1935 was a crucial pre-war year. On 16\textsuperscript{th} March that year Hitler openly repudiated the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, and according to some text books German re-armament began. In fact it had started considerably earlier. The German airforce, for example, had been formed well before Hitler’s time, and had been training secretly at airfields in the Soviet Union under the Treaty of Rapallo, 1922, which included secret clauses about technical and military co-operation. There was also clandestine naval construction.

Not long after the repudiation of Versailles, Hitler let it be known, through diplomatic channels, that he would be willing to restrict his naval strength to thirty-five per cent of the British level. To those who considered that Germany, more affected by the slump than most countries, could hardly afford a new army, let alone a navy, this was laughable. Nevertheless, the British cabinet took it quite seriously. Despite Nazi Germany’s new and ominous re-armament, Anglo-German naval talks got under way and a delegation under von Ribbentrop came to London in June, 1935, simply demanding thirty-five per cent or else! The British Cabinet seemed completely oblivious of everything except their own naval strength in the Pacific; oblivious of the serious repercussions that German re-armament was causing in Europe, and oblivious, above all, that they had just been a party to the Stresa Declaration together with France and Italy, gravely deploring Nazi Germany’s decision to re-arm. For the British then to act unilaterally, without consultation with France, Italy or anyone else, resulted first in utter disbelief, followed by consternation and then outrage in France. Nevertheless, the government went ahead and concluded an Anglo-German Naval Treaty. This allowed Germany not only to build a surface
fleet, thirty-five per cent of the size of the Royal Navy, but also, and quite incredibly, allowed them to build up to one hundred per cent of British submarine strength, provided some tonnage was reduced elsewhere. Bearing in mind that Britain had suffered severe economic problems caused by German submarines in the First War, which culminated in a serious crisis in 1917, this latter provision in the Treaty passed all understanding! It can only be described as the first major act in the policy later to be called appeasement. Stanley Baldwin, a member of the cabinet, soon to become Prime Minister, said, ‘This is a signpost, if Hitler breaks it or cheats we will know that he is going to challenge us’. He didn’t have long to wait. In December, the German Ambassador in London announced that his government intended to exercise their right under the Treaty to build up to parity with the British in submarines. They also proposed to convert two cruisers into heavy gun cruisers having previously told the British they would be only six-inch gun cruisers. The British protested but Hitler would soon denounce the Treaty anyway. He was totally untrustworthy and the British Cabinet should have been aware of it.

By 1938 Hitler had instructed the naval command to revise the entire shipbuilding programme, and even jeered at his Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Raeder, about the Bismarck and the Tirpitz, then nearing their launch, for being too small, too slow, insufficiently armed and armoured, causing Raeder, mortified, to offer his resignation. The new, extensively revised programme, called the ‘Z Plan’, was approved by Hitler early in 1939, but was a five-year programme. This was one of Hitler’s dreams, as Germany was already running out of resources, and could hardly feed its population. In fact, it was importing heavily from the Soviet Union, both as to essential minerals for the war industry and, extensively, wheat from the Soviet Ukraine! In fact the Nazis were obliged to go to war several years earlier than
planned, and were consequently far weaker, as a war economy than was recognised at the time. In reality, fierce battles raged within German industry about which factories, companies, or projects should get priority for scarce raw materials. Apart from Soviet imports, vital materials such as copper, and wolfram, (tungsten), could only be purchased on the open market. The German currency, the mark, was very weak, and these expensive materials could only be purchased abroad with financial help, which came, it has now been revealed, from Swiss banks, which must have taken the view that German arms would soon conquer Europe!! This premature plunging into war caused Admiral Raeder to write, in despair, in 1939, that the outbreak of the war four years too soon had spoiled his chances of ‘solving the British problem permanently’. Anyone the Nazis wished to destroy became ‘ein problem’, and so we get the Austrian problem, the Czech problem, the ‘Polish problem’ the Jewish problem, the Soviet prisoners problem (three million of them; few survived).

Commodore Doenitz, the commander of the U-boats, a committed Nazi and fervent admirer of Hitler, had written a book urging the building of a large fleet of submarines so that when war came, Gt. Britain (without actually mentioning the name) could be starved into surrender, but Admiral Raeder and the capital ships lobby had their way. The outbreak of war, earlier than planned, meant that the German Navy, though modern, was still below the 35 per cent agreed.

The actual strength of the Kriegsmarine (war navy) in September, 1939, was:-two battleships, three pocket battleships, one heavy and six light cruisers, twenty-one destroyers and fifty-seven submarines, of which only about twenty were of the ocean-going type.

