-loving but proud Americans is the very gravest of all mistakes. The officers and men of the U.S.S. *Houston* have placed us all in their debt by winning a part of the victory which is our common goal. Reverently, and with all humility, we acknowledge this debt. To those officers and men, wherever they may be, we give our solemn pledge that the debt will be paid in full."



The *Lexington* Was Shaken by a Terrific Explosion

14. THE BATTLE OF THE CORAL SEA

May 8, 1942

More than a month before the Battle of the Java Sea, the U.S. Navy had taken steps to reinforce to the greatest extent then possible the Allied forces operating in the Southwest Pacific and the Netherlands East Indies. In mid-January, 1942, it had ordered the aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, with attendant cruisers and destroyers, to leave Hawaii and cross the Pacific to the area where the Japanese were crowding headlong southward, bent on the capture of the Indies, the Solomons and Australia.

Great as was the need for ships in the Southwest Pacific, the Navy at that time was hard pressed to supply them. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had reduced the battleship strength in the Pacific from nine to three ships, the *Colorado*, *Maryland* and *Tennessee*. The number of aircraft carriers in the Pacific was four. These were the *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, *Lexington* and *Saratoga*; but they were soon to be joined by the *Yorktown*, which had been dispatched from the Atlantic.

It was clear that the aircraft carriers were the only available large vessels that could be used to carry the war to the enemy. As matters turned out, the *Enterprise* was first used to raid the Marshall Islands, while the *Yorktown's* planes bombed the Japanese installations in the Gilbert Islands. In April the *Hornet*, protected by the *Enterprise*, carried Major Doolittle and his planes to within striking distance of Tokyo. The *Yorktown*, as stated above, was sent to the Southwest Pacific, where she later met the *Lexington* by agreement.

By mid-February the *Lexington* was drawing near the Solomon Islands. She was not alone, but formed the center of a task force composed of a number of cruisers and destroyers, the entire force being under the command of Vice-Admiral Wilson Brown, whose headquarters were aboard the carrier.

The first objective that Admiral Brown planned to attack was the Japanese shipping in the harbor of Rabaul. This settlement, situated on the island of New Britain, and governed by the Australians under a League of Nations mandate, had been captured by the Japanese late in January. They were now busily engaged in making it their principal base in the New Guinea-Solomon Islands area.

As dawn broke on the morning of February 20, the *Lexington* was within a few hundred miles of the position from which it was planned to launch her planes against Rabaul. This was a spot on the northern coast of the island of New Ireland, lying to the north of Rabaul. It was Admiral Brown's hope that he would be able to lie there, partly concealed from Japanese patrol planes, while the *Lexington's* own planes struck against the shipping in Rabaul harbor.

This plan was destined not to be carried out, however, for between nine-thirty and ten o'clock in the morning when she was passing the island of Bougainville in the Solomons, the big ship and her task force were spotted by a Kawanishi four-engined flying boat. Her planes took to the air at once, and it was not long before the first Japanese plane sighted as well as a second one were shot down. But they had been able to report the location of the task force, and Japanese bombers were soon on the way.

The first flight, consisting of nine bombers, came over early in the afternoon, and six of them were shot down in short order. Two more were brought down by the *Lexington's* antiaircraft fire. Scarcely had this battle ended than another flight of nine bombers was reported. Fresh planes rose from the carrier, one of them piloted by Lieutenant Edward H. O'Hare. This plane, guided and fought by O'Hare, came upon the bomber formation from behind and, in four minutes shot down five of the enemy bombers one after the other—one of the most spectacular pieces of shooting done in the entire

war up to that time. Other planes from the *Lexington* shot down two of the remaining bombers, and the other two were seriously damaged and fled, losing altitude rapidly when they were last seen.

Due to the vigilance of the Japanese patrol planes, Admiral Brown had now lost the opportunity to attack Rabaul by an unexpected surprise raid. He therefore steamed to the southward toward New Caledonia, where he kept a rendezvous with tankers and replenished his supplies of fuel oil and gasoline. Then early in March the *Lexington* joined up with the *Yorktown* and her attendant group of lean-hulled cruisers and destroyers. This force was under the command of Vice-Admiral Frank J. Fletcher.

Consulting together, the two commanders decided to attack the two New Guinea settlements of Lae and Salamaua. The Japanese were busily at work at both these places landing troops, guns, and supplies of all kinds to make them into formidable bases. It would have been impossible at that time to approach New Guinea from the east, for the Japanese were in full control of all the waters in that area and were constantly patroling them with planes. Accordingly, the two Admirals planned to run their ships in toward the southern shore of New Guinea to a point near Port Moresby. From here, although it would be extremely hazardous, the planes belonging to the two carriers could reach Lae and Salamaua by flying over the 13,000-feet high Owen Stanley mountains. It was risky; but it was the only way in which the enemy could be attacked.

Unobserved, the ships reached their stations off the coast and the attack was launched on the morning of March 10. The planes from the *Lexington* took Salamaua for their target, while those from the *Yorktown* headed straight for nearby Lae.

The surprise was complete. No Japanese patrol planes were aloft, and the first warning of the American planes' approach was the ominous drone of their powerful motors. As soon as the planes were sighted, the Japanese warships at anchor offshore got under way and raced for safety. The transports and supply ships, however, remained at anchor, being unable to move with the instant dispatch of the high-strung men-of-war.

At Salamaua, the *Lexington's* torpedo planes were the first to get into action. Coming down in long fast dives they picked out the largest cruisers and transports as targets and made their runs at once. They were opposed by a single Japanese seaplane fighter, which dove in among them and forced some to turn away, but fighter planes from the *Lexington*, cruising the skies overhead, pounced on this plane and quickly shot it down.

Dive bombers from the *Lexington* now arrived on the scene and went after the fleeing cruisers and destroyers. One large cruiser was squarely hit by several planes and sank within a few minutes. The torpedo planes meanwhile had completed their runs and, all bombs and torpedoes having been expended, the planes gathered swiftly together and started for their home—the giant carrier beyond the mountains.

Meanwhile, the *Yorktown's* planes had dealt all the destruction possible at Lae. They also met with no opposition other than a single seaplane fighter, which was quickly destroyed by the American fighters.

No statement has been given out by the Navy showing separately the number of Japanese ships destroyed or damaged at Lae and at Salamaua. The total for both attacks, however, included the confirmed sinking of two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, one destroyer and five transports or supply ships. Two destroyers, a gunboat and a mine layer were left burning and may well have been damaged too seriously to repair. Only one American plane was lost.

Both carriers steamed away at high speed, once their planes had been safely taken aboard, for they wished to avoid an attack by Japanese planes. The *Yorktown* remained in the Southwest Pacific area, but the *Lexington* returned to Pearl Harbor. Here she took aboard fresh supplies of ammunition. Sailing on April 15, she recrossed the Pacific and on April 30 joined up once again with the *Yorktown*. Back in enemy waters again, she was to see action almost immediately.

Reports from American long-range patrol planes at this time were making it abundantly clear that the Japanese were making ready for another southward thrust, this time toward the Solomons and southern New Guinea. By the time that the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* joined forces, the Japanese invasion armadas that had started from the great naval base of Truk in the Caroline Islands, were already fast approaching the Solomons-New Guinea area.

The Japanese force was in two divisions, and was the strongest sent to these waters up to that time. The western division, which was steering to the west of the Solomons, included two aircraft carriers, five cruisers and twelve destroyers. Its mission was to protect an invasion fleet of transports that was gathering at DeBoyne Island off the southeastern tip of New Guinea. A second group of transports had been concentrated at Tulagi on the island of Florida, just north of Guadalcanal in the Solomons. The more powerful Japanese division was detailed to shield and aid these ships. It comprised three battleships, either two or three aircraft carriers, an estimated eight cruisers and some twenty destroyers.

The Japanese were not by any means sending a boy to do a man-sized errand. But they were to be rudely surprised before the errand was carried out.

In command of the American two-carrier striking force was Vice-Admiral Frank J. Fletcher, whose flag flew on the *Yorktown*. On the afternoon of May 3 one of that carrier's scouting planes spotted the concentration of Japanese shipping at Tulagi. It was almost by chance that this happened, for the clouds were very thick and low-hanging on that day, and it was due only to a momentary rift that the pilot sighted the great invasion force. At the same time, the clouds prevented the Japanese from seeing him. The break in the clouds was one of those rare chances of war that make history.

Upon receipt of the pilot's report, Admiral Fletcher at once commenced to lay his plans for attack. It was decided that the *Yorktown* should steam in close to the southern shore of Guadalcanal under cover of darkness and send her planes against the shipping at Tulagi before daybreak. The *Lexington* was to remain farther out at sea to act as a rear guard against Japanese carriers or other warships that might arrive unexpectedly on the scene.

Positions were taken during the night and at six-fifteen the following morning, the first planes left the *Yorktown*. Their course took them across Guadalcanal from south to north, and then to Tulagi only a few miles further on. Almost miraculously, the Japanese had no warning whatever of their approach. In the harbor of Tulagi they were busily at work unloading troops and supplies when the planes roared in from overhead. Below them, the American flyers could see a heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, four destroyers, three large transports, a seaplane tender and several gunboats as they dove down to the attack.

First came the dive bombers, then the slower torpedo planes. Not a single antiaircraft gun was fired as the dive bombers plummeted earthward on their three-mile screaming dive. At least two bombs struck the heavy cruiser, and flames rose from her decks 200 feet into the air. Bombs hit among the smaller craft and tossed landing lighters in the air, and the harbor was filled with huge columns of smoke rising from burning ships. Torpedoes from the torpedo planes hit a large transport, the seaplane tender and the three destroyers, and when the smoke cleared away one destroyer was seen to be sinking, another was slowly turning over, and the Seaplane tender had evidently been hit. "There was complete hell in that harbor and the Japs were running to cover," said one of the pilots.

Not a single plane was lost. All made their way back at once to the *Yorktown* and upon arrival the pilots demanded immediate refueling and

rearming. As one squadron leader put it, a lot of damage had been done, but they wanted to get "the entire bag."

By 11:00 A.M. the planes were once again ready to take the air and fifty-four of them soared aloft and streaked back toward Tulagi. As they drew near they saw a cruiser and a transport steaming at full speed through the harbor entrance. Direct hits on the transport sank her "in a matter of seconds," while the cruiser was hit aft and commenced to settle in the water. A cruiser that had reached the Open sea was attacked next. The dive bombers dropped seven 1000-pound bombs either on her deck or close alongside and she was believed to be capsizing when last seen.

Once again the planes returned to the *Yorktown* and once again the pilots demanded to be sent back. They reported that a few Jap ships were still afloat in the harbor. By 3:30 P.M. everything was ready and eighteen dive bombers escorted by several fighting planes were launched to finish off the attack.

Arrived over Tulagi they found only one ship under way, the cruiser that had been damaged earlier by a hit on her after deck. Six of the dive bombers roared down at lightning speed and sank her there and then. At the same time, the fighters discovered a destroyer some distance out. Using their 50-calibre machine guns they drilled innumerable holes in her deck and hull from which poured smoke, steam and oil. The other planes bombed previously damaged ships, most of which had been run ashore and were burning furiously.

These attacks, carried out with so much spirit, effectively disposed of the Japanese effort at Tulagi. The ships definitely reported sunk by British eyewitnesses who watched the bombings from the bush on Florida Island included the heavy cruiser, both light cruisers, three destroyers, three transports, the seaplane tender, and the four gunboats. One destroyer was severely damaged.

Their mission accomplished, the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* left the scene and proceeded south at full speed to meet tankers for refueling. As soon as this was accomplished, however, they set a course that would take them back to the Solomon Islands area, where they could contact the Japanese forces known to be gathering for invasion.

On the afternoon of May 6, a scouting plane from one of the carriers made the first contact with the Japanese western striking force. It was to the north of the Louisiade archipelago, which stretches out from the eastern tip of New Guinea and included two carriers, five cruisers and a dozen or more destroyers.

That evening plans were laid for the following day, May 7. At dawn the scout planes were to be sent out to determine the exact location of the enemy. As soon as this was done, the attack squadrons would be sent on their way.

All was ready when the first flush of dawn lighted the sky. The scout planes, warmed up beforehand, took to the air and were soon out of sight to the north. Nearly two hours passed before they could find the enemy. Then came the message that everyone was waiting for:

"Jap fleet—one carrier, three heavy cruisers, six destroyers—180 miles, course 120, speed 20, west-northwest."

It was evident at once that the Japanese force had divided during the night. The message indicated that the ships sighted were 180 miles to the north of the American force and that they were steering a course of 120 degrees, or approximately southeast at a speed of 20 knots. The carrier sighted proved to be the *Ryukaku*, one of Japan's new big 17,000 tonners.

A few minutes after the scouting plane's report was received, the dive bombers, torpedo planes, scouts and fighters of the *Lexington* and *Yorktown* —seventy-six planes all told—were on their way. By about 9:00 A.M. they were over the *Ryukaku*. They were to have the first chance of any Americans to sink a Japanese carrier.

The attack was started by the scout planes, each carrying one 500-pound and two 100-pound bombs. The very first bomb, dropped by Lieutenant Commander Robert Dixon, leader of the scouting group, plowed through the *Ryukaku's* flight deck amidships. Two other planes followed suit immediately. One scored a hit on the carrier's port side that hurled several planes into the sea, and the other made a direct hit on a starboard antiaircraft battery. At about the same moment another plane landed a 100-pound bomb on one of the *Ryukaku's* escorting cruisers.

Twisting and turning as she charged along at utmost speed, the *Ryukaku* struggled to avoid her fate. Soon, however, the American dive bombers were ready to launch their attack. As they came down, their leader, Lieutenant Commander Weldon Hamilton, made the first strike—a 1000-pound bomb that landed squarely amidships and sent flames leaping 400 feet into the air. Evidently this bomb plunged through the flight deck and set fire to planes stored below on the hangar deck, for the entire after half of the carrier was almost instantly covered with smoke and flames.

Down came the other dive bombers, one every three or four seconds, and more than half of them are believed to have scored hits. It is certain that either fifteen or sixteen bombs crashed into the luckless Japanese ship.

To complete her destruction, the torpedo bombers now came in, flying low. The doom of the *Ryukaku* was already a certainty, but it was just as well to make certain. Either ten or twelve of the torpedoes found the mark, and in a few minutes the holocaust that was the once-proud *Ryukaku* disappeared beneath the waves.

Lieutenant Commander Dixon announced the sinking in words which already have become part of the American Navy's tradition:

"Scratch one flat-top! Dixon to carrier! Scratch one flat-top!"

To add to this victory, one of the American planes hit a Japanese heavy cruiser with a 1000-pound bomb. Probably already damaged, she turned over and sank, scratching one more of the Mikado's ships of war from the active list.

Everyone in the American force now knew that they would soon be in action with other Japanese forces. Their location in the Coral Sea to the southward of the Louisiades was known. Japanese scouting planes had put in their appearance, and it was a foregone conclusion that an attempt would be made to avenge the *Ryukaku*.

At dawn the following morning, May 8, the American scout planes once more took to the air, and after two hours of searching succeeded in locating one group of Japanese ships. "Two carriers, four heavy cruisers, many destroyers, course 120, roughly 175 miles northeast," was the message that came through.

