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The Loss of the *Bismarck* Who Was to Blame?

Graham Rhys-Jones

RECENT ARTICLES commemorating the hunt for the *Bismarck* have recaptured some of the epic qualities of that action, and, following Dr. Ballard's discovery of the wreck, have done much to refine estimates of the damage inflicted by British action. None however, have returned to that most fundamental of questions—why so valuable a ship should have been risked on so humble an enterprise as commerce raiding. To the modern observer, the decision to send the *Bismarck* unescorted and unsupported through the British blockade and into the Atlantic is bound to seem a strange one. Any war college graduate who submitted a plan like this would be regarded as eccentric or worse. There seems some merit therefore in reviewing those higher-level decisions which appear in retrospect to have had the greatest influence on the course of events.

In attempting to answer the question “who was to blame?” it seems necessary, if only in the interest of brevity, to absolve the British from all culpability in the matter and to confine attention among the German actors to those principally involved. We can thus reduce the list of suspects to a manageable three: Hitler himself; Grand Admiral Eric Raeder, CinC of the German navy; and Admiral Gunther Lutjens, the fleet commander, flying his flag in the *Bismarck*.

It has to be said that Hitler is not a promising candidate. Although his intuitive approach to the problems of strategy was responsible for many of the calamities that later befell his armed forces, his instincts in this case were not unsound. He was skeptical, perhaps even apprehensive. His subordinates were so fearful that he would cancel the operation that they concealed the timing from him until after the ships had sailed. Even so, they were hard pressed to persuade him that it was wise to continue. Hitler's fault, if any, lay in accepting (for once) the advice of his military commanders.

What of Admiral Lutjens, the man most directly responsible for planning and execution? Anyone who compares the fleet commander's earlier skills with those

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he displayed now is left with the impression of a man bereft of new ideas. His contemporaries attacked at least three of his decisions, and later historians have had similar reservations. It can be said in Lutjens's defense, however, that he was no more than the obedient agent who, despite genuine doubts, put into effect an operational concept developed by the naval staff and endorsed by the commander in chief. He did not like the plan, but carried out his orders with teutonic stoicism.

Should we look to Admiral Raeder for our answer? Whether or not we regard surface raiding as a legitimate task for a ship of the *Bismarck*'s impressive qualities, we will have to admit that there was nothing in the history of naval warfare, or in German naval experience, to suggest that the kind of mission envisioned was beyond legitimate risk. That much can be said on Raeder's behalf. He was, on the other hand, a man in a hurry. He would not or could not wait, and he sent the *Bismarck* to sea on what was no more than the fag-end of a much more comprehensive and ambitious plan. We can reasonably, therefore, start with him.

On 3 September 1939, Grand Admiral Eric Raeder recorded somewhat ruefully in his war diary how he *would* have employed his surface fleet if war with Britain had been postponed until 1944 as Hitler had so recently assured him. By then, he wrote, "Two groups, each consisting of three of the heaviest type of diesel powered battleships . . . would have had the task of intercepting and destroying the heavy British forces which, more or less dispersed, would pursue the German forces engaged in merchant warfare. Two ships of the *Scharnhorst* and two of the *Tirpitz* class would have remained . . . in home waters to hold down some of the heavy British ships. In this way especially with the co-operation of Japan and Italy, who would have held down a section of the British fleet, the prospect of defeating the British fleet, cutting off supplies, in other words of settling the British question conclusively would have been good."¹

This concept represented something more than the employment of heavy forces in "cruiser warfare" or the *guerre de course*, which are the terms usually given to it by naval theorists. It aimed at the piecemeal destruction of the British fleet, seeking to exploit the dilemma always faced by the power which has extensive maritime interests to defend but which can not with confidence contain the opposing navy—whether to concentrate for a decision or disperse for commerce protection. For the inferior navy it was a possible route to sea control.

But in September 1939, a strategy of this kind was quite outside Admiral Raeder's grasp. His existing heavy ships, those of the *Deutschland* and the *Scharnhorst* classes, were few and undergunned; the first products of his ambitious Z-Plan, the *Bismarck* and the *Tirpitz*, were still more than eighteen months away.

Nor had Italy or Japan joined the war to add to the distractive effect that he was counting on.

If we shift our focus to the early summer of 1940, prospects look worse rather than better. The U-boats were by now achieving considerable success, although their numbers were increasing painfully slowly. The surface fleet, however, was in poor shape. The Norwegian campaign, brilliant strategic success though it was, had taken a heavy toll. Most surviving heavy ships were under repair.

But by the autumn of 1940 there was a perceptible change of mood in the German naval staff. It was not simply a question of ship availability in the short to medium term. The strategic situation had been transformed: France had fallen. Germany now occupied a strategic position on the Atlantic coast—an advantage that the Imperial Navy had never aspired to, and which it had barely grasped the need for. Spanish bases would soon become available. Hitler was talking of occupying Gibraltar, and was claiming that Franco was “obviously prepared” to assist.² Italy had entered the war, and the British fleet was now clearly stretched to maintain its position in the Mediterranean. Throughout the final months of 1940, therefore, Raeder was advising Hitler that the situation called for “a definite concentration of our forces” on the Atlantic coast and stating that “extensive operations” against Britain’s maritime arteries would be executed as soon as the battleships and cruisers could be based there. This had to be “our chief operational objective in the war against Britain. . . . Britain [was] the chief enemy in this fateful struggle. She [was] not yet broken.”³ In Naval Staff directives we soon find echoes of that more ambitious concept that Raeder had articulated so long before. The fleet was not yet powerful enough (they acknowledged in orders issued on 2 April 1941 for forthcoming Atlantic operations) to make an immediate bid for command of the sea, but it could “strive for local and temporary command, and gradually, methodically, and systematically extend it.”⁴

Was there solid evidence to support so optimistic an assessment? It certainly seemed so. It certainly seemed that timid spirits who had cautioned against exposing the nucleus fleet, and who were reluctant to test the efficiency of British containment, had been proved wrong. By the end of March 1941, Raeder could point to seven occasions when heavy ships had broken through the British cordon and, what was more important, had got safely back again. In fact no heavy ship had ever been lost in the attempt. The tradition of those masters Hipper and Scheer, who had done so much to demonstrate the art of disengagement and evasion, seemed to hold good even in an era of aerial reconnaissance.

A single operation—the two-month sortie of the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the early months of 1941—must suffice to illustrate the basis of German confidence. A chart of their activity during that period is shown at Figure 1.

The salient points are these. The squadron sailed from Kiel on 23 January under the command of Admiral Gunther Lutjens, no novice in operations of this kind. British intelligence had given warning of his departure, and the Home Fleet was at sea. But Lutjens proved equal to the situation. When, alert and cautious, he encountered a British picket in the Iceland-Faeros gap, he at once withdrew northeastward into the Arctic ocean and loitered there until the hue and cry had died down. He then slipped out undetected through the Denmark Strait.

