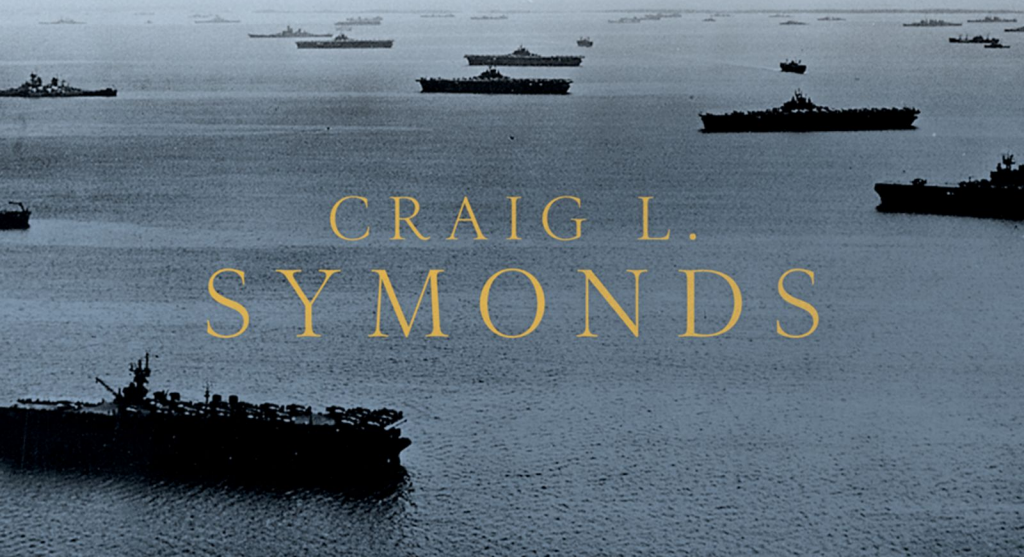




WORLD WAR II AT SEA

A GLOBAL HISTORY

CRAIG L.
SYMONDS



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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Symonds, Craig L., author.

Title: World War II at sea : a global history / Craig L. Symonds.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, [2018] |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017032532 | ISBN 9780190243678 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: World War, 1939–1945—Naval operations

Classification: LCC D770 .S87 2018 | DDC 940.54/5—dc23 LC record available at
<https://lccn.loc.gov/2017032532>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

For Marylou, again

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE SECOND WORLD WAR was the single greatest cataclysm of violence in human history. Some sixty million people lost their lives—about 3 percent of the world's population. Thanks to scholars and memoirists of virtually every nation, it has been chronicled in thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of books in a score of languages.

Many of those books document the naval aspects of the war. Unsurprisingly, the winners have been more fulsome than the vanquished—Stephen Roskill and Samuel Eliot Morison emphasized the particular contributions of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy in multivolume sets. Others have examined the role of navies in a particular theater or a particular battle, especially in the Mediterranean and the Pacific. Yet no single volume evaluates the impact of the sea services from all nations on the overall trajectory and even the outcome of the war. Doing so illuminates how profoundly the course of the war was charted and steered by maritime events.

Such is the ambition of this work, and it is one with challenges. The story of the global war at sea between 1939 and 1945 is a sprawling, episodic, and constantly shifting tale of conflicting national interests, emerging technologies, and oversized personalities. Telling it in a single narrative is daunting, yet telling it any other way would be misleading. There was not one war in the Atlantic and another in the Pacific, a third in the Mediterranean, and still another in the Indian Ocean or the North Sea. While it might simplify things to chronicle the conflict in such geographical packets, that was not the way the war unfolded or the way decision-makers had to manage it. The loss of

shipping during the Battle of the Atlantic affected the availability of transports for Guadalcanal; convoys to the besieged island of Malta in the Mediterranean meant fewer escorts for the Atlantic; the pursuit of the battleship *Bismarck* drew forces from Iceland and Gibraltar as well as from Britain. The narrative here, therefore, is chronological. Of course, leaping about from ocean to ocean day to day is both impractical and potentially bewildering, so there is necessarily some chronological overlap between chapters.

Whenever possible, I allow the historical actors to speak for themselves, for my goal in this book is to tell the story of World War II at sea the way contemporaries experienced it: as a single, gigantic, complex story, involving national leaders and strategic decision-makers, fleet commanders and ship drivers, motor macs, gunners, pilots, merchant seamen, and Marines; as a worldwide human drama that had a disproportionate and lasting impact on the history of the world.

PROLOGUE

London, 1930

THE MURMUR OF CONVERSATION ceased abruptly and there was a rustle of movement as the assembled delegates stood when King George entered the Royal Gallery, followed by the lord chamberlain and the prime minister. The king walked slowly but purposefully toward the ornate throne that dominated one end of the House of Lords, and he waited there while the delegates resettled themselves. That he was here at all was noteworthy, for George V had been ill for some time (very likely with the septicemia that would later kill him) and had retired to Craigweil House, in Bognor, on the Sussex coast, to recuperate. Unhappy and frustrated by his confinement there, he had made a special effort to be present for this ceremony.

The House of Lords, with its gilded coffered ceiling and stained glass windows, offered a suitable stage for the king's public reappearance, though the windows admitted little light on this occasion because on January 20, 1930, London was blanketed by a thick fog; local authorities had been compelled to turn on the streetlights in the middle of the day. The hall was

crowded, not with peers of the realm, but with more than a hundred delegates from eleven nations. Six of those nations were dominions within Britain's far-flung empire, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, though the audience also boasted representatives from the military powers of three continents. From Europe there were delegates from both France and Italy (though, significantly, not from either Weimar Germany or communist Russia). In addition to Canada, a delegation from the United States represented the Western Hemisphere, and from Asia there was a substantial contingent from the Empire of Japan, though not from China. Each delegation was headed by a high-ranking civilian, and the audience included two prime ministers, two foreign secretaries, and one secretary of state. The men—and they were all men—were mostly in their fifties and sixties, and they constituted a somber audience in their dark suits with stiff white collars.¹

Scattered among them, however, and lined up across the back of the hall, were the uniformed officers of a dozen navies, the fat and narrow gold stripes ascending their sleeves from cuff to elbow revealing their exalted rank. There was less variation in their attire than might have been expected from such a polyglot assemblage because all of them, including the Japanese, wore uniforms modeled on the Royal Navy prototype: a double-breasted dark blue (officially navy blue) coat with two vertical rows of gold buttons. Here was unmistakable evidence of the extent to which the Royal Navy was the archetype of all modern navies.

Many of the officers also wore gaudy decorations—stars and sashes—earned over a lifetime of service at sea and ashore, and the bright splashes of color among the dark suits suggested songbirds among ravens. Even the junior officers, tasked with note-taking, translating, and providing technical support, stood out by sporting thick aiguillettes of gold braid draped over their shoulders and across their chests, ornamentation that identified them as belonging to the staff of one or another of the gold-striped admirals.

George V, too, might have worn a naval officer's uniform, since in addition to being the Sovereign of Great Britain, Ireland, and British Dominions Beyond the Seas, he was also a five-star admiral in the Royal Navy. He had decided instead to wear a plain black frock coat. Solemnly he took his position

in front of the distinguished audience to offer a brief welcoming address. Speaking in what the London *Times* called “a firm and resonant voice,” he noted that every nation there was proud of its navy—and rightly so. But, he said, competition among navies had been a major factor in provoking what he called the “grim and immense tragedy” that had erupted in 1914. He hardly had to remind these men that the battleship construction race between Britain and imperial Germany from 1905 to 1914 had been a central feature of the mounting distrust that culminated in the outbreak of war.²

Indeed, in recognition of that, the victorious powers had met in Washington in 1921, a few years after the end of the war, to place limits on future battleship construction. Germany had not been invited to that conference (or to this one, either) since the Versailles Treaty already forbade her both battleships and submarines. The Washington conference had been a success nonetheless, producing a treaty in 1922 that established limits on the size and number of battleships that could be possessed by the major powers, limits that were enshrined in the subsequently famous formula 5:5:3, denoting the ratio of battleship tonnage allowed to Britain, the United States, and Japan, respectively, with France and Italy each accorded smaller totals. Now, the British monarch told the assembled delegates, it was time to go further and complete the job so nobly begun—to extend the limits to all classes of warships: cruisers, destroyers, and especially submarines.

The impetus behind this renewed effort had two sources: one of them philosophical and idealistic, the other pragmatic and economic. The philosophical touchstone was the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact, signed two years earlier by sixty-two nations, including all of those represented here. That agreement had outlawed war as an instrument of national policy. Years later, after regimes in Germany, Japan, and Italy had made a mockery of such high-principled declarations, it became popular to dismiss the Kellogg-Briand Pact as a fatuous exercise in wishful thinking. But in 1930 it was still being taken seriously, at least publicly.

A more pragmatic spur to action was the fact that the previous October, a stock market crash in New York had triggered a worldwide economic recession, the depths of which had not yet been plumbed. With employment and revenue falling, governments the world over were seeking ways to

trim their expenses, and warships were one of the most expensive items in any nation's budget. Additional naval arms limitation, therefore, seemed both philosophically admirable and fiscally responsible. In view of these circumstances, George V urged the delegates to lift "the heavy burden of armaments now weighing upon the peoples of the world" by finding a way to reduce warship construction.³

BATTLESHIPS REMAINED the universally accepted measuring stick of naval power, which was precisely why they had been the focus of the 1922 agreement. More than six hundred feet long and displacing more than 30,000 tons of seawater, battleships were operated by crews of twelve to fifteen hundred men, making them virtual floating cities. Heavily armed as well as heavily armored, their principal weapon consisted of large-caliber guns housed in rotating turrets fore and aft. The largest of these guns had grown from a diameter of 12 inches to 14, and recently to 16 inches, and they fired shells that weighed nearly two thousand pounds at targets ten to fifteen miles away. Indeed, the range of these massive guns was so great that most battleships carried airplanes that were used not only to scout for the enemy but also to spot and report the fall of shot. These planes were propelled into the air by an explosive charge, and because they were equipped with pontoons they could subsequently land alongside their host vessel and be hoisted back aboard.

Battlecruisers were in some cases even longer than battleships, though they had slightly smaller guns and considerably less armor, which meant they displaced less tonnage. The largest warship in the Royal Navy in 1930 was the battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, which at 860 feet was the pride of the fleet. Her eight 15-inch guns gave her exceptional offensive power, but her Achilles' heel was her relatively thin armor, which made her more vulnerable than any battleship. British battlecruisers had fared badly in the 1916 Battle of Jutland, when three of them had blown up spectacularly with the loss of almost all hands. That had provoked Royal Navy Admiral David Beatty to comment, with characteristic British sangfroid, "There seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today." After that, most naval planners began to think of battlecruisers not so much as light battleships as oversize cruisers.