Admiral Fletcher did not immediately order his planes to the attack, for he knew that heavy Japanese forces were in the vicinity in addition to the group just reported. He did not want to send his planes away and thus leave the carriers undefended in the event of a surprise attack by the enemy. Finally, however, beginning at 9:30 A.M. part of the dive bombers, torpedo planes and fighters were sent on their way, while the rest remained to protect the two big American mobile airdromes.

It was well that a sizeable force of planes was kept on hand, for at 10:50 A.M. nearly a hundred Japanese planes were reported speeding in toward the *Lexington* and *Yorktown*. Both carriers immediately turned into the wind, plunged ahead at full speed, and launched all the fighter planes that were on their decks.

The attack that followed was one of the heaviest and most desperate ever pressed home against American aircraft carriers. The torpedo planes came in first, diving swiftly from the clouds to launch their low-level attacks. More

than a score of torpedoes were dropped and the two great carriers turned and twisted, buffeting aside the seas, as they strove to run clear of the murderous missiles.

The *Yorktown*, which was attacked by less than half of the total number of planes, was both skilfully handled and lucky. Every torpedo launched by the first attacking group was avoided, and an officer on the bridge reported over the loud speaker to the men below decks, "We've dodged them all. Torpedo planes are falling like leaves."

The *Lexington* was not so fortunate. Two torpedoes struck her port bow, and a few minutes later when dive bombers screamed down, an 880-pound bomb smashed into her port forward 5-inch battery, killing the gun crews. While the big ship was still attempting to avoid the dive bombers, a second torpedo attack was launched. The action was now so furious that it is not certain exactly what happened during the next few minutes. Some observers, including Captain Frederick C. Sherman of the *Lexington*, believe that three torpedoes crashed into the carrier. In any event, there was a series of heavy explosions, which might have been caused by fresh torpedoes, by bombs, or by fires started by the first two torpedoes.

This attack lasted for fifteen minutes, and when it was over, nineteen out of an estimated fifty-four enemy attack planes had been shot down. But the *Lexington* had been badly hurt. She had a 6-degree list to port and was on fire below decks, while fuel oil was pouring into the sea through holes that had been blasted in her side.

For a few minutes there was a breathing spell. Then fresh Japanese dive bombers arrived on the scene and went to work. This time the *Lexington* escaped further damage, but the *Yorktown* took an 880-pound bomb on her flight deck, which crashed through the deck and killed a number of men below.

Meanwhile, the American flyers had been blasting two Japanese carriers each, as it turned out, belonging to a different group of Japanese ships. One of these was hit by five torpedoes and three 1000-pound bombs by the *Lexington's* planes, the Americans boring in to within 500 yards against concentrated ack-ack fire before launching their torpedoes at a height of only 75 feet. This carrier was not seen to sink; but she was very seriously damaged, and the probability is that she was destroyed.

The carrier attacked by the *Yorktown's* planes was one of two that formed part of the Japanese eastern division, which included three battleships. Four torpedoes and seven 1000-pound bombs were seen to hit the carrier chosen as a target, and it is extremely doubtful if she was able to

remain afloat, although she was not actually seen to sink. The identity of the damaged carriers is not known, although it is believed that one of them may have been the *Zuikaku*, one of the new 17,000 tonners.

By noon the air battles were over and the two fleets retired to seek ports of refuge where they could be repaired. Two Japanese aircraft carriers had been seriously damaged, one light cruiser had been sunk, and ninety-one planes had been shot down in combat while others were destroyed by antiaircraft fire. The American losses totaled twenty-seven planes shot down either in combat or by antiaircraft fire. The *Lexington* by this time had been trimmed to an even keel and although many fires were still being fought below decks, no one aboard her had any doubt as to her ability to reach port. Their calm was soon to be shattered.

At 12:45 P.M. the great ship was shaken by a terrific explosion. It was thought at first that it was caused by a Japanese bomb which had penetrated below decks during the battle. Twenty minutes later, however, there was another earsplitting blast, and this was to be followed by many others. The cause of these explosions, which in the end sent the *Lexington* to her destruction, was determined officially to be the ignition of vapors escaping from gasoline lines that had been cracked or broken during the battle.

All through the afternoon the fires raging in many parts of the ship continued to cause explosions that ripped and tore at the *Lexington's* vitals, turning her little by little into a mass of wreckage and flames. Finally at five o'clock, when it was obvious that the ship was doomed, Rear Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, commander of the *Lexington's* striking force and quartered aboard the carrier, turned to Captain Sherman and said quietly:

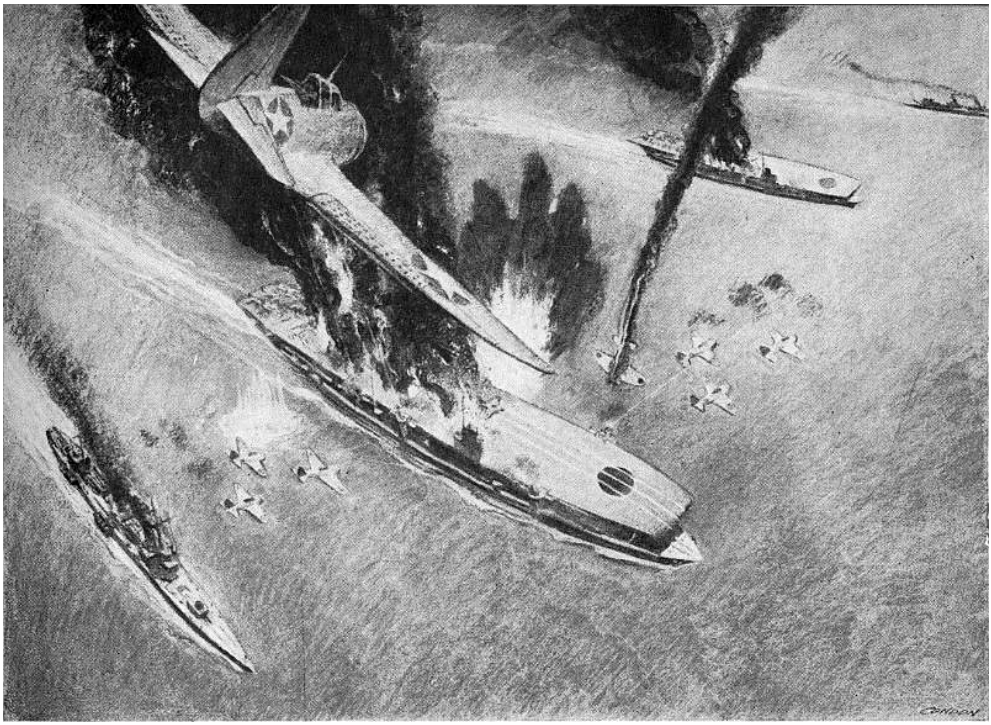
"Well, Ted, let's get the men off."

Three cruisers and four destroyers were ordered to come alongside and the men commenced to swarm down lines that had been dropped overside. Nearly an hour and a half went by before the last man had abandoned ship. A number had been killed during the battle and during the long-drawn-out agony of the afternoon, but 92 per cent of the ship's complement of approximately 2,400 men was saved. Every man known to be alive had been taken off when Captain Sherman, the last to leave, climbed hand over hand down one of the ropes as his men had done before him.

Darkness had fallen while the ship was being abandoned and now, as her fires raged ever more fiercely, the sea and sky were illuminated for many miles. Around her were grouped the dark shapes of the other ships, their sides and funnels reflecting the reddish glare of the roaring flames. There was grave danger that Japanese submarines might arrive on the scene and

destroy more of the fleet. Finally, at 7:15 P.M., Admiral Fletcher ordered a destroyer to close in and send the *Lexington* to the bottom with torpedoes. This was done, and as the great carrier, still wracked by explosions, commenced to settle, the American force steamed away into the darkness of the night.

The Battle of the Coral Sea was ended and though it cost the American Navy the loss of the *Lexington* its results were of very far-reaching importance. The Japanese advance on Port Moresby, New Guinea, and thence to Australia, as well as their progress toward islands from which they could easily attack the stream of transports and supply ships plying between the United States and Australia, were stopped and turned back. From then on the Japanese were unable to interrupt the steady building up of the American forces in the Southwest Pacific.



Dive Bombers from American Carriers Sinking Japanese Aircraft Carriers at Midway

15. *THE YORKTOWN, ENTERPRISE AND HORNET AT MIDWAY*

June 3-6, 1942

During the first week of June, 1942, just a month after the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese launched a tremendous two-pronged invasion thrust at American territory. The northern drive was aimed at the Aleutian Islands, some of which were occupied, but from which the Japanese were ultimately driven out. The southern attack consisted of a powerful striking force, support force and occupation force aimed at Midway Island, and probably Hawaii. The successful interception of these forces by planes based on Midway Island and the carriers *Yorktown*, *Enterprise* and *Hornet* constituted the epic Battle of Midway, the most decisive conflict between American and Japanese forces up to that time.

Reconnaisance reports made by long-range patrol planes and by submarines had indicated to the American Naval command that the Japanese, following the Battle of the Coral Sea, were withdrawing their ships from the southwest Pacific and were assembling large naval forces at

their home ports and at their Pacific island bases. It seemed clear that plans were afoot for a drive against Hawaii or the Aleutian Islands or both.

No time was lost in completing preparations to counter the expected onslaught. The battleship strength of the fleet was still reduced as a result of the Pearl Harbor attack, and reliance had to be placed upon the available aircraft carriers. The *Yorktown* was ordered to leave the Southwest Pacific and make all possible speed to Hawaii. At the same time, the *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, which were also in southern waters, were summoned back to Pearl Harbor. These two ships reached Hawaii on May 26 and the *Yorktown* arrived on the following day. All three ships were immediately supplied with fresh stores of fuel and ammunition and the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* cleared port and made off to the northwestward on May 28. The *Yorktown's* flight deck was still torn by the bomb that had hit her during the Battle of the Coral Sea, and in addition some other hull plates were sprung. Repairs were carried forward night and day, however, and after a record-breaking job had been completed she sailed on May 31.

The crews of all three ships knew that battle was imminent, for news of the Navy's reports had spread quietly through the fleet at Pearl Harbor. Moreover, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, did not hide from his men the fact that they were speeding toward a major battle. As they disappeared into the twilight to the west, he signaled: "In this cruise you will have the opportunity to deal the enemy many heavy blows."

There had been many rumors regarding the size of the Japanese force that was known to be pushing steadily eastward across the vast reaches of the Pacific. No one knew until battle was joined just how many ships there were. Actually, however, it was a force that the Japanese had intended to be overwhelming, possibly far greater in size than first reports had indicated.

It was divided into three parts. First came a powerful striking force containing two battleships—believed to be either of the *Huso* or *Kirisima* class—the four aircraft carriers *Kaga*, *Akagi*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, two heavy cruisers and twelve destroyers. This was followed by a reserve or supporting force comprising two more battleships (either *Ise* or *Kirisima* class), the aircraft carrier *Ryuzyo*, four big cruisers and twelve destroyers. These ships were to demolish American defences and clear the way for troops being transported by a landing force made up of eight troop transports and eight supply ships protected by four cruisers, ten destroyers and ten submarines.

All told, these Japanese armadas contained a total of eighty ships.

On June 2, when the American carriers were well to the westward of Hawaii, the officers and men were given further information as to the size of the enemy force and its intentions. Rear Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, in command of the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* striking force, issued the following order of the day:

"An attack for the purpose of capturing Midway is expected. The attacking force may be composed of all combatant types including four or five carriers plus transports and train vessels. If the presence of our task forces remains unknown to the enemy, we should be able to make surprise flank attacks on the enemy carriers from a position northeast of Midway. Further operations will be based on the result of these attacks, damage inflicted by Midway forces, and information of enemy movements. *The successful conclusion of the operation now commencing will be of great value to the country.*"

During the night of June 2 the three American carriers with their screen of cruisers and destroyers nearly completed the 1500-mile run to Midway to get into the position chosen for them. It was expected that long-range Navy Catalina flying boats would be able to pick up the Japanese ships on the morning of June 3. And so it turned out. At about 9:00 A.M. on June 3, Ensign Jewell H. Reid sighted one of the Japanese armadas and immediately signaled its location.

The American carriers, now stationed a little to the northeast of Midway, were not close enough to attack. They were at this time about a thousand miles distant from the Japanese and the effective combat range of their planes was only about 200 miles. As a consequence, the first force sent against the enemy consisted of nine Flying Fortresses that were based on Midway.

Led by Lieutenant Colonel Walter C. Sweeney, Jr., the Fortresses located the Japanese early in the afternoon, the group of ships they located turning out to be the rearmost squadron—the landing force transporting the troops intent on capturing American soil. Edging around the outskirts of the force, the Fortresses thundered on to the west and then turned to make their attack, with the sun behind them and shining into the eyes of the Japanese antiaircraft gunners.

The biggest ships were picked out as targets and the bombers roared in to the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Sweeney reported: "Our bombardiers and rear gunners saw direct hits on one cruiser, one transport and possibly a second cruiser." This ended round number one, of which the Navy reported that one cruiser and one transport were "severely damaged and left burning," and that lesser damage was done to several other ships.

Round number two involved tactics that had never before been used in naval warfare—the use of big, slow-moving Catalina flying boats (Consolidated PBY's) to deliver a torpedo attack. This step was decided upon by those at Midway because the distance to the Japanese ships was still very great.

As Captain Logan Ramsey, the operations officer for Army, Navy and Marine Corps planes based on Midway, explained it: "We wanted to hit some troopships and give the slant-eyes a bath. It was a very hazardous mission, and was placed on a volunteer basis. It had never been done before. The distances were very great and we hesitated to do it, but felt we had to hit the enemy." Four of the big PBY's were chosen for the mission and took off after dark, guided through the night by star sights to the latitude and longitude of the enemy ships.

Far out at sea the planes sighted the invasion force, dark outlines against the star-illuminated water. They were not seen by the enemy lookouts, and each plane dove down and made its run. The torpedo from the leading plane, guided by Lieutenant William Richards, struck a transport and there were two large flashes of light, followed by an explosion and heavy clouds of smoke. One of the other planes also scored a hit, but the amount of damage could not be ascertained, as by this time the Japanese were putting up determined antiaircraft fire. The official Navy score for this attack was "one large enemy ship believed to have sunk."

Shortly after the return of the Catalinas, dawn broke on June 4, a day that was to go down in the annals of naval warfare as marking one of the most devastating defeats ever suffered by a modern navy.

Long before sunrise the American patrol planes were out searching the endless waste of waters for the enemy. Soon after it became light they discovered the Japanese striking force with its two battleships and four carriers—the deadly spearhead of the invasion armada—at a point about 200 miles northwest of Midway. Looking down, the pilots saw that the carriers were running into the wind to launch their planes. Already some of their bombers and fighters were on their way to Midway. This information was immediately broadcast so that Midway would be prepared, and all American ships and planes would know the situation.

Upon receipt of these reports, the Americans on Midway plunged into action. Twenty-six torpedo planes and dive bombers streaked out to sea to attack the Japanese carriers. This was about 6:00 A.M. A few minutes later Marine Corps fighters took off to meet the fast-approaching Japanese air armada.

