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BISMARCK ACTION 70...LIVE NAVY!...UK CARRIER BUILD UP-DATE...SSNs FOR AUSTRALIA'S FLEET?

Battle of the Denmark Strait

The Bismarck Action began with the clash between Hood and Prince of Wales, and Bismarck, the latter supported by the Prinz Eugen, on May 24, 1941. Here, in artist Paul Wright's epic painting, Hood is already on fire after suffering heavy hits from Bismarck. She would soon explode killing all but three of her men. Prince of Wales escaped, but badly mauled, after landing hits that damaged Bismarck.

Image: Commissioned by Ron Feltham and subsequently donated to the National Museum of the Royal Navy.



BANDS OF Brothers

USING ELEMENTS OF HIS RECENT BOOK 'KILLING THE BISMARCK', **IAIN BALLANTYNE** TELLS THE STORY OF HOW THE NOTORIOUS GERMAN BATTLESHIP MET HER END, BUT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO ROYAL NAVY WARSHIPS THAT PLAYED KEY ROLES, THE DESTROYER HMS COSSACK AND CRUISER HMS DORSETSHIRE. THOUGH THE BRITISH VESSELS THEMSELVES WERE NOT TO SURVIVE LONG AFTER THE BISMARCK ACTION, TO THIS DAY THEY BOTH HAVE THRIVING VETERANS' ASSOCIATIONS, WHOSE MOST RECENT REUNIONS IAIN ATTENDED. HE MET SURVIVING WW2 VETERANS AND HEARD THEIR REMARKABLE STORIES.

HMS Cossack **May 26, 1941**

The Swordfish torpedo-bombers formed up on Lieutenant Commander James Stewart-Moore's aircraft for the flight back to HMS Ark Royal. His attention was drawn to an aircraft in the formation equipped with air search radar. Via semaphore flags, a young officer in its crew was indicating to his leader that a contact had been picked up, around ten miles away. Destroyers came into view below, which the aviators at first suspected might be German ships coming out to help escort Bismarck to a French port, but they flashed a British identification signal. It was Captain Philip Vian's 4th Destroyer Flotilla, battling rough weather in poor visibility as it struggled south.

Aboard HMS Cossack, junior rating Ken Robinson, a loader on the ship's 2pdr pom pom anti-aircraft weapon recalled that one of the biplanes flew 'practically alongside as the pilot waved to us before they flew away.' The torpedo-bombers turned back towards Ark Royal. They were

returning to the carrier in humiliation, for prior to encountering Vian's destroyers, the Swordfish had mistakenly attacked the cruiser HMS Sheffield, fortunately causing her no harm. Rearmed and determined to make up for their error, the young British aviators that night found and attacked Bismarck, her steering damaged so badly she stood no chance of reaching safety in Brest. The British naval aviators could feel well satisfied. There was now a solid chance for the Royal Navy to avenge the loss of 1,415 shipmates killed just over two days earlier when Bismarck's shells blew apart battle-cruiser Hood. For many of the men in warships scattered across the Atlantic - all heading towards a showdown with the Nazi high seas raider - it was a deeply personal mission. Many of them had known sailors and marines serving in Hood. A good few of them had at one time even served in Hood themselves. Now, crippled by a torpedo dropped by one of Ark's strike aircraft, the Bismarck was a wounded buffalo

PURSUE AND KILL

ROBERT FARLEY CONSIDERS THE MYTHS AND REALITY SURROUNDING DRAMATIC EVENTS IN THE ATLANTIC SOME 70 YEARS AGO, IN WHICH THE ROYAL NAVY PURSUED THE PRIDE OF HITLERS' FLEET.