RELATIVE SIZES OF
ROYAL NAVAL WARSHIPS IN THE 1930s



Battleship HMS *Nelson* (1927)



Battlecruiser HMS *Renown* (1916)



Aircraft Carrier HMS *Ark Royal* (1938)



Heavy cruiser HMS *York* (1930)



Light cruiser HMS *Leander* (1931)



Destroyer HMS *Gallant* (1936)



Submarine HMS *Starfish* (1933)

Cruisers looked much like battleships, with their characteristic superstructure amidships and rotating gun turrets fore and aft, and differed primarily in their smaller size. Heavy cruisers generally displaced about 10,000 tons (a third that of battleships) with guns that were 8 inches in diameter. Indeed, the Washington Treaty had specified that any ship displacing more than 10,000 tons or carrying a gun larger than 8 inches would count as a battleship, which led most nations to build heavy cruisers that conformed to those precise specifications.

Light cruisers were smaller yet, usually displacing about 6,000 tons and carrying guns that fired 6-inch shells. The British preferred these smaller cruisers because they were cheaper, which meant they could build more of them to patrol the extensive sea-lanes of their far-flung imperial possessions, from Gibraltar to Suez and from India to Singapore.

Destroyers were the workhorses of twentieth-century navies. Initially built to combat small torpedo boats, they were christened “torpedo-boat destroyers.” If cruisers were about a third the size of battleships, destroyers were about a third the size of cruisers, displacing between 1,200 and 2,000 tons. Too small to slug it out with the bigger ships, they were generally used as escorts, scouting out ahead of the battleships to patrol for submarines, or performing that same function for merchant convoys. They had guns that varied in size from 4 to 5 inches, but their most effective anti-ship weapon was the torpedo. Though the reliability of the torpedoes was sometimes problematic, a destroyer armed with them could be fatal even to the largest of warships.

THE OSTENSIBLE GOAL of the delegates in London was to extend the limits that had been applied to battleships in the 1922 treaty to cruisers and smaller ships as well, especially the heavy cruisers. The U.S. Navy’s General Board had instructed its delegates that the United States needed no fewer than twenty-seven of the big cruisers to ensure the security of its Pacific outposts at Hawaii, Wake, Guam, and the Philippines, though the board acknowledged confidentially that it could get by with twenty-three. The British preferred to have fewer of the big cruisers and more of the smaller, 6-inch-gun cruisers. One difficulty, then, was to devise a formula by which some number of smaller cruisers could be equated to one heavy cruiser.

Japan's case was unique. Back in 1922, Japan had reluctantly accepted the formula embedded in the Washington Treaty that allowed her only three-fifths of the battleship tonnage allotted to the Americans and the British. On one level this was logical: the British and Americans had interests in both the Atlantic and the Pacific as well as the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, and in Britain's case, the Indian Ocean, too. Japan's interests were almost exclusively in the western Pacific, so her apparent subordination to the British and Americans actually gave her a strong relative position in her home waters. To the Japanese, however, it was a matter of national pride. Japanese newspapers remarked that the 5:5:3 Washington formula equated to "Rolls-Royce, Rolls-Royce, Ford." The Japanese delegation had come to London with strict instructions to accept no less than 70 percent of the number of heavy cruisers allotted to Britain and the United States. As Katō Kanji, head of the Supreme Military Council, put it: "The real issue at stake is no longer our naval power per se, but our national prestige and credibility."⁴

In hindsight, it seems curious that so much effort and energy were focused on cruisers, and so little on aircraft carriers. Such ships were less than a decade old in 1930, and the major naval powers continued to think of them as experimental ships that functioned as auxiliaries to battleships. The British suggested that perhaps they and the United States could each accept a limit of 100,000 tons of carriers, but American delegates nixed that proposal in part because two of the existing American carriers—*Lexington* and *Saratoga*—displaced more than 36,000 tons each and would use up more than two-thirds of the total allotment, leaving little room for experimentation.

Nor was there any substantive agreement about submarines, the unrestricted use of which had nearly brought England to her knees in the last war, and which had played a major role in triggering American belligerency in 1917. Given that, it was not surprising that during the ensuing conversations both the Americans and the British urged the abolition of submarines altogether. Like germ warfare and gas warfare, submarine warfare would be banned entirely. Henry Stimson, the secretary of state, who headed the U.S. delegation, declared that "the use of the submarine revolted the conscience of the world," and noted presciently that regardless of any international

rules that might be adopted for their use, “those who employ the submarine will be under strong temptation, perhaps irresistible temptation, to use it in the way which is most effective for immediate purposes,” which was the destruction of unarmed merchant ships.⁵

Italy and France, however, rejected that argument. They insisted that submarines were defensive craft, invaluable to weaker naval powers, and that abolishing them would only increase the naval dominance of the English-speaking superpowers. The French minister of marine, Georges Leygues, argued that it was not the submarine itself that was evil, but the way it was used. Noting that airplanes could be used to bomb cities, he asked if they should be banned because they were capable of such acts. In the end, the only limit that all of the delegates could agree to was that individual submarines would be limited to no more than 2,000 tons displacement. Since most submarines displaced less than half that, this was, in effect, no limit at all. The delegates did adopt new rules for the humane use of submarines: captains were to provide their victims with sufficient time to abandon ship and get well away before attacking. Of course, since such rules were unenforceable, they were also largely meaningless.⁶

IN ALL THESE DISCUSSIONS, the unseen and unacknowledged specter was Germany. This was especially true for the French, who had been invaded twice by Germany within the lifetime of the French delegates in the room. There was no German delegation in London because the Versailles Treaty already detailed the size and type of navy that Germany was allowed to have, so what was there to discuss? The Kaiserliche Marine, the old imperial navy, no longer existed. In October 1918, with the war virtually lost, the commander of Germany’s battleship fleet, Admiral Reinhard Scheer, had ordered it to sea, presumably to engage in one last sacrificial battle for the sake of honor. The sailors refused to do it, some of them raising the red flag of the Bolsheviks in open rebellion. Consequently, when the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, the German fleet was still at anchor at Wilhelmshaven, the principal German naval base on the southern rim of the North Sea, between Holland and Denmark. During the negotiations at Versailles, that fleet steamed under skeleton crews to intern itself at the Royal

Navy's roadstead at Scapa Flow, north of Scotland. When it became evident that the British intended to demand those ships as spoils of war, the German crews scuttled them, opening the sea cocks below decks and sending them to the bottom of the chilly waters of Scapa Flow. Eleven years later, as the delegates met in London, they were there still.

That did not stop the French from worrying about a German revival. If France was expected to weaken her defenses in any way—by giving up her submarines, for example—the French government wanted a commitment from the British and the Americans that they would come to her aid, or at least consult with her, if she was attacked again. Given their tradition of insularity, the British were unwilling to make such a guarantee, and the Americans, firmly entrenched in a policy of isolationism, adamantly refused.

The biggest stumbling block at the conference concerned the Japanese. The Japanese were determined to secure no less than 70 percent of the number of heavy cruisers allocated to the British and Americans, who in turn were just as determined to hold the percentage at 60. In the end, a somewhat complicated compromise allocated the Americans eighteen heavy cruisers and the Japanese twelve—66 percent. While this seemed a middle-ground position, it was complicated by other factors. One was that the Japanese already had twelve such cruisers, and the Americans had only four. The practical effect of the agreement, then, was that the Americans could build fourteen new heavy cruisers, while the Japanese total was frozen at twelve. On the other hand, the Japanese would be allowed to replace their existing cruisers with new ones over the ensuing five years, while the Americans could not build the last of their new cruisers until 1935. The overall effect was that the Japanese would actually possess a *de facto* cruiser ratio of near 70 percent for the life of the treaty. In consideration of these factors, and unwilling to let the conference collapse, the head of the Japanese delegation, former prime minister Reijirō Wakatsuki, accepted the compromise. That infuriated most of the Japanese naval officers who had accompanied the delegation, especially the younger officers, who denounced Wakatsuki to his face. Back in Tokyo, however, the sitting prime minister and, crucially, the emperor, supported the arrangement, and the treaty was ratified.⁷

On the final day of the conference, Wakatsuki rose to thank the British for their hospitality and to offer some concluding remarks. He knew full well that despite the incremental gains he had secured, the treaty would be unpopular with the Imperial Japanese Navy, as the reaction of the officer delegates had already demonstrated, and that it was possible, perhaps even likely, that he would lose his position, or even his life, in consequence. He nevertheless praised the agreement as “a historic and lasting monument on the path of peace and human progress.”⁸

The Germans, of course, had no opportunity to say anything at all. The new agreement offered no easing of the strangling restrictions that the victors of the Great War had imposed on the German navy, and German resentment at the Versailles humiliation continued to rankle. In national elections held five months later, the National Socialist German Workers Party, Nazi for short, won 18.3 percent of the popular vote and 107 seats in the Reichstag, making it the second-largest political party in Germany.

PART I

THE EUROPEAN WAR

Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany less than three years after the signing of the London agreement. He did not seize power violently, as he had tried to do back in 1924; he was invited to become chancellor by virtue of the Nazi Party's success at the polls. Hitler then consolidated his power in a series of emergency decrees, and the Weimar government effectively disappeared. Two years later, in March 1935, Hitler publicly renounced the Versailles Treaty, including the restrictions it imposed on the size of the German navy. There were no repercussions to his unilateral announcement, and Hitler was confirmed in his view of the fecklessness of the Western democracies.

The renunciation of the Versailles Treaty was important, but the decisive moment in the rebirth of the German navy came three months later with the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. By then, many in Britain actively sought an accommodation with Germany. British diplomats saw Hitler's regime as a useful buffer to Stalinist Russia and welcomed the idea of an Anglo-German rapprochement. On June 18, 1935, without consulting either France or Italy,

Britain agreed to lift most of the naval restrictions that had been imposed on Germany at Versailles.

The new agreement permitted Germany to build a navy whose total tonnage was 35 percent that of the Royal Navy. While that would keep it subordinate to the British, it also opened the door for substantial new growth. The treaty even allowed for the construction of the first German submarines since 1918. By its terms, Germany could build its submarine force up to 45 percent of the British total, and there was an escape clause that allowed Germany to build up to 100 percent of Britain's total in the event of a national crisis, though what kind of crisis might justify such an expansion was not stipulated. The German navy also got a new name. Under the old empire it had been the Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial Navy); during the Weimar Republic, it was the Reichsmarine (National Navy). Now, under Hitler, it became the Kriegsmarine (War Navy).

On September 1, 1939, Hitler's revitalized German army, the Wehrmacht, invaded Poland. The naval war began the same day when a German warship opened fire on the Polish garrison of Gdansk (Danzig). Two days later, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain went on the radio to announce that since he had received no response to the Anglo-French ultimatum calling on Hitler to withdraw German forces from Poland, a state of war now existed between Britain and Germany. The lugubrious tone of his announcement underscored the reality that almost everyone in the British government—and in the British public, for that matter—dreaded the resumption of hostilities. Chamberlain had labored mightily to prevent war, and he had failed largely because he had underestimated both the breadth of Hitler's ambition and the perversity of his ideology. So now, barely twenty years after the last war had ended, war had come again.