Soon these planes put in their appearance, more than a hundred of them spreading far and wide across the sky. The American planes intercepted them 15 to 20 miles west of Midway and shot down four or five; but they were so outnumbered that most of the Japanese planes were able to get through. At the island, however, they were met by antiaircraft fire and a number of them were shot down into the sea. About twenty got through to drop their bombs. These did considerable damage to buildings, but the vital runways and antiaircraft batteries were not seriously hurt.

At least forty of the attacking planes were destroyed and more were damaged; possibly half of the entire force being put out of action. The rest, after dropping their bombs, flew off to the southwest. At any moment the garrison on Midway expected another attack, but the day wore on and the sky remained clear of enemy planes. The explanation of this lay in the fact that at the very moment that the Japanese planes were making their runs over Midway, American planes were commencing to make a shambles of the Japanese carriers.

The first planes to reach the Japanese were the twenty-six that had left Midway at 6:00 A.M. As the first six torpedo planes of this group dove down to low level and started to bore in to launch their missiles, they were met by a terrific antiaircraft fire, added to which the Japanese fired their 6-inch and 8-inch guns into the sea to throw up splashes that might wreck the American craft. Zero fighters also strove to break up the attack. Despite these murderous defensive measures, the Americans drove straight on and were able to score one hit on an enemy ship. But only one of the six planes survived the attack.

Four Army medium bombers—Martin B-26's or "Marauders"—armed with 21-inch torpedoes came in next, and scored at least one and possibly three hits on two different carriers. All but one of these planes returned.

The remaining sixteen planes were Marine Corps dive bombers, and as it turned out, they came in contact with a different portion of the Japanese fleet than that attacked by the first two groups. Their principal target was an aircraft carrier believed to be the *Soryu*, but possibly the *Ryuzyo*. Despite heavy and concentrated antiaircraft fire and persistent fighter plane attacks, the Americans made their dives and scored three direct hits and two near misses. The *Soryu* was left burning fiercely and giving off enormous clouds of smoke.

During this attack, the leading plane of the American squadron, piloted by Major Lofton R. Henderson, was hit by antiaircraft fire. What followed was recounted by a gunner in a nearby plane. "The left wing of Major Henderson's plane burst into flames," he reported. "Despite this, he

continued the attack and I saw him dive down the smokestack of the carrier. I am convinced it was deliberate."

Other planes from Midway now arrived on the scene and continued to pound the Japanese. A fresh group of dive bombers scored a direct hit on one of the battleships and then landed a bomb on the stern of a carrier. Sixteen Flying Fortresses then carried out a high level bombing attack, scoring three hits on enemy carriers, one of which was left "smoking heavily."

Where had the American carriers been during these early morning attacks? Before dawn, as the first scattered reports of the whereabouts of the enemy fleet had come in, they had changed their course and commenced to steam on a southwesterly course that would bring them close to Midway and near enough to the Japanese carriers to launch an attack. Their mission was to destroy these carriers. Otherwise the enemy planes would be able to attack and possibly sink the American carriers, and if this should happen the way would be clear for the Japanese planes to assault Midway and even Hawaii.

The first reports received were fragmentary and of little help in determining the best targets for the American carrier-based planes. However, by about 8:30 A.M., those in command believed that the position and course of the enemy carriers were known with sufficient accuracy to warrant the launching of planes. During the hour that followed, the American planes took to the air from the broad flight decks of the *Yorktown*, *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. Squadron after squadron soared aloft, circled, and sped away to the southwest. Each pilot had but one aim—to sink the enemy carriers.

First to find the Japanese were the fifteen planes of the now immortal "Torpedo Eight"—the *Hornet's* Torpedo Squadron Eight. Led by Lieutenant Commander John C. Waldron, this group located the main enemy force after a long flight which nearly exhausted their gasoline. The order came, "Attack at once."

Four carriers were in the enemy force, the *Kaga*, *Akagi*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*. Torpedo Eight chose as its targets the *Kaga* and *Akagi*, Japan's two largest carriers, each measuring nearly 27,000 tons. The results of their attacks, pressed home against the concentrated antiaircraft fire of the carriers and of nearby battleships and cruisers and the attacks of fighter planes, will never be accurately known, for every plane was shot down and only one man survived. This was Ensign George H. Gay. As his plane hit the water and sank, he sprang clear and by the greatest good fortune found a life raft and a cushion that had been freed in some way from the plane. Hiding under

the cushion, he escaped being machine-gunned by the Japanese, and eventually was rescued.

It is believed that Torpedo Eight's sacrifice was not in vain. During the attacks those aboard the *Hornet* heard some of the pilots report hits over their interplane radios, and Ensign Gay after releasing his torpedo heard a terrific blast that led him to believe he had made a damaging hit.

Scarcely had the planes of Torpedo Eight finished their attack when some of the *Enterprise's* planes—bombers protected by fighters—arrived on the scene. Dividing into two groups, one squadron bored in to punish the *Kaga* while the other pounced on the *Akagi*. At the same moment another group of American planes arrived and chose the already burning *Soryu*, some miles astern, as their target.

Bombs soon commenced to hurtle through the *Kaga's* broad flight deck. One of the first set on fire a large number of planes waiting to take off. As the big carrier tore through the water at 30 knots, the wind fanned the flames to white heat. Another bomb penetrated the flight deck and exploded in the hangar deck, wrecking the ship's interior and starting fires. Soon the entire vessel was blazing furiously and shortly after the attack ended there was a tremendous explosion amidships that sent an enormous pillar of smoke and fire more than a thousand feet in the air.

The second and third groups of planes had equal success in their attacks on the *Akagi* and *Soryu*. Both carriers were set on fire and as the planes drew away were masses of raging flames from which poured mountainous clouds of smoke. Other American planes continued to arrive and pressed home attacks that made the destruction of the three carriers a certainty. One group from the *Yorktown* that arrived about noon scored three hits on one carrier and one on another. Another group from the *Yorktown* dove from 14,000 feet on the *Soryu*, making six direct hits. Two planes of this squadron, seeing that the carrier was doomed, diverted their attack to a cruiser, scoring a direct hit. Two others took a battleship as their target and left her struggling to put out spreading fires.

One of the pilots who took part in the later attacks summed up the situation in the early afternoon of June 4: "The first eight dive bombers that came down made eight hits, and so far as the Japanese were concerned the Midway campaign ended right there. The decks of the carriers were smashed and the ships were afire. The planes below decks would never get off again and the planes already in the air would never have a chance to land."

The Japanese were done for; there was no question of that. But the American forces were not to escape unharmed. Far in the rear of the

Japanese main force was the aircraft carrier *Hiryu* and while the American planes were engaged with the three other carriers this vessel had the opportunity to launch her planes. Off they went to the eastward, searching for the American carriers. They found them without great difficulty and chose the one nearest to them as they flew in, the *Yorktown*, for their target.

There were eighteen Japanese planes, and of these eleven were shot down before they could attack the *Yorktown*. Three others were destroyed by the wall of fire put up by the carrier and her screening cruisers. Four planes got through, however, and from a height of 12,000 feet commenced their dives on the American carrier. The first two missed completely. Then came the third. Its bomb, well aimed, plunged into the forward elevator well, exploded, and blew to fragments many of the planes in the hangar deck, at the same time starting gasoline fires. Down came the fourth Japanese dive bomber, straight toward the flight deck. Like a downward-plunging rocket it crashed with terrific force into the side of the *Yorktown's* smokestack. Its bomb-ripped through the side of the stack, dropped below and exploded, putting out the fires in the ship's boilers. Slowly the great engines came to a stop and the *Yorktown* lay motionless upon the brilliant sea. Black pillars of smoke rose ominously from the fires that had been started by the bombs.

While those above decks battled with the flames, the engineers struggled to get the engines going. In this they were successful, and before long the big carrier was slowly moving ahead. Gradually bettering her speed, she worked up to 21 knots. By this time, moreover, the fires started by the Japanese planes had been subdued.

Then came a second air attack by the *Hiryu's* planes. This time there were almost fifteen torpedo planes escorted by fighters. Planes rose from the *Yorktown's* battered deck and from the other American carriers and in a fierce melee shot down almost ten of the enemy. Five Japanese planes got through, however, and were able to launch their torpedoes. Two torpedoes struck the *Yorktown's* port bow and a moment later a third tore into her side.

The big ship was badly hurt. Her interior was in inky blackness as all the electric lights had been put out. Her engines were stopped and as water poured in through her wounded side she commenced to list steeply to port. There seemed but one thing to do, and the pennant signaling "Abandon ship" was hoisted. Destroyers closed in quickly and began to take aboard the stricken *Yorktown's* men.

While this work was progressing, the planes of the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* were readied and late in the afternoon took off to find and destroy the *Hiryu*, the one Japanese flat-top that still remained undamaged. Some of the *Yorktown's* planes were also in the group.

At this time the *Hiryu* and the other ships of the Japanese main force were about 175 miles away from the American carriers and were steaming westward at maximum speed. Actually, they had turned tail and commenced to retreat at some time during the morning when it became evident from the destruction of the *Kaga*, *Akagi* and *Soryu* that their invasion plans had been ruined.

The American planes had no difficulty in finding the Japanese ships and the dive bombers lost no time in getting to work. One after the other their bombs went home, ripping up the *Hiryu's* flight deck and starting fires that soon became unmanageable. "The *Hiryu* was hit repeatedly and left blazing from stem to stern," says the Navy's report of the attack. "Two of the enemy battleships were also pounded severely by bombers and a heavy cruiser was damaged severely."

Darkness fell as the planes returned from the battle and the long day of destruction came at last to an end. It had marked the absolute defeat of Japan's greatest naval and military operations up to that time. Four enemy carriers, the *Kaga*, *Akagi*, *Soryu* and *Hiryu*, had been put out of action, and a fifth which may have been the *Ryuzyo*, had been severely damaged. Two battleships and several cruisers had been hit and a destroyer had been sunk. While plane losses had been high on both sides, it is believed that three Japanese planes had been destroyed for each American plane.

Throughout the night the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* steamed to the westward, in the hope that they would be able to strike additional blows at the enemy when daylight came. This plan, however, could not be carried out. The Japanese ships had evidently separated into small groups during the night and were scattered far and wide over the sea. Heavy clouds added to the difficulty of finding them.

However, the Japanese suffered further losses during this day, June 5, from American land-based planes. Several cruisers were hit and damaged and one of them, which was burning fiercely from hits received the day before, may have been sunk, for When last seen she had a heavy list and was evidently taking in a great deal of water.

The American carriers continued their westward course throughout the night and at dawn on the next day, June 6, sent out scouting planes to search for the enemy. A group of cruisers and destroyers was soon located and dive bombers were summoned from the *Hornet*. A cruiser of the formidable *Mogami* type was hammered into helplessness and sunk. The planes then attacked two other cruisers and one of them is known to have been destroyed, for survivors from among her crew were picked up several days

later. Two destroyers were also attacked, and one was sunk and the other damaged.

These actions ended the pursuit of the retreating enemy. The *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, with their accompanying cruisers and destroyers, turned back and made for Hawaii. The Japanese losses now totaled four aircraft carriers sunk, and a fifth damaged; three battleships damaged; two heavy cruisers sunk and three damaged; one light cruiser damaged; three destroyers sunk and several others damaged; one troop transport sunk and at least two more damaged. In addition it is estimated that approximately 275 Japanese planes were destroyed.

The Navy's report on the battle estimates that the Japanese lost 4,800 men who went down with their stricken ships or shattered planes. The American losses were ninety-two officers and 215 enlisted men, most of whom were flying personnel.

When the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* steamed off to the westward on the night of June 4, they left the *Yorktown* behind, with her men abandoning ship. On the following morning, the big carrier was still afloat, although heavily listed to port, and it was decided to tow her to Hawaii. A salvage party was put aboard, the pumps were started, and by the morning of June 6, the list had been materially decreased. Under tow of cruisers and destroyers the huge hull moved slowly ahead through the water. Moored to one side of the carrier was the destroyer *Hammann*, which was used to supply electric light and to add her pumping equipment to that of the *Yorktown*. This was the second time that the *Hammann* had aided a wounded carrier, the first having been at the Coral Sea battle where she took off many of the *Lexington's* men.

All was going well on the morning of June 6 and it was expected that the *Yorktown* would soon be on an even keel. Then disaster struck. Shortly after noon a Japanese submarine succeeded in approaching unobserved and in quick succession fired four torpedoes. Two of these hit the *Hammann*, causing her to sink in less than two minutes. The other two ripped holes in the *Yorktown's* side, water rushed in, and once again the men on board her were taken off.

Destroyers soon found the Japanese submarine and according to the Navy's report it was "certainly damaged and possibly sunk." Other enemy submarines were also found and depth-bombed and some of them may have been destroyed.

When dawn broke on the morning of June 7, it was apparent that the *Yorktown* could not be saved. Her list was so great that her port deck rail was

under water. Slowly and steadily it submerged deeper and deeper as the ship slipped over on her side, and at about seven o'clock the *Yorktown* sank. Her two great battle flags were still flying as she disappeared beneath the waves.

The Japanese Cruiser Blew Up, Silhouetting the *Salt Lake City* Against the Burning *Boise*

16. THE *SALT LAKE CITY* AND THE *BOISE*

October 11-12, 1942

The Battle of Midway put an effective end to Japan's dream of conquering and occupying the American stronghold of Hawaii. At the same time, the Battle of the Coral Sea had made it clear that they could not hope to attack Australia and New Zealand or the United Nations[3] shipping serving these bases, from points as far distant as Rabaul, in New Britain, or Truk in the Caroline Islands. To create a new base from which to harass Allied shipping the Japanese in June, 1942, landed on Guadalcanal Island in the Solomon's group and commenced the construction of an airfield.

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[3] Transcriber Note: The United Nations did not exist until October, 1945, a year after this book was first published. He probably meant 'Allies'.

American reconnaissance planes were quick to discover what was taking place, and American military and naval commanders lost no time in planning effective counter measures. Their decision was to land troops on Guadalcanal and to drive out the Japanese.

Preparations were made with the utmost speed and greatest secrecy and early in August the Americans were ready for their counter thrust. It was during the early morning hours of August 7 that they struck, their objectives being the Guadalcanal airfield, and the harbor of Tulagi on the south coast of Florida Island. Florida lies a few miles north of Guadalcanal and the area to be attacked contained the islets of Tulagi, Makambo, Gavutu and Tanambogo. All strange and unfamiliar names that were soon to be known to all the world.

Under cover of a heavily overcast sky and protected by carrier-based aircraft and supporting fire from cruisers and destroyers, a force of marines poured ashore and rapidly established several beachheads. By nightfall, after a day of bitterly-contested fighting, this operation had progressed to the point where the Marines had captured most of Tulagi, all of Gavutu, had occupied a position at Halavo on Florida Island, and had taken a strong beachhead near the mouth of the Tenaru River on Guadalcanal.

Three days later, by noon on August 10, the Marines had overcome all major opposition on Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Gavutu, Tanambogo, Makambo and parts of Florida Island and had begun “mopping up” operations.

