



Report of Lieutenant-Commander Hugh Guernsey aboard the *King George V* concerning the final battle with *Bismarck* on 27 May 1941

“Throughout the night on the Admiral's bridge we sat, stood, or leant like a covey of disembodied spirits. It was dark, windy, and rainy. None of us will ever know if it was cold. About 2 o'clock in the morning [of 27 May], cocoa appeared. We drank it gratefully, but it might equally well have been pitch-tar; no one would have noticed. At last came daylight, with patchy rain squalls, a flickering sun, a tearing wind from the north-west, and a rising sea. A little manoeuvring, and tin hats are put on. The *Norfolk* appears to the eastward; ‘Enemy in sight 12 miles to the south of me,’ she says. A little change of course, *Rodney* opens out to port a little more. ‘Enemy in sight.’ Well, I couldn't see him. It is the gun director aloft who can see him. And then, veiled in distant rainfall, is a thick squat ghost of a ship, very broad in the beam, coming straight towards us, end on.

There is a sort of crackling roar to port—the *Rodney* has opened fire with her 16-inch guns, and an instant later the *King George V* lets fly with her 14-inch. I have my glasses on the *Bismarck*. She fires all four guns from her two forward turrets, four thin orange flames. The Germans have a reputation for hitting with their early salvos. Now I know what suspended animation means. It seemed to take about two hours for those shots to fall! The splashes shoot up opposite but beyond the *Rodney's* foc'sle. I am sorry to say that we all thought ‘Thank heaven she's shooting at the *Rodney*.’ My second thought was that I wouldn't care to be facing nine 16-inch and ten 14-inch guns—I just kept my binoculars glued to the *Bismarck*. The *Rodney's* first salvo produced great white columns of water 120 ft. high that would break the back of a destroyer and sink her like a stone if she steamed through one of them.

The second splash I missed, all except one shot which seemed to belong to the *King George V* and was a little ahead of the *Bismarck*. Then I watched the *Rodney*, to see if she was being hit; but she just sat there like a great slab of rock blocking the northern horizon and suddenly belched a fun salvo. I actually saw these projectiles flying through the air for some seconds after they left the guns, like little diminishing footballs curving up and into the sky. Now I am sure that four or five hit. There was only one great splash and a sort of flurry of spray and splash which might have been a waterline hit. The others had bored their way through the Krupp armour-belt like cheese; and pray God I may never know what they did as they exploded inside the hull.

The *Bismarck* turned north, steaming about 12 or 14 knots. We kept turning in and out to confuse the enemy range-takers, all the while closing the range rapidly. The Admiral [Tovey] kept on saying: ‘Close the range; get closer;

get close. I can't see enough hits!' And so we closed the range.

But although you could not see the hits, they were there right enough. Somewhere about the eighth salvo there was a fire on the foc'sle which seemed to envelop "B" (the upper) turret, and one observer tells me he saw a huge plate torn away from the tail of it. She turned away, then back, writhing it seemed, under the most merciless hail of high explosive armour-piercing shells that any ship has, I suppose, ever faced. There was no escape for the *Bismarck*—our fellows just went on pumping it out in a steady succession of shattering roars, and I soon forgot all about ourselves in the intense interest of watching the *Bismarck*. Smoke shot up, perhaps in an endeavour to screen herself, but it quickly blew away. And then I noticed her two after turrets firing at us. There was a sort of shudder somewhere in our stern, and I glanced that way for a hit—but there was no sign of it. A little later I heard the first whine of her 15-inch shell—it was a straddling shot over our foc'sle, one short and three overs. I wondered if the next would hit and found myself involuntarily edging into the doorway at the back of the bridge. It would not have helped very much, as it is only splash-proof plating, so I stepped forward again to see how the *Bismarck* was getting along.

An extraordinary sight met my eyes. The action had been going perhaps 20 minutes; some of her secondary armament and certainly two of the great turrets were still firing—perhaps a little wildly, for nobody on our side showed signs of a hit. There, racing across her quarterdeck, were little human figures; one climbed over the wire guard rails, hung on with one hand, looked back, and then jumped into the sea. Others just jumped without looking back at all—a little steady trickle of them jumping into the sea one after another.

About this time the coppery glow of our secondary armament shells striking the armoured upper works became more and more frequent, and one fierce flame shot up from the base of the bridge structure, enveloping it as high as, and including, the spotting top for a flickering second. Every man there must have been incinerated—there was no smoke; the heat had consumed it. Once I saw evidently a small-calibre shell on fire, for a swift arc of flame shot high into the air and curved over the top of the mainmast. She still kept up some speed but seemed heavy in the water and had a slight list to port. Well, we just shot the guns out of her and left a smoking, lurching black ruin. It made one feel a little sick to see such a mighty powerful vessel brought to the state of an impotent hulk. Only her slow, wallowing speed seemed still to give her life—and those little jumping figures at the stern. It was like a dog that had been run over; someone had got to finish it off—because her colours were still flying at the mainmast head.

Our battleships turned away, and the *Dorsetshire* closed in and finished her off with torpedoes. When we were about 10 miles off, the hulk turned over to port, floated for a little bottom up, and then with a lift of the bows was suddenly gone. The *Dorsetshire* stopped, as did the destroyers, to pick up what survivors they could, but the *Dorsetshire* reported that she had sighted a U-boat between two deep seas, so they gave it up and cleared off with about a hundred saved."