

## **A survivor of the famous World War two German warship Bismarck tells us all**

The Sinking of the Bismarck  
27th May 1941

Quote:

“This is an extract from 'Battleship Bismarck', by Burkard Baron von Mullenheim-Rechberg. He was gunnery officer and the highest ranking survivor. It shows how awful the last moments of the ship were. The accounts of men escaping from the lower decks through the wreck are harrowing and graphic.

The Battle

The alarm bells were still ringing when, returning from the bridge, I entered my action station. I picked up the control telephone and heard, "Two battleships port bow." I turned my director and saw two bulky silhouettes, unmistakably King George V and Rodney, at a range of approximately 24,000 meters. As imperturbable as though they were on their way to an execution, they were coming directly towards us in line abreast, a good way apart, their course straight as a die. The seconds ticked by. Tension and anticipation mounted. The nerves of our gun directors, gun captains, and range-finding personnel were steady. After the utterly hopeless night they had just spent, any action could only be a release. The very first salvo would bring it. How many ships were approaching no longer meant anything; we could be shot to pieces only once.

Our eight 38-centimeter guns were opposed to nine 40.6-centimeter and ten 35.6-centimeter guns; our twelve 15-centimeter guns by twenty-eight 15.2-centimeter and 13.3-centimeter guns. A single British broadside weighed 18,448 kilograms (20,306 kilograms, including the sixteen 20.3-centimeter guns on the heavy cruisers, Norfolk and Dorsetshire) against 6,904 kilograms for a German broadside. In our foretop Schneider was giving orders in his usual calm voice. He announced that our target was Rodney, which was off our port bow and heading straight for us. Then, to the ship's command, "Main and secondary batteries ready, request permission to fire." But it was Rodney that got off the first salvo, at 0847. King George V's first salvo followed one minute later.

The range had closed to less than 20,000 meters, at which distance the time of flight of the shells was less than one minute, but it seemed many times that long. Finally, white mushrooms, tons of water thrown up by heavy shells, rose seventy meters into the air. But they were still quite far from us. At 0849 the Bismarck's fore turrets replied with a partial salvo at Rodney. At this time, our after turrets could not be brought to bear on the target. Schneider observed his first three salvos as successively "short," "straddling," and "over," an extremely promising start that I only knew about from what I heard on the telephone because the swinging back and forth of the Bismarck allowed me only intermittent glimpses of the enemy. Obviously not considering dividing our fire, he continued to concentrate on Rodney.

As the shells hurtled past one another in the air, I tried to distinguish incoming ones from those being discharged from our own guns. Suddenly I remembered wardroom conversations that I had had with British naval officers regarding range-finding techniques. They had high praise for their prismatic instruments while I praised our stereoscopic ones. Did we have the better principle? Rodney seemed to need a lot of time to find our range.

I spent the first few minutes of the battle wondering why no enemy shells were landing on us, but that soon changed and there were more than enough of them. At 0854 the Norfolk, which was off Bismarck's starboard bow, began firing her 20.3-centimeter battery at a range of 20,000 meters forward of the starboard quarter. A few minutes later, Rodney opened up with her secondary battery and, around 0902, she observed a spectacular hit on the forward part of the Bismarck. At 0904 Dorsetshire began firing on us at a range of 18,000 meters from the starboard side, astern. Bismarck was under fire from all directions, and the British were having what amounted to undisturbed target practice.

Not long after the action began King George V and, a little later, Rodney gradually turned to starboard onto a southerly course, where they maneuvered so as to stay on our port side. This tactic caused the range to diminish with extraordinary rapidity, which seemed to be exactly what Tovey wanted. Lindemann could no longer maneuver so as to direct, or at least influence, the tactical course of the battle. He could neither choose his course nor evade the enemy's fire. Tovey, on the other hand, could base his tactical decisions on the sure knowledge that our course would continue to be into the wind. We could not steer even this course to the best advantage of our gunners, who were faced with great difficulty in correcting direction. Though I could not see what was going on around me from my completely enclosed, armored control station, it was not hard to picture how the scene outside was changing. As the range decreased, the more frequent became the barrumphs of incoming shells and the louder grew the noise of battle. Our secondary battery, as well as those of the enemy, had gone into action. Only our anti-aircraft guns, which had no targets of their own and were useless in a close engagement between battleships, were silent. At first, their crews were held as replacements for casualties at other guns, and were stationed in protected rooms set aside for them. These "protected rooms," however, being on the main deck and not heavily armored, provided little protection even against shell splinters, let alone direct hits at the ranges this battle was fought.

When perhaps twenty minutes had passed since the firing of the first salvos, I searched the horizon through my starboard director for other hostile ships. Off our starboard bow, I made out a cruiser, the Norfolk, which by chance had just stopped firing. We had not fired on her because Schneider and Albrecht were still concentrating on the battleships, which were off our port bow and at that moment not visible from aft. No sooner had I begun to wonder whether, with so many enemies around us, our ship's command would decide to divide our fire, than I received an indirect answer. Cardinal came on the control telephone and said that the main fire-control station in the foretop was out of action or, at any rate, could not be contacted, that turrets Anton and Bruno were out of action, and that I was to take over control of turrets Caesar and Dora from aft. He said nothing about the forward fire-control station. I supposed that it would continue to direct the secondary battery, unless it had been disabled, which seemed not unlikely in view of the number of times the forward section of

the ship had been hit. There was not time to ask long questions and, since I was not given a target, I had a completely free hand.

An observer in the Norfolk saw both barrels of turret Anton fall to maximum depression as though its elevating mechanism had been hit. The barrels of turret Bruno, he commented, were trained to port and pointing high into the air.

"Action circuit aft,"\* I announced and, beginning forward, scanned the horizon through my port director. Strangely enough, there was no trace of Rodney, which I had not seen to starboard, either. She must have been in the dead space forward of my station. But there, steaming on a reciprocal course and now a bit abaft our beam, was King George V. She was about 11,000 meters distant - near enough to touch, almost like a drill in the Baltic. "Passing fight to port, target is the battleship at 250°," I told the after computer room and, upon receiving the "ready" report from below, "One salvo." Boom. It went off and during the approximately twenty seconds that it was in the air, I added, "Battleship bow left, one point off, enemy speed 20 knots."

\*"Action circuit aft" meant that the turrets were being directed by the after fire-control station through the after computer room.

The excellent visibility would be a great help in finding the range quickly, I thought, which was particularly important because the target was rapidly passing astern of us. "Attention, fall," announced the computer room. "Two questionably right, two right wide, questionably over," I observed, then ordered, "Ten more left, down four, a salvo." Boom!. "Attention, fall" . . . "Middle over" . . . "Down four, a salvo" . . . "Attention, fall" . . . "Middle short" . . . and, full of anticipation, "Up two, good rapid!" Then again our shot fell and the four columns of water began to rise . . . quarter, half, three-quarters of the way, at which point they were useful for observation, "Three over, one short," I never did see the splashes reach their full height. Lieutenant Commander Hugh Guernsey, in King George V, heard my fourth salvo whistle over and, wondering if the next one would be a hit, involuntarily took a step back behind a splinter shield.

My aft director gave a violent shudder, and my two petty officers and I had our heads bounced hard against the eyepieces. What did that? When I tried to get my target in view again, it wasn't there; all I could see was blue. I was looking at something one didn't normally see, the "blue layer" baked on the surface of the lenses and mirrors to make the picture clearer. My director had been shattered. Damn! I had just found the range of my target and now I was out of the battle. Though no one in the station was hurt, our instruments were ruined. Obviously, a heavy shell had passed low over our station and carried away anything that protruded. We tested all our optics and couldn't see our targets through any of them. I walked under the ladder to the cupola and looked up towards our large range-finder and its operators. There was nothing there. Nothing at all. What only a moment before was a complete array had vanished without a trace. A heavy shell had ripped through the middle of the cupola, whose jagged ruin allowed a clear view of the cloudy sky. From Rodney? King George V? Who knows? It made no difference. My God, we said to

ourselves, that was close. Two meters lower and it could have been the end of us. The armor of our station would not have been enough protection against a direct hit at that range.