Even before she slipped beneath the waves, the inaugural cruise of battleship Bismarck was shrouded in myth. For a week, Bismarck captured the world's imagination, representing the fear that Nazi Germany might displace Great Britain as a dominant world power, having starved the British into submission. The dramatic destruction of the battle-cruiser HMS Hood, one of the most famous and beautiful warships in the world, only added to Bismarck's mystique. Inevitably, myths and misunderstandings about Bismarck would grow, immortalised in some cases by film and song. The best approach to busting the myths about Bismarck is to place her journey within the proper strategic context of WW2. Hunting Bismarck wasn't the only challenge the Royal Navy faced in May 1941. In the Mediterranean, the Germans and the Italians combined to strike a blow even more telling than the destruction of the Hood. Moreover, the potential escape of Bismarck should be understood not in apocalyptic terms, but rather in what she would have meant for the conduct of the rest of the war in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and, as events turned and twisted several months later, in the Pacific. May 1941 quite simply tested what seemed to be the endless resources of the Royal Navy to the limit. From the perspective of its enemies, the RN always had more. It could always bring another battleship to the fray, along with more cruisers, destroyers, and even dozens of Swordfish torpedo-bombers. The strategically myopic commitment

to the defence of Crete represented the first, and perhaps the more important, WW2 crisis for the Royal Navy. The overall strategic value of Crete was in considerable question. While the island could help seal off part of the eastern Mediterranean, and provide a base for air attacks against Balkan targets, it would always have been exceedingly vulnerable to committed Axis efforts. Even less defensible was the commitment to Crete well beyond the point at which it had become clear that the island could not be held. By the end of the battle, three RN cruisers and six of its destroyers would be at the bottom, with two battleships out of action for extended periods. Although the Regia Marina (the Italian Navy) had been battered by the twin blows of Taranto and Matapan, it retained potent capabilities for dominating the central Mediterranean. Into this strategic picture charged the new German battleship Bismarck. Seemingly terrifying, she was truly large and powerful, but not a particularly well designed ship. She did not compare favourably with most foreign contemporaries, suffering from a series of design flaws that arose because of Germany's long holiday from battleship construction and operation. Every other world navy had operated battleships since WW1. Most had embarked on dramatic reconstructions that upgraded the capabilities and remedied the defects of older ships. These lessons found their way into new construction. Lacking this experience, Bismarck was a WW1 battleship constructed on a WW2 scale. Nonetheless, Hood and Prince of Wales discovered that even a poorly designed 45,000 tons battleship remains potent. After destroying the elderly Hood during the Battle of the Denmark Strait on May 24, Bismarck and her consort Prinz Eugen allowed the new battleship Prince of Wales to disengage. Had

about to be brought down by pursuing wolves and torn to pieces. In the darkness of a stormy Atlantic night, Cossack and the 4th Flotilla's other destroyers did their best to cause more damage and maintain contact with the enemy. Out in the blackness, the British battleships HMS King George V and HMS Rodney loitered, awaiting their curtain call to make the kill after dawn. Cossack led the way, aboard her Telegraphist Eric Farmer feeling adrenaline pumping: "Now was our chance. Cossack, full speed ahead, went in to attack. We are spotted and Bismarck opens fire on us. The first salvo was 50 yards short. The next one burst over the bridge causing everyone to duck. The range was less than a mile now. A sharp turn, several swishes as the torpedoes are fired..." Ken Robinson recalled of the attack: "We went in head to sea and fired a spread of torpedoes. At the time, we thought one of them had hit." Having tried her luck, Cossack did not hang around, Robinson remembering that his ship "turned and with the sea up our stern, sped away at what seemed to be the fastest we ever went, the sea throwing us all over the place."

May 27

The following morning, as the sun peeped over the eastern horizon, to reveal a storm-tossed scene, from his upper deck position Robinson scanned his surroundings. The

seascape was dotted with converging British warships: "There were large White Ensigns flying all over the place and the Bismarck was sporting two large swastika flags. Shots were soon hitting the Bismarck, who returned fire with her 15-inch guns." During an action between capital ships, unless called forward to make a torpedo attack, destroyers were required to keep out the way. They circled on the periphery, keeping watch for U-boats. Robinson saw Bismarck's ensign fluttering defiantly despite her being turned into a wreck. It was an image that would remain imprinted on his memory for the rest of his life. "She was a right mess. There was a lot of flame and smoke. The ship was just a mass of wreckage under all that. I wouldn't like to have been aboard her." He noted with regret: "From the start of the Bismarck Action, when Hood was sunk, until the end, which was four days, nearly four thousand seamen were killed."