After fuelling from a tanker prepositioned off Cape Farewell, Lutjens began to search the Halifax convoy route. On 8 February he found an eastbound convoy, HX 106, but it was escorted by the battleship *Ramillies*. He dared not engage; indeed his orders expressly forbade him to do so. He refuelled again before making another attempt. On 22 February he stumbled upon the area in which westbound convoys dispersed to make their way independently to their destinations. Here he sank five ships. He at once shifted his ground radically, refuelled again in mid-Atlantic, and in early March reappeared on the Sierra Leone route, critical to Britain's reinforcement of the Middle East. Here he found a troop convoy bound for Suez via the Cape. It was escorted by the battleship *Malaya*. He broke off again and, after sinking only a single independently-routed ship, returned to his former hunting ground off Newfoundland. On 15 March in that same convoy dispersal area he sank six ships and on the next day ten more. Next he encountered the eastbound convoy HX 114, but it was escorted by the battleship *Rodney*. He was then ordered to Brest. On the way, he was sighted by aircraft from the *Ark Royal*; he altered course to the northward and held it while he remained under surveillance. The British adjusted their disposition to counter a break-back to German waters. Lutjens then altered to the east and on 22 March made Brest safely.

The return on this investment was not, on the face of it, remarkable. But it is worth recording what the British naval historian Captain S. W. Roskill says of it: during these ships' two month cruise, he says, "they not only sank or captured twenty-two ships of 115,622 tons [a useful if not spectacular twenty-five percent addition to the U-boat total for the same period] but also, for a time, completely dislocated our Atlantic convoy cycles. . . . Their depredations forced the wide dispersal of our already strained naval resources, and successfully diverted attention from the returning *Scheer* and *Hipper*, while, by their subsequent arrival at a Biscay port, they became an imminent threat to all our Atlantic shipping. . . . The jubilation of the German Naval Staff. . . appeared . . . well founded."⁵

At the end of March 1941, therefore, a significant opportunity seemed to open up before the German naval authorities. Two capital ships were positioned on the Atlantic coast, and in the Baltic two new ships, the *Bismarck* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, were on the point of becoming operational. Each squadron would create opportunities for the other. If neither force was yet powerful

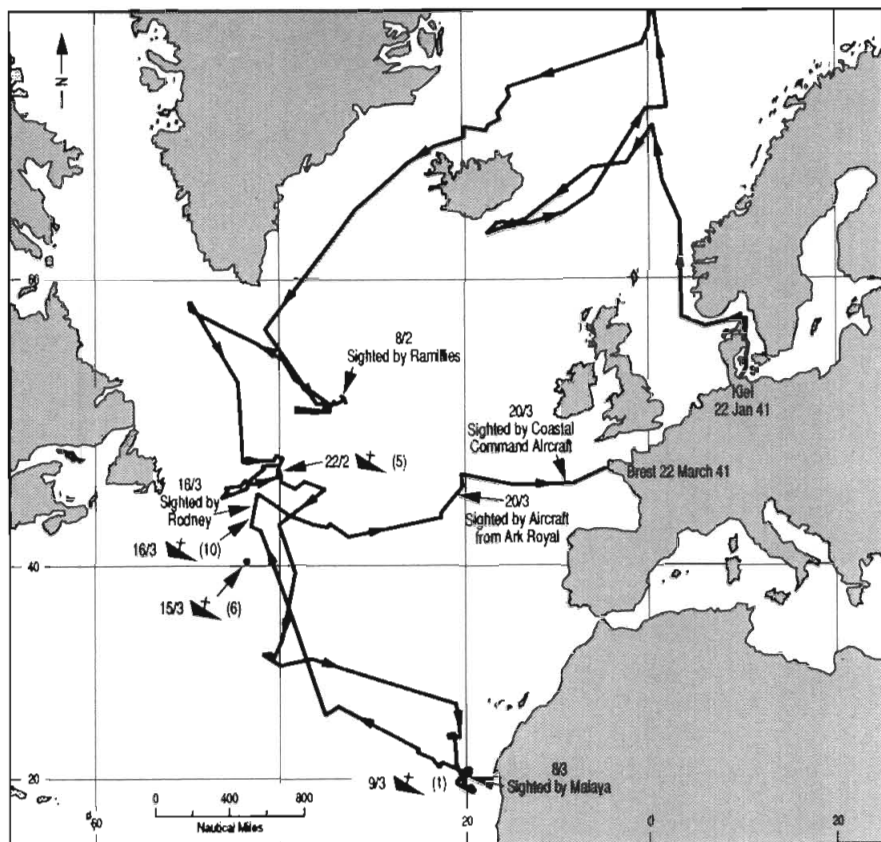


Figure 1. Battlecruiser Sortie January - March 1941

enough to *seek* an action, the naval staff had in the *Bismarck* a ship which could at least distract those heavy escorts which had curtailed the success of the battlecruisers, while her consort got on with the job. The naval staff began to work on plans for such an operation timed for the new moon period at the end of April. Questions of support were considered in great detail. Two scouts, two support ships, and five tankers were earmarked, and their waiting areas in mid-Atlantic or off the tip of Greenland assigned. Talks were begun on how to coordinate the actions of the surface forces with Admiral Doenitz's U-boats.

It is time to say a few words about the star of this show, the *Bismarck* herself. She had been launched in February 1939 by Frau Dorothea von Loewenfeld, Prince Bismarck's granddaughter. Nothing had been spared in the ship's construction. She was declared as displacing 35,000 tons in apparent conformity with London Treaty limits, but her captain, Ernst Lindemann, admitted to 42,000 tons and over 50,000 at full load. Her armour was thirteen inches thick and accounted for forty percent of her weight. She was of all-welded construction, a remarkable innovation at that time. She was more than nine hundred feet

long and, at 120 feet, exceptionally broad in the beam. She was steam turbine driven, power being applied through three shafts. On trials she made thirty knots. She carried 8,700 tons of fuel, giving her a range of nearly 9,000 miles at seventeen knots. Her main armament consisted of eight 38 cm (fifteen inch) guns in twin turrets. And now, at the time we are speaking of, she was in the final stages of an eight-month trial and work-up period conducted mostly in the eastern Baltic, far removed from the unwelcome attentions of the Royal Air Force.

The schemes of the naval staff did not stand unmodified for long. The first casualty was the *Scharnhorst*. She needed extensive machinery repairs after her Atlantic cruise and would not be available for some months. It was decided that the operation could continue without her. Then a series of misfortunes befell the *Gneisenau*. Between 6 and 11 April she was severely damaged in a series of air attacks on Brest. She too would be unable to take part.