Nothing could have been more devastating to me than being put out of action just when I had every hope of hitting King George V. For our ship, that was the end of all central fire control. I called both computer rooms, but neither of them could get through to the forward fire-control station. The only thing to do was let turrets Caesar and Dora fire independently. My station being blind, I told their commanders that they were free to choose their targets.

At 0916, shortly after loosing six torpedoes from a distance of about 10,000 meters, all of which missed us, Rodney turned to a northerly course and became the target chosen by our turret commanders. This choice was made apparently because the range to Rodney, which did not go as far to the south as King George V, had closed to 7,500 meters. The last shots of our after turrets were not badly aimed; a few shells fell very near Rodney. At 0927, one of our fore turrets, either Anton or Bruno, fired one more salvo, but the firing became irregular and finally petered out. First turret Dora and then Caesar fell silent. At 0931 the Bismarck's main battery fired its last salvo.

Our list to port had increased a bit while the firing was going on. Around 0930, gas and smoke began to drift through our station, causing us to put on gas masks from time to time. But it wasn't too bad.

Unable to leave our station because an inferno was raging outside, we knew little about what was going on elsewhere. Was the ship's command still in the forward command post? Was Lindemann still in charge there? No reports came down to us nor were we asked what was happening in our area. We had not heard a single word from the forward part of the ship since the action began but, considering the large number of hits we had felt, there must have been some drastic changes. Suddenly I heard Albrecht's voice on the control telephone. "The forward fire-control station has to be evacuated because of gas and smoke," he said, and immediately rang off, precluding any questions. I was surprised. I had assumed that the reason for the fire control being turned over to me was that the forward station was out of action. Had Albrecht been directing the secondary battery from there? Was his own station serving only as a place of refuge? I would not learn the answers to those questions until many years later. I was using all the telephone circuits and calling all over the place in an effort to find out as much as possible about the condition of the ship. I got only one answer. I reached the messenger in the damage-control center, and asked: "Who has and where is the command of the ship? Are there new orders in effect?" The man was in a great hurry and said only that both the First Officer and the Damage-Control Engineer had had to abandon the damage-control center, adding that he was the last one in the room and had to get out. Then he hung up. That was my last contact with the forward part of the ship.

Before 1000, men who had had to abandon their own stations or protected rooms began arriving to take refuge in my station. Most of them came through the narrow emergency exit where a perpendicular companionway led down to the after gunnery reserve circuit space. They clambered up its iron rungs, the uninjured, the slightly wounded, and many so badly wounded that one could only marvel that they did it. We were lucky that my station was not

hit. While heavy firing was still going on, I had the two small exit hatches carefully cranked open. I believed - and convinced the men - that it was better to take a chance on a few splinters than risk having the opening mechanism jammed by a hit. In fact, we were spared both shell splinters and fragments.

## Abandon Ship

Around this time, the order was given to scuttle and abandon the ship, although I did not know it then. In fact, no such order ever reached me, but the situation on board compelled me to conclude that it must have been given. Nevertheless, I did not allow the men in my station to leave while shells were exploding all over the superstructure and main decks, and ready ammunition was blowing up. To do so would have been nothing less than suicide. I did not give the order to leave until long after our guns had fallen silent, the enemy stopped firing and, presumably, the shooting had come to an end.

By this time our list to port was heavier than ever and starboard was the lee side. I called to the men to look for a place aft and to starboard on the main deck. Forward, there was too much destruction and the smoke was unbearable. The quarterdeck was out of the question: the sinking ship was too far down by her stern and heavy breakers were rolling over her from her port quarter. Those who made the mistake of jumping from that side or who were washed overboard in that direction were thrown back against the ship by the sea, in most cases with fatal consequences.

The last one to leave the station, I went forward, towards the searchlight-control station or, rather, towards where it had been. The scene that lay before me was too much to take in at a glance and is very difficult to describe. It was chaos and desolation. The anti-aircraft guns and searchlights that once surrounded the after station had disappeared without a trace. Where there had been guns, shields, and instruments, there was empty space. The superstructure decks were littered with scrap metal. There were holes in the stack, but it was still standing. Whitish smoke, like a ground fog, extended from the after fire control station all the way to the tower mast, indicating where fires must be raging below. It obscured anything that was left on the superstructure. Out of the smoke rose the tower mast, seemingly undamaged. How good it looks in its gray paint, I thought, almost as if it had not been in the battle. The foretop and the upper anti-aircraft station also looked intact, but I well knew that such was not the case. Men were running around up there - I wondered whether they would be able to save themselves, to find a way down inside the mast. The wreckage all around made it impossible for me to go any farther forward and I returned to my station, only to leave it again immediately and go aft. I had to clamber over all manner of debris and jump over holes in the deck. I saw the body of a fleet staff officer, lying there peacefully, without any sign of injury. He must have left his action station when the order was given to abandon ship, without waiting for the enemy fire to cease. Turret Caesar, its barrels at high elevation and trained towards our port bow, was apparently undamaged. The light, shining gray of its paint contrasted oddly with the surrounding devastation. Its commander, Leutnant zur See Gunter Bruckner, was forced to stop firing when his left gun barrel was disabled. Then Bruckner directed the following words to his turret crew: "Comrades, we've loved life; now, if nothing changes, we'll die like good seamen," and

ordered them to abandon the turret. From the upper deck I saw turret Dora, blackened by smoke, trained port side forward. A shell burst had shredded its right barrel, but the gun captain, Oberbootsmannmaat Friedrich Helms, had still fired two shots from the left barrel. Then Mechanikersmaat Ernst Moog had climbed up from the interior of the turret, shouting that turret Dora was burning, and the whole crew, still uninjured, had to abandon it, so the turret fell completely silent. Later still a shell detonated, probably on the battery deck, and hurled the hatch to the munitions chamber high into the air. Helms and others suffered burns to their faces and hands through the jets of flame that shot up.

Moving on, I glanced across the water off our starboard quarter, and couldn't believe what I saw. There, only around 2,500 meters away, was Rodney, her nine guns still pointing mistrustfully at us. I could look down their muzzles. If that was her range at the end of the battle, I thought, not a single round could have missed. But her guns were silent now and I didn't expect that they would go into action again.

King George V and Rodney had steered towards the scene of the coming battle on course 110° at a speed of 19 knots in line-abreast formation with a distance of 1,200 meters between them, Rodney to port of King George V. Rodney had not attained her design speed of 22 knots for several years, but during the last three days she had nevertheless averaged between 20 and 21 knots. Through the consequent vibration she had lost some of the rivets in her hull, with the result that fuel oil was leaking into the sea and leaving a thin coating in her wake as far as the eye could see. At 0843 the sharp gray silhouette of the Bismarck, making an estimated 10 knots, appeared out of a dark rain squall 250 hectometers to the southeast and Rodney's Captain F. H. G. Dalrymple-Hamilton, a man of few words, spoke only five to his crew: "Going in now - good luck!" Then Rodney had opened fire, followed a minute later by King George V. A minute later the Bismarck replied.

In Rodney men realized that they were facing a German battleship which, while incapable of maneuvering, had all her guns fully intact and a gunnery officer who was probably hoping quickly to eliminate the heavy batteries mounted exclusively on the foreship of his principal opponent and therefore dangerously exposed by this bows-on approach to the Bismarck, and perhaps to need only a few salvos to do so, as against the Hood three days ago. For must not Schneider, well aware of the frightful penetrating power of Rodney's more than two thousand-pound shells, force a quick decision in order to survive? But he could attain such a success only if, despite Rodney's extremely small silhouette in the opening stage of the action, his observations enabled him to find his target right away.

To continue, in the words of an observer in Rodney: "From about 0936 until cease firing at 1016 Rodney steamed back and forth by the Bismarck at ranges between 2750 and about 4500 yards firing salvo after salvo of 16" and 6" during this entire period." The trajectories of the shells were nearly flat and the devastation of the Bismarck was readily visible to her enemies. Several fires were raging and the back of turret Bruno was missing. The superstructure had been destroyed, men were running back and forth on deck, vainly seeking shelter, their only escape from the hail of fire being over the side.

Around 1000 the Bismarck appeared to the British to be a wreck. Her gun barrels pointed every which way into the sky, and the wind drew black smoke out of her interior. The glow of fires on her lower decks shone through the holes in her main deck and upper citadel armor belt.

