



Churchill sent an order to “sink the Bismarck.” This was particularly urgent after the German ship’s fatal attack on the battle cruiser HMS *Hood*, a few days before, when all but 3 of the *Hood*’s 1,418 crewmen died.

There is a controversy—still debated—about the *Bismarck*’s demise. As it happens, some of her crew had signaled “surrender” before the Royal Navy took her out.

The surrender efforts came about, among other things, by the raising of a black flag. This is a naval parley signal (expressed, in common parlance, as “let’s talk”). The *Bismarck* also used Morse lamps, from the ship’s yardarm, to signal a surrender message, but the Royal Navy’s senior officers either didn’t know about the signals or chose to disregard them.

Terry Charman, a senior historian at the Imperial War Museum, provides some of the reasons why the Royal Navy ignored the surrender attempt:

The Bismarck's admiral was a fairly fanatical believer in Hitler and the telegrams he sent were along the lines of “we will fight to the end.” It would have been very dangerous to take the surrender.

With so much damage from the air—and torpedo attacks from HMS *Ark Royal*, an aircraft carrier—the *Bismarck*’s steering was jammed. She was in peril unless the Royal Navy captured her instead of sinking her.

The lives of 2,200 men, aboard the *Bismarck*, were at stake.

Likely believing it was too dangerous to capture the battleship—even if *she* was disabled, most of her crew was not—the Royal Navy continued to pound the ship which had sent the *Hood* to the bottom of the Atlantic just days before.

Within two hours of the British attack on her, the once-mighty battleship was a wreck of twisted metal. Among her raging fires were dead and dying crewmen.

When the final torpedo, fired by the Royal Navy, ended her life, the *Bismarck* sank in the Atlantic (hundreds of miles off the coast of Brittany). Charman—author of *The Day We Went to War*—also tells us about her survivors:

HMS Devonshire picked up 200 [of the estimated 600] survivors but had to leave a lot of men behind because there was U-boat activity in the area.

Such—as historians tell us—is the awful price of war.

The battle between the *Hood* and the *Bismarck* is the subject of popular culture. One of the most-famous songs, about the events which took place in May of 1941, is by Johnny Horton.

This embedded YouTube video combines historical footage (of the *Bismarck*’s launch) together with excerpts from the film “Sink the Bismarck” (with Horton’s famous song playing in the background).

Credits:

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