UNTERSEEBOOTEN

THE NORTH SEA WAS ROUGH in October 1939, as it often was in the fall months, especially this far north. Strong winds whipped froth from the crest of the dark waves and turned it into a stinging spray that drenched the three men who stood precariously on the small conning tower of the actively rolling submarine U-47, wetting them thoroughly despite their oilskins. One of those men was the sub's captain, thirty-one-year-old Günther Prien (pronounced Preen), who had joined the merchant service as a cabin boy at the age of fifteen and almost literally grown up at sea. On an early cruise he had faced down and physically pummeled a much larger and older deckhand who had sought to intimidate him. As long as he lived, Prien considered that triumph over a bully to have been a defining moment in his life. At twenty-four, he had obtained his master seaman's license, but that was in 1932, during the depths of the Depression, and he had been unable to find work, a circumstance he blamed on the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty and the hapless Weimar government. His bitterness led him to join the Nazi Party, and by 1933—the year Adolf Hitler became chancellor—Prien was

an officer candidate in the slowly reviving German navy. Now, six years later, he was a *Kapitänleutnant* (lieutenant) in that navy, commanding his own submarine, and embarked on a very special mission.¹

As Prien later recalled the moment, he had to steady himself against the railing of the U-47 as he peered through his Leitz binoculars, searching for a recognizable landmark at the edge of the gray sea and the equally gray sky. And he found it: there on the horizon were the Orkney Islands, a forlorn archipelago off the northern tip of Scotland that embraced the commodious Royal Navy fleet anchorage known as Scapa Flow.

Despite its isolation, Scapa Flow was the very heart of the Royal Navy. It was from there that the British Grand Fleet had sortied in 1916 to meet the German High Seas Fleet in the Battle of Jutland; after the war, it was in Scapa Flow that fifty-two ships of the interned German fleet had been scuttled by their crews. Along with Spithead, below Portsmouth on the Channel coast, Scapa Flow was one of the Royal Navy's most important bases.

What made it so valuable was its location. Any vessel seeking the open Atlantic from the North Sea or the Baltic had to pass either through the English Channel past Portsmouth and Plymouth or around the northern tip of Scotland past Scapa Flow. Moreover, the anchorage at Scapa Flow was enormous, more than a hundred square miles—able to accommodate all the navies of the world with room to spare. It was well protected by the group of rocky islands that surrounded it, as well as by coastal batteries, booms, submarine nets, and minefields. Only three well-defended passages allowed access: Hoy Sound to the west, Hoxa Sound to the south, and the narrow channel of Kirk Sound to the east. The British Admiralty believed that the only vulnerable point in the defenses of Scapa Flow was from the air, for it was just within the extreme range of German bombers.²

Barely a week before, only a month after the declaration of war, the British commander at Scapa Flow, Admiral Sir Charles Forbes, had learned that two German cruisers, the *Gneisenau* and *Köln*, accompanied by nine destroyers, had ventured into the North Sea, and he at once ordered the Home Fleet out in pursuit. An impressive armada of battleships, battlecruisers, and cruisers set out from Scapa Flow to find and destroy the interlopers, while the battleship *Royal Oak*, with two escorting destroyers, had steamed northward to

block the escape route through the somewhat incongruously named Fair Isle Channel, between the Orkneys and the Shetlands. As it happened, the German cruisers had swiftly retreated, and so the British, too, returned to port, with the main body dropping anchor in Loch Ewe, on the western coast of Scotland beyond the range of German aircraft, while the *Royal Oak* and her escorts returned to the sanctuary at Scapa Flow.³

Now, four days later, on October 13, Prien studied the entrance to Scapa Flow through his binoculars. He had kept the object of the sub's mission a secret from everyone on board during the long journey northward, but now his first officer, Engelbert Endrass, risked a rebuke by venturing to ask him: "Are we going to visit the Orkneys, sir?"

It was time to let the cat out of the bag. "Take hold of yourself," Prien told Endrass. "We are going into Scapa Flow."⁴

THE U-47'S AUDACIOUS MISSION was not the spontaneous idea of an enthusiastic young lieutenant. It had been carefully planned in Berlin by Rear Admiral Karl Dönitz, the thin, pinch-faced, and reedy-voiced commander of the German navy's submarine force. Forty-seven years old in 1939, Dönitz had joined the German navy in 1910 at the age of eighteen. Commissioned three years later, he spent two years in surface ships before requesting a transfer to submarines (in German, *Unterseebooten*, or U-boats). While he had been commanding a U-boat in the Mediterranean near Malta in October 1918, a mishap in the engine room compelled him to surface in the middle of a convoy and he was taken prisoner, spending the last few weeks of the war in England. In spite of that experience, or perhaps because of it, he dedicated the rest of his life to the U-boat service.⁵

When Dönitz returned to Germany after the peace in 1919, he wanted to remain on active service in the navy even though the Versailles Treaty restricted the size of Germany's postwar navy to six older battleships, six light cruisers, and twenty-four smaller craft (destroyers and torpedo boats), banning submarines entirely. Convinced that these circumstances would not be permanent, Dönitz opted to remain in uniform, serving in a variety of billets in the small surface navy of the Weimar government while he waited for the time when U-boats would again become part of the service.⁶



Karl Dönitz was an ardent champion of U-boats throughout the interwar period and he commanded Germany's U-boat force after war began in September 1939. He regularly pressed Hitler to make U-boats the highest priority in the German military economy.

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It was a long wait. For fifteen years Dönitz served in a number of surface craft, rising to the rank of *Kapitän zur See* (captain) and commanding the light cruiser *Emden*, and still Germany possessed no U-boats, though all that time Dönitz never doubted that the day would come. During this interregnum, several clandestine efforts within Germany succeeded in sustaining and even expanding the kind of technical expertise that would be needed to revive the U-boat arm if the ban was ever lifted. A Dutch company acted as a cover for German naval architects and engineers who experimented with new submarine designs, and German firms built submarines for both Spain and Finland.⁷

Even before Hitler renounced the Versailles Treaty in 1935, Germany actively tested the boundaries of the restrictions. The first such test was the construction of the small battleship *Deutschland*, begun in 1929 and still under construction when the delegates met at the London Conference in 1930. While the Versailles Treaty allowed Germany to replace its six battleships as they aged, it specified that the replacement ships were not to exceed

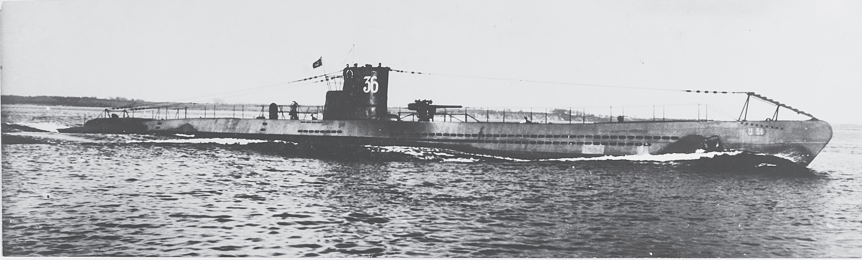
10,000 tons displacement, even though the battleships of other Western nations were up to three times that size. In spite of that, the *Deutschland* exceeded the 10,000-ton limit by at least 20 percent, and her 11-inch guns and ten-thousand-mile cruising range suggested that she had been designed for missions other than coastal defense. Launched in 1931, she was bigger than any cruiser, yet smaller than a battleship, and she was colloquially known as a “pocket battleship,” or in German, a *Panzerschiff* (literally “armored ship”). Her construction was a relatively minor transgression of the Versailles limits—the international equivalent of putting a cautious toe over a dare-mark line on the playground. Neither Britain nor France formally objected, and Germany soon constructed two more *Panzerschiffe*. Along with two new cruisers, the *Köln* and the *Karlsruhe*, they became “symbols of hope and spiritual rebirth” to champions of a German naval revival, including Dönitz.⁸

With the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June 1935, Germany’s naval revival accelerated. In particular, Germany began to build its first U-boats. The British were willing to tolerate the rebirth of the German U-boat arm that had nearly starved them into submission in the last war in large part because British scientists had developed a counter-weapon. It was called Asdic, an acronym for the Anti-Submarine Detection Investigating Committee, which had helped to develop it in the 1920s. By sending out repeated electronic impulses, or pings, then timing and measuring the echo, Asdic equipment could locate and track submerged submarines. The Americans later developed a similar technology that they called sonar (sound navigation and ranging), but the British, for whom the technology was crucial, were a full decade ahead of them. Before Asdic, the first notice a surface ship was likely to have that a submarine was nearby was the explosion of a merchant ship struck by a torpedo. Now, Asdic could find and track a submerged submarine while it was still several thousand yards away. In some quarters, it was believed that Asdic made submarines all but obsolete as anti-ship weapons. A 1936 Admiralty memo claimed that thanks to Asdic, “the submarine should never again be able to present us with the problem we were faced in 1917.” As subsequent events would demonstrate, such conclusions were wildly optimistic.⁹

The first German U-boats were small (250-ton) coastal craft, colloquially called *Nordsee Enten* or “North Sea ducks,” which were clearly intended for harbor defense. Several were assembled in secret even as the 1935 agreement was being negotiated, and the first of them was launched the day after the treaty was signed. Soon enough, 500-ton and 750-ton boats began to join the fleet. (Submarines, then as now, are generally called boats rather than ships.) By 1939, the most common version was the Type VII, which was 220 feet long, displaced 769 tons, and carried fourteen torpedoes that could be fired from four forward tubes and one tube astern. Powered by twin 1,400-horsepower diesel engines, Type VII-B boats had supplementary external tanks that nearly doubled their fuel capacity and extended their range to 7,400 miles. They had a speed of seventeen knots on the surface, faster than any merchant ship or convoy, and possessed a 124-cell battery that enabled them to cruise for eighty miles while submerged, where they could make 7.6 knots, though four knots was the best speed for conserving battery power. The Germans were able to produce these new boats quickly once the new naval treaty was signed, because they had stockpiled the components in advance, anticipating the lifting of the ban. Within weeks of the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, Dönitz surrendered his command of the cruiser *Emden* to assume control of the swiftly growing U-boat arm of the new *Kriegsmarine*.¹⁰

The British did seek to impose a different kind of restraint on the German U-boats. In November 1936, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy all signed an agreement in London that specified the protocols to be used by submarines in time of war. All four signatories agreed that submarines were to act under the same rules of engagement as surface ships. That is, they were to stop the vessel in question and send a boarding party to examine its papers; if satisfied of its belligerent status, they were to allow the crew and any passengers time to escape into lifeboats. Only then could a submarine sink the ship with a torpedo or with gunfire. Though all parties solemnly affixed their signatures to this document, it is unclear whether any of them genuinely believed that, should it come to war, those protocols would be strictly observed.

In 1938, citing the threat of Russian forces in the Baltic, Hitler invoked the emergency clause in the Anglo-German treaty that authorized Germany



The U-36, seen here, was a Type VII-A U-boat built in 1935–36 after the Anglo-German Naval Agreement once again allowed Germany to build submarines. It was dangerous work—the U-36 went down with all hands in December 1939, sunk by the Royal Navy submarine *Salmon* off Norway.

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to build U-boats up to the total possessed by Britain. Thus on September 3, 1939, when Chamberlain announced that war had begun, Dönitz had a total of fifty-seven U-boats—the same number as Britain—though only forty-six of them were ready for immediate operations, and half of those were the smaller coastal *Enten*. That gave Dönitz only about two dozen of the larger Type VII boats to begin the war.