To Tovey it appeared almost incredible that the Bismarck was still afloat. The knowledge that German long-range bombers or German U-boats might appear at any moment made the urgency of sinking her ever more pressing. Moreover, his flagship and Rodney were running alarmingly low on fuel. Repeatedly he urged Patterson, "Get closer, get closer - I can't see enough hits." In order to hasten the end of the Bismarck, Rodney fired three full salvos with her 40.6-centimeter battery at full depression, scoring three or four hits per salvo. At a range of 2,700 meters, she released her last two torpedoes and the Norfolk, at a range of 3,600 meters, fired her last four torpedoes - the Bismarck remained afloat.

In Rodney, senior Lieutenant and Air Defense Officer Donald C. Campbell had been able to observe the whole course of the engagement. The "highest man" aboard in his storm-tossed action station in the lofty, unarmored antiaircraft director, he had an unimpaired view, from which no German aircraft appeared to distract him. He saw Rodney's first salvo fall far ahead of the Bismarck, presumably the result of overestimating her speed. The second British salvo fell just a little closer and not until the third was one satisfactorily "short." From the beginning, the Bismarck's shooting impressed him as excellent by any standards and almost aroused fears of a repetition of the Hood disaster. The first German salvo was around 180 meters short and drenched Rodney with a spray of evil-smelling water. The second, roaring over like fifty express-trains, struck the water with a deafening detonation around 300 meters in her wake. Campbell could follow the flight of the British 40.6-centimeter shells with his naked eye: black dots growing smaller on their trajectory. As the five dots from Rodney's fourth salvo were on the point of vanishing he was horrified to see their number almost double as the Bismarck's third salvo appeared on a reciprocal trajectory in a two-way race for seconds to shatter the enemy's armor and morale, a breathless duel that would decide life and death - Rodney would win, - for her five shells raised only three waterspouts and the Bismarck's turret Bruno disappeared behind flame and smoke after the impact of two shells, while to Campbell the Bismarck's onracing shells grew in size - he could even see a coppery gleam from their driving-bands, thought of the fate of the Hood and, in futile reaction, ducked his head. And then they hit, our third salvo, a straddle, a perfect straddle, port and starboard amidships, throwing great walls of dirty water over Rodney, but not scoring a direct hit, missing her by a hairsbreadth. One of the many splinters flying around, a fist-sized chunk of red-hot iron, ripped into and around Campbell's directory, smashing instruments, gun-ready lamps, telescopes, and the master-trigger for the antiaircraft battery, and finally came to rest with a thud, but, thank God, without harming the five men in the station. Not until, that is, one of them, Hambly ("stupid boy"), picked up the three pounds of jagged metal to drop it with a yell, having badly burned his hand.

Campbell reported the director out of action, put his guns under local control and then gave his attention to how Rodney steamed through the Bismarck's frightfully near misses, ahead, astern, and alongside, without even taking a hit. At 6,000 meters he saw Bismarck's turret Anton explode into a blazing ruin, which meant that both the Bismarck's fore turrets had

ceased to exist and only her secondary battery continued to shoot. Then Rodney could maneuver without any danger from Bismarck's defenseless bows.

Horried, almost stunned, by the ongoing work of destruction, Campbell saw how Rodney's heavy shells crashed through Bismarck's armored sides, how a 15.2-centimeter shell burst against her bridge like an egg against a wall, how another sent the top of her main fire-control station spinning through the air like a giant trash-can lid - where a yellow-white flame like a scorching thunderbolt consumed its own smoke and incinerated living and dead. Through it all the Bismarck's flag still waved, and Campbell cried out, "My God, why don't we stop?" And then, as if in answer, the cease-fire gongs rang. All that Campbell could hear then was the keening of the wind in the halyards and the wash of the sea against the ship's hull as Rodney, the paint of her turrets blistered by ninety minutes of firing, her decks ripped by the tremendous blast of the guns, her guardrails bent, withdrew from the scene of action, leaving the Bismarck, down by her smoke-shrouded stern, blazing fore and aft, a smashed but still beautiful ship.

Ark Royal's aircraft were anxious to get into the fight. Twelve Swordfish were launched at 0926 but, when they reached the scene of the action, they realized the risk they would be taking if they attacked. Four ships were firing simultaneously at the German battleship from several sides at very close range. That meant flat trajectories, and the Swordfish had to fly low to launch an attack. It was much better for them to forgo it.

Meanwhile, Tovey became increasingly irritated by the Bismarck's refusal to sink. She endured a hail of shells, such as he could not have imagined. How much more would it take? How much more time would her obstinacy cost him? He had no more time. His fuel supply was almost exhausted; every additional half-hour he spent on the scene would make his return home that much more hazardous. Once again he examined the Bismarck through his binoculars. She lay deep and sluggish in the water; it now appeared certain that she could never reach port. And with that certainty he had to be content. At 1015 he ordered Rodney to follow in the wake of King George V on a northeasterly course at 19 knots. It was the course home.

At 1022, Admiral Somerville with Force H, out of sight to the south of where the action was, ordered the Dorsetshire to torpedo the Bismarck. Two minutes earlier, Captain Martin, acting on his own initiative, fired two torpedoes at the Bismarck's starboard side at a range of 3,000 meters. One was observed to hit below her bridge, the other astern. Thereafter, the Dorsetshire went over to the battleship's port side and, at 1036, launched a third torpedo at 2,200 meters. This was the last of all the projectiles fired at the Bismarck on 27 May.

Suppressing a desire to retrieve a few personal belongings from my stateroom, which was not far away on the port side, I joined a little group of men assembled to starboard, forward of turret Dora, where they were waiting to jump overboard. For the moment, that seemed the best refuge. Many men were already in the water, and those with me were wondering whether this was the moment for them to jump. I told them to wait: "There's still time. We're sinking slowly. The sea is running high and we'll have to swim a long time, so it's best we jump as late as possible. I'll tell you when."

Before joining the group, I had seen King George V and Rodney steaming away to the north in line ahead and concluded that they would not take part in rescuing our survivors. But that other ships would do so, I was firmly convinced. "Some ship will surely come along and pick us up," I told my companions, but I had no idea which it would be. Had I given them false hope? Looking around us far and wide, I saw only empty ocean.

Although we all must have heard many of the same terrifying sounds and must have shared a sense of incredible desolation that morning, we did not all have the same experiences or see the same things. Here, then, are accounts, in more or less their own words, of the events that stand out most vividly in the memories of some of the other survivors.

### Survivor's Stories

Soon after the battle started, water began pouring through the ventilator shafts into Junack's action station, the middle engine room, below the armored deck in Compartment VIII. It was clear that the enemy's shots were striking close to us. After a while, red-orange fumes coming through the ventilators forced the crew to put on gas masks. The bridge issued hardly any orders over the engine telegraph but, when the din of battle was reduced to an occasional explosion, Junack received the order through the engine-control station, "Clear ship for scuttling." That was the last order given aboard the Bismarck. At this moment, the entire communications system broke down; the central turbine room was cut off from the engine-control station and the bridge. When scuttling charges had been brought to the cooling-water intakes and things became quieter above, Junack sent his best petty officer to get further orders. The petty officer did not return, and Junack had no choice but to act on his own responsibility. He had all bulkhead doors to the shaft alleys opened, then sent his men to the main deck and ordered the chief machinist to set the charges with a nine-minute fuse. He was the last to leave the engine room, where the lights were still burning and the turbines turning in accordance with the last order, "Slow ahead."

Not until he reached the battery deck did Junack see the devastation of the battle. As he made his way through the wreckage, he heard the charges in the engine room exploding. There was no getting forward and, on his way aft, he ran into a crowd of men, scared because they found their passage blocked. Telling them not to panic, he pushed his way into the midst of them and, as soon as they realized he was an officer, they calmed down. They tried to shove their way through an armored hatch that was jammed half-open, but their gas masks and inflated life jackets made it a tight squeeze. Things went faster when, at Junack's suggestion, they took off their life jackets and jettisoned whatever other equipment they had. He had mastered the chaotic situation at a glance. Junack waited until last to climb through the hatch to the upper deck. There, five junior officers and several hundred men were gathered around the after turrets, getting ready to go over the side. By this time, the enemy was doing very little firing. A curtain of flame amidships hid from view what was forward of it. All he could see were some dead and wounded scattered about the deck. Our ensign still flew from the mainmast, but seawater was spilling over the quarterdeck in the brilliant sunshine and the ship was sinking ever deeper. There was no doubt that the Bismarck was slowly capsizing.