Admiral Raeder was somewhat defensive when he called on the Fuehrer on 20 April. He pointed out that Wilhelmshaven was just as dangerous as Brest. He reminded Hitler of his unfulfilled promise of Spanish bases. He reported that the Atlantic operations would proceed with the *Bismarck* and the *Prinz Eugen* alone, but agreed that "until further notice, large ships [would] put into Brest only in exceptional circumstances."⁶

Only five days later, however, and only three days before the operation was due to begin, plans received a further setback: the *Prinz Eugen* was damaged by a ground mine in the Baltic. Damage was not serious but some delay would be inevitable, and this delay gave Raeder and Admiral Lutjens (who, fresh from his successes last time round, was to command this operation too) time to review their options.

They met in Berlin on 26 April. Their discussion appears to have been open and comprehensive, and included the question of whether it might not be better to wait some months until the battlecruisers, or even the *Bismarck*'s sister ship, the *Tirpitz*, were ready. Lutjens argued that this was the proper course, but the decision—and it was a shared decision—was to go ahead as soon as repairs to the *Prinz Eugen* could be completed.⁷ Raeder would never concede that this decision had been unwise.

Why was it so important to proceed *now* rather than wait until a properly constituted force could be put together?

There are many answers. At the tactical level, a breakout would become more difficult rather than less so as summer weather approached; but this is hardly a sufficient explanation. We must certainly acknowledge that it was part of Raeder's mission to keep the German maritime spirit alive in difficult circumstances. If his fleet was to survive the unequal battle for resources, it had to show a return on investment. This may have created a predisposition to action on Raeder's part, although it hardly explains any specific decision.

We are better advised to look for an explanation in the strategic trends of the time, at least as they appeared to Admiral Raeder. In his autobiography he seeks to give the impression that he saw his surface fleet as a wasting asset, something best committed before it was too late. It is not easy, however, to reconcile such views with what he was saying at the time. He says that war with the United States was “staring us in the face.” He forgets that on the basis of then-standard assumptions (namely that the United States Navy would become embroiled in the Pacific), Atlantic operations would become easier rather than the reverse. He was, on the other hand, well aware of Hitler’s growing obsession with the eastern question, and had long since begun to express reservations about launching an offensive against Russia before settling matters with Britain.⁸

It was certainly clear to him by the winter of 1940-41 that with Operation Sealion (the invasion of England) on the shelf and gathering dust, a successful campaign against British sea communications was the only way to bring the war to a conclusion. And this war was being lost. Every day that passed saw the enemy getting stronger under the influence of Lend Lease. There was only one way to reverse this trend.

It is too often overlooked by those examining the *Bismarck* episode that by the spring of 1941, when these decisions were forming themselves in Raeder’s mind, the strength of the operational U-boat fleet had fallen to the lowest level ever. The “happy time” was long since over. By February 1941 there were only some twenty boats operational. In March five more were lost (roughly one-fifth of the operational fleet), and with them three aces, including Gunther Prien, hero of the Scapa Flow incident. Monthly sinkings per U-boat deployed had declined from eight during the “happy time” to less than two. The convoy system was by now well established; it was being extended and strengthened as more escorts became available. The escorts had inflicted a resounding defeat on their opponents.

Raeder decided as he did because he had no real alternative. He was well aware of the limitations of the instrument he was about to deploy. As he told Lutjens at their April conference, this was no moment “to risk a heavy engagement.” “Deliberate and careful” operations were called for. The object, they agreed, “with the *Bismarck* and later the *Tirpitz* must be continuous, sustained operations.”⁹

Discussion of the battlecruiser sortie in the early months of 1941 will have been sufficient to create some impression of the measures adopted by the British Admiralty to counter the surface threat. Defense of maritime communications rested on two principles: containment, control of access to and from the Atlantic; and close escort of convoy, and very powerful escort at that. The situation when the *Bismarck* sailed was not untypical. There were five Royal Navy capital ships at sea on escort duty or earmarked for the task. The battleship *Rodney*, enroute to Boston for a refit, had already sailed with a westbound convoy. The *Revenge*

was in Halifax preparing to sail back. The *Ramillies* was in mid-Atlantic eastbound with an incoming convoy. The battlecruiser *Repulse* and the new carrier *Victorious*, the latter full of crated Hurricane fighters, were about to sail for Malta with another convoy. Convoys which could not be provided with capital ship cover—and there were typically a total of twelve at sea in the North Atlantic—were accompanied by at least a heavy cruiser. Orthodox naval opinion might regard this as a wasteful, even dangerous, dispersal of force, ripe for exploitation by a determined enemy. The Admiralty, however, had at least reached a firm policy on the matter, and one which surely would have earned the approval of Sir Julian Corbett. Where a choice had to be made between the protection of shipping and reserving that margin of superiority needed to provide comfortable assurance of decisive victory, the first had chief claim on resources.

Certainly, the assets immediately available to the CinC Home Fleet, Admiral Sir John Tovey, on whom control of northern access to the Atlantic and the containment of the German fleet depended, were paled to the bone. His flagship, the *King George V*, was new, efficient, and well protected. But the First Battlecruiser Squadron, which lay with him at Scapa Flow, was a weaker asset than it might have appeared on paper. It included the battlecruiser *Hood*, a large and elegant ship, the final flowering of Admiral Fisher's battlecruiser concept, seen by many as the symbol of Britain's maritime power. She was now twenty years old, unmodernized (there had never been time to get the job done), and known to be vulnerable to plunging shell fire. Her consort, the *Prince of Wales*, was scarcely out of the builder's yard. In fact contractors were still on board attempting to cure teething troubles in her main armament. The only other formed "maneuver force," Admiral Sommerville's Force H, lay at Gibraltar, positioned there following the fall of France to take responsibility for the western Mediterranean. This too, at the time we are speaking of, was earmarked to cover the Malta convoy.

One last observation must be added concerning the operational capability of the Royal Navy at this period. Surprising as it must seem to modern professionals who have come to regard it as a routine matter, refuelling at sea was effectively unknown. Fuel was provided in harbour or in a network of fleet anchorages. The ability of the commander in chief to get to sea and to occupy an intercepting position in the northern exits depended crucially upon warning.