HMS Dorsetshire May 25, 1941

According to one contemporary account of the Bismarck Action, the men of the cruiser HMS Dorsetshire were filled with 'remorseless determination to get revenge' for Hood. Bert Gollop, one of her junior ratings described the feeling aboard: "We had just left Cape Town and the ship was escorting a large convoy. Soon after we heard the news of HMS Hood and we were all devastated, could not believe it." Signals were scrutinised intently as they flashed back and forth between the Admiralty and other vessels actively involved in the pursuit of Bismarck, which had been

follow Nelson's instruction to his sailors before the Battle of Trafalgar: 'In case Signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.' George Bell was not much more than a lad, at the time the Captain's Messenger, tasked with taking important instructions wherever needed in the ship and as such he was stationed on the bridge of the cruiser. "Captain Martin told us what we were going to do, but we thought if Bismarck does come our way, gosh what chance do we stand?"

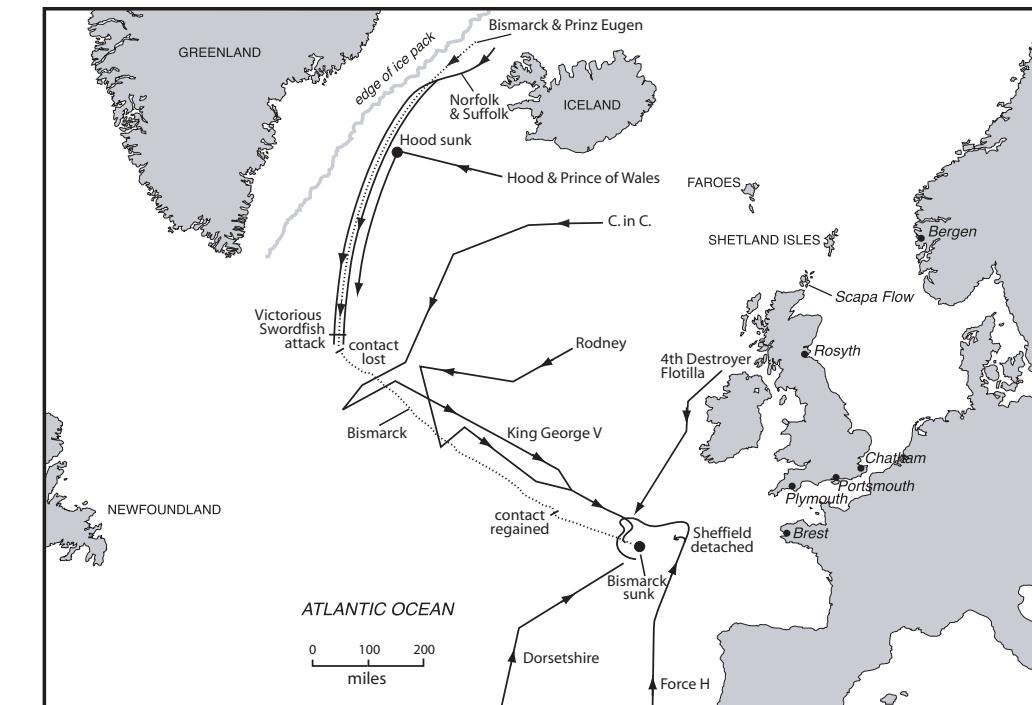
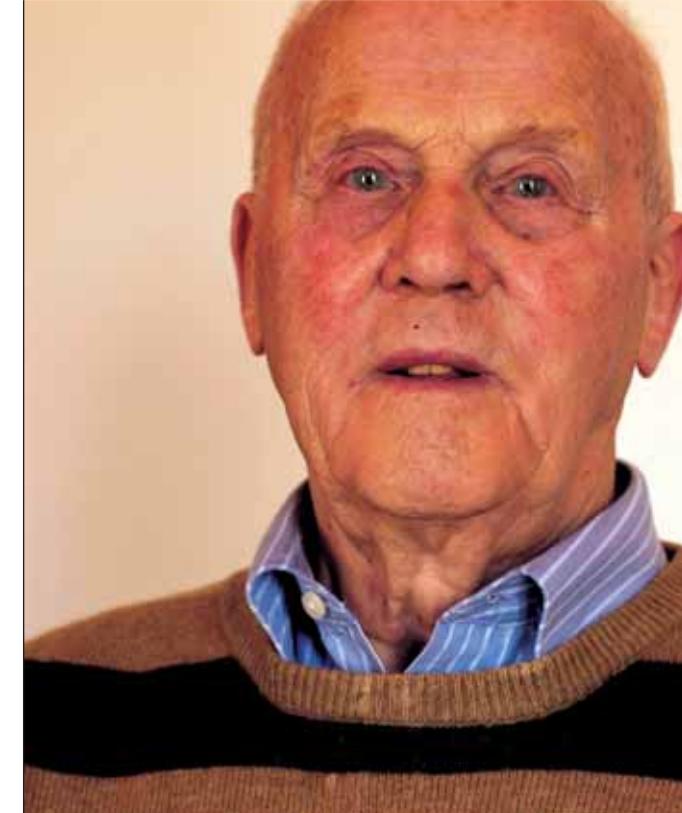
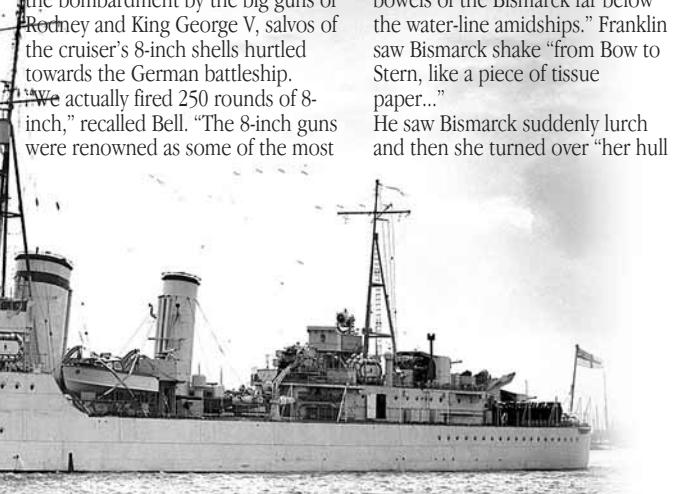
May 27