Far aft, the leader of Damage-Control Team No. 1, Stabsobermaschinist Wilhelm Schmidt, could tell whenever our guns fired by the shuddering of the ship. Five enemy shells penetrated the upper deck in the area of his responsibility and exploded on the battery and main decks. One landed in Compartment I and another in Compartment II, where it produced a huge flash. Nitrogen gas seeped through the closed armored hatch to the vicinity of the damage-control command post in Compartment III. Shell splinters from the third hit put the lighting and ventilator for the main deck out of action. All that was left was emergency lighting. Hits four and five were in Compartment IV where, among other things, they demolished the companionways. Fumes from fires penetrated everywhere. A messenger arrived from the damage-control center with an order to Schmidt to send some men to put out a fire on a superstructure deck aft. A party went, but none returned. Schmidt had already lost some of his people to shell splinters. A chief gunner rushed up with the news that there was fire in turret Dora, and Schmidt, reversing pump No. 2, flooded the ammunition spaces below the turret. Schmidt continued to receive reports of fires, some of them on the superstructure decks and in compartments on the battery and main decks.

Finally the order came from the bridge to all areas, "Scuttle ship."

Schmidt reversed whatever pumps were still in operation in his area and flooded the compartments. He heard the condenser intakes and the seacocks blowing up in the engine and boiler rooms. A messenger brought another order, "All hands on the upper deck." All the armored hatches on the main and battery decks were jammed and the companionways gone. The only way they could get to the upper deck was by using a narrow shell hoist. When they reached topside, Schmidt and his men joined the life-jacketed men waiting on the quarterdeck. The Bismarck was lying in heavy seas, fire and dark columns of smoke belching from her superstructure. There was no sign of the enemy near or far, only a few wheeled aircraft circling overhead.

Very soon after the firing started, most of the shells were landing forward in the ship, where fires raged and huge pieces of iron and steel flew through the air. The Bismarck was jolted particularly hard when, shortly after 0900, her fore turrets, forward fire-control station, and tower mast were hit. A little later, somewhat aft, a heavy shell went right through the superstructure deck. The protected space it landed in was used for storing ready ammunition for the 10.5-centimeter guns, which blew up, killing the crews of the heavy anti-aircraft guns who were taking shelter there. Around 0940 the back wall of turret Bruno, whose guns had jammed in a position pointing athwartships, was blown off and the turret was on fire. Shortly before the British ships stopped firing, bright flames burned briefly around turret Anton.

As a member of the ammunition-handling group assigned to the after anti-aircraft control station for the heavy flak, Musikmaat Josef Mahlberg was stationed in a powder chamber in Compartment IX. When the fight had been going on for some time, the door to the chamber opened and in stepped Bootsmaat Rolf Franke of the after anti-aircraft computer room. He had a strange expression on his face. Mahlberg knew him well; the two of them always went most of the way to their stations together. Franke cried out, "The word's just come through,

abandon ship, the ship's going to be scuttled!" Dropping everything, Mahlberg and his men scrambled to go through the auxiliary shell hoists to the superstructure. When that proved impossible, they turned back and went through the bulkhead door to the decks, where, in contrast to their well-lighted chamber, they were in darkness and soon lost sight of one another. Only flashlights made pools of light here and there.

Mahlberg's first stop was the battery deck in Compartment X, where hundreds of men were jostling one another in an effort to get to the upper deck. Suddenly he heard the familiar voice of the First Officer, sharp and incisive: "What's all this? Go forward and help put out the fire. We aren't lost, not by a long shot. Is there no officer here who can take command?" But none came forward. Whatever happened, Mahlberg somehow reached the starboard upper deck in the neighborhood of the aircraft crane. Only then did he fully grasp our plight. All that was left of the once-proud ship was ruin. He tried to get to the forecastle, but water flowing over the deck near the middle 15-centimeter turret blocked his way. He turned back towards the quarterdeck and when he passed turret Dora, he saw some of its badly burned crew sitting or lying on the upper deck. Because the quarterdeck was already partly under water, Mahlberg climbed up to the roof of the turret. "Just look at what's happened to my turret!" Oberstieckmeister Friedrich Alfred Schubert, one of the burned men, called to him. "Get away, it's going to blow up at any minute!" Mahlberg turned and went back to the main deck.

In the starboard turbine room Maschinenmaat Wilhelm Generotzky was aware that our own guns were firing very irregularly and that we were being hit again and again, but not a single shell penetrated his area or anywhere else below the armored deck. He felt very proud of German naval architecture and German workmanship. He and his men had no idea what the upper decks looked like, but they could not fail to think that the end was at hand. The Bismarck seemed to have been transformed into a practice target for the enemy. The second mate of his watch, his face chalk-white, called to him in passing, "It's over, it's all over!" He knew the young mate well, knew he was happily married.

From the ventilator shafts that led to the diesel engines there came a sound like peas dancing on a drum. It was shell splinters falling on the main deck. A highly excited stoker came in and yelled, "Herr Maschinenmaat, transformer room No. 1 is on fire. You must go below!" Generotzky put on his respirator, grabbed a fire extinguisher, and tumbled down the companionway. Below, he carefully opened the door to the transformer room - nothing, neither fire nor smoke greeted him. He went on to the door to the diesel room, but all was clear here, too. Still, while he was climbing down, he thought he smelled smoke. Where was it coming from? He checked all the spaces near the companionway and, as he opened the door to a 10.5-centimeter shell and powder chamber, acrid yellow fumes assailed him and he saw a reddish glare. Quick as a flash he closed the door and rushed back up on deck to where the flood-control valves were mounted on a bulkhead. Oh, God, how long it took, half a turn one way, half the other way - and beneath him the burning ammunition! At last, open. Quickly, open the seacocks, start the pumps. Open the flood-control valve more. Hold it, that won't work. Too much water pressure on the valve. Shut off the pumps, open the valve, let the pumps run again. Water was beginning to cover the burning ammunition! His hands were shaking, his knees trembling, and sweat was pouring down his face. Just as he

was making his report to his leader, his division officer came from the engine-control station and gave orders to flood the rooms in flood group No. 4. But at the same moment, a petty officer from Damage-Control Team No. 4 reported that the rooms in flood groups Nos. 4 and 5 were already flooded. There had been fires in several ammunition chambers. Generotzky and his men did not know that all the 10.5-centimeter guns had been demolished or had their turrets shot away. They were also not aware that some of the 15-centimeter turrets had been hit and their armor penetrated on the port side by fragments or direct hits.

When "abandon ship" was ordered, Generotzky climbed to Compartment X of the battery deck, where some sixty men were already waiting to use the companionway to the upper deck. Hits landing above were clearly audible. In the passageway stood the First Officer and the commander of Division 11, Kapitanleutnant (Ingenieurwesen) Albert Hasselmeyer. Fregattenkapitan Oels said: "Don't go up there. It would be certain death. Better go to the forecastle and help put out the fires!" But that didn't make any sense. Fuses had been set and the scuttling charges would go off at any moment.

Generotzky was standing about five meters from the companionway, with a wall of waiting comrades ahead of him. Suddenly there was a flash of light, a rumbling roar, and he was thrown into the air, landing hard on his back. A shell had hit the companionway. Men stumbled over him, one helped him up, and they both ran aft to Compartment VIII, where the companionway to the upper deck was a mass of men. Maschinenmaat Heinrich König unloaded the ammunition hoist from the trunk in the adjacent 10.5-centimeter shell and powder chamber, the one that Generotzky had flooded a few minutes earlier, so that it could be used to escape. Forty men, one behind the other, began to climb up the narrow shaft, only fifty centimeters wide. The lights had gone out and some of them held their flashlights in their mouths. Everyone waited his turn patiently. There was no pushing, no jostling. Each man was lifted by the ones behind so that he could grab the first rung of the ladder. Muffled explosions below encouraged them to make the greatest possible haste. Finally Generotzky's turn came. He was pushed up into the duct and, rung by rung, he pulled himself up. When he got a hold on the upper deck, his hands were in a pool of blood. He stood up inside the demolished superstructure and found himself surrounded by dead bodies, three and four deep, lying where they had fallen. But he was out, out of the frightening coffin the Bismarck had become. At least, there was light up there and the whitecaps on the water showed that there was life. The enemy was still firing, adding to the chaos, as corpses piled on top of one another. He made for the hangar, where, although it had a huge hole in one side, he hoped to find shelter, but when he got there he shrank back. Too many had already tried to find shelter there, in vain. He jumped down to the upper deck and ran aft, but so much water was already washing over it that he clambered back up. At last, the firing ceased.