It is worth asking therefore what Admiral Tovey knew of German intentions as the time for *Bismark's* departure approached. In fact he knew quite a lot. He knew that the *Bismark* was ready. He knew that the ship had embarked prize crews, even what chart folios she had drawn, and could make his own conclusions. He was aware that German reconnaissance aircraft were showing an unusual interest in Scapa Flow. He knew from decryption of Luftwaffe Enigma that the Germans were looking at the limit of the ice edge in the Denmark Strait. He had no clues as to the critical timing of the German move;

the decryption of German *naval* Enigma was running obstinately four to five days behind events. Information from this source was to have no influence on operational decisions during the events now about to unfold.¹⁰

The following account of the *Bismarck* operations will, rather than giving equal weight to all phases, concentrate on the few which seem to have had the greatest influence on the final outcome. The development of operations is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

The first of these phases is the breakout plan itself. Admiral Lutjens's objective was, obviously enough, to gain the Atlantic undetected or, failing that, at least without being brought to action. To do this he needed to exploit any weakness, geographical or technical, in the enemy surveillance system and in his opponent's ability to react. On the face of it—and provided he remained undetected for a reasonable length of time—there was every reason to rush the picket line. This option was effectively ruled out, however, by the short endurance of the *Prinz Eugen*.¹¹ It was deemed necessary to refuel this ship at the latest possible moment before the breakout. The operations plan gave Lutjens two choices: to fuel in the Arctic or on the coast of southern Norway.

If he could cross the Shetlands–Bergen line undetected and lose himself in the Arctic, the first option made good sense. This appears to have been Lutjens's first choice. Its advantages would be less imposing if he were detected entering the Norwegian Sea. The enemy would not find it easy to catch him in the north but could take steps to control the exits. He might therefore have to wait for ideal conditions before making his break.

The second choice had rather less to commend it. It would leave him well poised for a breakout if foul weather could be relied on to mask his departure. The fjords would offer a temporary place of refuge while he waited for the right conditions. The Luftwaffe would certainly discourage the snooper. But southern Norway was well within range of British reconnaissance and strike aircraft and it was no place to linger for long. In the event however, this *was* his choice, and he put in to the Grimstadtfjord just south of Bergen in the morning hours of 21 May.

It is not easy to fathom his reasoning. Ludovic Kennedy likens his action to that of the burglar caught loitering outside a police station.¹² Some have suggested that his decision was prompted by an encounter with the Swedish cruiser *Gotland* as he left the Baltic. This had certainly worried him, and rightly so, for the news was quickly leaked to the British naval attaché in Stockholm. But why this encounter should have made the southern alternative suddenly better is far from clear. It seems far more plausible that he made his decision on the basis of the short-range weather forecast. Though current weather was not suitable for his purposes, within twenty-four hours a weather front would close in and provide much better conditions. But soon after mid-day on 21 May,

while the *Prinz Eugen* was fuelling, the German squadron was photographed by a photo-reconnaissance Spitfire.

Confirmation of his presence on the Norwegian coast prompted far reaching decisions on the part of his opponents.

- The CinC Home Fleet, Admiral Sir John Tovey, at once reinforced his patrols in the Iceland–Faeros gap and in the Denmark Strait.

- He immediately sailed the *Hood* and the *Prince of Wales* for an intercept position off western Iceland. He himself waited on tenterhooks at Scapa Flow for news of the *Bismarck*'s departure.

- The Admiralty took the *Victorious* and the *Repulse* off their Malta convoy assignment and gave them to the CinC.

- A bomber command strike force set off for Bergen that evening. When it got there the cloud was right down over the fjords; the few aircraft that even found the place, bombed blind.

The stable door was nevertheless being firmly shut well before the horse bolted.

Lutjens sailed from Bergen in the late evening of 21 May within about six hours of his being sighted. His passage was covered first by darkness and then by a frontal system that greatly hampered British reconnaissance efforts during the next twenty-four hours. The weather was ideal for his purposes.

He elected to leave by the Denmark Strait, a choice that would not test his enemy's speed of reaction. Perhaps he believed this did not matter; he was receiving reassuring reports from Germany that his departure was undetected (right) and that Home Fleet dispositions were unchanged (this was wrong). He may well have been influenced too by his experience of the last sortie in January, and by the reasonable expectation of poor visibility along the ice edge.

Admiral Tovey knew nothing of all this. No aircraft could get into Norway all next day until late on 22 May when a naval aircraft with a crew of massive experience crept into the Grimstadfjord at sea level and found it empty. Admiral Tovey then sailed for western Iceland with the rest of the Home Fleet. He was thus about twenty-four hours behind his battlecruiser squadron.

In the Denmark Strait the conditions were not quite what Lutjens had hoped for. There was intermittent patchy fog, but sometimes the visibility opened up to offer a glimpse of the Greenland ice cap. And at 1922 on the evening of 23 May he met the cruisers *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*. He tried to evade and to drive them off with gunfire, but to no avail. It became apparent that one of the cruisers (in fact the *Suffolk*) was fitted with a radar of remarkable efficiency. These unwelcome shadows followed him through the Strait, reporting his position with tedious regularity. It was nevertheless a complete surprise to him when at about 0530 the following morning the masts of the *Hood* and the *Prince of Wales* showed up on the southeastern horizon.