Though taken by surprise and badly beaten in the initial engagements, the Japanese had no intention of withdrawing without a fight. For months they had been laboring to build their airfield on Guadalcanal and this, in particular, they were determined to try to recapture. Under cover of darkness, they persistently attempted to run in reinforcements and on many occasions these attempts were successful. But during these operations a number of valuable ships were lost by both sides.

Off Cape Esperance, the northwest tip of Guadalcanal, lies Savo Island, and in that vicinity the Australian cruiser *Canberra* and the American heavy cruisers *Astoria*, *Quincy* and *Vincennes* were taken by surprise and shelled and sunk by a Japanese task force during the night of August 8. Later in the month and in the same area, Japanese forces coming down from the north were detected and met by American carrier-based planes, which damaged a number of enemy vessels, including two carriers, a battleship, several cruisers, a destroyer and a transport. One of the carriers, tentatively identified as the *Ryuzyo* or *Hosyo* was left “burning fiercely.”

Then, on September 15, near the Solomon Islands, three torpedoes fired by Japanese submarines hit the American aircraft carrier *Wasp* while she was escorting a convoy of merchant vessels carrying supplies to Guadalcanal Island. Within a short time after being hit, the *Wasp* became such a blazing inferno that she had to be abandoned and was later sunk by an American destroyer. About 90 per cent of her men were saved.

The *Wasp* was the third large American carrier to be lost in World War II. The *Lexington*, as has already been told, was destroyed at the Battle of the Coral Sea in May, 1942, and the *Yorktown* at the Battle of Midway Island in June. The Japanese carrier force had also suffered severely. Four of their carriers, the *Kaga*, *Akagi*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, had been sunk in the Midway Island battle; while the *Ryukaku* and *Shokaku* had been heavily damaged and possibly sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

Throughout September and October the Japanese continued their unremitting efforts to land more men and more supplies on coveted Guadalcanal. The constant reconnaissance maintained by the American planes based on Henderson Field frequently discovered these forces and caused serious Japanese losses. During the night of October 5-6, for instance, Navy and Marine Corps dive bombers and torpedo planes from Guadalcanal attacked six Japanese destroyers which had been located by American search planes. The destroyers were attempting to assist landing operations at the northwestern end of the island. One destroyer was sunk and another damaged.

When the Japanese continued reinforcement operations, American Navy and Marine Corps dive bombers on October 8 attacked a sizeable enemy surface force steaming down toward Guadalcanal from the northwest. This force included a cruiser and five destroyers. The cruiser was hit by both torpedoes and bombs, and during the air battle that followed, four Japanese seaplanes were shot down.

It was just three days after this engagement, on the night of October 11, that the American cruiser *Boise* carried through the brilliant action that won her the title of "the one-ship Navy." Briefly, her achievement consisted of sinking six Japanese warships in what is probably the record time of twenty-seven minutes. Two of these ships were heavy cruisers, one a light cruiser, and three destroyers. The American heavy cruiser *Salt Lake City* also distinguished herself in this vicious and heavily contested engagement.

The *Boise*, a light cruiser, which means that her main battery consisted of 6-inch guns, while those of heavy cruisers are 8-inch, was steaming off Cape Esperance, at the northwestern end of Guadalcanal in company with other cruisers and destroyers on the night of October 11. She was under the

command of Captain Edward J. Moran. The task force of which she was a member had been ordered to break up any Japanese attempt to land reinforcements and supplies.

All through the daylight hours of October 11 the *Salt Lake City* and *Boise* together with other cruisers (one of which was the *San Francisco*), and a number of destroyers had waited patiently outside the range of probable Japanese air reconnaissance. Sooner or later those aboard were certain that enemy surface vessels of the "Tokyo Express" service would be coming down from the north with fresh troops and more supplies and ammunition. During the afternoon American planes spotted a force of about fifteen Japanese ships—transports protected by cruisers and destroyers—steaming at high speed toward Guadalcanal. The American ships waited until darkness fell to screen their movements, and then set out toward the approaching enemy force.

Soon they were patroling to the westward of Savo Island, for it was expected that the Japanese, coming down from the northwest, would pass between that island and Cape Esperance, the northwest tip of Guadalcanal. The entire American force was steaming westward at 25 knots, with every lookout on the alert to catch the first glimpse of the enemy's ships. The night was pitch black, and it was a certainty that no lights would be showing in the Japanese vessels, so that the two forces would be close together before either detected the other's presence.

Contact was made shortly before midnight, when through the inky blackness a group of enemy ships was made out headed almost directly toward the center of the American battle line. This was a situation that gave an instant advantage to the Americans. It was "one of those things that naval officers wait twenty years to see," said Captain Ernest G. Small of the *Salt Lake City*. "We capped their *T*." This means that the American ships were crossing from east to west past the leading ship of the Japanese column, forming the crossbar of a *T*, of which the enemy ships constituted the vertical base. In this position, all the guns of the American's starboard batteries could be brought to bear, while only the forward guns of the leading Japanese ships were in position to retaliate.

Switching on their searchlights, the American ships opened a fast and murderous fire, taking the Japanese almost completely by surprise. "The Jap ships turned in utter confusion," said Captain Small, "each ship taking its own course and trying to bring the action parallel and uncross the disastrous *T*." In the Japanese force there appeared to be four heavy cruisers in line-ahead formation, flanked by two light cruisers and six destroyers.

The *Salt Lake City* trained her main battery of ten 8-inch guns on one of the light cruisers, while the *Boise* opened up with fifteen blazing 6-inch guns on a heavy cruiser of the *Nati* class, with a sweeping sheer forward and two sharply raked funnels. There were four ships in this class—the *Nati*, *Asigara*, *Haguro* and *Myoko*, each mounting ten 8-inch guns. Within a few minutes the light cruiser taken on by the *Salt Lake City* was burning fiercely and the American cruiser shifted her guns to the *Nati*-class cruiser already being hit severely by the *Boise*.

"Within four minutes I saw our salvos going in like red box cars on a Jap cruiser, plunging right into her," said Captain Small. She sank. Taken by surprise, the Japanese ship was beaten to destruction almost before her gun crews-could commence firing. For four minutes she took as savage a hammering as any ship had ever received and then, with her stern high in the air and her propellers still turning, she plunged to the bottom in a cloud of roaring steam.

The *Boise* now trained her 5-inch antiaircraft battery on a destroyer which in a few minutes broke in two and sank. For a few moments the American cruiser's guns were silent, while her officers peered through the darkness seeking out another target. The first vessel they made out was another destroyer and orders were quickly passed to train the main batteries on her. Sixty seconds had passed since the *Boise* sank her first destroyer. Now there was a minute of earsplitting inferno while her big guns again stabbed the night with murderous flashes. At the end of that time the second Japanese destroyer exploded and sank.

Meanwhile the *Salt Lake City* had found an auxiliary vessel and with two or three of her salvos had sent her to the bottom. She went down bow first, with her stern high in the air and her propellers still turning.

The *Boise* was now firing again, this time at a larger ship. The American guns soon set the bow of the enemy vessel on fire and by the light of the flames she was seen to be a two-funneled heavy cruiser. Her guns were manned and she returned the *Boise's* fire with savage and damaging salvos, hitting the American ship with at least one 8-inch shell and several 5-inch shells. Captain Moran's cabin was wrecked and set on fire and one of the *Boise's* 5-inch guns was put out of action.

Captain Moran, on the bridge, was told that his cabin was shattered and in flames. Smiling slowly, he said quietly, "Tell the Japs I'm not at home tonight."

The *Boise's* gun crews were now working like men possessed, determined upon sinking the Japanese cruiser and the ship shuddered

continuously from the shock of her fast-delivered salvos. Like the Yankee frigates of a hundred years before, the sleek and deadly cruiser seemed able to concentrate a fire of such terrific devastation that no opponent could stand up to it. Other American ships were by now also firing at the *Boise's* target. For four minutes the Japanese ship blazed back against the American line. At the beginning of that time she was a proud and magnificent fighting machine. At the end of it she was a mass of white-hot flames and torn and twisted steel. Explosions of terrific violence tore her apart and she went down with all hands.

The battle had so far lasted but twelve minutes. Four Japanese ships had been sunk. As one of the American officers described it later, it was a "hell of a melee."

For two full minutes now there was silence as the two opposing forces plunged on through the darkness, each side looking for targets to train on. At 11:58 P.M., as the two minutes ended, those on the *Boise's* bridge saw flames rising from a Japanese destroyer that had evidently been hit by one of the other American ships. The *Salt Lake City* sighted the enemy at practically the same instant and both of the American cruisers immediately opened fire. After two minutes of deadly fire from their superbly-handled batteries the enemy destroyer, the fifth Japanese ship to be sunk, disappeared beneath the waves.

Flames from the fire in Captain Moran's cabin had by now made considerable headway, and damage-control parties were hard at work endeavoring to extinguish them before they could endanger the whole ship. Other repair parties were busy stopping up a hole in the ship's side just above the waterline made by a shell from the Japanese heavy cruiser. Mattresses were jammed into the opening to serve as a temporary patch to keep out the water of the *Boise's* bow wave.

While this work was going forward the cruiser was saved by a hair's breadth from disaster. Almost by a miracle keen-eyed lookouts in sky control made out the white wake of a torpedo racing toward the ship. A group of Japanese destroyers had crept in close and had launched a number of torpedoes. Captain Moran instantly ordered full right rudder, turning the ship so that she headed toward the enemy on a course parallel to that of the torpedo. The order was given in the nick of time, for the torpedo rushed by only a few feet from the *Boise's* bow. No sooner was the first torpedo out of sight than another one was sighted, headed for the ship's stern. The cruiser again was quickly maneuvered away, and the second torpedo passed across the stern. Still charging ahead at top speed the *Boise* was given full left

rudder. Heeling over in a sharp turn she reversed her course and once again took up her position in the American battle line.

During this interval the *Salt Lake City* had sighted the light cruiser that she had hit several times and set on fire at the very beginning of the battle. The American ship poured in four more broadsides and then passed on. As the *Boise* swung back into line she too caught sight of the enemy cruiser, which was burning fiercely off her starboard quarter. Her turrets were revolved until the smoking guns were trained on this fresh target and bedlam again broke loose as the *Boise's* main battery once more went into action.

But now, from a point on the *Boise's* starboard bow, a Japanese heavy cruiser joined in the battle. Aiming her guns by the flashes of the *Boise's* salvos, the enemy ship poured in a galling fire. Her salvos of 8-inch shells were well directed and from the very start commenced to straddle the American cruiser, dealing her punishing blows. The *Boise* shifted her fire to this new opponent and, as other American ships gathered in, they too commenced to hammer the Japanese craft.

But during the three or four minutes in which the *Boise's* 6-inch guns had duelled unsupported with the 8-inch batteries of the Japanese ship, the American cruiser had suffered heavily. Her three forward turrets were put out of action and a shell that plunged through an unarmored point below the waterline set the forward magazine on fire. Water rushed in, partly flooding the magazine and preventing a disastrous explosion, but at the same time pulling the ship down by the head and giving her a list to starboard. Flames from fires that had commenced to rage shot a hundred feet into the air.

It looked as though the *Boise* was done for. In any event Captain Moran ordered her swung out of line to port in order to fight the fires and staunch the hole in her side.

Her place in the line was immediately taken by the *Salt Lake City*, which came up from astern, a grim and battle-tested heavy cruiser whose 8-inch guns hurled shells that equaled in size and destructive power those of the Japanese heavies. Captain Small of the *Salt Lake City* maneuvered his ship to play a heroic part. He placed her between the enemy cruiser and the burning *Boise*, in order to shield the latter and give her a greater chance to recover from her wounds. In taking up his position, Captain Small realized to the full that his ship would be silhouetted against the brilliant glare of the *Boise's* flames; but he took the risk and determined to justify it by fast and overwhelming offensive action.

The range was now down to 5,000 yards, almost point-blank for 8-inch guns. Any hits at such short distance were likely to be fatal ones. Already on

the range, the Japanese cruiser poured out three rapid salvos in an effort to destroy the *Salt Lake City* before she could get on the target. The salvos straddled and some of the shells struck home.

But the American ship now had the range and opened fire. The earsplitting roar of her ten big guns crashed out through the night and ten 8-inch shells tore at express-train speed at the enemy. Some of them hit. Then in quick succession she let loose four more salvos. Again it was the same terrible type of fast and concentrated fire that the *Constitution* had dealt out in her many victorious battles. In a minute or two it had accomplished its object. The Japanese cruiser, overwhelmed and torn to twisted steel, blew up with a deafening explosion and sank.

The thunder of the *Salt Lake City's* guns brought the desperately fought night battle to an end. The Japanese ships that had not been sunk were in full flight to the northward, pursued by some of the American craft.

It is difficult to realize how swiftly the action had taken place. The ships had been at death grips for no more than thirty-nine minutes. The last shots had been fired just before 12:30 A.M. Yet in that brief time the *Boise* and *Salt Lake City*, aided by the others of the American force, had sent to the bottom six once-proud enemy ships. Four Japanese cruisers and four destroyers had been blown to eternity according to the Navy's final reckoning. More than forty thousand tons of enemy fighting ships now lay on the ocean bottom under the calm blue waters off Cape Esperance. The Americans lost one ship, the destroyer *Duncan*, which was sunk by gunfire or torpedoes during the height of the battle. Five of her officers and fifty-five of her men went down with her.

When the other ships of the American force left the *Boise* behind, to pursue the retreating Japanese, it was believed that the hardhitting American cruiser was doomed. She had been hit by shells of eleven salvos and one big shell had plunged through her hull below the waterline. Above decks she was on fire, with sheets of flame roaring aloft as high as the mastheads. Few ships had ever been at the focal point of such terrific action concentrated in such a short space of time.

But the *Boise's* crew, magnificent in battle, proved equally heroic when it came to saving their gallant ship. Under the direction of Commander Thomas M. Wolverton, the repair parties overcame almost insurmountable obstacles and pulled the *Boise* through. The forward magazine was completely flooded, and after a hard battle the deck fires were brought under control. Below decks the forward compartment was full of water which poured in through the hole in the ship's side, nine feet below the waterline and "big enough to drive a small tank through." The bulkhead separating

this compartment from the rest of the ship was under an enormous strain and might give way at any moment. To prevent this a repair party worked and sweated with desperate energy to shore up the bulkhead with heavy timber. To aid them, the ship's speed was reduced, and with the pressure relieved in this way the bulkhead was successfully patched up. Many hours of work still remained and the damage repair parties toiled on throughout the night, but the fires and the tottering bulkhead were the principal dangers and these were energetically and swiftly put to rights.

Prior to the battle, a rendezvous position had been named at which the American ships were to gather if they became separated during the action. As the damage-control measures were being carried out, Captain Moran headed the *Boise* toward this point. The other ships, as it turned out, had been evaded by the Japanese, and at about 1:00 A.M., they turned to a southerly course and made for the rendezvous.