As mentioned earlier, cheating the Versailles Treaty had already started. In March 1933, almost as soon as the Nazis had come to power, two new battle-cruisers
of about 26,000 tons were planned, (the Scharnhorst and the Gneisenau), and the keel-plate of the first one was laid in February, 1935 (British and French intelligence being in the dark). A few months later the design of these ships was upgraded to mount nine instead of six, eleven inch guns, and with stronger armour the displacement was pushed up to 31,300 tons. Two battleships of around 35,000 tons were also planned (Bismarck and Tirpitz). However, in 1935 - the year of the Anglo-Naval Treaty - Hitler ordered a review of the armament of all four. The first two were left unchanged, probably because of the earlier upgrading, but the battleships were now upgraded to carry eight fifteen inch guns, increasing their displacement to 42,000 tons. Neither of these upgradings was disclosed, and were twenty per cent above the 35,000 tons agreed in the Treaty. The British battleship, King George V, comparable to the Bismarck but with only fourteen inch guns, was kept to within five per cent of the agreed limit, the British not wishing to start an arms race. Definitely cricket! But the British didn’t just play by the rules, they played with one arm tied behind their backs. Richard Hough, in his book, ‘The Longest Battle’, (1985) mentions that the Chamberlain government, in 1938, when war clouds were ominously gathering, decided to return three Treaty ports to the Irish government as part of a settlement of other claims arising out of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, when the Irish state was set up, and were reserved for British use. They had proved invaluable in the First War, protecting the Western Approaches, especially against the U-boats, and Hough suggests this voluntary surrender of the bases probably cost the lives of thousands of seamen in the Second World war.

When war came, the Germans decided to complete those ships already building, but make no new starts (except for submarines). They intended to make bold use of what surface vessels they had, as they knew the enormous dislocation,
both to trade routes and to British naval dispositions, that the presence of even one
capital ship could cause. But boldness had to be tempered with discretion as the
ships were not replaceable. In 1940, with the seizure of French and Norwegian bases
the Kriegsmarine was in a much stronger position to invade the trade routes than it
was in 1914, and that success had been very considerable. Moreover, the Germans
had an overwhelming intelligence advantage - they were able to decipher the British
naval codes as well as those of the merchant navy, and so they knew what they were
looking for, and occasionally even what action was planned against them, whereas the
Admiralty were operating mainly in the dark, or at best, in the half-light.

In the winter of 1940/41 there had been some very damaging commerce
attacks by enemy surface raiders, including six armed “merchantmen”, contrary to
international law as they were disguised auxiliary cruisers. In the first three months
of 1941, during three short cruises, the pocket battleship ‘Scheer’, the two
battle-cruisers ‘Scharnhorst’ and ‘Gneisenau’ and the heavy cruiser ‘Hipper’, sank
over 150,000 tons of shipping. These winter raids, although a successful German
operation, were still limited in their scope.

2. THE LIFE

Now however, with both Bismarck and Prinz Eugen ready to sail, Admiral
Raeder planned a grand spring offensive, possibly in conjunction with Scharnhorst
and Gneisenau, together with the U-boat fleet and the auxiliary cruisers. But the two
battle-cruisers had suffered damage, were under repair and not able to leave Brest
when the two new ships, Bismarck and Prinz Eugen, sailed from Kiel on 19th May,
1941. The British naval attaché in Stockholm learned that two large ships had been
sighted passing through the Kattegat, and he informed London the next day (20th
May). When the Admiralty received this warning they asked for air reconnaissance of the Norwegian coast. A spitfire from No. 1 PRU (Photographic Reconnaissance Unit) at Wick found and photographed a battleship and an eight inch gun cruiser at 1300 hours on 21st May. The pictures showed Bismarck and Prinz Eugen then being off Bergen. Just before this sighting, Bletchley Park had managed to decipher some back April messages which showed beyond doubt the enemy intention to raid the trade routes. The messages disclosed that the two new ships were then carrying out exercises together, that prize crews had been embarked and the appropriate charts supplied. As a result of these messages the Admiralty’s Operational Intelligence Centre (OIC) issued a warning to all naval commands. This was Bletchley’s only positive contribution to the sinking of the Bismarck, despite anything said or written to the contrary.