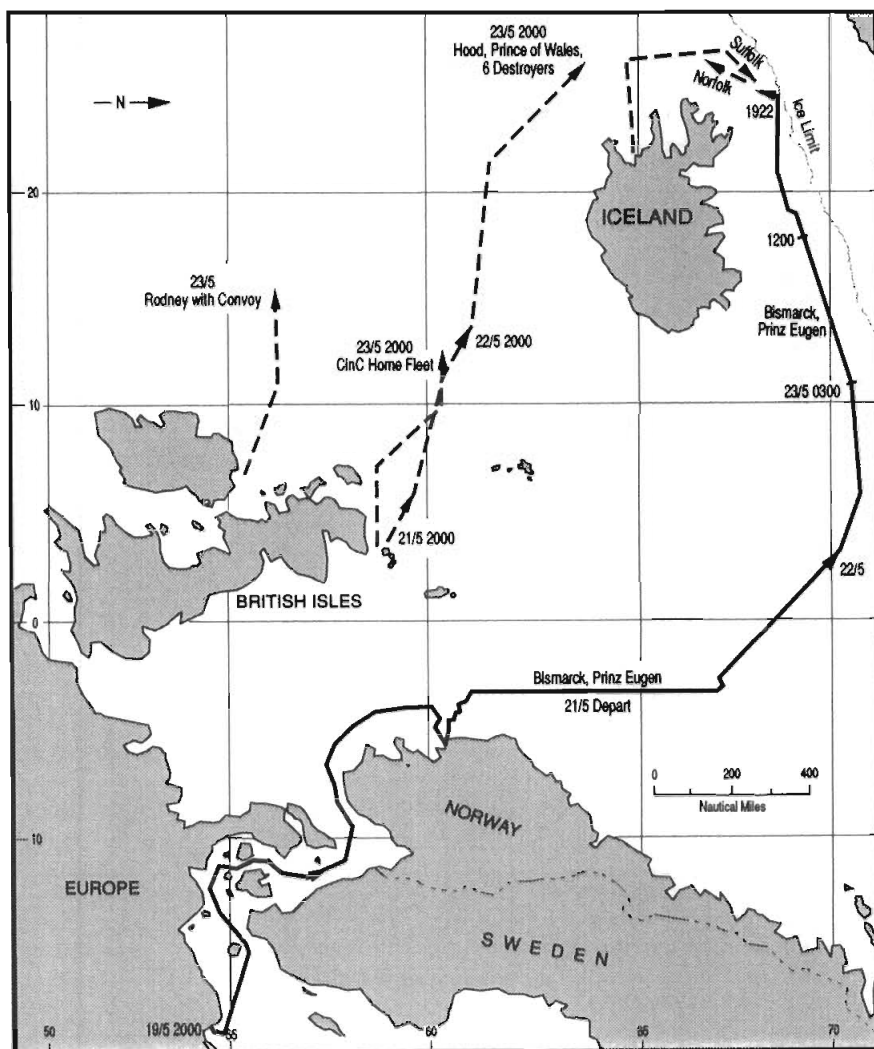


Figure 2. Operations 19 May 1941 to 2000, 23 May 1941

The outcome of this encounter is well known, but there has been so much criticism of the handling of the British squadron, and of Vice Admiral Lancelot Holland flying his flag in the *Hood*, that something at least must be said about it. Reconstruction of Admiral Holland's intentions is not easy since the records of neither the *Hood* nor the *Prince of Wales* survived the action; historians have thus turned to the signal logs of the shadowing cruisers, and these conflict in certain important respects. Roskill's version is I think the safest; he was a gunnery specialist and was familiar with the doctrine of the day.¹³

The material deficiencies of the British squadron have already been mentioned. On the credit side, they enjoyed a substantial superiority in weight of

fire, which could have been turned to advantage. It is accepted that there were two essentials in setting up for this action, first that the British squadron should pass through the zone of the *Hood's* vulnerability quickly, and second that the squadron should close at such an angle that all guns would bear. Admiral Holland had all the time in the world to maneuver for such a position; in the event he met neither requirement. It is clear at least *how* he came to lose his favorable position on his enemy's bow: some two hours before he expected the encounter, he turned from his intercepting course (roughly west) to north. It is less clear *why*. But again following Roskill, it seems likely that he ordered this turn because the cruisers had reported a temporary loss of contact, and because he saw his best course as closing the last known position of his enemy as rapidly as possible rather than maneuvering for gunnery advantage. Whatever the reason, he had in the jargon of the trade "lost bearing." If he was to force an action at all, he was now committed to a slow relative speed of closing from his enemy's beam, and to an angle of approach which allowed him to bring only his forward guns to bear.

Both squadrons sighted one another at a range of seventeen miles. Fire was opened at 25,000 yards, and from the first salvo *Bismarck's* fire was impressively accurate. After only five minutes of action, the *Hood* was torn apart by a titanic explosion almost certainly the result of a shell (or shells) penetrating a main magazine. There were only three survivors. The *Prince of Wales* continued the action, but within minutes she took a hit on the bridge which killed everyone except the captain and the chief yeoman of signals. Then with half his main armament out of action through material defects, Captain Leach broke off under cover of smoke, placed himself under the orders of the cruiser admiral, and maintained contact at long range until a better opportunity should present itself.

The *Prinz Eugen* had emerged unscathed from this encounter. The *Bismarck* had not; three fourteen-inch shells from the *Prince of Wales* had hit her. One struck the upperworks causing no critical damage. A second shell hit amidships below the armour belt, flooding a turbogenerator compartment, damaging the bulkhead to the adjacent boiler room, and perforating some oil tanks. Salt water contamination of boiler feedwater was threatened although in the event it was averted. The third passed right through the fo'c'sle just above the waterline, leaving an exit hole more than a yard across. In no time the *Bismarck* had taken on two thousand tons of water, and a small reduction in speed became necessary to preserve the integrity of the forward bulkheads.

What was Lutjens's proper course of action at this point?

It seems certain that Captain Lindemann urged him to press his advantage against the *Prince of Wales*. Tempers, or so it was later rumored, flared over the issue. The admiral's mission was commerce raiding. His orders directed him to