After her long dash north through heavy seas, bows plunging into gigantic waves and shaking them off before the ship hurtled on, Dorsetshire finally came within range of her quarry. George Bell waited on the cruiser's bridge to carry messages from Captain Martin. Like every man in the British warship, he knew the task at hand was absolutely necessary: "We closed to open fire, for the last thing we wanted was to allow Bismarck under any circumstances to cause havoc among our convoys." Amid the bombardment by the big guns of Rodney and King George V, salvos of the cruiser's 8-inch shells hurtled towards the German battleship.

"We actually fired 250 rounds of 8-inch," recalled Bell. "The 8-inch guns were renowned as some of the most accurate in the Navy." Dorsetshire turned broadside on and let rip with all eight guns. Flame rippled down her sides, dirty yellow-brown smoke enveloping the cruiser's upper works. Dorsetshire began getting the range and scoring hits. With their ship ceasing fire at around 10.15am the cruiser's men gazed in horrified awe at the stricken enemy ship. Bert Gollop thought "Bismarck was in an unbelievable shambles but refused to sink...it must have been hell aboard her." With the big ships withdrawing, Dorsetshire moved in for the final act against the dying giant, torpedoes leaping from her tubes. George Bell saw the decisive actions unfold: "I was on the bridge wing, just down from the compass platform. When the Torpedo Officer got the order from the captain to fire I was right alongside him and I saw him act to launch them." As a precaution against any potentially lurking enemy submarines Dorsetshire zigzagged as she went in to deliver the decisive blows.