On his way up from below deck, Maschinengefreiter Bruno Zickelbein of Damage-Control Team No. 6 saw the First Officer in Compartment XIII on the battery deck. "Comrades," Oels was shouting, "we can no longer fire our guns and anyway we have no more ammunition. Our hour has come. We must abandon ship. She will be scuttled. All hands to the upper deck." Oels then led Zickelbein and seven other men aft to Compartment IX and told them to carry four wounded men, who were waiting there, to the main deck. Carrying

their burdens, the men went to the only companionway they could get up, the one near the catapult, amidships. When Zickelbein and his partner were halfway up with their load a shell struck and hurled them back to the battery deck. Another hit killed the wounded and a number of other men. Now, the companionway was wrecked and, through a huge hole in the battery deck, Zickelbein could see all the way down to the main deck. "Everyone here is dead," Maschinenmaat Erich Vogel told him, "we are the only ones alive." They gave up trying to get to the upper deck and went to Compartment X. Then came the order, "Maschinenmaat Silberling and his party report to the engine-control station immediately." Hans Silberling gave Zickelbein his hand and said: "We won't see each other again, this is the end! Say hello at home for me." They clasped hands for a moment and tears ran down their cheeks. Zickelbein was barely nineteen years old and the twenty-five-year-old Silberling had been a kind of fatherly friend to him. But there was nothing for it, and Silberling carried out his last order.

There were more hits and the lights went out. Holding handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses to protect themselves from the dense smoke, Zickelbein and his companions tried to get to the upper deck by way of the companionway near the enlisted men's mess. While they were waiting for wounded men to be carried up, they heard Marinestabsarzt Arvid Thiele say, "Leave them, they'll sleep better here." Everyone knew what he meant. Hardly had the doctor spoken when a shell smashed the mess companionway, killing those closest to it. Fearing that none of the companionways forward was usable, the surviving men tried to climb the shattered one. So much water was pouring in from above that by the time Zickelbein reached it he was standing in water higher than his waist. Eventually he, too, escaped.

Topside, the Bismarck looked like a heap of scrap metal, all on fire. Men were running back and forth, trying to find a way of saving themselves. However, the ship's boats, life preservers, and floats had all been long since destroyed. Amid all the devastation on the main deck, Springborn saw wounded men lying on stretchers. They were supposed to have been carried to the dressing station below but, because the continuing fall of shells made that impossible, the doctors were scurrying around giving them sedatives.

Maschinengefreiter Hermann Budich, the talker in action station "E" in Compartment IX of the lower platform deck, who around midnight had taken Maschinengefreiter Gerhard Bohnel's telephone report that the starboard rudder had at last been uncoupled, was wounded and brought to the action dressing station aft. Since he was not seriously hurt, he was laid on the deck outside. He had just heard one of the doctors say, "Only serious cases inside," when there was a frightful crash. A direct hit on the dressing station. Inside it nothing stirred.

Followed by some of the men from his command center, Oels passed through Compartments XIII and X of the battery deck - where, he met Zickelbein, Mahlberg, and Generotzky - to Compartment VIII of this deck. There he found a surging mass of some three hundred men pushing and shoving towards the ladders. Acrid, yellowish green smoke swirled across the deck, and the men who didn't have gasmasks were wracked by choking coughs. The hatch at the top of one ladder was jammed halfway open. "Get out, get out,"

called Oels in an emotional, cracking voice, "everyone off the ship. She's being scuttled. You can't get through forward. Everything is burning forward." The words were barely out of his mouth when a green flash whizzed by, burst into a fireball, and exploded with a deafening crash. Men reeled, were hurled through the air, and fell hard on the deck; more than one hundred were killed, Oels among them. He was standing between the canteen and the companionway when the shell struck. The groans and whimpers of the wounded arose from every direction.

In the damage control center Statz remained standing at the table. His glance fell on the damage control board, which mercilessly revealed the bad situation of his ship. Red, the color for "taking water," covered almost the entire port side; green, for "flooded," showed for the port shell and powder chambers and nearly the entire starboard side - the outboard list-control tanks there had been filled for a long time. White, indicating "pumped," was lit up only for the engine rooms below the armored deck. First Statz emptied his pockets, there was an order about that, then put on his life jacket, unfastened, of course; but what to do next?

Statz was now completely alone in the command center; the electric light was burning as though nothing had happened. Nervousness gripped him. Should he, would he, go aft, as Oels had indicated? He tried it and stepped through the bulkhead out of the center, but he didn't get much farther. Pitch-black darkness and thick smoke made it impossible for him to see anything and soon he was standing in knee-deep water on the upper platform deck of the heavily listing ship. He stopped near the flood valves for the 15-centimeter munitions chambers. To think that barely thirty minutes earlier he and Sagner had opened them. The chambers had shown external temperatures of 80 degrees centigrade, and Sagner ordered for them all to be flooded. Statz objected, "But there are still people in there!" Yet after the chamber bulkheads could not be opened, Sagner stood firm: "For Fuhrer, Folk, and Fatherland, it's got to be, otherwise we'll all go sky-high." My God, flashed through his head, are we really going to go sky-high now? Better get away from here, anyway, back to the familiar control center.

Once again Statz was alone in his still well lit, accustomed surroundings, which he should have left long ago but in this almost incredible fashion could not. While he was considering what to do, the damage control telephone shrilled in the silence. Who can still be calling now, heavens, still now, after such an inferno? thought Statz. He picked up the receiver and heard my question from the after fire-control station: "Who has and where is the command of the ship? Are there new orders in effect?"

With Oels's last words spinning around in his head that barely ten minutes remained for the crew to save themselves - how many of them had already elapsed? - and thoroughly perplexed as he was, Statz pulled himself together and replied quickly and tersely: "First Officer and Damage Control Officer have left the control center together with the compartment personnel, I must follow." And from my call he realized: someone's still alive up there, there's still hope, but now I've got to get out of here fast!

Hardly had he hung up the receiver than suddenly two men entered the compartment, Maschinenobergefreiter Heinz Moritz and Erich Seifert - his messmate "Fietje." Two oldtimers who knew every nook and cranny in the ship, they had found their way from aft to the connecting shaft to the forward conning tower. Turning to Moritz, Statz asked, "Should we try to go up seven decks through the cable shaft or communications tube and then four more below from there to the upper deck?" He had only a hazy recollection of that route. By way of answer, Fietje stepped smartly into the shaft, Moritz followed, and Statz came last.

Inside the narrow communications tube, the ascent was a true ordeal for the three men. The iron rungs were welded on the starboard side, but for some time the Bismarck had a steadily increasing list to port, so that the men, hanging onto the rungs on the opposite side and repeatedly snagged by cable housings, had to expend three times the usual amount of energy to clamber up. This difficult climb, the hellish circumstances, and the worry constricting his throat as to how all of this would end completely confused Statz. Every time he glanced up past the men above him and saw light, he asked himself, "Is that the sky or is that water?" The higher he went - with the continuous battle noise becoming even more ear-splitting, the light ever brighter just where the forward conning tower should have cast everything in darkness - it became all the more clear to him that "something must have happened to the conning tower." And, in fact, on climbing out of the shaft, Statz found himself in the open, with apparently nothing left standing above the platform there.

Another direct hit struck the conning tower, demolishing its remains and spewing scraps of metal overboard. Now only the outline of the conning tower could very faintly be discerned in the short segments of upright armor plate on the deck, that was all. Its destruction had meant death for the many officers massed at their action stations there; they lay in their blue uniforms. Statz recognized Jahreis and Sagner, who had come from below shortly before, saw them not far from the mouth of the shaft, both dead, and thought, "Honor to their memories."