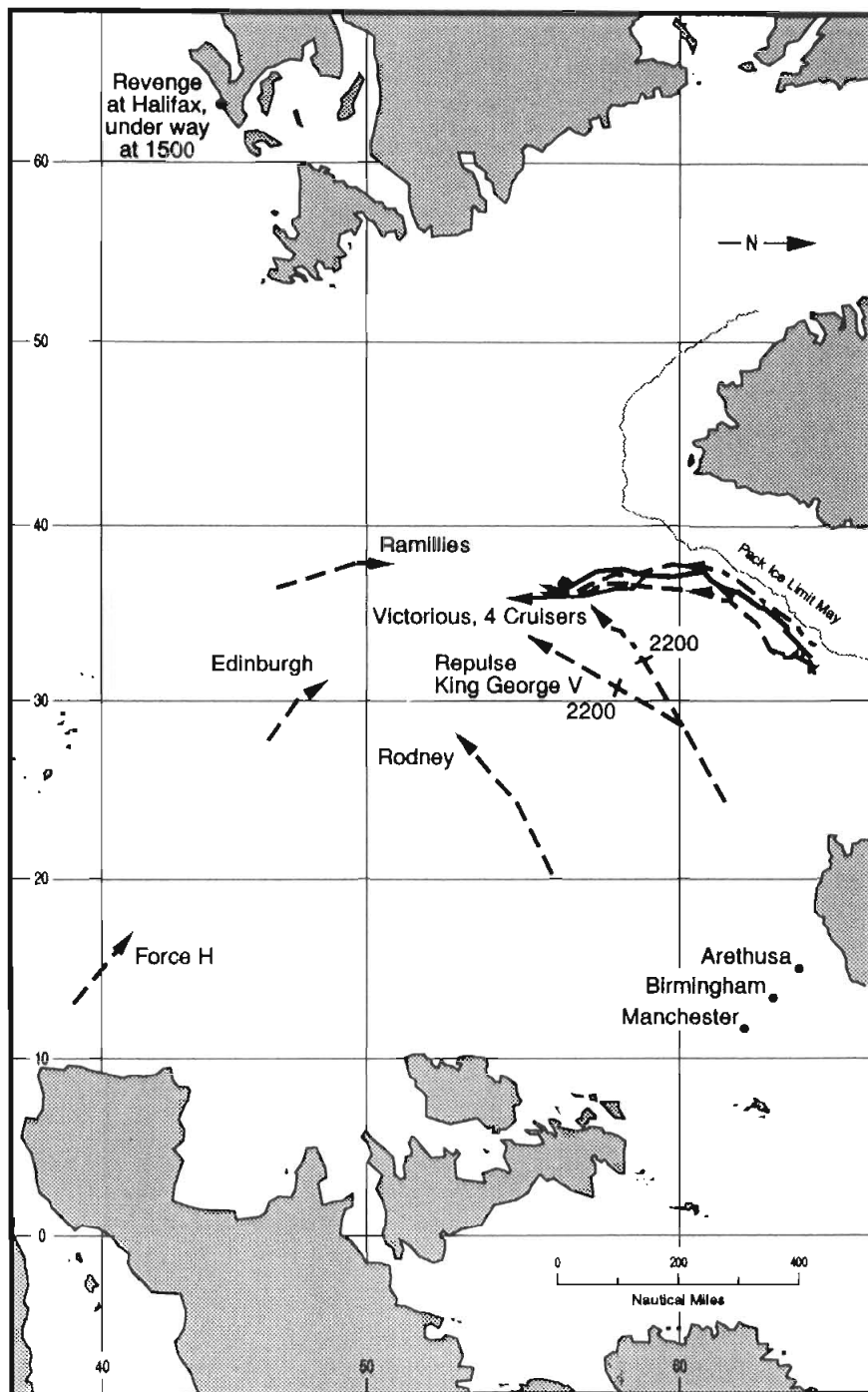


Figure 3. Situation, 24 May prior Bismarck's Evasion

accept action only if it became inevitable. Clearly he did not yet regard it as inevitable.¹⁴

That question settled rightly or wrongly, should he continue with his mission? He decided quite quickly that he should not. No one has questioned this decision. Although the full implications of the damage received would reveal themselves only over the course of time, he would have been able to judge within the hour, or at the most two, that his ship was in no condition for a protracted cruise and that he could not exert that "continuous and sustained" pressure on Britain's sea communications that he and Raeder had discussed a month before. Within two hours of the action, therefore, he had reported to his shore authority (Navy Group West, in Paris) his intention to release the *Prinz Eugen* for commerce raiding and to make for St. Nazaire.

It is his choice of destination that has attracted the greatest volume of criticism. It is worthwhile therefore looking in more detail at what his choices were and what factors would have influenced his final decision.

The conclusions reached by the German naval staff, and indeed by Churchill, seem heavily influenced by questions of range; at the time we are speaking of Norway was substantially closer.¹⁵ We know of course that sixteen hours after his action with the *Hood* Lutjens ordered a further reduction in speed to conserve fuel and that two days later, while still some seven hundred miles short of his destination, he was declaring his fuel state as "critical." When he made his decision, he had no reason to anticipate such a problem. True, the damage forward had flooded a pump room, effectively isolating one thousand tons of fuel in the forward tanks. But how quickly would this limitation have become apparent? How soon would it have been proper to rule out all hope of repair?

It is fair to contend that in making his choice he would have been driven by other considerations. Not least of these would have been the resumption of his mission. Norway could offer a temporary haven only; for repair he would have to return to Germany. He would face the risks of breaking in and then of breaking out again. The *Normandie* dry dock at St. Nazaire offered a solution that was both quicker and safer.

Which route gave him the best chance of avoiding interception by heavy forces? It is surely clear that none of the possibilities offered significant advantage unless he could break contact with his shadowers, since the Home Fleet would in all cases be operating on interior lines. We know from his reports to shore authorities that breaking contact was very much at the forefront of his mind. Should he pass south of Iceland, back into an area heavily patrolled by British cruisers and within range of shore-based surveillance aircraft? Such a course would hardly increase his chances of evasion. Should he have gone back through the Denmark Strait? He had just found out how little sea room there was along the ice edge and how effective his shadower's radar was in narrow waters. He had commented on both these factors to Navy Group West. To break contact

he wanted space, room to maneuver, and an area clear of British air activity; the Atlantic offered all these advantages. He therefore held on to the southward at his best speed, alert for an opportunity to release the *Prinz Eugen* and to break contact himself.

During the early morning hours of 25 May, Lutjens succeeded in throwing off the pursuit. It is instructive, finally, to consider the problems faced by the British authorities in responding to this development and to consider why, despite almost thirty hours of "freedom," Lutjens's maneuver ultimately failed.

As the German squadron continued its southerly course, Admiral Tovey was closing from the east with the *King George V*, the *Victorious*, and the *Repulse*. His quarry was still more than 300 miles ahead of him. Weather was deteriorating and the CinC was becoming increasingly aware that his hold on the *Bismarck* rested on the *Suffolk's* radar alone. He himself could not reach an intercepting position for some sixteen hours, so during the afternoon of 24 May he detached the carrier *Victorious* to close to within one hundred miles of the enemy and deliver a torpedo attack. This attack went in shortly after midnight. One torpedo hit was obtained but the weapon struck the armour plate and did little additional damage.

Meanwhile, however, the Admiralty had been watching developments closely. Indeed, Churchill's attention was by now riveted on the matter and London was beginning to reveal in very unsubtle ways how it thought individual admirals and captains were doing. Much of this traffic was very unhelpful.¹⁶ At the same time, however, the Admiralty had been making some wise decisions. They had sailed Admiral Somerville's Force H from Gibraltar as soon as the cruisers had gained contact in the Denmark Strait, and since then had been systematically stripping convoys of their heavy escorts and ordering reinforcements to the central Atlantic. As long as the position of the *Bismarck* was known, the course of these reinforcements was clear enough. But what were they all to do when at about three o'clock on the morning of 25 May the *Bismarck* disappeared from the *Suffolk's* radar screen and it became evident that contact would not quickly be regained?

The cruisers judged that the *Bismarck* had evaded to the west or southwest, and set off to search in that direction. The CinC weighed all possibilities and concluded that his enemy's most probable course would be to rendezvous with a tanker off Greenland or in the Davis Strait. The air searches that he planned for 25 May were all to be biased in that direction. Everyone's attention, in fact, was focused on the central and western Atlantic, and there no doubt it would have remained but for one critical event.

During the forenoon of 25 May, more than six hours after he had broken contact with his shadowers, Lutjens transmitted a lengthy situation report to his shore authority in which he reported that the efficiency of the enemy radar made it impossible for him to shake off his pursuers and that in the circumstances

fuelling at sea was quite out of the question.¹⁷ He provided further details of the action in the Denmark Strait and of the damage received.

His message caused some surprise ashore. Group West quickly told him that the last British enemy report had been transmitted seven hours earlier and that it was their strong impression that contact had been broken. How could Lutjens have failed to realize that he had escaped?