Junior rating A. E. Franklin saw "a tremendous explosion", believing some of his ship's torpedoes must have "planted themselves in the bowels of the Bismarck far below the water-line amidships." Franklin saw Bismarck shake "from Bow to Stern, like a piece of tissue paper..."

He saw Bismarck suddenly lurch and then she turned over "her hull



PURSUE AND KILL Continued

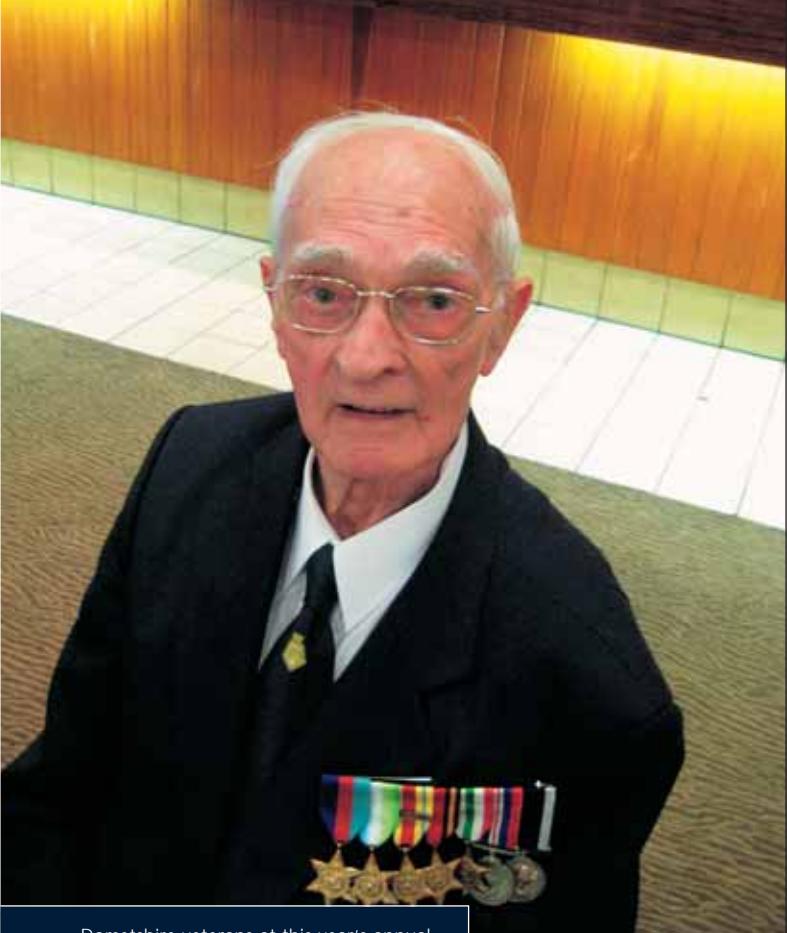
being red hot...some raging inferno within burning out the heart of the ship...[Bismarck] sank stern first and the waves covering her after a glorious fight against the odds..." Franklin concluded: "The Hood has been avenged." German survivors would later claim that they had received orders to scuttle the ship and this is what finally put Bismarck out of her misery, rather than Dorsetshire's torpedoes. It is a point that has been hotly contested ever since. Captain Martin ordered a signal sent as 'Most Immediate', which told the world of the German battleship's end and her bravery as she went down: 'Torpedoed Bismarck both sides before she sank. She had ceased firing but her colours were still flying.'

CONTINUED on P54

Here, top: A Swordfish from HMS Victorious skims low over the waves after the valiant, but unsuccessful attack on Bismarck late on May 24, 1941. Above: A battle map depiction of the Bismarck Action. Both images: Dennis Andrews. Left: HMS Cossack, WW2 Tribal Class destroyer. Photo: NMRN. Far left: Ken Robinson during WW2. Photo: Ken Robinson Collection. Left, above: Ken Robinson today. Photo: Jonathan Eastland/AJAX.