The question was; after re-fuelling at Bergen, where would Bismarck go? The Admiralty had every reason to be worried. This ship, 820 feet long, with armour thirteen inches thick, a high speed of thirty knots and bristling with eight fifteen-inches guns, (plus anti-aircraft guns) and reputed to be unsinkable, was the most powerful vessel on either side and capable of inflicting enormous damage. It had been built to the formula; faster than anything that could out-gun her. (e.g. HMS Rodney) and to outgun anything faster than herself. From first light on 22nd May, aircraft of coastal command had tried to discover whether the two ships had left Bergen. Unfortunately there was fog and low cloud, but at 2200 hours that night, a torpedo trainer aircraft from RN Air Station Hatston, sent out on the commanding officer’s own initiative, penetrated the fog by flying at almost sea-level, established that the Bergen area was clear of enemy ships. In fact, the two warships had left Bergen only six hours after being sighted. On the evening of 23rd May, the cruisers
Norfolk and Suffolk sighted the Bismarck in the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. The enemy warships were shadowed throughout the following night, probably with the help of their new radar. Soon after dawn on 24th May the two enemy ships were engaged by two British warships; one too old, one too new. Neither of them were suited to the kind of conflict they were now facing; the Hood because she was too old and her decks were neither fully nor sufficiently armoured to withstand plunging fifteen-inch shells, the new Prince of Wales was not fully operational, indeed still had shipyard workers on board. The angle of interception prevented the full armament of the two British ships being brought to bear, and while the two British ships divided their fire, the two enemy ships concentrated on the old Hood. Bismarck fired a salvo from seventeen miles distance with unerring accuracy, penetrated the poorly-armoured deck, and by a very strange chance indeed found one magazine which caused a mighty explosion and a fire-storm which rapidly reached the forward end magazine resulting in a second great explosion which caused the ship to sink immediately. Out of a complement of 1419 men there were only three survivors. Half an hour later the battleship Prince of Wales sustained seven hits and was forced to break off, but not before she had damaged the Bismarck below the water line.

Norfolk and Suffolk continued to track the Bismarck, and gradually closing in from the east were the battleship, King George V, the battle-cruiser Repulse, and the aircraft-carrier Victorious. Admiral Tovey on King George V ordered a torpedo attack against the Bismarck by aircraft from Victorious, and this also damaged her. Bismarck then doubled back in a rainstorm and headed east, Admiral Lutyens having divided the two ships and ordered Prinz Eugen to head south-west. This was, or should have been, a clever move, as the British lost both ships in the confusion, the
new radar not coping with the weather. However, some naval historians believe that although Lutyens knew he had shaken off his pursuers, he suspected that the British had good radar as well as air patrols which might soon discover him, and as the Bismarck was leaking oil, and had to reduce speed, he lost his nerve and sent a signal to base asking for U-boat and air support. If so this was a mistake as the signal roughly disclosed his position to the British direction-finding stations. The third gunnery officer on the Bismarck, a survivor, recalls being appalled when heard of the wireless message - i.e. breaking wireless silence. The official History of British Intelligence mentions a total of twenty-two signals from the Bismarck in three days. However, blunders were not confined to the enemy. Normally, from the direction-finding bearings of enemy signals the OIC would work out the actual position of an enemy vessel and transmit it to the naval forces concerned. For some reason however, Admiral Tovey, Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, on the battleship King George V, was supplied not with the actual position of the enemy ship, but with the original direction-finding bearings from the Bismarck’s transmission. These bearings were wrongly plotted on the flagship with the result that the fleet received a signal from the Commander-in-Chief, telling them to change course, and soon they were all steaming blissfully towards the Iceland-Faroes gap while the Bismarck continued to head south! The Admiralty in London, monitoring the signals from the flagship, noted the discrepancy between its own (correctly calculated) positions, and the new course given in the order to the fleet. But they did not draw the Commander-in-Chief’s attention to it. No reason is given in any records - perhaps too embarrassing to mention! Now the Admiralty, unlike the War Office or the Air Ministry, is an executive department which directly controls its ships at sea and it should not have mattered whether the First Sea Lord or the deity in person were
on board the flagship, she should have been told. The Bismarck was Public Enemy No. 1! However, the Admiralty played its second card; it instructed Force H to move up from Gibraltar, and also ordered the powerful HMS Rodney and the Flag Officer submarines’ to proceed on the assumption that the enemy ship was making for a Bay of Biscay port. Probably, the Admiralty hoped that when the Flagship monitored these messages or had them repeated, they would realise their mistake. What a debacle! Yet there was more confusion to come that day at the Admiralty based on misreading signals from other enemy vessels causing them to issue a signal to the Rodney and then finally changing back to the original instructions. The Commander-in-Chief, hearing these conflicting signals decided to steer a middle course before he finally realised and turned back. Nelson must have turned in his grave!