The last direct hit had also wounded Moritz, Seifert, and Statz, the latter with a twenty-centimeter-long gash in his left shoulder. Luckily, he was wearing leather clothing; the other two were not. Amid the glowing shell splinters he could only roll out of the shaft, and as he did so heard the familiar, Rhenish voice of his friend Oberleutnant Cardinal: "Well, Slim, did they get you?" My God, he thought, someone is still alive up here, too.

Then they were standing beside one another, Statz and Cardinal, just the two of them, for no one else was on his feet anywhere within their field of vision. "Half bad with my wound," he told Cardinal, "but we must get below as quickly as we can." Then he saw Moritz lying terribly wounded on the deck with his whole chest torn open, and Statz and Cardinal pulled him gently behind the armored bridge bulwark, the only part of the ship that was still intact here above. How he could help his comrade, Statz was too excited to have any idea, and simply stroked his face, as one would a baby's. But Moritz smiled at him gratefully, gasped "Say hello to Cologne for me," and died.

The destruction round about was frightful. Everything up to the bridge bulwarks had been erased. Stumps indicated the columns on which nautical apparatus had once rested; the big

binoculars in the middle of the ship on the bridge, remarkably enough, undamaged; on both sides, close to the wings of the bridge, the remains of anti-aircraft guns identifiable only by the seats for the men who had directed them.

Cardinal and Statz now sought shelter behind the bulwark, but had to leap constantly from side to side, for shells continued to hit, mainly on the tower mast and below it. The heavy "trunks" could be seen clearly with the naked eye as they rushed through the air. After a leap to the starboard side Statz was surprised to glimpse another living being there. He was sitting on the bridge deck, immobilized by serious leg wounds, an officer with four stripes on his sleeve, a Fregattenkapitan. Bracing himself against the deck with his left hand, he sat completely upright - and around him only the dead! He was observing the bombardment with professional interest. What a fine, neatly styled haircut he had, thought Statz; what beautiful, lustrous white hair.

Then the hits had Cardinal and Statz on the run again, and Statz fervently hoped that the lieutenant would take the initiative and tell him the best way to get down from here. Yet he began to feel that it was he himself who had to lead now; Cardinal had changed. His previous question to Statz, "Well, Slim, did they get you?" were the last words he would ever speak; after them he kept silent - he, for Statz always "the officer," "example, expert, soldier, a man with whom one could move mountains." Statz no longer recognized him. From their position they had a completely unobstructed view of the flak control centers on both sides aft, standing like fingers in the sky, completely untouched, as though nothing had happened. Nearer, fires were swirling up to the more elevated admiral's bridge, the smoke coiling itself into dense swaths; the bridge itself appeared undamaged, the windscreen glass intact, but no one could be seen there.

Statz said, "I'm not going below to the starboard." Cardinal merely nodded. It really looked horribly high from up here; on the starboard side, the upper deck was already towering far above the sea. Several voices from below bawled "Gas!" and then a direct hit beneath the bridge silenced them. On with the gas mask, Statz told himself, and pulled it on, but immediately felt suffocated; in his excitement he had not unscrewed the microphone cover, so off with the mask, and by then the gas had blown away. Now he and Cardinal peered forward again, towards the main turrets, whose terrible condition brought tears to Cardinal's eyes. Then they saw a British cruiser approaching with guns blazing and the bridge deck again reverberated with impacts. But the little cruiser shells weren't so bad, not nearly so bad as the battleships' 40.6 and 35.6s, which shattered everything beyond recognition wherever they hit. The Fregattenkapitan must have fallen victim to a direct hit, for the place where he had been sitting was no more.

Looking to port, Statz saw a rope ladder made fast forward of the flak control center and told Cardinal, "That's our chance!" Then suddenly, the firing ceased - what a blessing - and it became possible to walk upright again, diagonally across the bridge deck, where the conning tower had once stood, up to the bulwark. Statz helped Cardinal over, - the latter climbed on the rope ladder and immediately fell like a stone - blissfully unhurt - to the lower bridge deck, for the belaying knots of the ladder had burned through. The fire was most intense here and somehow Statz managed to get down to the lower bridge deck, too. There,

an absolute wasteland, nothing recognizable. Now, down again to the Aufbaudeck, dangle part of the way, jump the rest. And another leap to the middle port 15-centimeter turret, whose roof was intact, if in other respects it no longer resembled a gun turret. From there they saw some comrades who had sought shelter behind turret Dora, the first living men in an apparently endless time! They heard the national anthem sung and a triple "Sieg heil" and saw men leaping into the sea. Not a soul came from anywhere else in the forepart of the ship. Besides Cardinal and Statz, no one escaped the hell there.

Some men were trapped below. The hatches leading to the main deck (particularly on the port side) were either jammed shut or there was heavy wreckage lying on top of them - again more so on the port side where wreckage from the forward command tower including louvers to the boilers had been ripped away by direct shell hits. In Compartment XV near the forward mess on the battery deck, two hundred men were imprisoned behind jammed hatches. They were all killed by shellfire. Flames cut off the whole forward part of the ship. One of the starboard 15-centimeter turrets had been hit and its access hatch was jammed. No amount of effort from inside or out could pry it open. The turret became a coffin for its crew. Farther aft, two men who had managed to reach the main deck were blinded by the dense smoke and fell through holes in this deck back into the fire below. There were young sailors, petty officers, even men of the prize crews, experienced seamen, who decided it would be pointless to try to climb out.

With the silencing of our guns, one after the other, the doctors' and corpsmen's hour had come - and in what dimensions! Hundreds of wounded lay where they had been hit, in the foretop, on the bridge, in the control stations, at the guns, on the upper deck, and on the battery and main decks. Stretcher-bearers, including civilians, carried them from the upper deck amid a hail of shells, but the only thing that could be done for such numbers was relieve their pain by giving them morphine. None of those who really knew what feats were accomplished in the dressing stations and at the collection points lived to tell the story.

The task of the doctors and corpsmen became overwhelming as one action station after another was knocked out and the men who were no longer able to take part in the fight crowded the battle dressing stations. As the minutes passed and ever great numbers of wounded requiring ever more attention pressed into the stations, the possibility that our medical people would have a chance to save themselves became slimmer and slimmer. The armor of the battery and main decks within the citadel offered them no protection as they labored amid a stream of heavy hits, every casualty providing them with a preview of what lay in store for them. What they suffered was the epitome of what observers in two British ships preferred not to imagine: "What that ship was like inside did not bear thinking of; her guns smashed, the ship full of fire, her people hurt; and surely all men are much the same when hurt," "Pray God I may never know what those shells did as they exploded inside the hull."

Referring to the forty-five minutes of relentless cannonading that followed the silencing of our guns, Captain Dalrymple-Hamilton said, "I can't say I enjoyed this part of the business much, but didn't see what else I could do." Captain W. R. Patterson of King George V would

have stopped firing earlier had he been able to see what was happening on the Bismarck, but the wall of splashes from near misses obscured his view of her port side,

The doctors and the corpsmen endured the horror and helped the wounded until they themselves fell victim to a hit. When and where they died, I do not know. Only the direct hit in the action dressing station aft has been recorded.

## The Sinking

This is as far as I can reconstruct the Bismarck's last battle from my own experiences and from the testimony of others. The concentration of hits on the forward section of the ship in the opening stage of the battle explains why the Bismarck's command system was crippled so early. Only afterwards did I understand why, once the battle had started, not one order or message from the bridge reached me in my after fire control station. To us participants, each phase of the action seemed much, much longer than it actually was. By 0902, fifteen minutes after the first salvo was fired, the foretop, the forward fire-control station, and turrets Anton and Bruno had been disabled, which meant we had lost more than 50 percent of our firepower. No one who was in those forward action stations survived, and my report, from the perspective of a position aft, can only be a fragment.

No survivor saw the Fleet Commander during the last battle. I assume that Admiral Lutjens and his staff fell at their action stations.