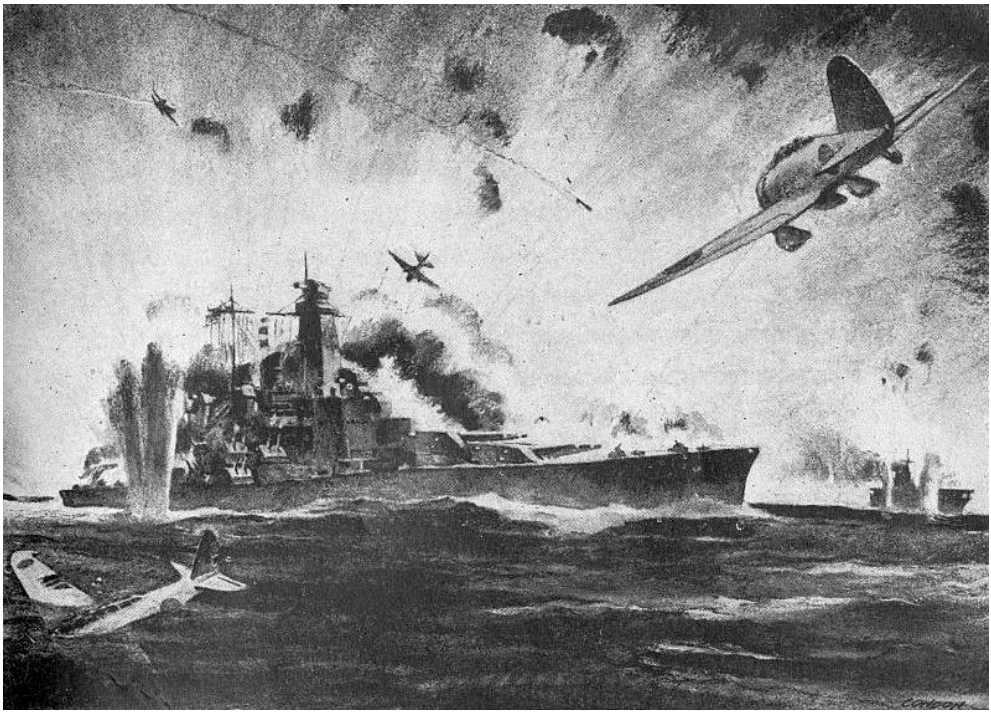
By this time the *Boise* had been definitely given up for lost. So when the returning American ships saw a flashing signal, they believed it to be a Japanese warship. They did not open fire, however, for the flashes were very similar to the American recognition signal.

Again the signal was flashed. Yes, it was the American code. The unknown vessel flashed the signal for a third time.

"What ship is that?" the Commander of the American force signaled. And the reply came back:

"The *Boise*."

Taking up her old position in the American battle line ahead of the *Salt Lake City*, the *Boise* steamed on to the south at 20 knots—down by the head, battle-scarred and wounded, but triumphant.



A Curving Wall of Steel from the *South Dakota* Met the Enemy Planes

17. THE *SOUTH DAKOTA*

October-November, 1942

The *South Dakota* is the American battleship which for an entire year after her first successes against the Japanese, recounted here, was know to the world only as "Battleship X" or "Old Nameless." This name was originated by Sidney M. Shalett, a newspaper correspondent, who at the time he wrote of her was not permitted by the Navy to reveal her name. Subsequently, when the information could be of no value to the enemy, the Navy announced her identity, as the battleship that had performed such heroic service in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands and the Battle of Guadalcanal.

She is one of the 35,000-ton *North Carolina* class, commissioned since the United States was attacked by Japan. These ships are huge and modern, and there are six of them, the *North Carolina*, *Alabama*, *Indiana*, *Massachusetts*, *South Dakota* and *Washington*. They measure 704 feet in length at the waterline and have a maximum beam of 108 feet; a greater width would prevent them from passing through the Panama Canal. They

are reported to have 16-inch belt armor amidships, 6-inch armor on their upper decks, and 4-inch armor on the lower decks. This gives them solid protection against the heavy guns, the torpedoes, and the aerial bombs of the enemy.

To carry the fight against the enemy, the *North Carolinas* have nine 16-inch guns, the largest yet to be mounted on any battleship. These are housed in three giant turrets, two of which are forward and one aft. Each gun can throw a 2,400-pound armor-piercing shell about twenty miles. Antiaircraft or ack-ack batteries are all over the ship on decks and special towers. These comprise large guns, probably 5-inch, "Chicago pianos" or multiple pom-poms, consisting of eight or more heavy machine guns grouped closely together, and other machine guns mounted separately.

These men-of-war are tough. There is no mistake about that.

The British have only two 16-inch gun battleships, the *Nelson* and *Rodney*. Japan probably has six. These are the old battleships *Mutu* and *Nagato*, built in 1920 and carrying eight big guns apiece, and the four new ships of the *Nissim* class, reported to carry 16-inch guns, though the number is not known.

Early in 1942, the *South Dakota* started on her first cruise, one that was destined to lead her to as flaming and terrible a battle as any that has been fought in World War II. Her mission, as her commander, Captain Thomas Leigh Gatch, told his officers and crew not once but many times, was "to kill Japs." Kill Japs she did, as will soon be seen.

Out to the Pacific went the new battleship and, when the time came in August, 1942, for the American marines to capture Guadalcanal, she was near the scene of action. Her first time of testing and triumph did not come until two months later, however, when the American naval forces again beat off a Japanese attempt to retake Guadalcanal, in what has come to be known as the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. This is a small group of islands that lies to the eastward of the Solomons.

For this attempt against Guadalcanal, the Japanese prepared two large forces, one of which assembled at Truk and Ponape in the Caroline Islands, and the other at Rabaul in New Britain. Their plan apparently was to destroy American planes on Guadalcanal's Henderson Field by using carrier-based and land-based planes, then to drive off the American naval craft near the island and land an overwhelming number of troops and mobile artillery. Their forces included battleships and aircraft carriers, in addition to cruisers, destroyers and transports filled with troops.

Early on the morning of October 25, a Flying Fortress cruising to the north of Guadalcanal sighted the main Japanese force. Its pilot, Lieutenant Mario Sesso, reported his find, and an American carrier in a task force that was to the east of the Solomons near the Santa Cruz Islands launched attack groups. They could not find the Japanese ships, but early the following morning other American planes located them. They were about 250 miles to the northwest of the American task force, and with them were two large aircraft carriers, probably of the new 17,000-ton *Zuikaku* (Lucky Stork) class, and two battleships.

Planes from the American carriers, which were the *Hornet* and the *Enterprise*, took to the air. Their orders were to "get the Jap carriers." At about 8:00 A.M. two of the *Enterprise's* planes sighted the carriers—"two nice flat-tops surrounded by cruisers and destroyers, something you dream about," as one of the pilots reported later.

"We came at them out of the sun and on the downwind," the pilot continued. "We split our wing flaps and pushed over into an 80-degree dive. There was a nice big red circle on the big carrier's deck. I released my bomb and got a hit smack among the planes on deck." There was a flash of flames and a big cloud of black smoke as the 500-pound bomb hit. A few seconds later the other plane landed a bomb in the same area.

As the smoke billowed upwards besmirching the heavens, planes from the *Hornet* roared in to the attack. Six of their 1000-pound bombs crashed on to the second carrier. Another plane hit a Japanese *Mogami* class cruiser and shattered her after turret, while still other planes gave the entire Japanese force "a good going over," scoring a number of hits.

Meanwhile, however, the planes from the Japanese carriers had gotten into the air and were carrying the battle to the American ships. At 10:00 A.M. the *Hornet* was fiercely attacked, and though she and her planes shot down more than half of the attacking aircraft several got through and one of these made a suicide crash on the American carrier. Plummeting through the flight deck, it started several fires. A heavy bomb from another plane then hit the *Hornet* and, minutes later, two more planes crashed her.

Scarcely had the ship recovered from these blows before Japanese torpedo planes came in. Some were shot down, but two, possibly three, torpedoes ripped through the *Hornet's* hull. Her engines were disabled and stopped, and the huge ship lay motionless in the water. Fires raged in many places and gained on the crew who fought them in bucket brigades, since the main water lines had been destroyed.

At 11:09 A.M. more Japanese planes attacked, but following this wave, the succeeding enemy planes turned their attention to the *Enterprise* and the *South Dakota*. Dead in the water and ablaze from stem to stern, the *Hornet* seemed done for. Actually, she remained afloat until the evening, when her crew abandoned ship and she was sunk by shells fired by American destroyers.

When the attacks began, the *South Dakota* was near the *Enterprise*, which she had been assigned to protect. At 11:12 A.M. twenty Japanese dive bombers, which had been flying toward the carrier, suddenly changed course and headed for the battleship. Her hour of action had arrived.

"The first attack lasted from 11:12 to 11:20 A.M. on October 26," Captain Gatch wrote in his official report. "There were twenty dive bombers. All were shot down."

The tornado of fire put up by the *South Dakota's* batteries had to be seen to be believed. Observers on other American ships, watching with their hearts in their mouths, said that she put up such a volume of fire that they had to look twice to make sure she wasn't ablaze. And as she fired, the ship tore through the water at close to 30 miles an hour, twisting and turning in incredible evasion tactics.

She "was cutting circles and figure eights and other maneuvers without names," Captain Gatch wrote in his report. "I was more afraid of ramming the carrier we were protecting than of the attacking planes."

Following the first attack the ship and her men were given a thirty-minute breathing spell. Fresh ammunition was brought up and everything made ready for the enemy's expected return. Then, shortly before noon, forty dive bombers and torpedo planes came in, escorted by fighters whose mission was to try to beat off the American Wildcats from the carriers.

"They maneuvered into position to strike together, the bombers a moment before the torpedo planes swept down to release their charges," says the Navy's official report on the battle. "A curving wall of glowing steel from the great ship met them."

Once again, the *South Dakota's* terrific barrage sent Japanese planes hurtling into the water like falling leaves. Most of the attackers were shot down by her guns or her protecting planes. But near the end of the attack there was a close call. A single torpedo plane came, miraculously untouched, through the hail of fire, heading straight for the ship.

"It came at the stern of the ship," Captain Gatch wrote in his report. "It appeared that millions of tracer shells went right past that plane without hitting it, but some did strike it, and at the right time. They struck just before

the pilot released his torpedo. The plane was jarred out of its line of flight and its torpedo was released well up in the air."

Straight for the ship came the torpedo. It seemed certain that it would crash the deck. But at the last moment it shot over the stern, missing it by inches, and fell into the sea. If the ship's guns had been five seconds later in hitting the plane, the *South Dakota* would have been a casualty.

The second attack ended, the men caught their breath, and wondered what would happen next. They had not long to wait, for at 12:19 P.M. twenty-four fresh dive bombers and torpedo planes closed in and the battle was on again.

For the third time the *South Dakota* threw out her enormous eruption of gun fire. Again a number of planes were shot down; but one got through. "I was out on the catwalk in, front of the bridge, where I had no business to be," wrote Captain Gatch. "I saw its bomb released from not more than a hundred feet above the forward part of the ship. I hoped that it would strike a turret and not the deck, for it was a good-sized bomb, probably a 500-pounder, and it might blow a hole in the deck and kill people underneath; and it certainly would kill many in gun crews on the deck itself. The automatic guns forward were manned by mess attendants, some Filipinos, some Negroes. They never stopped firing for a second. Those men are good. The bomb did land on the top of a turret. That was the only hit we took, and it was the one that got me."

Captain Gatch was hit in the neck by a piece of shrapnel which severed the jugular vein and he was hurled against the conning tower with terrific force so that his shoulder muscles were injured and he was knocked unconscious. Two Quartermasters saved the Captain's life. Running to where he lay, they stopped the flow of blood by pressing on the severed vein with their fingers. If it had not been for their prompt action, Captain Gatch would have bled to death in a few minutes.

The third attack was the last one. The *South Dakota* tore on beside the *Enterprise*, heading toward the far-distant Japanese surface vessels. But she was not to make contact with the enemy's ships until three weeks later.

Meanwhile she had made naval history. Of the eighty planes that had been sent against her, forty had been shot down. Of this number the battleship's own guns had accounted for thirty-two. This was the greatest number ever shot down by a battleship in a single engagement up to that time.

During the entire battle of October 26, the Japanese suffered damage to two aircraft carriers, one battleship, believed to be of the *Kongo* class, and

five cruisers, while more than a hundred planes were destroyed and fifty damaged.

Turning to the northward, the Japanese withdrew to repair and regroup their forces.

During the following two weeks there was steady fighting on Guadalcanal and the Japanese continued to land reinforcements at night, though at heavy cost. Air attacks on Henderson Field were frequent. On November 8, American flyers located a small Japanese naval force and hit a cruiser and two destroyers. Four days later an American task force bombarded Japanese positions near Tassafaronga, twelve miles west of Henderson Field, silencing the shore batteries, and destroying thirty large landing boats.

Then on the night of November 12 the Japanese came back in full force, ignoring their previous terrific losses, and determined to smash their way through to land overwhelming reinforcements on Guadalcanal.

This time the Japanese naval force comprised two *Kongo* class battleships, two heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, about ten destroyers, and a large number of transports jammed with fighting men. This force reached the Guadalcanal area shortly after midnight on the morning of November 13, and was attacked almost at once by American cruisers. This action is described in the following chapter about the *San Francisco*, which took the outstanding part in that battle.

During the daylight hours of November 13, the Japanese ships, already damaged, were pounded by American planes. Night fell and under cover of the darkness, two newly-arrived Japanese battleships bombarded the American positions on Guadalcanal. Later that night, American flyers located twelve Japanese transports about 150 miles northwest of Guadalcanal, and sank eight of them.

There was no contact with the enemy during daylight on November 14, but when night fell the Japanese came forward, drawn as by a magnet to "bloody Guad." This time the *South Dakota*, and the 16-inch gun flagship *Washington*, together with cruisers and destroyers, were waiting for them. Early in the evening, they had taken up their positions off the shore of the island, at a point from which they could watch "Windy Gulch," the strait between Guadalcanal and Savo Island. Dark and menacing, with only dim battle lights on, the American ships steamed slowly along the coast, watching and waiting for the first sign of the approaching enemy.

At 11:20 P.M. the first group of Jap ships came into sight. First was a *Mogami* class heavy cruiser, easily recognized by her upward curving stern

and heavily piled forward control tower. After her followed two other smaller cruisers.

To the American ships, Rear Admiral Willis Lee, commander of the battleship *Washington*, the flagship, flashed the signal:

"Commence firing when ready!"

An instant later the flagship's big guns spoke. The *South Dakota* swung her guns and shuddered from stem to stern as her first salvo roared on its way.

The marksmanship was good. Two of the Japanese ships were hit by the first shots. The third staggered under the terrible impact of 16-inch shells immediately after. Flames enveloped the *Mogami* class cruiser, turning night into day. One of the other cruisers burst asunder, broke in two and sank. The third ship was also hit and soon became a blazing funeral pyre.

In an effort to see the ships that were dealing them such terrible blows, the Japanese fired star shells, calcium flares attached to parachutes. These illuminated the night and glowed weirdly over the burning cruiser, but it is doubtful if they permitted the Japanese to see the American ships distinctly. The range was too great.

Three or four other Japanese ships could now be seen nosing their way through the strait between Savo Island and Cape Esperance, near the western tip of Guadalcanal. Although they fired at the Americans, they did not score any hits at this time. Soon they withdrew, steaming off to the northward of Savo Island. As they did so, the American squadron steamed westward at high speed, aimed to pass to the south of the island. As they charged on through the night, they kept up a steady fire directed against the fleeing Japanese.