3. THE DEATH

The Bismarck, twice damaged and leaking fuel, had decided to make for Brest, and might have well have reached port unimpeded had the ship not signed its own death warrant. Breaking the golden rule of absolute wireless silence, especially in such a perilous situation, the Bismarck, in addition to the other fairly short messages, now sent a half-hour-long message which very rashly, totally betrayed her position. Considering that those armed German ‘merchantmen’ mentioned earlier, maintained complete wireless silence and that U-boats, which had to signal frequently, restricted transmissions to bursts of around thirty seconds, this behaviour smacks of arrogance, recklessness, even stupidity. Even if the Admiral or Captain - Bismarck carried both - never satisfactory as it may result in divided command - even if he or they believed the enemy knew roughly their position, no ship or aircraft had yet found her, and they
must have realised that the entire British fleet would be searching for her. Thus a very costly and prestigious ship, and over 2000 lives were needlessly endangered. But even worse was to follow. The long message was actually repeated, this time sent from Berlin to Athens, and now using a Luftwaffe Enigma key which Bletchley Park was deciphering regularly, although Bletchley had not yet mastered the naval code. The message was deciphered by Hut Six at Bletchley Park just after 1800 hours on the evening of 25th May, merely confirming that Bismarck was heading for the French coast. By then however, the Bismarck’s course had been ratified, the exact position finally determined by a Catalina aircraft. The reason the message was repeated, was, incredibly, that a Luftwaffe general, who was in Athens preparing to attack Crete, knew a young man - relative or friend - aboard the Bismarck and wished to be informed! The great length of the message was presumably, to give details of the engagements and damage caused both to the enemy and to themselves. Hitler’s forces had not yet suffered a reverse, and may well have become arrogant and careless. The Catalina aircraft found the Bismarck at 10.30 on the morning of the 26th and was seen again, forty-five minutes later, by a carrier aircraft from Force H. It was then a question of whether the battleship could be slowed down and engaged before it reached the approaches to Brest and protective air cover. On the evening of the 26th aircraft from Ark Royal struck twice with torpedoes, one of which very luckily, jammed the rudder. This meant that possibly the world’s most powerful warship, the pride of Hitler’s navy, was going round in circles, had ceased to function as a stable gun platform, and had become target practice for the Rodney and King George V the following morning. Nevertheless, even the Rodney’s sixteen inch guns with their armour-piercing shells failed to sink the Bismarck - which was indeed so well built as to withstand a terrible battering - and terrible it must have been for those
on board as the ship was reduced to a blazing inferno. With Churchill constantly
demanding that the Bismarck be at the bottom of the sea, she was finally finished off
with torpedoes from the cruiser Dorsetshire. The Bismarck, with ‘state of the art’
technology, was fatally damaged by an antiquated Swordfish aircraft showing what
was beginning to be apparent, that the battleship was already becoming obsolete, as
the fate of other capital ships was soon to prove. The huge element of luck in hitting
Bismarck’s rudder was matched by a similar chance in one of the first shells from the
Bismarck penetrating the Hood’s magazine.

Despite the terrible destruction and loss of life on the Bismarck, Admiral
Lutyens refused to surrender or even show the white flag while the remainder of the
crew took to the lifeboats. Because, presumably, of the symbolic importance to the
Nazi regime, the ship could not be surrendered, nor could the lives of the crew be
spared. There were only 115 survivors out of a complement of 2,222. Some
German post-war historians, using anecdotal evidence from one or two survivors,
claimed that the ship was finally scuttled. However, an underwater exploration by
divers with TV cameras and powerful lighting showed conclusively that an earlier
torpedo attack by Rodney and Norfolk had caused extensive flooding from which no
ship could survive.

The Importance of Sinking the Bismarck

The word that went around the world was that German might was not as
invincible as was supposed. This was Hitler’s first major set-back; the pride of the
Kriegsmarine, the most powerful battleship afloat, the unsinkable Bismarck, had been
reduced to a battered sunken wreck, after only eight days out at sea. The ship had
been seen in some German military and naval quarters as a folly; the immensely
strong construction, with thirteen-inch thick armoured steel, had long been regarded as a gamble with scarce resources, taking up an unfair share of the war economy. There were mutterings that the steel would have produced at least one Panzer division, and Commodore Doenitz said the ship might have built a hundred submarines.

After the sinking of the Bismarck Hitler ordered the other surface raiders to be concentrated along the Norwegian coast, where they could attack Arctic convoys to Russia and defend Norway against invasion! Thus, the winter and spring of 1940/41 were the peak of the surface raiders’ success.

The Bismarck was fatally damaged by a Swordfish aircraft of obsolete design, very slow (90mph), and carrying one torpedo. This was the second big success for this antiquated machine - the first being the Taranto raid - and was soon to lead to the inescapable conclusion that air-power was going to prove superior to sea-power. Pearl Harbour and the battle of Midway were to follow.

For the British this came as a refreshing morale-booster. After a run of bad news, at best narrow escapes such as the evacuation from Dunkirk, or an inconclusive draw, like the battle of Britain, when the enemy withdrew from day-time attack, but was deterred sufficiently to abandon any invasion plans. Moreover, London had just sustained a very heavy night raid on 10th May, any repetitions of which could have had serious consequences.

Sources