Some have speculated that the search receivers fitted in the *Bismarck* were still giving warning of British radars. If this is true, propagation conditions must have been extremely unusual. Some have suggested that the evident efficiency of British radar had made so deep an impression on his mind that Lutjens's powers of reasoning were somehow paralysed. That he was the victim of surprise is not in doubt; that surprise should have led Lutjens to reject the considered advice of his signals intelligence staff seems much less certain. It is tempting to conclude instead that his small intelligence team had after days of continuous pressure begun to lose its grip on events.¹⁸

The mistake, whatever its origins, was a fatal one, for the *Bismarck*'s signal was intercepted by British direction-finding stations. The bearing "cut" was extremely poor. There was a wide discrepancy between the fix as plotted in Tovey's flagship and that plotted in the Admiralty. The CinC concluded that the *Bismarck* was breaking back to the north, the Admiralty thought she was bound for Biscay, but one fact was inescapable: the *Bismarck* was well to the east of earlier estimates.

This ambiguity resolved itself only very gradually. The Admiralty was never sufficiently confident to override the CinC's opinion, although they did order Admiral Somerville's Force H to cover the southerly route. But as the day drew on, opinion began to harden in favour of an Atlantic coast destination. By the evening of 25 May the CinC himself had come to this view, although, as he well realized, short of some miraculous intervention there was no way for him to catch up.

We have here a case of Murphy's law working in reverse: the Admiralty had been right in its judgement although partly for the wrong reasons. One piece of evidence that helped to resolve their doubts is particularly interesting and may serve as a cautionary tale. A very senior Luftwaffe officer who had a son serving in the *Bismarck* signalled his headquarters to find out where the ship was going. The reply was sent in air force Enigma, which was then being decrypted almost instantly in England, and the answer was "St. Nazaire."¹⁹

The effect on British deployments is shown in Figure 4. Lutjens's incautious transmission during the morning of 25 May had refocused attention on the eastern Atlantic. Later evidence, some right and some wrong, had refined the focus of attention towards the Biscay ports. Finally, at 1030 on 26 May a Catalina flying boat (co-piloted by Ensign Leonard Smith, USN, a "special observer" with R.A.F. Coastal Command) relocated the *Bismarck* seven hundred miles short of her destination. Force H was well positioned to exploit this detection,

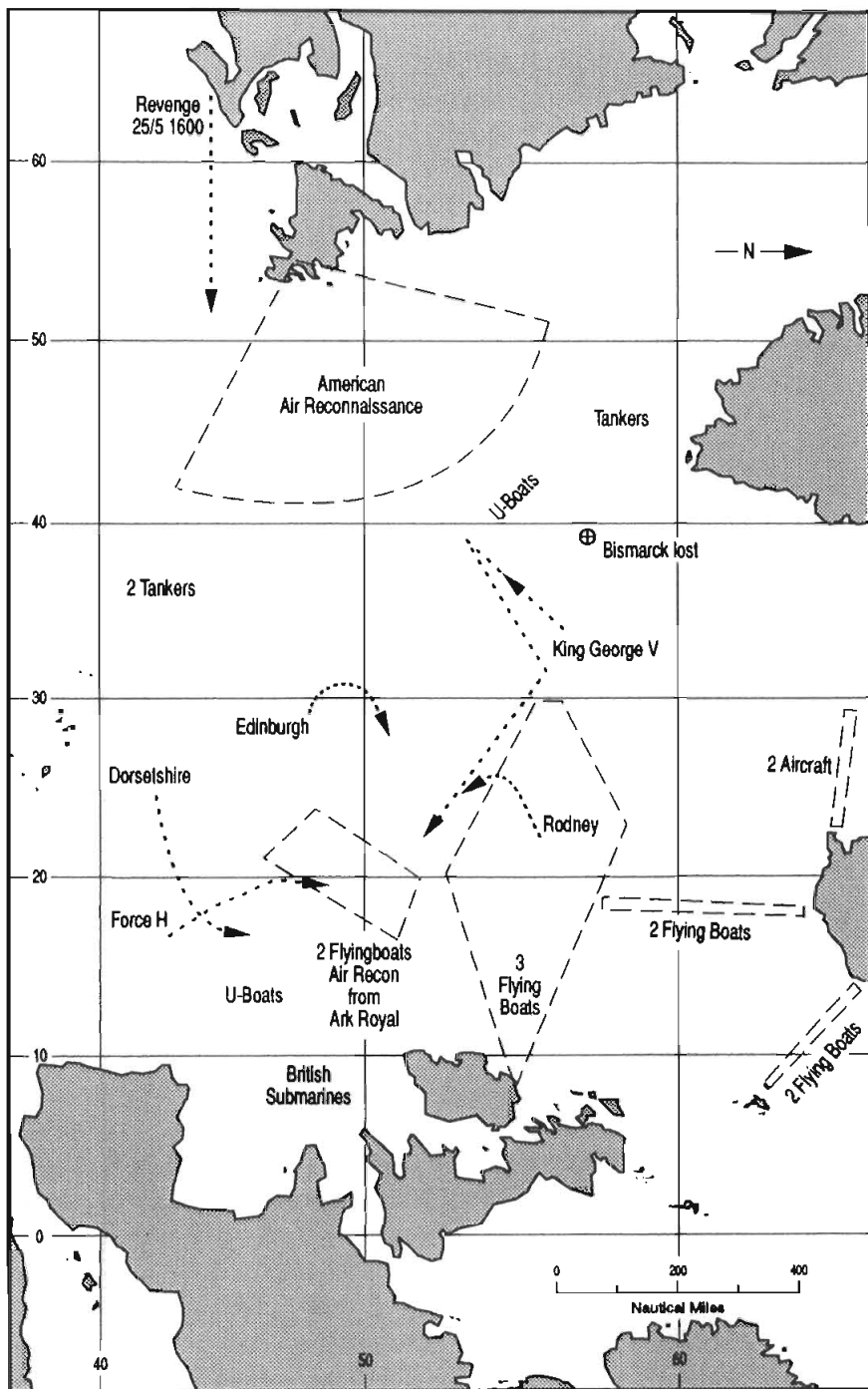


Figure 4. Operations following Interception of Lutjen's Transmission

and thus at the eleventh hour the *Ark Royal's* torpedo planes obtained that lucky hit which opened up the *Bismarck's* steering motor compartment, jammed her rudders at fifteen degrees to port, and left her without power to manoeuvre.

The sequel is well known. At daylight on 27 May Tovey's battleships closed in and reduced the *Bismarck* to a flaming shambles. But the wreck would not sink, and, Ballard's work notwithstanding, it remains a matter for speculation whether it was the torpedoes of the cruiser *Dorsetshire* or the scuttling charges ordered by Captain Lindemann which finished the job. The *Bismarck* sank at 1036 on 27 May with her ensign still flying. About one hundred survivors were recovered.