While the little group I was with was waiting to starboard, forward of turret Dora, the Bismarck sank still deeper by her stern and her list to port increased. The gradual emergence of more and more of her hull on the starboard side told me that the moment to jump was approaching. "It's that time," I said, "inflate your life jackets, prepare to jump." Just as earlier it was vital not to go over the side too soon, now, it was vital not to delay so long that we would be sucked down with the ship when she finally sank. "A salute to our fallen comrades," I called. We all snapped our hands to our caps, glanced at the flag, and jumped.

In the water we were pushed together in a bunch, as we bobbed up and down like corks. At first we swam away from the sinking ship as hard as we could to escape her suction. When I got clear by some 150 meters, I stopped and turned around for one last look and to take in everything I could about her.

What I saw was that the Bismarck was listing still more. She had no stability left. She was also deeper down by her stern, her bow rearing steeply out of the water. The whole starboard side of her hull, all the way to the keel, was out of the water. I scrutinized it for signs of battle damage and was surprised that I saw no trace of any. Her port side had borne the brunt of the battle, and that side of her hull may have told a different story.

When swimmers close to the bow of the ship looked back, they saw Lindemann standing on the forecastle in front of turret Anton. His messenger, a seaman, was with him. Soon, both men went forward and began climbing a steadily increasing slope. Lindemann's gestures showed that he was urging his companion to go overboard and save himself. The man

refused and stayed with his commanding officer until they reached where the jackstaff had been. Then Lindemann walked out on the starboard side of the stem which, though rising ever higher, was becoming more level as the ship lay over. There he stopped and raised his hand to his white cap.

The Bismarck now lay completely on her side. Then, slowly, slowly, she and the saluting Lindemann went down. Who among us knew that at this moment there was being fulfilled the demonically strange youthful yearning of a man who at the age of thirteen had conceived a passion for the navy and had then repeatedly told his brothers and his friends that his "greatest wish" was one day to command his own ship and to go down in her "with colors flying." Later a machinist wrote, "I always thought such things happened only in books, but I saw it with my own eyes." The time was 1039 and the battleship's position was approximately 48° 10' north and 16° 12' west.

At 1322 Group West radioed to Lutjens, "Reuter reports Bismarck sunk. Report situation immediately." But at the place where such messages had previously been received and answered there was now only empty sea.

The sight of the sinking Bismarck and the thought of my many comrades who had gone down with her cut deep into my heart.

For us in the water the scene changed quickly. We found ourselves being continuously swept from one cluster of men to another. In the distance I saw the familiar faces of Kapitanleutnant (W) Werner Schock, commander of Division 12 and second damage-control officer, and Oberleutnant (Ing) Gerhard Hinz, commander of Division 8 and the ship's technical gunnery officer. I saw them briefly, then they were lost to sight, forever. All of a sudden I found myself next to the ordnanceman from my action station. "Careful, careful," he called out "don't get too close to me, I've lost a foot." "Listen," I replied, "we'll soon be aboard a Briton, and they'll take care of you." Shortly thereafter he, too, disappeared in the swells.

Like toys, we floated on the heaving Atlantic. Only when we topped the crests of waves did we catch glimpses of the horizon. Were there any British ships around? Would they come to our rescue? Although there were none in sight, I was quite sure they would come. Repeatedly, I called to the men near me, "Stay together, as soon as a ship comes we'll swim over and get aboard." It wasn't much encouragement but, I thought, better than none.

Even today, when I think about being out there in the Atlantic, it strikes me as remarkable that I was not conscious of the temperature of the water. It was 13 degrees centigrade. Cool enough. But I was fully dressed, which helped keep me warm. And, still more important, the tension and excitement were such that external circumstances didn't matter. In our helplessness, all we thought about was what's going to happen, what's coming next. The minutes flew past, and the water temperature meant nothing to me.

One thing that was really horrible was the fuel oil from our sunken ship that was floating on the surface of the water in a wide, thick sheet. Its odour stung our noses. It blackened our

faces and forced its way into our eyes, noses, and ears. What luck it's not burning, I thought, although I knew that was not much of a danger with heavy oil. My Tissot wristwatch stopped at 1031 - salt water and fuel oil, the combination was too much for it. We continued to float in high swells. There were still no British ships to be seen.

## Rescue

When almost an hour had passed, from the crest of a wave I sighted a three-stack cruiser, her ensign stiff in the wind: the Dorsetshire. I urged my companions to hold on, "Cheer up, we'll soon be aboard her." The Dorsetshire steered for the thickest concentration of survivors and stopped shortly before reaching it. Soon she lay athwart the waves, drifting and rolling rather heavily. I had quite a long way to go to get to her. I told the men in my vicinity to be sure to head for the port, or lee, side of the ship and stay there.

The Dorsetshire threw lines over, a few of which had bowlines on the end. Lines and bowlines became so slippery from the oil in which they dangled that it was difficult to handle them, but it was that or nothing. At last, the Dorsetshire lowered a rectangular wooden raft (Carley float) for us to hold onto so that we could catch our breath.

Getting up those lines was not easy even for an experienced seaman. Not only were they slippery as eels but, because of the rolling of the ship, they were in the water one second and the next they were too far above our outstretched hands for us to grab. It was quite a trick to catch one at the right moment. Most of the men I saw were technicians, who had probably not had to use lines since they were in basic training, so I advised them to choose those that had bowlines. That, too, was easier said than done. I soon found that there was a limit to what the best-intentioned advice could accomplish. At some points men bunched up, all trying to grasp the same line, while lines nearby were ignored. Feeling that I was strong enough to do so, I decided to wait a while. Then I noticed that certain lines were almost always free. I called attention to this fact and swam to one with a bowline. I don't remember how many times I was within a few feet of the line for a fraction of a second only to have it jerk far out of reach. I almost gave up, but then I was lucky. Just as the ship was about to roll back up, I got one foot firmly in the bowline, closed both hands round the line, and gave the two British seamen above the signal to hoist. They did, and slowly, slowly, I went up the gray hull, past the portholes - how high can a ship be? - to the upper deck. I reached one hand out to grab the lifeline, intending to hold on to it as I climbed out of the bowline. But my reach was longer than my grasp was strong. One hand was not enough to hold the line, and I fell back into the water. Fortunately, I didn't land on anyone's head, nor did I hurt myself, but it was very disheartening. Had I so greatly overestimated my reserve of strength? I wouldn't wait long before I tried again. After getting my breath I looked for and found another line with a bowline. I glanced up and there were the same two seamen. Unwittingly, I had returned to the same line! They hoisted me up again. This time I kept both hands on the line and said, "Please, pull me on board." They did, and there I was standing on the upper deck, aft of the second port lifeboat, a prisoner of war, in an oil-stained uniform. The first thing I did was take a look over the side at my comrades still in the water. There were hundreds of them, hundreds of yellow life jackets. Perhaps eight hundred, I estimated. It would take a good while to get them all on board. That they would

all be saved, I had no doubt, but I was not allowed to stay on deck for long. Others were now the masters of my time. Also, my two rescuers had to carry on with their humanitarian work.

One of them, Tom Wharam, a young telegraphist, obeyed an officer's order to take me below, to the midshipmen's quarters. Little did I know that barely a year later he would be among the survivors of the Dorsetshire when she was sunk in the Indian Ocean by Japanese dive-bombers. After the war he became a good friend of mine, in that unique brotherhood that, as he once wrote me, binds men who once fought on opposite sides.

Below I saw some of my shipmates in various stages of undress. They were being given dry, warm clothing. My allotment was the civilian suit of an obviously very large officer.

Maschinenmaat Wilhelm Generotzky, who was standing on the superstructure deck, saw men jumping into the water, among them his best friend. He also saw Luftwaffe sergeants shoot themselves and heard a chief engineer say, "If I had a pistol, I'd do the same thing." Then there were shouts, "She's sinking!" and "Turret Dora's blowing up!" The deck was trying to slide out from under him. He and several others leapt down and went into the water from the starboard side of the upper deck. At almost the same moment that side of the ship rose completely out of the water. The jump must have brought a quick end to many of those men. Generotzky's leap took him to a considerable depth and, as he fought his way to the surface, he kept telling himself, "It'll get light any minute now." When that finally happened, he shot halfway out of the water and sucked precious air into his empty lungs. He saw the Bismarck some 100 meters away, floating keel-up. Hissing jets of water escaping from various apertures in her hull were soaring into the air. While he watched, her stern sank, her bow rose, as if in a last farewell, and, with a gurgling sound, the Bismarck slid below the waves.