Now, for the space of a few minutes, there was a lull. Lookouts on the American ships scanned the sea ahead, for Japanese battleships were known to be near at hand. The white bow waves, clear against the darkness, hissed and spumed away from the swift-moving bows, making the only sound to break the sudden silence.

Then, at ten minutes past midnight Japanese ships were sighted.

"Three ships, bearing 30 degrees, target 18,300 bearing 330 degrees. . . ."

The men in the *South Dakota's* plotting room bent to their work of keeping the range, determining how the guns should be pointed. From the conning tower, Captain Gatch checked with Admiral Lee in the battleship *Washington*. Very soon Admiral Lee gave the word, "Fire when you're

ready." Captain Gatch turned to his bridge "talker" and said, "Tell them they can fire now."

With a roar and recoil that shook the ship from stem to stem the 16-inch guns spoke. Results could not be seen, but a minute later the *South Dakota* concentrated on another target. This was a destroyer or light cruiser that suddenly appeared astern. The American ship's after turret was swung into position. There was a loud hissing sound as the gun crews blew compressed air through the barrels to clear them before loading. A few seconds later the first salvo hurtled through the night. Two others followed in quick succession, and the third ripped the Japanese ship apart. She burst into flames, her bow pointed Skyward, and she sank stern first.

Leaving her flaming astern, the American ships pressed on. The Japanese battleships were still to be found. After a half hour's steaming, the ships reached the western end of Savo's southern shore. Here the Japanese sprung a trap that they had evidently been at great pains to prepare.

The channel at this point was narrow. There was little or no room in which the American ships could maneuver or turn aside. Fully aware of this, the Japanese had posted their heaviest forces here.

As the Americans reached this point, Japanese destroyers dashed out from Savo's shore and launched a torpedo attack. How they missed their targets is hard to understand, but they did. No American ship was touched.

But as the white wakes of the torpedoes were feathering through the American squadron, between the ships, another danger suddenly loomed ahead. Around the western end of Savo came a Japanese battleship and two cruisers. Searchlights on the cruisers stabbed through the night and focussed on the *South Dakota*. An instant later the Japanese battleship let loose a salvo.

Captain Gatch's first order was, "Get those searchlights." This was a job for the ship's secondary batteries. Firing at maximum speed and with great accuracy they were soon successful. The searchlights were doused, and the *South Dakota* moved forward in greater safety.

The second battleship, the *Washington*, ahead of the *South Dakota* in the line, now took on the Japanese battleship. The *South Dakota* concentrated on the cruisers, using her heavy guns. Their return fire was heavy and, in addition, the Japanese battleship found several opportunities of giving the *South Dakota* a salvo.

All hell had now broken loose, with every ship engaged determined to find a victim. The *South Dakota* dealt out punishment; but she did not come through this battle of vengeance unscathed.

The Japanese cruisers were quick to find the range and their 6-inch and 8-inch shells were soon making many hits on the *South Dakota*. Her after control tower, the radio room, the sky control station forward, and many parts of the superstructure were hit and fires were soon raging at half a dozen different points. Men were struck down by flying fragments from the shells. A torpedo came heading directly toward the vessel's bow, and only instantaneous action by Captain Gatch in ordering "Hard right rudder" avoided the blow. A few minutes later the ship shuddered as a 14-inch shell tore into her hull just forward of the bridge.

The men in sky control, huddled together in a small compartment far up in the ship's massive control tower, had a particularly bad time of it. Here there were about fourteen men and two officers, Lieutenant Commander Burke and Lieutenant Commander Pavlic. Early in the battle a shell tore through their station, creating havoc. Both officers and many of the men were killed. Yeoman Patrick was the only one who was not so seriously wounded as to be incapacitated. But even he was in desperate condition, for one kneecap had been torn off. Despite this injury he tended the wounded men, gave morphine injections to the most painfully injured, and summoned the strength to continue his reports to the bridge with unfailing regularity.

"Batt II," where the ship's helm is located and which served as the auxiliary control room, also passed through a bad time. Here there were about six men, headed by Commander A. E. Uehlinger, the ship's Executive Officer. A shell landing here had smashed through a steam line and started fires as the molten metal from the shell flooded across the deck. "There was a tremendous, blinding shower of sparks outside," Commander Uehlinger said after the battle. "It was like fireworks. Then came the noise of this hissing, roaring steam."

The men were in danger of being scalded to death. They moved to the door to escape and flames leapt in at them. Commander Uehlinger ordered each man who wasn't wearing his life jacket to put it on to provide some protection against the steam. Meanwhile he was making every effort to get through to the bridge or engine room to have the steam shut off.

While the men in Batt II were passing through their agony, other men at lower stations in the control tower were being shelled to death. These shells started other fires which, as they spread, blistered the deckplates of Batt II. Unable to get out, Commander Uehlinger and his men stuck it out, hoping against hope. At last the steam was shut off. Then followed several hours when, almost roasting alive, they waited for a damage-control party to extinguish the fires that hemmed them in. Once during this period the ship shook and trembled throughout her length when a big shell hit her No. 3

turret aft. Outside their compartment they could hear the groans of wounded men.

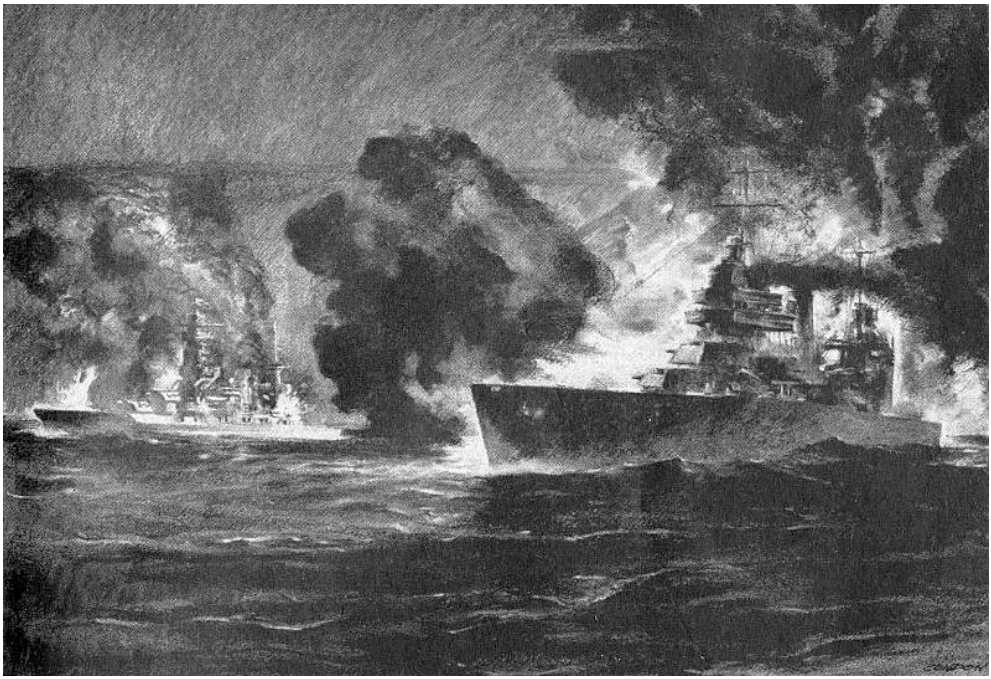
Finally, toward morning, the fires were gotten under control. The heat subsided and the men were free to leave their torture chamber. Said one of them:

"When the dawn finally came, it was the most beautiful sunrise I think I ever saw."

No Japanese ships were in sight as the sun rose and revealed the sea as far as the horizon to the weary men aboard the *South Dakota*. Some had been sunk, and the others had fled, their final big attempt to reinforce "Bloody Guad" shattered by American naval guns.

The losses inflicted on the Japanese by the *South Dakota* and her sisters in the battle of November 14-15 were: one battleship sunk, three cruisers sunk, one destroyer sunk; one battleship, one cruiser and one destroyer damaged. A total of five ships sunk and three damaged. The battleship was the one that had engaged the *South Dakota* and then been taken on by her sister ship, later identified as the *Washington*. The *South Dakota* did much to account for the remaining vessels sunk.

This action, together with those that preceded it on November 13 and 14, had a decisive effect upon the Japanese plans for recapturing Guadalcanal. Another smaller attempt was made two weeks later, and that was the end. The Japanese soldiers and marines on Guadalcanal were left to defend themselves as best they could, and in February, 1943, those that were still alive were rescued and taken off by destroyers under cover of darkness. This marked the victory of the American forces in the campaign for the southeastern Solomons.



The *San Francisco* Tore On Between the Two Lines of Enemy Warships

18. THE *SAN FRANCISCO*

November 12-13, 1942

It was in the opening round of the *South Dakota's* second battle, the Battle of Guadalcanal, that the American heavy cruiser *San Francisco* carried out the exploit that ranks her with the brave and gallant ships of all time. It was an action so unprecedented and unexpected that it brings to mind inevitably the "Nelson touch"—that breaking with orthodox, traditional naval fighting methods that utterly confounded the enemy and won the day for the British at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Briefly, when confronted with two superior enemy columns steaming toward her at a high rate of speed, the *San Francisco* chose to run between them and strike at both, rather than to sheer off and gain a position from which she could engage a single column only. The object was to destroy as many Japanese men-of-war as possible while they were within striking distance. Naval historians of the future, in full possession of all the facts, will doubtless maintain that this objective was achieved.

During the second week of November, 1942, as recounted in the story of the *South Dakota*, the Japanese massed a large invasion force containing at

least two battleships, and came down once again from their northern strongholds to make a last desperate attempt to overwhelm the American forces holding Guadalcanal. American scout planes sighted the enemy ships as early as November 10, and during the hours that followed, the naval and air forces defending Guadalcanal prepared to meet the heavy blow that was to be made against them.

The battle started on the afternoon of November 12 when Japanese torpedo bombers from one of the enemy carriers launched an attack against a group of American cruisers and destroyers that were shelling the Japanese positions west of Henderson Field. Antiaircraft batteries swung into action on the American ships and sent nine enemy planes down into the sea, while American fighters from Henderson Field shot down an additional twenty-one planes.

None of the Japanese torpedoes landed on a target, but the American squadron suffered damage in another fashion. One of the Japanese planes, disabled and on fire, was crashed by its pilot on the after part of the *San Francisco's* superstructure. A white-hot gasoline fire broke out and flashed along the deck among the machine-gunners that were firing near by. All told, the crash cost the lives of thirty of the *San Francisco's* complement. At about the same time, the destroyer *Buchanan* was struck by one of the Japanese shore batteries and five of her crew were killed.

As evening drew in, the American force formed in line of battle and prepared for the night's work that they believed lay ahead. The big armada of Japanese ships was close, and steaming steadily on toward Guadalcanal. If they did not falter or turn aside, they would reach the island some time during the hours of darkness.

Flagship of the American squadron was the *San Francisco*, flying the flag of Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan. Under his command there was another heavy cruiser, three light cruisers, the *Atlanta*, *Helena* and *Juneau*, and eight destroyers. The *Atlanta* and *Juneau* were new ships and interesting because of the number of guns mounted in their main batteries. Each ship carried no less than sixteen 5-inch rapid-fire guns, an innovation designed to give them a heavy broadside that could be repeated time and again with great rapidity. The *Atlanta* was commanded by Rear Admiral Norman Scott, who had led the American forces to victory at the Battle of Cape Esperance the previous month.

Leaving the Japanese shore positions that they had been shelling, the American ships steamed off to the westward toward "Windy Gulch," the passage between Savo Island and Cape Esperance at the western end of Guadalcanal. If the Japanese should arrive that night, it was more than

probable that some of their ships would attempt to force this passage. Leading the American column was the *Atlanta*, followed by the *San Francisco*, two other cruisers and the *Juneau* bringing up the rear. The cruisers were screened on both sides by their accompanying destroyers.

On this evening of November 12, no American battleships were on hand to give their assistance to the cruisers. These, driving on to the westward, were well aware of the heavy odds that they might find arrayed against them before the night was through. At 7:30 P.M. the Americans went to their battle stations, while the lookouts peered through the blackness to detect the first signs of the approaching enemy.

Cruisers against battleships. There is little hope for the lighter craft. But on they went, just as the British cruisers *Exeter*, *Ajax* and *Achilles* had resolutely closed in on the formidable German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* on another memorable occasion.

Midnight passed, and then another hour, as the men on the American ships, tensed for action, stood by their guns awaiting instant battle. Finally, nearly two hours after midnight, the enemy appeared and at 1:48 A.M. on November 13 the guns broke loose in their wild and tumultuous uproar of destruction.

The Japanese force was soon discovered to be a big one. There were at least two battleships, three or more heavy cruisers, four light cruisers and ten destroyers. Nine or ten big ships against the American five. Behind the Japanese warships were a number of troop transports protected by additional destroyers.

As it came down from the north the Japanese force was arranged in three columns. To the west was a column of cruisers with some destroyers out ahead. In the center of the column were the battleships, while the remaining cruisers protected by destroyers were on the eastern side of the group.

Apparently the Japanese were not aware that the American force was waiting for it. Either that, or they believed that they would have no difficulty in blasting it out of the way. In any event, they did not advance with caution; but as though confident of their overwhelming power, steamed headlong on toward Savo Island at high speed. Upon reaching the island the formation divided. The heavy cruisers on the western flank headed for “Windy Gulch,” While the columns containing the battleships and the other cruisers steered to pass to the east of the island.

The American warships shuddered as the order for full speed was given and the force rushed in for the attack. They were to the southeast of Savo Island, pounding to the northward at well over 30 knots, and headed for the

two enemy columns that were coming down off the eastern shore of the island. Leaving her position in the van, the *Atlanta* with two or three destroyers sped northeastward through the night straight for the Japanese cruiser column to deliver a torpedo attack. On board the *San Francisco* the range-finders showed that the distance between her and the enemy was decreasing with great rapidity. Soon the range was only 3,000 yards, almost point-blank, and the curt order was given:

"Commence firing."

The first batteries to go into action were those of the *San Francisco*. Her nine 8-inch guns were trained dead on the leading enemy cruiser, and six salvos were fired with rapidity. The spirit of the gunners of the famous Yankee frigates seemed to live again in the gunners on board their modern counterpart. Hit hard and hit fast. Smother and overwhelm the enemy in a blazing, unbelievable blanket of fire poured in with incredible speed.

The very first salvo straddled the enemy and hit him. Another blinding flash and earsplitting roar and he was hit again. Within a minute or two the big Japanese ship was on fire from stem to stern. The *San Francisco* tore on to the north straight up the watery path between the two enemy columns, followed by the other American ships, all of them picking close-range targets and firing hard. Punished beyond the limits of her endurance, the Japanese heavy cruiser with a deafening explosion blazed with terrific intensity and in a short while sank with all hands.

"It was the most awe-inspiring sight I ever saw," said Commander Bruce McCandless of the *San Francisco*. "It seemed to explode a thousand feet in the air."