Worse, from his perspective, was the fact that at any given moment, two-thirds of them would necessarily have to be en route to or from enemy shipping lanes, undergoing repairs, or taking on stores, so only a paltry eight or nine could be on station at a time. Dönitz had made it clear to Hitler that an effective trade war against Britain would require at least three hundred such boats. As late as August 28, only three days before the invasion of Poland, and six days before war with Britain began, he submitted a memorandum to the Führer stating bluntly that the German navy, and the U-boat arm in particular, were not “in a position to fulfill the tasks which will be allotted to them in the event of war.” Hitler, however, was impatient, openly skeptical of British and French resolve, and he ordered German forces across the Polish frontier on September 1.¹¹

Hitler had been astonishingly successful in calling the bluff of the Western powers concerning Austria, the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia, and he more than half expected that Britain and France would back down once again. For that reason, even after Britain and France declared war, he ordered Dönitz to abide strictly by the Hague convention and the 1936 London

treaty concerning submarine warfare—at least for now. He did not want some untoward event to galvanize British attitudes and make a return to the negotiating table more difficult. Despite that, on the very first day of the war, Oberleutnant (lieutenant junior grade) Fritz-Julius Lemp, commander of the U-30, espied a ship a few hundred miles off the Irish coast that was proceeding blacked out and zigzagging, circumstances that suggested to Lemp that it must be either an armed merchant cruiser or a military transport ship and therefore a legitimate target.

The ship was, in fact, the commercial liner *Athenia*, with more than fourteen hundred passengers on board. Hit by two torpedoes, it went down quickly with over a hundred killed, including twenty-eight Americans. Only after he surfaced to witness the ship's death throes did Lemp discover the true character of the ship he had targeted. Hitler was furious, worried that the incident would derail a possible rapprochement with Britain. Officially, Germany denied responsibility and the German propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, suggested that the *Athenia* had very likely been sunk by the British themselves in order to elicit American sympathy, though few outside Germany took such claims seriously.¹²

For his part, Dönitz was only moderately disappointed that the Führer placed limits on his submarines, since with the small number of boats he had available, all he could do was deliver what he called “a few odd pin-pricks.” Soon enough it became evident that the British were not going to reconsider their declaration of war after all, and Hitler lifted the restrictions, informing Dönitz that his U-boats could now attack without warning any vessel identified as hostile. Of course, warships had always been approved targets, and two weeks before Hitler lifted the ban on attacking merchant ships, Dönitz sent word to Lieutenant Prien that he had a special mission in mind for him.¹³

PRIEN WAITED UNTIL DARK before attempting to enter Scapa Flow. Quitting the tiny conning tower of the U-47 for the relative quiet of the control room, he called the crew forward and explained the mission. Then he ordered them to their diving stations. In his subsequent memoir, he recalled the moment vividly: the hatch cover dropping into place with a muffled

clang, and the change in his ears as the boat pressurized. Crewmen closed the exhaust valves as the diesel engines were shut down, and a low-grade hum indicated that the electric motors had kicked in. Until the submarine surfaced again, the engines, lights, fans, and all other onboard machinery would run off the boat's batteries.¹⁴

Prien ordered the tanks flooded, and four kneeling men pressed down on levers that drove air from the ballast tanks. The hissing sound of escaping air was followed by the noise of seawater burbling into the tanks, and the U-47 inclined forward and downward. Instead of tossing on the surface, the U-boat was now suspended in the sea, producing what Prien described as "a sensation of floating as in a balloon." The noisome violence of the outside weather was replaced by an unnatural quiet as the submarine descended through the frigid North Sea waters and settled gently on the bottom, where Prien intended to wait until the following evening. The engines were cut and lights extinguished to save battery power. Though there was no logical reason for it, men instinctively spoke in whispers.¹⁵

At four o'clock the next afternoon, which was October 14, the crew of the U-47 was awakened and fed a rather extravagant meal (for a submarine) of veal cutlets and green cabbage. After that, the men checked the engines and the torpedoes to ensure that everything was in good order. At 7:00 p.m. Prien calculated that it would be full dark this far north in mid-October, and he ordered the U-47 to periscope depth—about forty-five feet. Once there, he ordered the scope raised and put his face to the eyepiece, swiveling the scope around 360 degrees. Seeing nothing, he ordered the boat to surface.

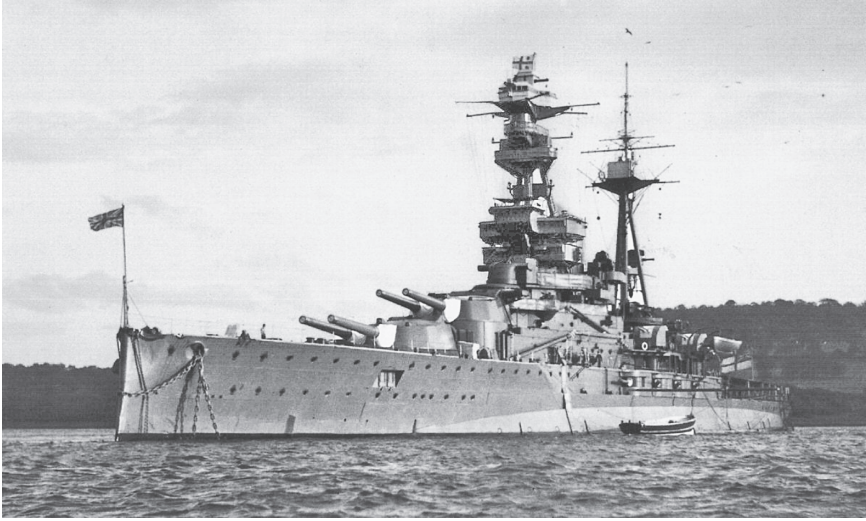
As the U-47 broke the surface, it rocked back and forth in the choppy sea, almost, Prien recalled, "as if half drunk from the immersion." Prien and Endrass climbed out onto the conning tower, so small it could barely accommodate them. They stood stock still and listened for the sound of screws in the water. Nothing. As their eyes adjusted, the shoreline became visible. Indeed, it seemed much *too* visible. Dönitz had timed Prien's sortie to coincide with the new moon, when it would be darkest, but the skies were unnaturally light. Orange and green flashes lit up the sky, and after a moment of confusion, Prien understood: it was the aurora borealis, the

northern lights, of which he had heard but which he had never seen. He briefly considered calling off the operation and submerging again, then decided to go ahead. He ordered half speed, and as the U-47 approached the entrance to Holm Sound, Prien noted that one of the topside lookouts was staring upward at the flickering lights, his eyes wide in wonderment.¹⁶

The British, too, may have been staring skyward, for as the U-47 passed through Holm Sound and into the narrow channel of Kirk Sound, there was no challenge from the shore. The British had sunk several unmanned hulks in Kirk Sound to block the channel. More hulks were scheduled to be placed there soon, but on this night there was just enough room for the U-47, still on the surface, to squeeze between the northernmost of the hulks and the coastline. Visibility was limited despite the northern lights, and that made the slow passage difficult as the submarine threaded its way between the blockships and the rocky coast. At one point the U-47 became entangled with an anchor chain from one of the blockships, and not long after that the boat briefly touched bottom. A car driving along the coastal road passed by so close that its headlights washed across the sub's conning tower. Then, suddenly, the U-47 emerged from the narrow passage and into the wide expanse of Scapa Flow. Half surprised, Prien said in a loud whisper, "We are inside!"¹⁷

A number of tankers were at anchor in the lower bay, and while they would constitute a worthy target under any other circumstance, Prien was after bigger game. He turned the U-47 northward toward the upper reaches of the anchorage, and just past midnight, he saw it. Silhouetted against the shore—"hard and clear, as if painted into the sky with black ink"—was the unmistakable profile of a Royal Navy battleship.¹⁸

HMS *Royal Oak* was an older ship, launched in 1914 on the eve of the First World War. She was a battleship nonetheless, displacing some 30,000 tons, with a crew of over a thousand men, and armed with a main battery of eight 15-inch guns plus a secondary battery of fourteen 6-inch guns. Even one of her two 3-inch guns could blow the fragile U-47 out of the water. The *Royal Oak*'s major weakness was that her speed topped out at twenty-three knots, which was why she had been sent on her solitary mission to patrol Fair Isle Channel the week before instead of accompanying the task force sent to pursue the *Gneisenau* and *Köln*. Given the presumed security



HMS *Royal Oak* was one of five *Revenge*-class battleships in the Royal Navy, all of which bore names that started with the letter *R*, and all of which were old enough to have fought in the First World War. Though slow, the *Royal Oak* had heavy armor, including a thirteen-inch armor belt along her waterline.

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of the anchorage in Scapa Flow, none of the Royal Navy ships had its Asdic system in active mode, though even if they had it would have done little good, for Asdic had been designed to track U-boats under water, and the U-47 was on the surface.

Excited by the spectacle of an enemy capital ship only four thousand yards away, Prien felt the blood hammering in his temples and found that he could hardly breathe. He quietly called down the hatch to prepare a spread of four torpedoes. There was a muffled gurgling sound as water ran into the opened tubes, a hiss of compressed air, and a metallic click as the levers snapped into position. Prien gave the order, and the U-47 lurched backward as the first torpedo left the tube, then two seconds later another, then a third. The fourth torpedo misfired. The torpedo officer counted off the seconds aloud as Prien and everyone else on board waited silently. After an interminable three and a half minutes, there was a muffled explosion near the bow of the *Royal Oak*, but no reaction from the battleship—no searchlights, no gunfire, and no secondary explosion.¹⁹

As it happened, two of the U-47's torpedoes had missed entirely, and the third struck only the *Royal Oak's* forward anchor cable, cutting the cable and sending up a geyser of seawater that splashed up onto the foredeck, but doing no evident structural damage. The men of the battleship's duty section instinctively looked skyward, the only conceivable direction from which danger was likely to come. They had heard no aircraft sounds, however, and were uncertain about what had happened. One suggested that perhaps a CO₂ tank had exploded; others wondered if the anchor chain had run out and splashed noisily into the sea. The commanding officer of the *Royal Oak*, Captain William G. Benn, who had been asleep in his cabin, came topside to see what the commotion was. He at once suspected an internal explosion, and sent a team below to discover the cause and report. He did not order the ship to general quarters. Indeed, many on the crew did not even hear the explosion, and most of those who did simply turned over in their bunks, assuming that if it was important, there would be an announcement. There was no announcement. Based on the reports he received, Benn concluded, as he later testified, "that some explosion must have occurred in the Inflammable Store from internal causes."²⁰

Prien, meanwhile, turned the sub around and fired again with his stern tube. That torpedo, too, either missed the target or failed to explode. Undaunted, Prien then headed southward, away from the *Royal Oak*, to reload his bow tubes. An hour later, just past 1:00 a.m., with the crew of the battleship still no wiser about his presence, he returned to fire three more torpedoes.