All that was left were the men in the water, hundreds of them, fighting a desperate battle with the elements. Generotzky did not expect to be rescued. He had lost his socks and cold pressed ever deeper into his body. His legs became numb. Floating oil burned his face and hands and forced its repulsive way into his mouth. It took him about forty minutes to reach the Dorsetshire and the many lines that had been thrown over. He let himself be lifted up by a wave and grabbed hold of one of the lines. But in the trough of the wave he lost his hold and fell helplessly back into the cold bath. Several other times he tried, in vain. As more and more men reached the ship, a struggle for survival broke out. When two or three men would try to hang on the same line, none of them made it. In the scramble someone stepped on Generotzky's head and while he was under water a wave threw him against the ship's hull, injuring his leg. Noticing that the British seamen aft were tying eyes in more lines, he floated in that direction, managed to get his foot through one of them, and clamped both hands on the line. Seamen pulled him on board.

The port middle 15-centimeter turret was already a third under water, the upper deck long out of sight. Cardinal and Statz looked at one another, then the lieutenant leaped into the sea. Statz hesitated until the appropriate moment had passed, let the big oncoming sea surge on and jumped as it subsided. Cardinal was swept away on the crest of a wave and when

they were washed together again Statz saw that Cardinal's head was hanging slackly. The lieutenant had carried a pistol with him and used it on himself on the wave crest.

Statz now drifted parallel to the ship in the direction of her stern and was lucky not to be thrown back aboard by the sea. He saw the Bismarck's heavy list and was barely past the ship before she rolled over. The entire starboard hull now lay before his eyes; unbelievable as it seemed, he could not detect the least damage, and not on the port side either, part of which he could see. Despite his nearness to the ship, he did not feel any suction and had no difficulty moving away from her. The Bismarck now lay keel upwards, her propellers still turning slowly and steadily, - then she sank by the stern.

Now Statz was completely alone in the water; he did not even notice the cold, but the oil floating on the surface gave him trouble. For the first time, he noticed how good it was that he had kept on his leather clothes. The air pockets inside them, especially in the arms and knees, supported him wonderfully well, taking over the job of his life jacket, which had been completely shredded by shell splinters. Unfortunately, many others had not obeyed the ship's standing order, "Don't undress!"

Suddenly, Statz saw a ship coming towards him, very close, so that he had to swim hard to keep from being run over. In the end, he reached her starboard side. On the jack he saw an oversize British flag, on the upper deck men with steel helmets running back and forth, and recognized that this was the same cruiser he had last seen from the Bismarck's bridge deck with all guns blazing.

In the meanwhile, comrades had come swimming up from all directions. As Statz later determined, they had all gone overboard at the last moment; those who had jumped prematurely were carried hopelessly out of reach of the British rescue effort. Now Statz discovered lines hanging from the ship, with British seamen standing on deck ready to haul them up, and was urged on by the redeeming hope of finally being saved. But first came the struggle to get a hold on the oil-soaked, slippery rope-work - impossible to find it, his hands slipped off again and again. After definite eye contact with one of the rescuers, the latter threw him a rope ladder. Statz grasped it, held it in an iron grip, and was pulled up to the upper deck of the Dorsetshire. A last glance at the ocean showed him that there were still many swimmers in the water. "How easily Cardinal could be standing here beside me," he thought, "if he hadn't..."

Throughout the action Fahrnich (B) Hans-Georg Stiegler had performed his duties with two men inspecting the electrical cable circuits below deck on the starboard side aft. He and his men soon learned to distinguish between the recoil from the ship's guns (lateral shock), the impact of enemy shells (shock from above), and torpedo hits (shock from below). He had not seen an extreme situation in the course of the action; his equipment had been working perfectly and panic was nowhere evident before the order came to "Abandon ship!" He encountered a crowd of men for the first time on the main deck.

Above him Stiegler saw a burning launch; the smoke blocked his view and his way forward. Then the ship began to heel more and more to port. He observed some confusion among the

men, kept them from jumping overboard too soon, and at a suitable moment slid down the starboard side of the ship's hull more-or-less amidships with them and entered the water without injury. He saw many heads in the heavy ocean swells, a lieutenant commander drifted past, then he took off his shoes - why, really? - with the unpleasant result that his legs bobbed up and he was left in an unsteady state for swimming. Not long thereafter, it seemed to him, the bow of the Dorsetshire appeared. He grasped the end of one of the ropes hanging from her and let himself be hauled up, but lost his strength and hold, and fell back into the sea. He tried again, winding the rope tightly around his thigh, held on desperately, and this time it worked; his rescuer hoisted him aboard.

Maschinenobergefreiter Hans Springborn saw many men dive overboard headfirst, hit the bilge keel, and fall into the water with broken necks. He wasn't going to let that happen to him, so he slid down the hull from the upper deck to the bilge keel and jumped into the water from there. When the Bismarck rolled over on her side, strong currents pulled him under and he was violently whirled around before he managed to regain the surface. That experience told him to get away from the ship as fast as he could.

After some time he saw the British destroyer Maori and had the luck to drift over to her. After several tries he got hold of a line, and was hoisted to safety by two seamen.

I was still changing my clothes when the Dorsetshire suddenly began to vibrate violently. What was happening? Was she leaving the area, and at a full power? Now, in the midst of the rescue? Was there some sudden danger? From what? There weren't any U-boats around, as we knew all too well. Only that morning, we had asked for one to pick up the War Diary and none had appeared. That was a sure sign that there were no U-boats in the vicinity. Also, neither during the night nor at dawn had any boat come to the aid of the Bismarck. No rumor even of any intended U-boat action had reached me in my after station. It couldn't be a U-boat that had caused this precipitate withdrawal. What could have? German planes? If that was it, the aircraft alarm would have been sounded. I racked my brain, but the only thing that registered was horror that our men in the water, hundreds of them, before whose eyes the Dorsetshire was moving away, were being sentenced to death just when safety seemed within reach. My God, what a narrow escape I had. There was nothing that I, a prisoner of war, could do.

As the senior-ranking survivor on board, I received next morning a handwritten note from Captain B. C. S. Martin, the commanding officer of the Dorsetshire:

"I will be glad if you will visit your men this morning with my commander and then come to the bridge with him to see me.

If there is anything you require for your personal needs please let me know.

I hope you slept well and feel none the worse for your swim."

Escorted by the First Officer, Commander C. W. Byas, I went to see how our men were getting along. Everything was satisfactory; the ship's surgeon was taking care of the sick and injured, and they all felt they were being treated very well. They were getting five meals a day and eating the same excellent food as the crew. The smokers among them were being

issued twenty cigarettes a day. I learned later that it was no different in the Maori, which picked up twenty-five men, bringing the number rescued to 110, about 5 percent of the more than 2,200 on board.

When Byas took me to the bridge, Captain Martin greeted me in a friendly enough manner and gave me a Scotch. The gesture was well meant but I was still too horrified at his leaving all those men in the water the day before to really appreciate it. "Why," I burst out, "did you suddenly break off the rescue and leave hundreds of our men to drown?" Martin replied that a U-boat had been sighted or at least reported, and he obviously could not endanger his ship by staying stopped any longer. The Bismarck's experiences on the night of 26 May and the morning of the 27th, I told him, indicated that there were no U-boats in the vicinity. Farther away, perhaps, but certainly not within firing range of the Dorsetshire. I added that in war one often sees what one expects to see. And so we heaped our arguments against one another, uncompromisingly, beyond any possibility of agreement. Martin brought our discussion brusquely to a close with the words: "Just leave that to me. I'm older than you are and have been at sea longer. I'm a better judge." What more could I say? He was the captain and was responsible for his ship.

Apparently some floating object had been mistaken for a periscope or a strip of foam on the water for the wake of a torpedo. No matter what it was, I am now convinced that, under the circumstances, Martin had to act as he did."

Source:

[https://www.world-war.co.uk/bismarck\\_story.php](https://www.world-war.co.uk/bismarck_story.php)