



Bismarck

John Asmussen

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Bismarck, pride of the German Navy, displaced more than 50,000 tons fully loaded, and when commissioned she was the largest warship to date. The Bismarck took part in only one operation that ended with her sinking after just nine days. On 24 May 1941, in the Battle of the Denmark Strait, Bismarck and the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen were engaged by the Royal Navy battleship HMS Prince of Wales and the battlecruiser HMS Hood. Less than ten minutes after the British opened fire, a shell from Bismarck struck Hood near her aft ammunition magazines. Soon afterwards, Hood exploded, and sank within three minutes with the loss of all but three of her crew. Prince of Wales continued to exchange fire with Bismarck but suffered serious malfunctions in her main armament as the British battleship had not fully worked up after being completed in late March 1941 and soon broke off the engagement. Bismarck had not escaped unscathed and required dry-dock facilities at St. Nazaire, and prepared to head in that direction. In the morning of 26 May British aircraft spotted the whereabouts of Bismarck and in the late evening Swordfish from HMS Ark Royal launched an attack. A hit by a single torpedo jammed Bismarck's rudder and steering gear. The following morning, Tuesday 27 May 1941, HMS Rodney and HMS King George V drew closer to Bismarck in line abreast, their enemy well illuminated by the morning sun in the background. Rodney steered to the east so that her gunfire would work the length of Bismarck, while King George V took the side. They opened fire at 08:47.

Bismarck returned fire, but her inability to steer and her list to port severely affected her shooting accuracy. Within thirty minutes, Bismarck's guns had all been silenced, but Bismarck continued to fly its ensign. HMS Dorsetshire launched torpedoes which may have hit the Bismarck at comparatively short range and rather than risk her being captured, First Officer Hans Oels ordered the men below decks to abandon ship; he instructed the engine room crews to open the ship's watertight doors and prepare scuttling charges. Most of the crew went into the water, but few sailors from the lower engine spaces got out alive. Bismarck went under the waves at 10:39 that morning.

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