This time the results were spectacular. A massive plume of water, as high as the ship's superstructure, erupted amidships, followed in quick succession by two more. Pieces of the ship flew skyward, and flames in a variety of colors—blue, red, and yellow—shot up into the night. Black smoke roiled up from the spaces below, and the big ship began listing heavily to starboard. Within minutes she was sinking. Several of the watertight doors had been dogged shut for safety, and now they blocked the way as hundreds of men tried to scramble out from the lower decks. As the big battleship slowly rolled over, the giant 15-inch gun turrets broke off and toppled into the sea. As they did, more flames shot up from inside the ship. Those of the crew who had managed to make their way topside jumped into the frigid water.

The great battleship rolled majestically over onto its starboard side, with the escaping air producing a noise that, to at least one witness, sounded exactly like a forlorn sigh. Three hundred and seventy men survived; more than eight hundred did not.²¹

Elated by this vista of destruction, Prien called down through the hatch into the control room, “He’s finished!” and the announcement provoked wild cheering until Prien ordered them to be silent. By now the British knew this was no internal accident, and Prien assumed that they would be eager to seek out the deadly menace that had found its way into their midst. Searchlights probed from a nearby seaplane carrier (which Prien misidentified as another battleship), and several ships that Prien assumed to be destroyers got under way. It was time to leave.

He kept the U-47 on the surface, where it could make seventeen knots, as opposed to only seven knots when submerged, and raced for the exit. A surface ship behind him was perceptibly gaining, and Prien ordered “extreme speed,” only to be told that the engines were already at extreme speed. It would be only moments before the destroyer—if that’s what it was—was on them. Despite the northern lights, however, the skipper of the pursuing ship did not see the low silhouette of the sub running on the surface, and turned away. As Prien gripped the safety rail and silently urged the boat to go faster, the U-47 pressed on for the narrow exit.

The tide was falling now and, recalling the shallow water along the northern coastline, Prien decided to hug the southern edge of the sound on the way out. He squeezed past another blockship and maneuvered around a jutting promontory. Gradually the sounds of the *Royal Oak* breaking apart grew more distant. By two-fifteen in the morning of October 15, the U-47 was back in the open sea. Prien set a course southward for Wilhelmshaven, and told his men they could now cheer all they wanted.²²

The trip back was not without incident. British patrol boats caught up with the U-47 in the Moray Firth, on the east coast of Scotland, and forced it to dive. Prien tried to escape by changing course while submerged, but the British ships were equipped with Asdic and tracked him underwater. The men in the U-47 could hear the eerie and insistent *ping...ping...ping* of the searching Asdic, and soon enough, depth charges began to detonate

nearby, sounding like a hammer smashing against the hull: a sharp metallic clang followed by a deafening wham. The fragile sub shuddered like a rat shaken by a terrier; lightbulbs shattered, and one of the boat's two drive shafts, sheared in half by the concussion, broke free from its bearings. Prien again took the U-47 to the bottom and stayed there hoping to outlast his pursuers. Those crewmen not working to repair the broken shaft bearings tiptoed around in slippers to avoid making any sound. The British continued their search, and the men in the U-47 could hear both the pinging of the active Asdic and the whir of propellers passing overhead. Eventually, however, the pinging ceased and the sound of the propellers moved away. With both air and battery power running low, Prien took the U-47 to periscope depth to discover that his tormentors had left. With the shaft repaired, he again set a course for Wilhelmshaven.²³

PRIEN'S TRIUMPH in Scapa Flow was not the first U-boat success of the war. Despite the long voyages necessary for them to reach their cruising grounds west of Ireland, Dönitz's handful of U-boats sank more than sixty Allied ships in the first six weeks of the war—ten ships a week. Most of them were merchant ships, though that number also included the British aircraft carrier *Courageous*, sunk by the U-29 off Ireland in mid-September four weeks before Prien's exploit in Scapa Flow. Hit by three torpedoes, the *Courageous* went down in a mere fifteen minutes with the loss of 519 men. That was especially worrisome because the Royal Navy had only five carriers in commission at the time. The sinking of the *Courageous*, therefore, represented the loss of 20 percent of her carrier force. Yet Prien's accomplishment in Scapa Flow was unique. It was chilling to the British Admiralty that a solitary U-boat had managed to penetrate the inner sanctum of the Royal Navy, sink one of its battleships at anchor, and get clean away—bearding the British lion in its den. For Germany it was wonderful propaganda, and Goebbels made the most of it. Both Dönitz and his boss, Grossadmiral Erich Raeder, the head of the Kriegsmarine, came on board the U-47 when it arrived in Wilhelmshaven to congratulate Prien and his crew, and Hitler sent his personal airplane to fly Prien to Berlin for a parade from Templehof Airport to the Kaiserhof Hotel.²⁴

Dönitz was under no illusions that sinking one carrier and one battleship would significantly affect the trajectory of the war. He was convinced that the real target of his U-boats was not the Royal Navy but Britain's merchant trade, and he was aware that it would be many months, if not years, before he possessed a sufficient number of operational U-boats to mount the kind of campaign he believed necessary to have a strategic impact on the war. Then, too, the first several weeks of war had revealed flaws in the torpedoes that were the U-boats' principal weapon. The triggers in the warheads were magnetic, and when operating in northern latitudes, they often failed to work. Dönitz estimated that during the first six weeks of war, "at least 25 percent of all shots fired have been torpedo failures." He worried that if U-boat crews lost confidence in their torpedoes, it would erode their morale and their willingness to take risks. He resolved to do all he could "to keep up the fighting spirits" of the U-boat crews. He did not sugarcoat it. He warned his officers that the war would be neither swift nor easy. It could last for seven years, he told them, and even then it might end with a negotiated settlement rather than outright victory. Still, he was determined to do what he perceived as his duty, and that meant building up the U-boat arm as swiftly as possible so that it could destroy not ten ships a week, but twenty, thirty, or more, cutting off British trade altogether.²⁵

PANZERSCHIFFE

ON THE DAY THAT KAPITÄNLEUTNANT PRIEN AND THE U-47 entered Scapa Flow, the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* was more than five thousand miles almost due south in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, halfway between Africa and Brazil. In contrast to the bitter cold of the North Sea, the water temperature here was in the high seventies. The *Graf Spee* was one of the three *Panzerschiffen* that Germany had built in the early 1930s. In August, Hitler had authorized Grossadmiral Erich Raeder, the administrative and operational head of the Kriegsmarine, to pre-position two of them—*Deutschland* and *Graf Spee*—in the Atlantic, where they would inaugurate a campaign against British shipping in the event that Britain followed through with its threat to declare war if Germany invaded Poland.

Since then, the invasion had taken place as planned, and the British had indeed declared war, yet for three weeks the *Graf Spee* had stayed out of the shipping lanes and scrupulously avoided contact with other vessels. The reason was Hitler's conviction that the British could be enticed back

to the negotiating table once Poland had been dispatched by a swift German victory. Just as he had ordered Dönitz's U-boats to pull their punches, Hitler ordered Raeder to restrain his surface raiders. Finally on September 26, with the war in Poland all but settled (Warsaw would fall the next day), Hitler decided that the British were not going to be reasonable after all, and he authorized the *Deutschland* in the North Atlantic and the *Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic to begin offensive operations.¹

The *Graf Spee* was under the command of Kapitän zur See Hans Langsdorff, a career officer with a high-domed forehead who was something of a throwback in the Kriegsmarine: a gentleman warrior of the old school, correct, punctilious, and unwilling to let war interfere with good manners. He adopted a benign demeanor with his subordinates, and even with his foes. Langsdorff had been inspired to join the navy in 1912 at the age of eighteen because of his admiration for a Düsseldorf neighbor, Admiral Maximilian von Spee, a Prussian nobleman who bore the title of count (in German, *Graf*). Von Spee had been killed in the 1914 Battle of the Falklands, and in a curious coincidence Langsdorff now commanded the ship that subsequently had been named for him. Almost certainly Langsdorff would have preferred combat operations to stalking and sinking unarmed merchantmen, but that was his assignment and he was willing, if not altogether eager, to do what was necessary for victory.²

Once Langsdorff received orders to commence active operations against British shipping, he began to search for prey. On September 30, lookouts reported a thin trace of smoke on the horizon. Langsdorff ordered the ship's scout plane catapulted off its rail amidships, and turned the *Graf Spee* toward the contact. The smoke was from the stack of a British merchant ship, the *Clement*, an undistinguished steamer of some 5,000 tons displacement characterized by one contemporary as "a typical tubby, ocean-going, tramp."³

The captain of the *Clement*, F. P. C. Harris, had only a bows-on view of the swiftly approaching warship, and at first he thought it might be the British cruiser *Ajax*, which he believed to be operating in the area. He appreciated his error when the *Spee*'s scout plane flew past, spraying his bridge with machine gun fire. At once Harris stopped his ship's engines, ordered the life-

boats hoisted out, and began to destroy the *Clement's* confidential documents, which included Britain's naval codes. He also sent out a distress signal over the wireless radio, repeatedly flashing the letters "RRR" to indicate that he was under attack by a surface raider, and providing the coordinates.* Langsdorff was disappointed that the British ship had managed to get off a radio signal, but he was all courtesy when Harris was brought on board the *Graf Spee*. Langsdorff saluted him and remarked in perfect English, "I am sorry, Captain, but I will have to sink your ship. It is war."⁴

Langsdorff saw to it that Harris and the *Clement's* chief engineer were comfortably settled on the *Graf Spee*, and ensured the safety of the rest of the *Clement's* crew in their lifeboats, even reporting their location to the nearest ports on the Brazilian coast. Then he ordered the *Clement* sunk by torpedoes. The first torpedo missed, as did the second, and rather than expend more of these expensive (and apparently unreliable) weapons on a tramp steamer, Langsdorff decided to use the *Graf Spee's* secondary 5.9-inch guns. After twenty-five rounds, the *Clement* remained stubbornly afloat, and Langsdorff ordered the *Graf Spee's* big 11-inch guns to finish her off. After five rounds, the *Clement* finally slipped beneath the waves.⁵

LIKE PRIEN'S MISSION TO SCAPA FLOW, Langsdorff's presence in the South Atlantic was part of a larger operational scheme. The orders that had sent him there were a product of Admiral Raeder's vision of a war on British trade carried out by dozens of swift surface raiders. If Dönitz was a lifelong advocate of U-boats, Raeder was a dedicated champion of the surface navy. He had spent the First World War in battleships and cruisers, and had participated in both of the great surface battles of that war at Dogger Bank and Jutland. In the latter battle, he had been the chief of staff to Vice Admiral Franz von Hipper.

* Rather than the conventional SOS, established in 1905 as a universal distress signal, the British Admiralty adopted a new protocol with the outbreak of war. As noted above, RRR (or RRRR), repeated several times, indicated an attack by a surface raider; SSS indicated a submarine attack, and AAA an air attack. After that, the vessel in distress provided its identity in a series of code letters, and then its position in latitude and longitude.



Grossadmiral Erich Raeder, head of the German navy since 1928, hoped to create a traditional surface navy centered on battleships and battlecruisers. He crafted a long-range plan to achieve that goal based on Hitler's assurances that war would not begin until 1946 or 1947.