Scarcely had the *San Francisco* ceased firing at the doomed cruiser when she poured forth her wrath upon a second target, a large destroyer that was rushing forward on the flank of the Japanese column. Again she got on the range at once and scored repeated hits. Then, passing out of range into the blackness to the west, she left her victim to be finished off by the ships that followed in her boiling wake.

At almost the same time, one of the other American cruisers put an end to a second Japanese destroyer. The night, already illuminated by the flames devouring the Japanese heavy cruiser, was made still brighter as this destroyer exploded and sent aloft a brilliant shower of red-hot pieces of twisted steel.

While these actions had been going on, the *Atlanta* and the destroyers that had gone with her to close in for a torpedo attack had met with determined resistance. Before the attack could be launched, the *Atlanta* was

picked up by the beam of a searchlight on one of the Japanese light cruisers. She trained her guns on this ship and at once commenced firing, but at the same moment became a target for an enemy heavy cruiser. Blinded by the dazzling glare of the searchlight, the *Atlanta's* gun directors strove to smash it.

The crash of her own guns firing was followed almost immediately by the impact of 8-inch shells tearing into her hull and superstructure. Her bridge was wrecked and Admiral Scott was killed. The *Atlanta* fired again and again she was hit. Then, as she struggled to deal another blow, she was hit by two torpedoes delivered by destroyers that had dashed close in at breakneck speed.

All this had happened in an incredibly short space of time. The *Atlanta*, in all, was engaged with the enemy for no more than a minute and a half. During this time she fired three salvos, and was hit by fourteen 8-inch shells and a number of smaller shells, as well as receiving the two torpedo hits. It speaks well for her construction that she stayed afloat. As it was, she was partially out of control and her commander, Captain Samuel P. Jenkins, steered her toward the shore of one of the small near-by islands. At times throughout the night it seemed that she might be saved, but toward dawn the water flowing in through the holes in her side became too great and she slid gently beneath the waves.

After leaving behind the destroyer she had hit, the *San Francisco* continued on a westerly course that took her across the head of the enemy battleship column. Suddenly, lit up weirdly by the flames of the burning heavy cruiser, one of the battleships came into view off the *San Francisco's* starboard bow. She was distant but 2,500 yards, point-blank range. To those aboard her, it seemed a certainty that the *San Francisco* would be blown to pieces within the space of a few seconds.

Both ships commenced to fire at practically the same instant and both quickly commenced to hit. The heavy thunder of the battle grew in magnitude with each second, the grinding crash of hitting shells, the deafening roar of the great guns fighting to kill, and the ominous hiss of enormous shell splashes. It was that most awesome of all spectacles—seapower in action.

Firing rapidly and with deadly precision, the American David poured a murderous fire into the Japanese Goliath. What vital spots she hit and what precise damage she did will never be known. But the *San Francisco's* salvos in the few minutes that the engagement lasted marked the beginning of the end for the enemy leviathan. After taking them the battleship stopped firing. Something serious had happened to her.

The battleship's first two salvos fell short, but the third crashed into the starboard side of the cruiser's superstructure. This was a hammer blow of terrific force. One or more of the shells hit the bridge, where the ship's commander, Captain Cassin Young, the navigating officer, Commander Rae Arison, and the acting officer of the deck, Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless, Jr., were stationed. Captain Young was killed instantly and Commander Arison was desperately wounded. By a lucky chance Lieutenant Commander McCandless was on the port side of the bridge and was only slightly hurt. He and the helmsman, Quartermaster Harry Higdon, were the only two men left alive on the bridge.

An instant later another salvo landed, crashing into the conning tower and killing Admiral Callaghan and those of his staff who were with him. An urgent message to the bridge informed McCandless that another shell had demolished the after conning position. Below decks, other messages reported, there was tremendous damage.

Lieutenant Commander McCandless sized up the situation and found it desperate. Going to the conning tower, he took over the ship's control, determined to continue fighting as long as possible, but at the same time to edge his wounded cruiser away from the enemy columns.

By this time the *San Francisco* had penetrated between the two lines of enemy warships that were to the eastward of Savo Island with the other American ships following close behind her. As Lieutenant Commander McCandless put it, she had "a battleship on one bow, a cruiser on the other and another cruiser behind us."

With the battleship silenced, Lieutenant Commander McCandless prepared to disengage the *San Francisco*, when the chance to do so should present itself. He was in the conning tower peering out through one of the slits in its heavily armored sides. Suddenly and without warning a shell struck the tower about two feet away. Shrapnel poured in through the slit and the concussion of the blast threw him to the deck, unconscious.

For a few moments he lay motionless and then slowly struggled to his feet. Almost immediately the cruiser was in fresh peril as a Japanese destroyer raced in, veered to a parallel course, launched torpedoes and opened a staccato fire with her 5-inch guns. Guns along the *San Francisco's* side blazed into action and she was supported ably by the cruiser next astern. It was one of the *San Francisco's* 5-inch guns, however, that knocked the destroyer out. Hitting the depth charges lined up in her stern racks, it exploded them and blew up the after half of the enemy ship.

While the American cruisers had been engaged as described, the destroyers had been supporting them at every point, and had suffered heavily. Of the eight that went so bravely into battle against enormous odds, seven were sunk by gunfire or torpedoes. These were the *Barton*, *Benham*, *Cushing*, *Laffey*, *Monssen*, *Preston* and *Walke*.

Some of these were with the light cruiser *Atlanta* when she turned toward the eastern enemy cruiser column to deliver a torpedo attack, while the others became engaged with the cruisers and the battleship that the *San Francisco* and her group took on.

One of the latter fired first at a destroyer and a cruiser and then discovered the battleship coming toward her and less than a thousand yards away. Quickly she fired one torpedo, but in the tenseness of the events that followed, it could not be determined if it made a hit. The battleship was close, so close that the American destroyer raked her decks with machine-gun fire. Then from out of the night a Japanese destroyer raced in and opened fire in the sudden, blinding glare of her searchlight.

One of her shells stopped the American destroyer's engines. The battleship, seeing what had happened, turned and ran close alongside to destroy her. But as the enormous hull of the battleship tore past, the American destroyer delivered six torpedoes, three of which were seen to hit.

These hits put the battleship out of the fight. Hurt in vital places by the *San Francisco* and the other American cruisers, she was by this time out of control, and her career was nearly at an end. Swinging from a southerly to a westerly course, she lumbered off through "Windy Gulch" between Cape Esperance and Savo Island. On the following day she was discovered by American aircraft, so badly disabled that she could creep along at no more than five knots and with under-deck fires turning her steel deckplates to a glowing cherry red. American flyers bombed and torpedoed her throughout the day, but could not sink her. When night came the Japanese themselves sent her to her end by scuttling.

The American destroyer that had sent her from the battle was abandoned in the early morning hours, after having been set on fire by the guns of a cruiser and a destroyer.

The *Laffey* first engaged the enemy cruiser and destroyer fired on by the first American destroyer and then loosed a salvo of torpedoes at a large ship, either a second battleship or a heavy cruiser. This ship was later seen floating in a capsized position, her hull being described as "huge." Despite this adjective, however, it is believed that the vessel was probably a heavy cruiser.

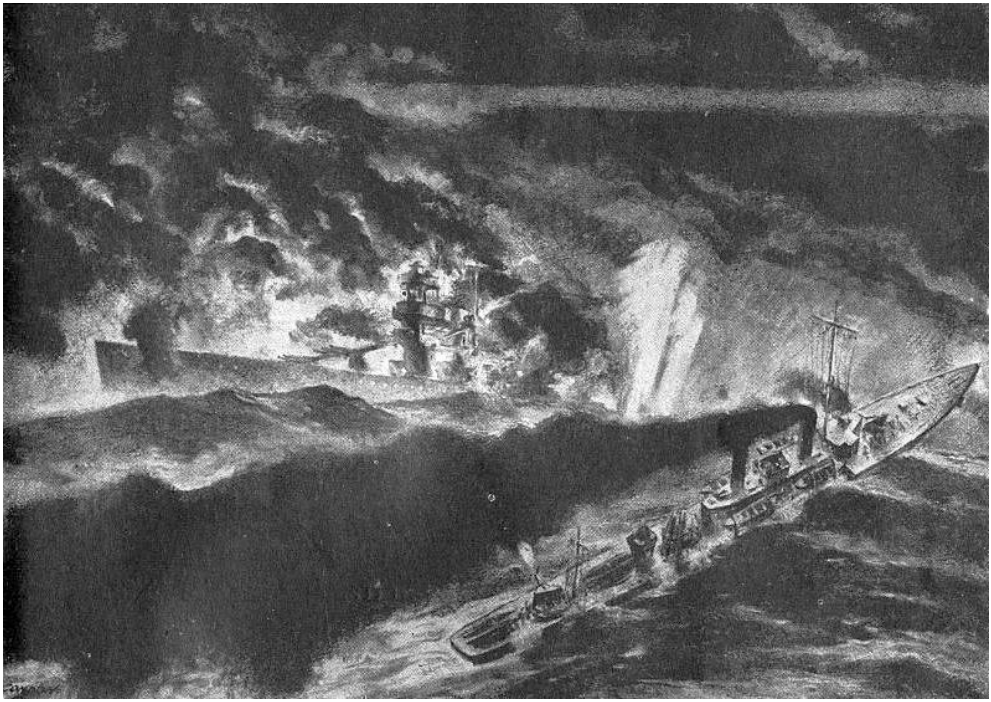
The *Laffey* next became engaged in a furious action with two Japanese destroyers. One of these she put out of action. The other succeeded in knocking out several of the *Laffey's* guns and landing a torpedo hit. Still the American ship kept firing. Soon she was hit again and had but a single gun left. With this she pounded the enemy destroyer until it blew up and sank.

Crippled and in sore straits, the *Laffey* went on through the darkness. In a few minutes, however, she was sighted by a Japanese heavy cruiser, possibly the one she had previously torpedoed. This ship poured in a terrific broadside at close range which riddled the *Laffey's* hull and started consuming fires. With decks awash and in a sinking condition, she was abandoned. While her men were getting away, her commander, Lieutenant Commander W. E. Hank, with three other officers, stood on the foredeck waiting for the last wounded man to be brought up from below by the medical officer. As they waited, the magazines blew up. The gallant destroyer and her commander and those with him perished in the blast.

During these actions, Lieutenant Commander McCandless turned the wounded *San Francisco* toward the west in order to pass through "Windy Gulch." "At this time," he said, "the *San Francisco* was still between the two Jap columns, and both were firing at us. As we pulled out there seemed to be a general cease firing. Then we fired once again and to our own astonishment the two Japanese groups started potting at each other. We slipped away. We had worked one group over pretty thoroughly and had gone all the way down the columns."

This would seem to indicate that as the *San Francisco* and the other American ships steamed between the two Japanese lines, the enemy ships kept on to the southeast and at the end of the engagement were south of the American group and almost completely clear of it.

This ended the *San Francisco's* adventurous night engagement, which had cost the Japanese a battleship and several other men-of-war that they could ill afford to lose. Her course of action, which the other American ships followed—that of steaming straight between two vastly superior enemy columns—was almost unique in naval warfare. To Admiral Callaghan, it appeared the course to pursue to deal out the greatest destruction in the shortest possible time. There was much at stake and he took the responsibility and the risk. It was an action typical of American naval tradition and one that will live in naval history.



The Torpedo Struck, and the *Scharnhorst* Was Enveloped in Flames

19. DEATH OF THE *SCHARNHORST*

December 26, 1943

The great sea and air battles of November, 1942, in which the American Navy decisively defeated the Japanese, secured Guadalcanal and the southern Solomons for the American ground and air forces. Thereafter, the campaign in the Southwest Pacific was featured chiefly by the steady, relentless and successful attacks of American and Australian troops and planes against the Japanese positions in the Northern Solomons, on the island of New Britain where the enemy held the important outpost of Rabaul, and in New Guinea. These attacks continued throughout the year 1943 and forced the Japanese back from one stronghold after another.

Meanwhile, in the same month that witnessed the climax of the naval and air fighting in the Solomons, November, 1942, American and British forces commenced the amazing North African campaign, which after a few months of the hardest kind of fighting drove the German Afrika Corps and the armies of Italy out of North Africa once and for all.

The part played by the American Navy and the Royal Navy in launching and supporting the North African campaign was immense. The operations involved in transporting the American Western Task Force of nearly sixty thousand troops from the United States directly to Morocco were unprecedented. It was the first time in the history of warfare that an army was transported over so great a distance, without stopping on the way, to land and launch an attack on a hostile coast.

During the initial operations, it was the Navy that supplied air support from aircraft carriers, provided gunfire support for the troops, and demolished over-zealous shore batteries. At the same time the Navy ferried across Army fighting planes on its carriers, and protected the many enormous convoys that kept the armies supplied with oil, ammunition, food, and the thousand and one other articles of warfare that were needed to press the campaign to its successful conclusion in May, 1943.

In July of 1943 the Allies invaded and captured Sicily, and early in September they landed on the Italian mainland. On September 8 the Italians capitulated and a few days later surrendered the bulk of their once dreaded fleet. All these operations, involving the sea-borne transportation of unprecedented numbers of troops together with their equipment and supplies, were possible only because Allied sea and air power had doggedly battled their way through to a position of dominance over the enemy.

During this momentous year that witnessed the first great successes of the United Nations[4] against the weakening but desperate Axis powers, many strong units of the British fleet had been kept tied to their home bases by the ever-present threat of raids and offensive action by the remaining German battleships and heavy cruisers. The principal danger came from the battleships *Tirpitz* and *Scharnhorst*. These ships were lying, well protected in deep Norwegian fjords and might at any time sally out to attack the convoys bound for Murmansk in northern Russia or attempt raids on Allied shipping in the North Sea.

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[4] Transcriber Note: i.e., the “Allies”.

Most of the other warships that flew the flag of Nazi Germany at the beginning of the war had been sunk or severely damaged. The giant battleship *Bismarck* lay at the bottom of the Atlantic. The pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* was sunk off the mouth of River Plate in December, 1939, and the remaining two pocket battleships, *Luetzow* and *Admiral*

Scheer had been damaged and were believed to be undergoing extensive repairs. The *Gneisenau*, 26,000-ton sister ship of the *Scharnhorst*, had been badly mauled by British planes when attempting to dash from Brest, France, to Germany earlier in the year. During the latter part of 1943, she was reported being used as an antiaircraft training school at the Baltic port of Gdynia, where she was said to have been hit in the big United States Eighth Air Force bombing raid of October 9.

Germany's two 10,000-ton heavy cruisers, the *Admiral Hipper* and the *Prinz Eugen*, once considered a menace, were believed to be pretty well knocked out. The *Hipper* was reported to have been written off by the Germans for the war's duration, being laid up at a Baltic port, while the *Prinz Eugen*, several times bombed and blasted by the British, was said to have been converted into a training ship. The third ship of this class, the *Seydlitz*, was not yet completed, possibly because of the repeated bombings of Germany's dockyards and harbors by the Royal Air Force.

Of the six German light cruisers afloat at the beginning of the war, there remained but three, the *Emden*, *Leipzig* and *Nuremberg*. These were kept in the sheltered waters of the Baltic during most of the year 1943, apparently afraid of running into British warships if they ventured out into the North Sea.