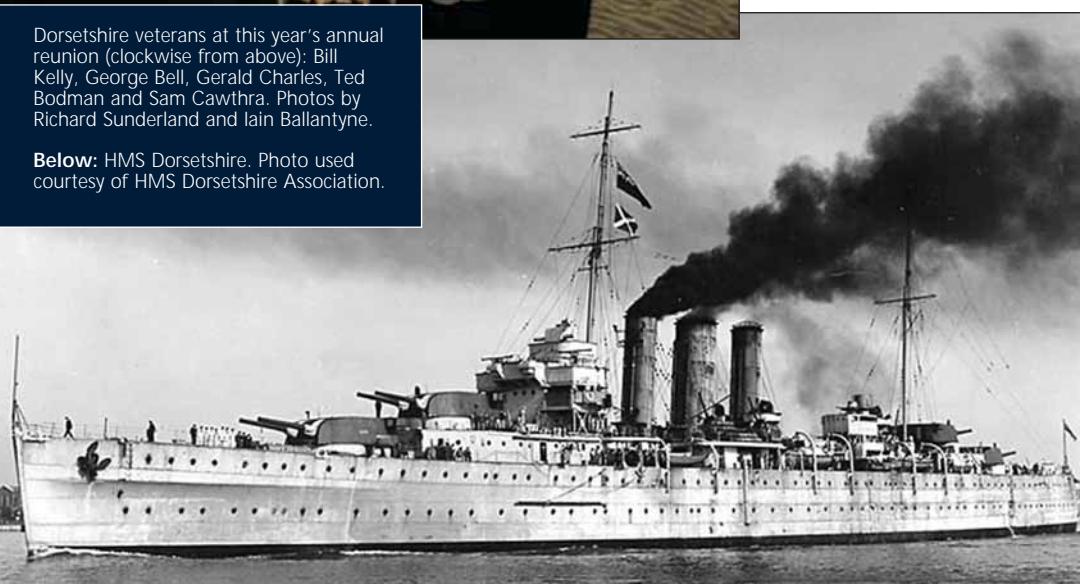
would also have shifted the dynamic in the Pacific. Ironically, the unavailability of Prince of Wales might have saved Repulse from being dispatched to her doom off Malaya, but it also would have put great pressure on the Allies in early 1942. The fast battleships of the US Navy might not have been sent to the Pacific as early as they were: in November 1942 USS Washington could have found herself waiting for a sortie from Bismarck or Scharnhorst instead of destroying HIJMS Kirishima. The fast carriers of the USN might also have remained in the Atlantic longer, giving Yamamoto a few more months to rampage. The window of vulnerability, however, would not last forever. In 1943 the RN and the USN commissioned enough fast battleships to counter both the German and Japanese threats. By 1944 none of this would matter; Allied naval superiority would be more than sufficient to manage both the Germans and the Japanese. In some sense, however, all of this is beside the point of the story of Bismarck and her pursuers. The symbolic meaning of Bismarck and Hood goes beyond calculations on the ledger of naval power. Perhaps the biggest myth shattered by the chase of the Bismarck is the idea that war, and especially war at sea, is conducted rationally and without emotion. We are accustomed to think about war at sea in terms of the great ships that hurl shells and torpedoes at one another, rather than in terms of the men and women who sail those ships. When we speak of how the Royal Navy destroyed three Italian cruisers at Matapan in early 1941, or about the destruction of Graf Spee at the River Plate in late 1939, we think about naval assets that will no longer be available for future fights. The great expense of individual warships combined with the 'personality' that each vessel has, allows us to think in this way. However, as the pursuit of Hood's killer demonstrates, the realities of naval warfare leave considerable room for rage, courage, and thirst for revenge. Finally, when the guns are silent it also leaves room for mercy with attempts by one foe to rescue survivors of the now lost enemy ship, as happened when the British attempted to offer salvation to the Bismarck's survivors.





Dorsetshire veterans at this year's annual reunion (clockwise from above): Bill Kelly, George Bell, Gerald Charles, Ted Bodman and Sam Cawthra. Photos by Richard Sunderland and Iain Ballantyne.