U.S. Naval Institute

Raeder was fifteen years older than Dönitz, and very different in both appearance and temperament. Unlike the cadaverous Dönitz, Raeder was robust and handsome. Indeed, to many he was the idealized personification of Prussian manhood. He admired strict discipline and formal protocols, and possessed a strong work ethic that he imposed on others as well as himself. He later listed his core values as “fear of God, love of truth, and cleanliness.” Raeder was skeptical of the relaxed, comradely environment that Dönitz encouraged among his U-boat crews where, in Dönitz's words, “every man's well-being was in the hands of all and where every single man was an indispensable part of the whole.” Such communal claptrap did not appeal to Raeder, who was a product of the *Kaiserliche*—the old imperial navy—and preferred to maintain what he considered a dignified professionalism.

As one example of that, he sought to reestablish the requirement, abolished during the Weimar years, that all navy personnel attend formal religious services every Sunday. On this, as on other issues, Raeder occasionally clashed with Hitler, who had little interest in religious services—or in a large surface navy, for that matter—and at least twice Raeder submitted his resignation in response to one of Hitler's tirades. In both cases Hitler prevailed upon him to withdraw it and stay on.⁶

Despite their differences, Raeder shared Dönitz's commitment to a revived German navy, as well as a hope that any future war could be postponed until at least 1944 or 1945 so that they would have time to develop the kind of fleet they believed necessary for victory. Raeder had become chief of the Admiralty in 1928, and from the start he had focused his efforts on building a balanced fleet centered on battleships and battlecruisers—the kind of navy that defined sea power in the first half of the twentieth century. In another divergence from Dönitz, he believed that submarines were useful auxiliaries, but hardly a foundation for naval greatness. Once the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement opened the door for expansion, Raeder got to work to produce the kind of navy he envisioned.

In addition to the three pocket battleships built in the early 1930s, Raeder championed a far more ambitious construction program that included battleships, heavy cruisers, and even aircraft carriers. The first step in the fulfillment of this vision was the construction of two sleek new battlecruisers, subsequently christened the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*. At 771 feet, they were longer than the newest British battleships; they were designated as battlecruisers rather than battleships because they had 11-inch guns instead of 15-inch guns, and less protective deck armor. That also made them both lighter (though still quite large at 32,000 tons) and faster (thirty-one knots) than most battleships. Laid down in 1935 within days of the naval treaty with Britain, they were commissioned in 1938 and 1939, just in time for the war. Raeder also presided over the construction of two even larger warships: the battleships *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*. Displacing more than 40,000 tons empty and over 50,000 tons when fully equipped, they were each armed with eight 15-inch guns, making them the largest and most powerful battleships in the world when they were laid down in 1936. Both

remained under construction when the war began, though they were only months from completion.⁷

In constructing this new navy, Raeder envisioned a possible future conflict with Poland over Danzig—a war that might easily involve France—or perhaps a war with Russia for control of the Baltic Sea. He did not, however, envision a war against Britain. Like many other Kriegsmarine officers, Raeder believed that fighting Britain in the First World War had been “a tragic mistake which should never be repeated,” and that a future war with Britain was out of the question. Hitler assured him that he shared in this view, repeatedly telling Raeder that Britain was not a potential foe in any future war. Not until November 1937, in a secret meeting with his service chiefs, did Hitler announce that the admirals and generals should begin to plan for a war with Britain as well as with France, and that such a war could begin well before 1944.⁸

Raeder was annoyed by this volte-face, which he attributed to Hitler’s “self deception” about British determination. There would be no opportunity now to build the kind of balanced fleet that Raeder believed the country needed and deserved. In his private diary, he wrote bitterly that the new circumstances doomed his beloved Kriegsmarine to proving that it could “die gallantly.” Raeder nevertheless embraced a program crafted by a young staff officer, Commander Helmuth Heye, which called for a fleet composed of ten large battleships to tie down the British main fleet, and fifteen of the swift *Panzerschiffe* to savage British commerce. Even this less ambitious plan was doomed to failure, since Hitler’s timetable for a confrontation over Poland ensured that it could not be completed before the outbreak of war.⁹

Denied the opportunity to challenge British supremacy with a daunting surface fleet, Raeder embraced a plan to starve her into capitulation. Trade was Britain’s lifeline, and during the First World War, U-boats had been the principal tool by which Germany had sought to strangle that trade. While Raeder did not discount the importance of U-boats in this new war, he also wanted to sow mines in the sea-lanes around the British Isles, and employ a fleet of swift surface raiders. The mines, mostly dropped by airplane, proved especially effective in the first few months of war, in part because the

Germans had developed a sophisticated magnetic mine that detonated when a ship passing overhead disturbed the magnetic field. By the end of 1939, of the 422,000 tons of shipping lost by the British, more than half of it was to magnetic mines. The British countered this new technology by demagnetizing their ships, wrapping electrical cables around them in a protocol known as degaussing. This dramatically reduced the effectiveness of the mines, though they remained a serious threat throughout the war.¹⁰

In addition to U-boats and mines, Raeder also counted heavily on surface raiders, though his resources were limited. He had only the three pocket battleships, two battlecruisers, a handful of cruisers, and (as soon as they were complete) the two big battleships. Still, he hoped that these modest assets, if deployed creatively, would compel the British to disperse their own warships in order to protect their convoys and thereby weaken themselves elsewhere. "By scattering our forces all over the globe," he wrote in his postwar memoir, "we might hope to hit damaging surprise blows before the enemy would bring up superior forces to meet us."¹¹

Forewarned by Hitler of the imminent invasion of Poland, Raeder obtained permission to dispatch two of the pocket battleships into the Atlantic, the *Deutschland* in the North Atlantic south of Greenland, and the *Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic. Should Britain determine to challenge German ambitions, these two ships would begin a campaign of destruction against British trade. For all his disappointment at the turn of events, Raeder was determined "to use all possible means to damage and disrupt the enemy."¹²

IN CONDUCTING A CAMPAIGN OF COMMERCE RAIDING, Langsdorff and the *Graf Spee* acted in conformance with a long-standing maritime tradition. More than seventy-five years earlier, in May and June 1863, the Confederate raider CSS *Alabama*, which had been built and fitted out in England, had conducted a commerce-raiding cruise against American shipping in these same waters, destroying a dozen merchant ships off the eastern tip of Brazil. The captain of the *Alabama*, Raphael Semmes, had been unable to bring his prizes into port for adjudication, and so, after removing the crew and any passengers, he had set the ships afire. Periodically

Semmes had spared a prize, filled it with his accumulated prisoners, and sent it off as a cartel. That 1863 campaign was very nearly a template for Langsdorff and the *Graf Spee*. One great difference between 1863 and 1939, however, was the advent of wireless radio, which enabled the victims to report the location of a raiding warship even as it approached, as Harris had done on the *Clement*. Langsdorff knew that his campaign against British shipping would be effective only if he remained elusive, and that would not be possible if every ship he stopped immediately reported his position.

Langsdorff's sinking of the *Clement* provoked a reaction in England. The distress signal sent out by Captain Harris had been picked up by a Brazilian ship and relayed onward, reaching London the next day. On October 4, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the British First Sea Lord, presided over a meeting at Admiralty House in London to determine how to respond to this new danger. Pound had spent nearly half a century in the Royal Navy. Like Raeder, he had fought at Jutland, where he had commanded the battleship *Colossus* with considerable distinction. Though the sixty-four-year-old

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound became First Sea Lord in June 1939, just three months before the outbreak of war. He had served in the Royal Navy for forty-six years, and his indifferent health was a concern even at the time of his appointment.

U.S. Naval Institute



Pound was Raeder's chronological contemporary, he looked at least a decade older, in part due to his indifferent health. Arthritis in his hip caused him to walk with a slight limp, and he had a tendency to doze off during lengthy staff meetings. At least one Royal Navy officer thought he was "a worn out old man." Even less charitably, others described him as "pig-headed" and temperamentally unsuited for the job of First Sea Lord. Then, too, he was relatively new to the job. Whereas Raeder had been in charge of the German navy since 1928, Pound had become First Sea Lord in the summer of 1939, only four months before the war began.¹³

In response to the news from the Atlantic, Pound and his advisors in the Admiralty considered their options. Though a convoy system had already been implemented for the vital transatlantic shipping from Canada and the United States, the small escort vessels assigned to North Atlantic convoy duty had no chance against a pocket battleship, so the first decision made by Pound and the Admiralty was to send several older battleships to Halifax to serve as additional escorts. As for the South Atlantic, there were simply not enough escorts to establish a network of convoys there. The Admiralty did, however, send a battlecruiser, HMS *Renown*, plus the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, escorted by a small cruiser, into the South Atlantic to look for what they believed was a different pocket battleship, the *Admiral Scheer*.¹⁴

More broadly, Pound and the Admiralty developed a whole new protocol for defending British commerce from surface raiders. Instead of using warships to patrol the sea-lanes as if they were police cruisers on oceanic highways, the British created half a dozen hunter-killer groups, most of them composed of two cruisers each. One (dubbed Force F) headed for North America, another (Force H) headed for South Africa, a third (Force G) went to the east coast of South America, and a fourth (Force M) steamed for Dakar, in French West Africa, to join French forces there, including the new battlecruiser *Dunkerque*. This, of course, was exactly what Raeder had hoped to achieve: the dispersion of Royal Navy assets in pursuit of a few surface raiders.¹⁵

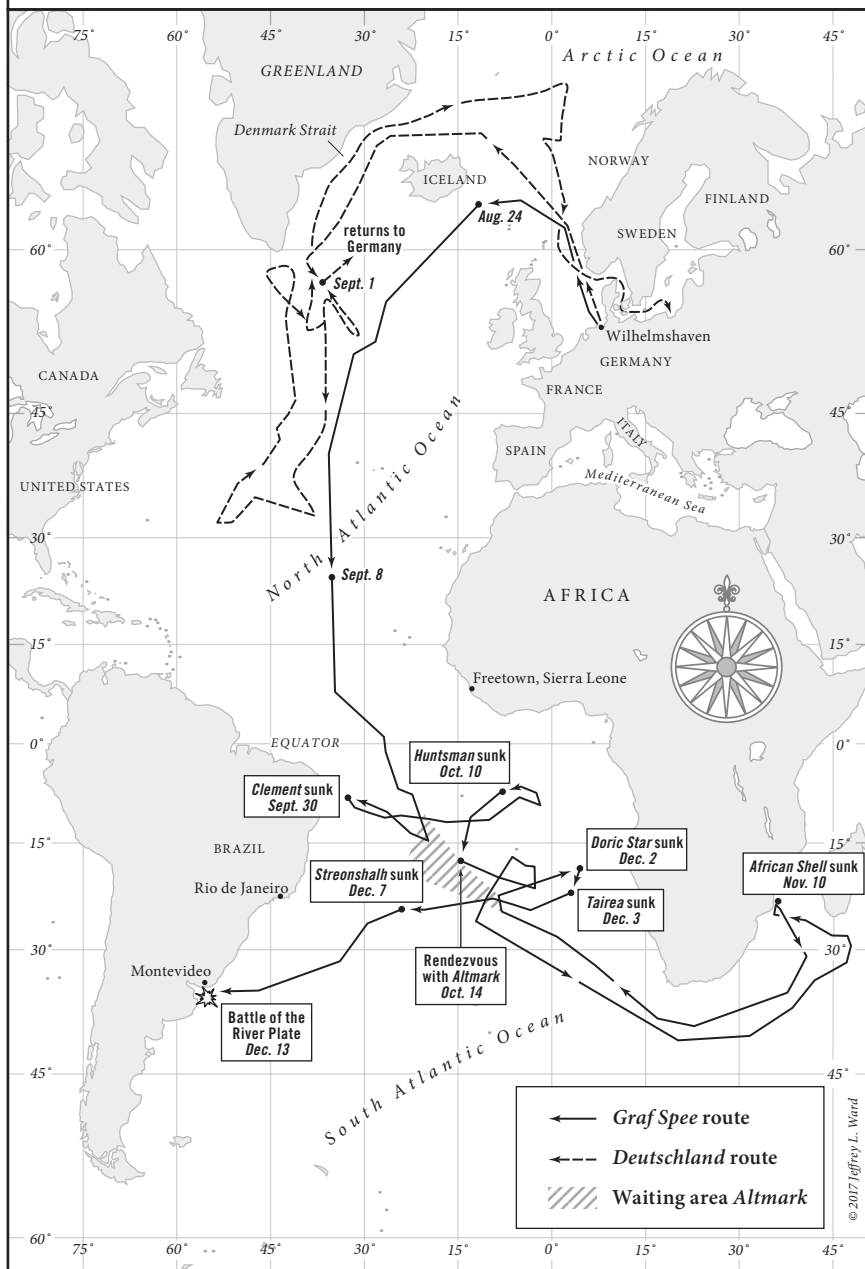
The written orders for these hunter-killer groups stated bluntly that "the strength of each hunting group is sufficient to destroy any armored ship of the DEUTSCHLAND class or armored cruiser of the HIPPER class." That