The presence on the Norwegian coast of the 35,000-ton or larger *Tirpitz*, sister ship of the *Bismarck*, and the 26,000-ton *Scharnhorst*, was quite sufficient, however, to tie up a number of British battleships and cruisers. The British ships were kept ready, with steam up constantly, to steam out in pursuit of the Germans if their presence at sea should be reported, and, in addition, they were used as escorts for the important convoys carrying war materials to the Russian port of Murmansk.

It was not until September that the two German battleships attempted a sortie. Early in that month, accompanied by seven or eight destroyers, they steamed north to the Norwegian-owned island of Spitzbergen and landed troops at several points. The Norwegians opened fire with three small guns, but after a thirty-minute fight, were forced to retreat. It has not been revealed whether or not the German landing parties remained on the island, but, in any event, the *Tirpitz* and *Scharnhorst* soon got under way and beat a retreat to Alten Fjord in northern Norway.

Here, on September 22, the British delivered a daring, original and successful attack against their most dangerous enemy, the *Tirpitz*. The attack was carried out by midget submarines, which were probably constructed for this special mission. Stealing submerged into the fjord, the submarines succeeded in launching a number of torpedoes, many of which tore holes in

the *Tirpitz's* side. The big ship, lying at a point far distant from any dockyard or facilities, was left in a seriously damaged condition, unable to move or at least to fight offensively, for many months.

The *Scharnhorst* escaped in this attack, but her end was to come in an epic sea battle fought in the northern mists and darkness three months later.

On the morning of December 26 a large convoy of merchant ships, guarded by a battleship and cruisers and destroyers of the British Home Fleet, was passing North Cape, the northern extremity of Norway. The ships were not close in to the coast, but were in the latitude of Bear Island, a desolate, rocky Arctic Ocean outpost, some distance to the north of the Cape.

As usual in these dismal waters, the weather was atrocious. Howling gales had piled the icy seas into black, racing mountains, and the deep-laden merchantmen and their guardian men-of-war were being badly tossed about as they made their slow way eastward. Even in the battleship, the *Duke of York*, few people had had much sleep the night before, owing to the violence of the big ship's pitching and rolling. When morning came, there was no sunrise to lighten the waters, for there is no daylight in those latitudes, only a period of dim twilight in the middle of the day.

For protection against close-in submarine or air attack, the convoy was surrounded by destroyers and corvettes. Some distance to the southward was a force of cruisers, under the command of Vice-Admiral R. L. Burnett. The Admiral was on the light cruiser *Belfast*, with the heavy cruiser *Norfolk* and the light cruiser *Sheffield* in company. To the westward, a number of miles astern of the convoy, but in good position to come into action the moment that danger threatened, was the battleship *Duke of York*, flagship of Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, commander of the British Home Fleet. One of the new *King George V* class, she carried ten powerful 14-inch guns and was commissioned after the beginning of the war. With a displacement of 35,000 tons, she had a speed of over 30 knots. Acting as an antisubmarine screen for the *Duke of York*, were the cruiser *Jamaica*, the destroyers *Savage*, *Saumarez*, *Scorpion* and the Norwegian destroyer *Stord*.

The size and power of this protective force is an indication of the British determination to see the Russia-bound convoys through to their destination and to be prepared for the heaviest German raiding craft that could be sent against them. It is believed that the British deliberately stationed the *Duke of York* behind the convoy and well out of sight in the Arctic darkness, in order to create the impression that no battleships were present. If so, their tactics were successful, for the *Scharnhorst* fell into the trap prepared for her. If she

had been aware that the *Duke of York* was at hand, it is more than probable that she would have run for safety after the opening phases of the battle.

The action began in the half-light of the northern early morning when, at about 9:30 A.M., the lookouts on the cruiser *Belfast* spotted the *Scharnhorst*. The German ship was traveling fast, and was headed north to intercept the convoy. Vice-Admiral Burnett, in command of the three British cruisers, ordered speed to be increased to 27 knots, and set a course that would head off the German battleship.

Knifing swiftly through the icy seas, the cruisers were soon within range and all three opened fire. A moment later the *Scharnhorst* was silhouetted against the flashes of flame that shot from her turret guns. The cruisers swept on, closing in and firing with every gun that they could bring to bear. Around them rose the towering shell splashes tossed up by the *Scharnhorst's* salvos, but the Germans could not clamp down on the range. The roar of the rapid firing reverberated over the desolate sea and was clearly heard by those on board the ships of the convoy, out of sight beyond the northern horizon.

The onward rush of the cruisers soon had its effect upon the German ship. Her commander, unwilling to risk the British close-in fire, began to turn away to widen the range. At this time the side of the *Scharnhorst* was suddenly illuminated by a blinding flash. One or more of the *Norfolk's* 8-inch shells had crashed into her superstructure, momentarily showering her with flame. The *Scharnhorst* altered course again, heading off toward the northeast, and racing off at her full speed of 30 knots or better. Owing to her greater bulk, she was able to pound her way through the long rolling seas better than the British cruisers. In a short time she outdistanced them and was lost to sight in the darkness.

During this preliminary action, which continued until about 10:30 A.M., Admiral Frazer in the *Duke of York* had steamed at full speed toward the Norwegian coast in order to get between the *Scharnhorst* and her base at Alten Fjord. The trap was being laid.

The cruisers, which had been joined by the destroyers *Matchless*, *Musketeer*, *Opportune* and *Virago* from the convoy escort, now raced back to protect the convoy in case the *Scharnhorst* should attempt another attack upon it.

Shortly after noon the expected happened. The *Scharnhorst*, having swept around in a broad circle, reappeared from the westward in an attempt to attack the rear ships of the convoy. As soon as she was sighted, the British cruisers turned and once again drove toward her at full speed, firing with

their bow guns. Unable to attack the merchant ships, the *Scharnhorst* concentrated her fire on the cruisers and one of her shells tore into the *Norfolk*, killing an officer and six ratings, and seriously wounding another half-dozen men.

As had happened in the early morning battle, the cruisers held rigorously to their course, which brought them closer and closer to the enemy ship. And once again the *Scharnhorst* turned away, unwilling to stand up to their furious and determined charge. This time she slanted off to the south. Apparently her commander had decided that he could not get near the convoy and that his wisest move was to retreat to Alten Fjord and wait there for another opportunity.

All through the afternoon the German ship sped swiftly to the southward. After her followed the British cruisers, determined to keep her in sight and to keep Admiral Frazer on the *Duke of York* advised as to her position. Later, in his report on the battle, Admiral Frazer wrote: "The pursuit to the southward lasted all afternoon. Admiral Burnett had fleeting glimpses of the enemy and was able to keep me informed of the enemy's movements, my force coming up from the west and to the south of Burnett. From this invaluable information I was able to decide a course on which I must steer to intercept the *Scharnhorst* before she got too near her base. The stage was now set for the main action, the *Scharnhorst* being pursued by the cruiser force with dogged persistence and the *Duke of York* making all speed to intercept to maximum advantage."

At a little after half-past four in the afternoon the watchers on the *Duke of York's* bridge at last caught sight of the swiftly-moving German battleship. She was pounding through the seas a little off the British battleship's port bow, still racing at top speed for the safety of the Norwegian coast. The *Duke of York* immediately altered her course to the southward to bring her full broadside to bear and at 4:49 P.M. sent up a dazzling star shell to illuminate the enemy ship. A minute later, at a range of six miles, the *Duke of York* opened fire with a broadside of her ten 14-inch guns.

For some reason, the *Scharnhorst* did not reply immediately. Quite possibly her commander was taken completely by surprise by the unexpected appearance of the *Duke of York* and, convinced that he was out of danger, had not kept his men at their battle stations. While she hesitated, the *Duke of York* opened with her secondary battery of 5.25's, and the cruiser *Jamaica* commenced to pour out 6-inch shells.

The *Scharnhorst* then came to life and sent up a star shell to give her fire control officers a chance to see the British ships. Several minutes later, at 5:00 P.M., she opened fire on the *Duke of York* with her 11-inch turret guns.

From then on for nearly an hour and a half, the two battleships fired at each other continuously, the vivid flame-spurts of their powerful guns weirdly lighting up the darkness. Each ship was tearing south at 30 knots or more, shouldering the seas aside. Each ship was shaking to the tremendous roaring of its own guns and was surrounded by ghostly-white, hundred-foot-high shell splashes reared up by the other's big projectiles.

Soon the *Scharnhorst* commenced a species of evasive tactics to lessen the chances of her being hit. After firing a broadside, she turned sharply away to port so that her stern was toward the *Duke of York* and only her narrow beam was presented as a target. Then, when her turret guns were reloaded, she straightened out on a southerly course, fired another broadside, and then once more turned away. As a result of these tactics and by reason of her superior speed, the *Scharnhorst* was gradually drawing out of effective range. The *Duke of York* had by this time hit her several times and shortly after 6:00 P.M., one of the British shells must have crashed through to the German vessel's engine room. The *Scharnhorst* was wreathed in clouds of steam and her speed slackened perceptibly.

While the *Scharnhorst's* fire had been persistently accurate and her shells had time and again missed the *Duke of York* by the narrowest margins, the British ship received only two minor hits. Both of these were high and passed through her masts.

By twenty minutes after six the *Scharnhorst*, in spite of her reduced speed, had succeeded in getting out of effective range of the *Duke of York's* guns. Both of the big ships stopped firing. For a few minutes, those on board the *Scharnhorst* were elated. They had run clear of their chief danger, the British battleship's 14-inch guns. Now, with luck, they would soon be safe out of harm's way in Alten Fjord.

But they reckoned without the four swift destroyers that formed the escort for the *Duke of York*. Like shadows, these ships had stolen ahead through the darkness, creeping ever closer to their intended victim. Shortly after the *Duke of York's* last thunderous salvo, they were in position.

Suddenly, the lookouts on the *Scharnhorst* made out the dim shapes of the destroyers and the alarm was given. Every gun on the German ship that could be brought to bear burst into staccato action, the lighter pieces of her secondary batteries drowned out at short intervals by the earsplitting detonations of the turret guns. The destroyers were by now close in, maneuvering to launch torpedoes and the men aboard the *Scharnhorst* knew that their ship and their lives were at stake. The buoyant confidence of a few minutes before turned to desperate fear, and the gun crews fired with the

cold precision of men in the last extreme of mortal danger. Beneath them their ship lurched and faltered, her speed by now cut down to 20 knots.

At about 6:45 P.M., the *Savage* and *Saumarez*, according to Admiral Frazer, "swept in on the starboard bow of the enemy and the *Scorpion* and *Stord* on the port bow under murderous fire form the *Scharnhorst's* guns. They passed on indomitably and the range was under one mile when each in turn fired torpedoes point-blank and turned away under smoke to make good their escape."

By a miracle, only one of the destroyers was hit. This was the *Saumarez*, which sustained damage to her upper works and lost an officer and ten men killed. As the little ships sped away, those on board them heard three deep muffled explosions rending the interior of the German ship. "From then on," says the official report, "the fate of the *Scharnhorst* was sealed."

The *Duke of York*, meanwhile, had been steadily gaining on the enemy and at one minute after seven again opened fire. At this time the *Scharnhorst* was still making fair speed and was a blaze of violent flame from stem to stern as she kept rapidly firing all her guns at the destroyers. From now on the gunners sweating in the *Duke of York's* turrets did yeoman service, and hit the German ship repeatedly with devastating 14-inch shells. Soon the metal of her hull commenced to glow red from the fires that were raging through her lower decks and blinding flashes of exploding ammunition turned night to semidaylight. She started to circle, her speed gradually dropping, until a few minutes before half-past seven she almost stopped. At this time she was headed toward the north, a beaten ship, steering directly away from the haven toward which a few hours earlier she had been swiftly and confidently making her way.

At 7:32 P.M. the *Duke of York* stopped firing to allow the cruiser *Jamaica*, detached for the purpose, to close in and finish off the *Scharnhorst* with torpedoes. Other forces were now on the spot as well. The cruisers *Belfast* and *Norfolk* had come down from the northwest, and the destroyers *Matchless*, *Musketeer*, *Opportune* and *Virago* had arrived from the west, where they had been on guard in case the *Scharnhorst* attempted to escape in that direction.

Between 7:31 and 7:40 P.M. the *Belfast* and *Jamaica* attacked from one side with torpedoes and the four destroyers from the other. One after the other, the deadly missiles tore into the *Scharnhorst's* hull below the waterline, and it is impossible to say which ship or ships may have fired the final shot. "It can only be said," reported Admiral Frazer, "that somewhere between these times she sank in position not far to the northward of North Cape."

The British destroyers immediately started to search the waters for survivors. The *Matchless* picked up six and the *Scorpion* thirty. Seven others were picked up later by German rescue planes. These were all that were left of the *Scharnhorst's* normal complement of 1,460 men.

One of the survivors described the last moments of the doomed ship in unforgettable words. "Unbelievable scenes took place as the heavy shells of the British battleships poured into the *Scharnhorst*," he said. "The death struggle of the German vessel began when the British heavy ships came within 5,000 meters. By that time two torpedo hits had already put the steering gear out of action and the ship was completely out of control.

"Time and again heavy shells crashed through the *Scharnhorst's* thick armor plating, causing terrific damage. Fire was raging throughout the vessel and there were wild scenes as seamen and stokers fought to reach the upper decks. Several sections of the ship had to be cut off by closing the watertight bulkheads, condemning all in those sections to death by drowning.

"All passageways below decks were red hot and filled with choking smoke, making breathing almost impossible. The hospital bays were crowded to overflowing with battered and mutilated men lying about floors as all beds were occupied.

"Above the din of explosions and the roaring of fires could be heard the ship's loud speakers, over which an officer repeatedly admonished the men to keep calm and not to lose their heads, but he roared himself hoarse in vain, none heeding his appeal and all struggling without ceasing to get out of the inferno below to God's air above.

"But those in the upper decks were little better off. When a heavy shell exploded in one gun turret, the whole structure became enveloped in flames and all gunners surviving the explosion threw themselves headlong into icy Arctic waves. Suddenly all the ship's lights failed, but despite this the gunners whose guns were still workable continued firing while ammunition came up to them on those ammunition hoists whose crews below had not joined in the mad fight for open air.

"Then came the end. A particularly heavy hit caused the great ship to quiver and then she sank while hundreds of men threw themselves headlong into the water. Even had help been available few of them could have been rescued, for almost all were sucked down in a swirl as the *Scharnhorst* plunged to the bottom."

The action was one in which each type of British ship played its allotted part practically to perfection. In summing up the different stages of the

daylong pursuit, Admiral Fraser emphasized this point and paid due tribute to the cruisers, the destroyers and the *Duke of York*.

"The cruisers had by their dogged pugnacity given safe conduct to the convoy and delivered the enemy to the *Duke of York*. The *Duke of York* fought the *Scharnhorst* hard, skilfully and well, and after being subjected to the full weight of the enemy's fire for over an hour and a half won a capital-ship gun action at night. The skilled handling of the *Savage*, *Saumarez*, *Scorpion* and *Stord* in instantly perceiving the opportunity for their audacious attack and the gallant way in which they pressed it home under intense fire insured the eventual destruction of the *Scharnhorst*."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Brave Ships of World War II* by Joseph Leeming]