

# Sink the Bismarck! The German battleship was the “terror of the seas” 85 years ago

*Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - May 2026*

Eighty-five years ago this month, Great Britain's Royal Navy suffered a catastrophe that shocked the nation. At a time during the Second World War when one German army was sweeping across Western Europe and another was secretly preparing to invade Soviet Russia, Britain still considered itself Master of the Seven Seas. The Royal Navy was the largest in the world at the outbreak of hostilities in 1939. Its 1,400 surface ships included seven aircraft carriers, 15 heavy cruisers and 51 light cruisers.

In August of 1918, Britain had launched the battle cruiser HMS Hood. She was 100 feet longer than the George V-class battleships, and quickly became the pride of the Royal Navy. Between 1923 and 1924, The Mighty Hood, as she was known, displayed the royal naval ensign on a world tour. Thirty countries, including Canada, welcomed HMS Hood in British Empire ports around the globe. The Hood was the visual representation of British naval might.

German naval strength throughout the Second World War was vested in its submarine fleet. Hitler's U-boat wolfpacks were attacking Allied merchant convoys carrying the imported oil, munitions and raw materials that Britain depended upon to fuel the war effort. The Nazis' surface fleet, however, posed no threat to Royal Navy domination. Launched in 1939 and 1941 respectively, the German battleships Tirpitz and Bismarck sought to change that dynamic. Tirpitz was stationed in Norwegian waters to disrupt convoys to the Soviet Union. In May of 1941, the greatest surface threat to the British Navy came from the sudden appearance of Bismarck.

Bismarck was one of the deadliest and most powerful warships on the high seas. On May 24, in what would become known as the Battle of the Denmark Straits, the battleship Bismarck and the German heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen were positioned in the waters between Iceland and Greenland, preparing to attack Allied convoys. A ferocious early morning artillery battle ensued involving HMS Hood and the new British battleship, HMS Prince of Wales.

The fight lasted only 16 minutes, but it was devastating. A shell from Bismarck pierced the lightly-armored deck of HMS Hood, detonating the aft magazine. The explosion was stupendous. Three minutes after being struck, The Mighty Hood sank, carrying 1,415 sailors to their deaths. Only three survived.

In Britain, as in the entire Commonwealth, the loss of HMS Hood struck like a thunderbolt. The shock and the stunning blow to both national pride and confidence in Royal Navy superiority swelled demands for revenge.

“Sink the Bismarck!” demanded Prime Minister Winston Churchill to the Admiralty. Sink the Bismarck! came the headlines from newspaper editorials across the United Kingdom. Sink the Bismarck! came the cry from an enraged public.

During the battle, Bismarck had been damaged by the guns of HMS Prince of Wales. Trailing a wide oil slick, she fled for the German-occupied port of Brest and safety. Three days after the Battle of the Denmark Straits, on November 27, Bismarck came under fire from the British battleships HMS King George V and HMS Rodney. Struck by multiple blows during a raging two-hour fight, an exhausted Bismarck, facing annihilation by the British warships, finally gave up. Scuttled by her doomed crew, she sank in the North Atlantic. Of her crew of 2,221, only 115 survived to be pulled out of the oily waters by British sailors.

The impact of the three days in May 1941 that witnessed the loss of HMS Hood and the destruction of Bismarck was immediate and critical. Military enlistments soared, both in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth. Canada proceeded to build what, by war's end, would be the third-largest navy in the world. Allied shipyards bustled with renewed energy as they built and launched destroyers, minesweepers, corvettes and more. Merchant convoys carrying supplies and war material to Britain were strengthened by increased naval escorts.

In May of 1943, a month that would become known in Germany as “Black May,” the enemy lost 41 submarines. Germany's hope of mounting a naval threat, a goal that had begun with Bismarck, now lay utterly in ruins.