Below: HMS Dorsetshire. Photo used courtesy of HMS Dorsetshire Association.



Ted Bodman, who was one of Dorsetshire's signalmen, thought this was a genuine tribute: "Captain Martin sent this signal saluting the bravery of the Germans in their fight, news of which was suppressed at the time, but he was a sailor playing tribute to the bravery of other sailors, even though they were our enemy. Looking across at the Bismarck I couldn't believe there could be any survivors - she was so badly shot up." The aftermath of Bismarck's sinking saw desperate calls for salvation from hundreds of German survivors fighting to stay afloat amid oil and debris in a strength-sapping cold sea. Captain Martin gave the order for Dorsetshire to stop by the biggest group of survivors and start rescuing them, despite fears of U-boat attack and the likelihood of a Luftwaffe assault. Observed A. E. Franklin: "The foe is beaten and hearts go out in sorrow to them that are in the water. Ropes come from nowhere. Willing hands rush to haul inboard the survivors. More ropes, more hands. Various groups of sailors hauling with all their might; one then another and then three are hauled inboard...willing hands give artificial respiration [while] the more serious cases are taken to the

sickbay where doctors and other willing hands give succour to the fallen foe." However, it all came to a halt 20 minutes after it started, when there was a submarine scare. Captain Martin giving the order for slow ahead to remove Dorsetshire from peril. The cruiser accelerated through floating knots of Germans who cried out in despair, faces etched with agony as their only means of survival sped away. Horrified British sailors staring over the side knew they were leaving fellow mariners to a slow, excruciating death. They threw lifebelts and anything else that would float overboard to give the Germans a slim, if vain, chance to stay afloat. Royal Marine gunner Geoff Kitchen found it "heartbreaking to hear their cries." Some of the Germans hung stubbornly onto the ropes, only letting go when washed away by the ship's foaming wake. One lucky soul was pulled up and over the side even as the cruiser accelerated away.

Seventy Years On

At this year's annual reunion of the HMS Cossack Association, these days mainly composed of veterans who served in the Korean War ship of the name, Ken Robinson reflected on events during the Bismarck Action. Casting his mind back, he recalled that by the time the fighting was over that day, all he and his shipmates wanted to do was get some sleep. "What we needed above all was to get our heads down," he recalled. "Cossack was always in the thick of it and it was only the latest episode in an exhausting war." He thought that while the men of the Royal Navy had been after revenge, it wasn't true to say there was any hatred of the enemy. "I don't believe you should do things just for revenge," he said. "We thought justice had been delivered for the loss of Hood. There really was no personal animosity because I think the Germans respected our way of

fighting and we respected theirs - regardless of what happened elsewhere in the war, I think the navies were different." Legend has it that, after a Bismarck officer was hauled up over the side of HMS Dorsetshire, plucked from a watery grave by the willing hands of his enemies, he told his British rescuers: "Us today, you tomorrow." And so it was in the months and years which followed that his prediction came to pass for a number of the ships, their sailors and marines, who had pursued the mighty German battleship. Among those lost was the Cossack and it took four days for her to give up the fight after she was struck by a torpedo fired by U-563, west of Portugal, just five months after she took part in the Bismarck Action. The fatal hit blew off her bows and the destroyer suffered 159 deaths, her 29 survivors picked up by other British warships. Ken Robinson lost many friends, but he was not aboard at the time of his ship's sinking as he had broken his arm and was in a hospital ashore.

AT this year's HMS Dorsetshire Association reunion, George Bell also pondered on the fact that there never was any personal enmity for the foe. "When we went to pick up survivors, we did so because they

were seamen doing their job of work, just like us," he said. "We had done our job, which was to sink the Bismarck and so now we offered them mercy." Ted Bodman revealed that, during other postwar reunions, he had been pleased to establish a friendship of sorts with his former foes. "After the war we did establish good terms with the German

survivors and I am glad to say they did attend a few of our reunions." However, when Dorsetshire, too, was claimed by war's bitter harvest, there was no such mercy shown by the enemy on that occasion, the cruiser's men being machine-gunned in the water by the Japanese. The end came on 5 April 1942, in the Indian Ocean, under a hail of bombs from Japanese carrier aircraft. Dorsetshire sank stern first, after sustaining ten hits and near misses that inflicted catastrophic damage and great slaughter.