assertion—that two Royal Navy cruisers would be “sufficient” to defeat a pocket battleship—reflected the lingering faith in Whitehall, and indeed throughout the service, that Royal Navy ships could prevail over forces that were nominally more powerful because of superior British skill and *élan*. This legacy of the Napoleonic era continued to influence British thinking despite the disappointment—even the embarrassment—of the Battle of Jutland during the First World War, when the German High Seas Fleet had more than held its own against the British Grand Fleet. Most of the cruisers now being sent to confront the *Admiral Scheer* (actually the *Graf Spee*, of course) were heavy cruisers with six 8-inch guns plus a substantial secondary battery. The *Graf Spee*, however, had six 11-inch guns that could out-range the British cruisers by thirty-five hundred yards—nearly two miles. The Germans could probably get off a dozen or more salvos during the three or four minutes it took for the cruisers to get close enough to open fire. Of course, if the British cruisers operated in pairs, the Germans would have multiple targets to deal with, while the British could focus all their fire on the pocket battleship. In any case, it was evident that the Admiralty fully expected that by attacking together, the British cruisers could overmaster the German raider.¹⁶

ON OCTOBER 14, 1939, the same day that Prien and the U-47 slipped into Scapa Flow, Langsdorff kept a scheduled rendezvous with his supply ship, the modified tanker *Altmark*, which had been sent into the Atlantic in August precisely to act as Langsdorff’s floating base. By then, the *Graf Spee* had sunk four ships including the *Clement*, and the pattern of her rampage was well established. The *Graf Spee* was one of only four ships in the Kriegsmarine that had radar, a technology that was still in its infancy. Even so, more often than not, Langsdorff had to rely on visual sightings to discover his quarry. Spotting a wisp of smoke on the horizon or receiving a sighting report from his floatplane pilot, Langsdorff steamed at full speed toward the contact, ordering it by blinker light—in English Morse code—to stop, and not to transmit any wireless signals. Despite that, in most cases the captain of the steamer at once began to send a radio message. That inaugurated a test of wills in a potentially deadly cat-and-mouse game.

THE CRUISES OF THE GRAF SPEE AND DEUTSCHLAND

August–December 1939



As one example of that, on October 22 when the *Graf Spee* stopped the steamer *Trevanian* in mid-ocean, Langsdorff sent his usual warning (“If you transmit on your wireless I will fire”). Almost immediately, however, the radio operator on the *Graf Spee* detected an outgoing message from the *Trevanian*, and Langsdorff ordered his machine gunners to spray her bridge. That seemed to do the trick, as the transmission suddenly ceased. On board the *Trevanian*, however, the ship’s captain, J. M. Edwards, went into the radio room and asked the wireless operator if he had managed to send out the complete message. The nervous operator said no, that he had stopped sending when the gunfire started. Edwards ordered him to send it again, and stood by him while he did so. When the renewed transmission was detected on the *Graf Spee*, Langsdorff ordered the machine guns to open fire again. This time, despite bullets flying into and past the radio room, the wireless operator completed the message.¹⁷

Rather than resent this British defiance, Langsdorff admired it. As one of his officers wrote later, “When there are brave men on the other side, the machine-gun fire is of little use.” For Langsdorff, the good news was that his own radio operators did not detect an acknowledgment of the *Trevanian*’s distress signal, so he could hope that perhaps it had not been received by anyone. In any case, when Edwards was brought on board the *Graf Spee*, Langsdorff offered his usual apology, telling him, “I am sorry I have to sink your ship. War is war.” When Edwards remained stubbornly silent, Langsdorff reached out, seized his hand, and firmly shook it.¹⁸

Having sunk five ships in less than four weeks, Langsdorff decided to change his hunting grounds by passing around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean, and after another prearranged rendezvous with the *Altmark* near the tiny and remote island of Tristan de Cunha, he headed eastward, giving the cape a wide berth in order to stay beyond the range of British reconnaissance aircraft. Once in the Indian Ocean, however, he found slim pickings. For a week he searched fruitlessly for a likely victim, finally stopping the small tanker *Africa Shell* in the Mozambique Channel. Her captain protested that his ship was within three miles of Portuguese Mozambique, and since Portugal was neutral, the capture was illegal. Langsdorff took a careful survey and insisted that the *Africa Shell* was seven

miles from shore and therefore a legitimate prize. Having revealed his presence in the Indian Ocean, however, Langsdorff turned south again to reenter the Atlantic.¹⁹

By then it was November. The *Graf Spee* had been continuously at sea for nearly four months and had cruised more than thirty thousand miles, equivalent to a circumnavigation of the globe. The *Deutschland*, after a disappointing cruise that resulted in the destruction of only two ships, had already been recalled from her cruising grounds in the North Atlantic, and Langsdorff suspected that he, too, would soon have to return to Germany. On the other hand, he still had sufficient fuel and supplies to last through January, and he began to think that a fine way to cap off his cruise would be to defeat an enemy warship. On November 24, he told his officers that with the cruise so near its end, it was no longer necessary to avoid enemy warships so scrupulously. Indeed, Langsdorff's actions after November suggest that he was actively seeking a battle. For one thing, he disguised the *Graf Spee* with a false smokestack amidships and a dummy gun turret made out of wood and canvas, modifications that so changed his ship's profile that from a distance she could well be mistaken for the British battlecruiser *Renown*. That might allow him to get within gun range of an unsuspecting British cruiser.²⁰

Another clue that Langsdorff might be seeking a fight was his apparent unconcern about revealing his location. On the afternoon of December 2, several hundred miles off the coast of Namibia in the South Atlantic, the *Graf Spee* encountered the *Doric Star*, a large (10,000-ton) steamer of the Blue Star line, carrying a cargo of mutton and wool from New Zealand to Britain. Abandoning his usual protocol of steaming up to the quarry while flashing a signal not to employ the wireless, Langsdorff instead fired a number of warning shots from long range. That gave the captain of the *Doric Star*, William Stubbs, time to send off several detailed and repeated distress calls while the *Graf Spee* closed the range. When he got closer, Langsdorff did send his usual signal: "Stop your wireless or I will open fire." By then, however, Stubbs had already sent off repeated signals and had received acknowledgments from several vessels.²¹

After sinking the *Doric Star*, Langsdorff barely had time to contemplate his next move before lookouts espied yet another potential victim—the

steamer *Tairoa*. Once again, Langsdorff's warning not to transmit had little impact, and even after the *Graf Spee*'s guns opened fire, the *Tairoa*'s wireless operator, lying prone on the deck, got off several messages, even identifying the attacker as the *Admiral Scheer*. The capture of two ships so quickly, each of which managed to send out detailed reports, provided the British with more information than they had previously had. For more than two months, the enormous size of Langsdorff's cruising ground had allowed him to hide in plain sight. That was about to change.²²

THE REPORTS from the *Doric Star* and the *Tairoa* reached the bridge of the Royal Navy light cruiser *Ajax* on December 3. The *Ajax* was the temporary flagship of Commodore Henry Harwood, commander of the hunter-killer group Force G. Comfortably plump and somewhat jowly, with impressive bushy eyebrows, Harwood was a thirty-six-year veteran of the service. His command included a total of four cruisers, though on December 3 they were spread out all over the South Atlantic. Two of them were heavy (8-inch gun) cruisers, and two others, including the *Ajax*, were light (6-inch gun) cruisers. Collectively they could well prove more than a match for the *Graf Spee*, as the British Admiralty had assumed, but only if Harwood could concentrate them in the right place at the right time. He was aboard *Ajax* on that December 3 because his regular flagship, the heavy cruiser *Exeter*, was undergoing a much-needed refit at Port Stanley in the Falklands, more than four thousand miles from the scene of the *Graf Spee*'s latest predation. His other heavy cruiser, the *Cumberland*, was a thousand miles to the north and en route back to the Falklands for her own refit. Besides the *Ajax*, Harwood's other light cruiser was the *Achilles*, manned predominantly by New Zealanders. It had come from the South Pacific through the Straits of Magellan in late October and was now in Rio de Janeiro.*

In receipt of the twin sighting reports, Harwood tried to put himself in the mind of his adversary. He was sure that the German captain, whoever he

* The New Zealand navy was not formally constituted as a separate service until September 1941, so in 1939 the *Achilles* technically belonged to the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy.

was, would vacate the area of his recent captures as soon as possible. Most likely he would head west again, recrossing the Atlantic toward South America. If the German captain wanted to have the maximum impact on South Atlantic commerce, he would very likely go where the shipping lanes converged. There were two such places on the South American coast: Rio de Janeiro and the wide estuary at the mouth of the river Plate that led up to Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. Doodling possible routes on a piece of message paper, Harwood calculated that, at a cruising speed of fifteen knots, the German pocket battleship might be expected to arrive on the South American coast somewhere between those two cities early on the morning of December 12. Making the plunge, he ordered the ships of his command, less the *Cumberland*, which still had to complete its refit, to rendezvous at seven o'clock on the morning of December 12 at a designated position halfway between Montevideo and Rio. If he had guessed right, he intended to attack the German pocket battleship immediately with all three of his cruisers. His orders to his ship captains read: "Attack at once by day or night."²³

Harwood's assumptions about the movements of the *Graf Spee* were incorrect, for the German raider headed west not at fifteen knots but at twenty-two knots. On the other hand, Langsdorff stopped en route to effect another meeting with the *Altmark*, and he also made another capture—of the steamer *Streonshalh*—and these activities slowed his westward journey, so even though Harwood's calculations were wrong, his conclusion turned out to be very nearly spot on. As it happened, a Buenos Aires newspaper retrieved from the *Streonshalh* informed Langsdorff that the British were using Buenos Aires as a gathering spot for convoys, and a radio update from Berlin informed him that a convoy from the river Plate, escorted by one cruiser and two destroyers, was soon to depart from there. To intercept it, Langsdorff set a course for the coast of South America.