What lessons would Admiral Raeder draw from these events, and what direction would German naval strategy take from now on? The Grand Admiral was wholly unrepentant. At his next meeting with Hitler he stoutly defended his objective of "permanently disrupting" British sea communications. The use of single battleships was "not wrong in principle." He spoke of a new sortie the following month by the *Scharnhorst* and the *Prinz Eugen*, which had returned to Brest with engine defects on 1 June. He acknowledged that the development of radar had made a breakout from home waters more difficult but maintained that the task was by no means impossible. The *Lutzow* and the *Scheer* would make the attempt in July and August.²⁰

Despite the heavy weight of air attack now directed against the ships in Brest, which kept them in an almost permanent state of disrepair, Raeder was still arguing at the end of 1941 in favour of his Atlantic strategy, now particularly since events in the Pacific would place yet further burdens on the Royal Navy and keep the U.S. fleet fully occupied.²¹ By now, however, Hitler's attention was directed elsewhere. He had become obsessed with the threat of an allied offensive against Norway. This was now the "zone of destiny," and he instructed a still reluctant Raeder to bring the Brest squadron home.

On 12 February 1942, the *Prinz Eugen*, the *Scharnhorst*, and the *Gneisenau* set out from Brest on one of those carefully timed set-piece operations that were so characteristic of the German method and that could still make the opponent seem heavy-footed. The squadron passed up the English Channel under a strong air umbrella and made it to German waters. For all its dash and daring, however, the operation was less than a complete success; both battlecruisers were mined off the Dutch coast. The *Scharnhorst* was repaired, and remained a thorn in the flesh for a further two years. The *Gneisenau* went into dry dock in Kiel and never came out again. Although the British authorities could not know it, and continued to fret about further raiding actions in the Atlantic, Raeder's strategy was dead.

The idea that enduring lessons or “principles” can be drawn from historical experience is uncongenial to the modern mind. There will be many who will point to those technical developments that played so prominent a part in undermining Admiral Raeder’s strategy, who will wish to consign the *Bismarck* episode to the library shelves and pass on to new problems and new challenges. To an extent they are surely right. Yet there has been an inescapable continuity in the kind of strategic problems that admirals have been called upon to resolve. Raeder’s concept—that of disrupting a complex and vulnerable network of maritime communications, and, in its more ambitious form, of exploiting the dispersion of effort forced upon the opposing navy—has after all an ancient lineage. It was well understood by Elizabethan seamen and by Frenchmen of the Napoleonic era. “Inferior” naval powers have been drawn to it repeatedly; “superior” maritime powers with extensive and vulnerable interests upon the sea have had in their turn to find an answer to it. Rather therefore than dismiss Raeder’s concept out of hand, we might better ask whether the strategic effects that he sought cannot be reproduced in other ways, with instruments that continue to enjoy the immunity to detection and prosecution that the surface ship has lost. Unless we can answer this question with a definite “no,” modern maritime powers would do well to consider how they might tackle the problem.

Notes

1. “Reflections of the CINC Navy on the Outbreak of War, 3 September 1939,” *Fuehrer Conferences on German Naval Affairs* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, 1947), v. 1, p.i.
2. Conference of 4 November 1940, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1940*, v. 2, p. 32. Raeder raised the question again on 27 December 1940. The possibility of bases in the Azores, Cape Verdes, and Canaries was also under discussion during these months.
3. Conference of 14 October and 3 December 1940, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1940*, v. 2, pp. 30-31, 64-65.
4. “Exercise Rhine” (operation order for the *Bismarck* sortie) dated 2 April 1940. Full English translation in Burkard von Mullenheim-Rechberg, *Battleship “Bismarck”* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1980), pp. 253-259.
5. S. W. Roskill, *The War at Sea* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1954), v. 2, p. 379. The remark in parenthesis has been added.
6. Report of 20 April 1941, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1941*, v. 1, pp. 50-51.
7. This account of the April conference is taken from Mullenheim-Rechberg, pp. 60-61. Raeder gives the date of this conference as 25 April, but his recollection is surely wrong.
8. Eric Raeder, *My Life* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1960), pp. 351-352. For Raeder’s warnings against the Russian offensive, see conference reports of 14 November and 27 December 1940, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1940*, v. 2, pp. 41, 71.
9. Quoted in Mullenheim-Rechberg, p. 61. Raeder used similar terms in his later defence of the *Bismarck* operation; see *Fuehrer Conferences, 1941*, v. 1, p. 79.
10. F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), v. 1, pp. 340-345.
11. This limitation was recognized by the planners, but the advantages of including the *Prinz Eugen* were considered to outweigh the risk. See operation order “Exercise Rhine,” Mullenheim-Rechberg, p. 255.
12. Ludovic Kennedy, *Pursuit: The Chase & Sinking of the Bismarck* (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 41.
13. Roskill, pp. 398-406.
14. Raeder defended Lutjens’s decision strongly. See his report of 6 June 1941, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1941*, v. 1, p. 79. See also Mullenheim-Rechberg, p. 115.
15. See W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1950), v. 3, pp. 273-275. See also Mullenheim-Rechberg, pp. 121-122.

16. For an account see Kennedy, pp. 107-108.
17. Mullenheim-Rechberg, p. 142.
18. Mullenheim-Rechberg evaluates the various possibilities without coming to a conclusion. See Mullenheim-Rechberg, pp. 143-144.
19. Hinsley, p. 345.
20. See "Lessons Learned from the Events," *Fuehrer Conferences, 1941* (6 June), v. 1, pp. 95-96.
21. Conference of 12 December 1941, *Fuehrer Conferences, 1941*, v. 2, p. 79.

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SMOKE/OBSCURANTS SYMPOSIUM XVI

The Smoke/Obscurants Symposium XVI will be held 14-16 April 1992 at the Kossiakoff Conference and Education Center, The Johns Hopkins University, Laurel, Maryland. The theme of the Symposium is "Smoke, the Margin of Victory." Topics to be presented are Smoke Systems and Materiel, Modelling, Operational Uses, Health or Environmental Effects, Desert Storm Lessons, Countermeasures, Nonmilitary Applications, Data Analysis, Data Assessment and Evaluation, Camouflage, Concealment, Deception, Natural Obscurants, and Electromagnetic Systems Performance. The Symposium is sponsored by the U.S. Army Chemical Research, Development and Engineering Center, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. Members of the Department of Defense, industry, academia, and allied nations are invited to submit papers up to and including the SECRET level on the aforementioned topics. The abstract deadline is 15 January 1992.

For further information contact Judy Cole, Symposium Coordinator (804) 865-7604 and telefax (804) 865-8721; or Walter Klimek, Symposium Chairman (301) 671-2494, DSN 584-2494 or telefax (301) 671-3471.