The fate for many of Dorsetshire's 234 dead was every bit as horrific as that suffered by Bismarck's men. With bombers having dealt the death blows to the ship, Zero fighters swept up and down, machine-gunning anyone who dared to move on the upper deck or in the sea. The survivors were in the water for 30 hours before being picked up. "And we were extremely fortunate, because the British warship that did spot us was

just about to call off the search," reflected Kelly. The Dorsetshire will be forever remembered as the ship that delivered the final, fatal blows to Bismarck but we should never forget the bitter fate that awaited her, and so many other Royal Navy warships that took part in that triumph. The knowledge that the cruel wheel of fate brings death and disaster in war as surely as it brings glory and survival is surely the primary, and timeless, lesson of the Bismarck Action.

• *The stories of the loss of HMS Cossack and sinking of HMS Dorsetshire will be told in more detail in future editions of this magazine. You can visit the web sites of the associations at www.dorsetshire.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk www.hmscossack.org*

• *Killing the Bismarck - Destroying the Pride of Hitler's Fleet* is published by Pen & Sword Books (£25.00, hardback). www.pen-and-sword.co.uk



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Hood & Bismarck



Wallsmacker Art Web Site Project

In the last edition of this magazine we revealed a unique art project to create two new paintings commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Bismarck Action. The paintings - one of HMS Hood between the wars and the other of battleship Bismarck firing during the Battle of the Denmark Strait - are making good progress and are on target for completion in time for the anniversary (May 24 - 27).

Wallsmacker Art informs us that Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, has kindly agreed to sign the first print in a limited edition of 50 of the painting of HMS Hood, to be donated to 'The Big Salute' for auction in aid of British Forces' charities.

The print will also carry the signatures of Rob White, co-ordinator of the expedition that located the wreck of HMS Hood, and rediscovered the remains of Bismarck, as well as that of David

Mearns, whose deep-sea search skills were vital to the success of the expedition. Artist David Folland is most grateful for their contribution, which should make this a most collectable and unique item.

Ten prints of the limited edition of 50 of the Bismarck painting will also be signed by Rob White and David Mearns, as well as lain Ballantyne, author of the award-winning book 'Killing the Bismarck' (and Editor of this magazine). These will be available

Salute to a Battle-cruiser

A new museum in Glasgow is staging an exhibit to commemorate Hood's loss. A magnificent model of the Hood is centre-piece of the display, in Glasgow's Riverside Museum, about the battle-cruiser's construction at John Brown's in Clydebank (1916 - 1920), one of the Scottish city's many construction yards at the time. It also tells the story of Hood's interwar days, when she was the pride of the Royal Navy and Britain. Hood's final three minutes in battle are also on view, via archive film and photographs. The curators hope they have created a display that tells Hood's story in a thoughtful and informative way. The HMS Hood model is one of about 250 from Glasgow Museums' world-class ship model collection to go on display at Riverside; their stories told, for the first time, in the context of a Clydeside setting. Located on the banks of the River Clyde, the prestigious Riverside Museum also has the 19th Century sailing ship Glenlee moored outside.

To support the Riverside Museum's fund-raising appeal and ensure a remarkable showcase for Glasgow's amazing shipbuilding past continues to thrive visit:

www.riversideappeal.org

Pictured: Left - A preliminary work that has contributed towards David Folland's final composition for his Bismarck Action 70 project (Wallsmacker Art image); above - the stunning model of HMS Hood that is on display in Glasgow (Glasgow Museums image).

for sale through the web site, with ten per cent of the proceeds being donated to the charities. A forum has now been launched on the site where visitors can add their contributions and make suggestions of suitable titles for each painting.

David invites all those interested to visit the web site and join in his tribute to two lost capital ships and their crews.

Visit:
www.wall-smacker-art.com