Meanwhile, Harwood successfully concentrated three of his four cruisers (*Cumberland* was still en route) at the designated rendezvous, and at 6:10 on the morning of December 13, lookouts spotted a trace of smoke on the horizon. Harwood sent the *Exeter* to investigate, and the resulting report was electrifying: "I think it is a pocket battleship." Harwood at once

ordered all three of his ships to increase speed and spread out in order to attack the *Graf Spee* from different quarters.²⁴

Langsdorff, too, decided to attack. Based on the report he had received from Berlin, he believed he faced the convoy escort of one cruiser and two destroyers. Even after the two smaller ships were correctly identified as light cruisers, Langsdorff held his course, remarking to his senior gunnery officer, Commander F. W. Raseneck, "We'll smash them." What a fine culmination to his cruise this victory would make.²⁵

Langsdorff conducted the battle from the foretop, a small (three-by-five-foot) platform above the bridge. From there he could track the course of all three British ships, though it also cut him off from the plotting table and the advice of other officers—only his young flag lieutenant stood with him. The greater range and firepower of the *Graf Spee*'s 11-inch guns gave him an early advantage. Shells from the *Graf Spee*'s second salvo straddled the *Exeter*, and on the fifth salvo, an 11-inch shell struck squarely on *Exeter*'s second forward turret (the B turret), just below the bridge. The turret was utterly wrecked, its twin 8-inch guns thrown drunkenly askew, and the explosion smashed up the bridge as well, killing everyone there except the ship's captain, Frederick S. Bell, and two others. It also cut off all internal communication. Bell had to quit the bridge and carry on the fight from the after control room, using messengers for communication. Hit seven times in twenty minutes, the *Exeter* was soon left with only one working gun, taking on water and listing badly to starboard. Bell nevertheless continued the fight until Harwood ordered him to retire and make his way to Port Stanley under best speed. That left Harwood with only the two light cruisers to face a pocket battleship, and they, too, had received serious damage. *Ajax* took an 11-inch shell in her stern that put both of her rear turrets out of action, and another shell took down her mast. On *Achilles*, an 11-inch shell blew shrapnel across the bridge, creating a horrible execution. It was some minutes before anyone on the bridge realized that the range-finding operator, hunched over his equipment, was in fact dead.²⁶

Of course, *Graf Spee* had been hurt, too. The most serious damage had resulted from the *Exeter*'s 8-inch shells, three of which hit home, and one of

which penetrated the *Graf Spee*'s 3.1-inch-thick armor belt. The 6-inch shells from the light cruisers hit more frequently but did less damage. Nevertheless, thirty-seven of the *Graf Spee*'s crew had been killed, and fifty-seven more were wounded, including Langsdorff, who was knocked unconscious and probably suffered a concussion, though after coming to he remained at his post in the foretop.²⁷

When Harwood ordered his two cruisers to launch torpedoes, Langsdorff turned away to avoid them. That created a respite in the battle during which the opposing commanders assessed their circumstances. Harwood concluded that it would be folly to continue the attack with only his two smaller ships, and he remained out of range. As for Langsdorff, rather than finish off the *Exeter* or attack the two small cruisers, he instead allowed the British ships to withdraw. He conducted a quick inspection of the *Graf Spee* and concluded that she could not get back to Germany in her condition. The galley had been destroyed, so feeding the thousand-man crew was problematic; the main battery range finder had been smashed as well, which meant that the 11-inch guns were unreliable, and the ammunition hoists for the ship's secondary battery had been wrecked. The ship also had a six-by-six-foot hole in her port bow that might not withstand a voyage across the North Atlantic. Without consulting his officers, he decided to head into the river Plate to effect repairs.²⁸

Harwood followed at a distance, shadowing his foe and sending out radio messages to the *Cumberland* to hurry, and other messages to the battlecruiser *Renown* and the carrier *Ark Royal* to come join the fight as soon as possible. The *Cumberland* would arrive the next day, but it might be five days before the *Renown* or the *Ark Royal* could get there. How long would the *Graf Spee* stay in the river before coming out again? And if she did come out, could Harwood's two small battered cruisers deal with her? Even if the *Cumberland* arrived in time, it would be another desperate fight. Whatever the answers to those questions, Harwood was determined to stay where he was and find out.²⁹

LANGSDORFF HAD TRAPPED HIMSELF. International law held that a belligerent warship could remain in a neutral port for no more than twenty-

four hours unless it was unseaworthy. Langsdorff tried hard to convince Uruguayan authorities that the *Graf Spee* was not seaworthy—that he would need two weeks to effect repairs. The *Graf Spee*'s real problem, however, was less its seaworthiness than its battle-worthiness. From the start, Harwood had speculated that even if he failed to destroy his foe, he could effectively pull its teeth by crippling it or even forcing it to use up its ammunition. The *Graf Spee* was not quite toothless, but its offensive capability had been dramatically compromised, and because of that, Langsdorff petitioned local officials to allow him to stay longer in Montevideo.

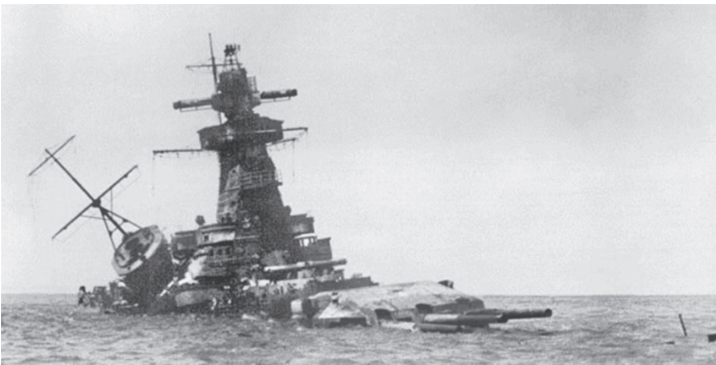
Ironically, Harwood wanted the same thing. If the pocket battleship came out now, even compromised as she was, she might still be able to fight her way past two small cruisers, each of which had also expended most of its available ammunition. Even after the *Cumberland* arrived the next day (December 14), it was by no means certain that the British could prevail, and it would be five more days before the *Renown* and *Ark Royal* arrived. In the end, the Uruguayan government gave Langsdorff until 8:00 p.m. on the seventeenth to leave port or face internment, a decision that disappointed everyone. Harwood and the British consul in Montevideo, Eugen Millington-Drake, engaged in an elaborate program of disinformation to convince Langsdorff that the *Renown* and the *Ark Royal* had already arrived and were hovering just over the horizon.³⁰

Above all else, Langsdorff wanted to avoid internment. Not only would that mean the loss of his ship and the imprisonment of his crew, but it was possible that Uruguay would eventually turn his ship over to the British. He did not think he could fight his way out, and he clearly could not stay where he was. Since radio silence was useless now, Langsdorff reported his dilemma to Raeder in Berlin, and Raeder, unwilling to second-guess a commander five thousand miles away, told him to use his best judgment: to fight his way out if he could, or to scuttle his ship if he must, but under no circumstances to let it fall into the hands of the British. Almost at once, Langsdorff concluded, "Under the circumstances I have no alternative but to sink my ship." Just minutes before the deadline given him by local authorities, Langsdorff raised the large German battle flag and took his ship out

beyond the four-mile mark. As they had done on so many merchant ships, demolition specialists set charges around the ship while the crew evacuated. At six minutes to eight on December 17, six separate explosions turned the *Graf Spee* into a pyrotechnic display. British sailors on the cruisers ten miles out to sea lined the rails and cheered.³¹

The German officers and men, watching from tugboats and launches as well as from the German merchant steamer *Tacoma*, were silently grim. Langsdorff, too, had evacuated the *Graf Spee*, and he watched as well while the big ship settled to the bottom, with much of her superstructure still showing. His goal had been to ensure the safety of his men and to get them to Argentina, whose government he expected to be more accommodating. He was disappointed in that, too, however, for most of the *Graf Spee*'s crew was interned by Uruguay for the duration of the war. That might have been Langsdorff's fate as well, but on December 19, he put a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. The bullet missed, only grazing his skull. He then raised the pistol a second time, and this time he was successful.

Only hours before, in a conversation with an Argentinian naval officer, Langsdorff had mused aloud that the whole concept of using surface raiders to attack British commerce was misplaced. "Germany should abandon



The wreck of the *Graf Spee* lies on the bottom of the Rio de la Plata following her destruction at the hands of her own crew. Langsdorff's decision to scuttle his own ship was controversial at the time and remains so today.

Naval History and Heritage Command

that method of warfare on commerce,” he told Commander Edwardo Anamann, “and instead dedicate all effort to submarine war.”³²

Dönitz could not have agreed more.

THERE WAS A POSTSCRIPT. Though the *Graf Spee* never escaped the South Atlantic, her consort, the *Altmark*, did. With 299 British prisoners on board, collected from many of the *Graf Spee*’s captures, she steamed northward through the center of the Atlantic Ocean, passed east of Iceland, and turned toward Norway. Once her captain, Heinrich Dau, got the *Altmark* into Norwegian territorial waters, he dismounted the ship’s guns and sent the prisoners below so that he could claim sanctuary as a merchant ship in neutral waters. Of course, Dau and the *Altmark* still had to steam the roughly six hundred miles south along Norway’s treacherous coast to make it to a German port.

Meanwhile, the British conducted a search for her, and on February 19, their persistence was rewarded when a scout plane found her anchored near Jøssing Fjord, south of Bergen. Not long afterward, three Royal Navy warships appeared off the Norwegian coast. Undeterred by Norway’s neutral status, one of them fired two warning shots across the bow of the *Altmark*. That led Dau to move his ship well into the fjord, convinced that the British would not openly violate Norwegian neutrality by attacking him there.³³

He was wrong. Like Langsdorff, Dau had trapped himself. Back in London, Winston Churchill, who had been recalled to his old job as First Lord of the Admiralty, personally composed the orders authorizing British destroyers to search the *Altmark* to see if she did indeed hold British prisoners. If the *Altmark*’s captain did not allow a thorough search, Churchill wrote, Royal Navy forces were authorized to “board *Altmark*, liberate the prisoners and take possession of the ship,” regardless of her presence in neutral waters.³⁴

Just before midnight on February 19, the British destroyer HMS *Cossack*, under the command of Captain Philip Vian, steamed boldly into Jøssing Fjord, brushing past two Norwegian torpedo boats. As the *Cossack* approached, Dau ordered the *Altmark* full astern, hoping to back into the British destroyer and force her aground. Instead it was the *Altmark* that ran

aground, hard up against the ice. Vian maneuvered the *Cossack* alongside, and, in an act reminiscent of the age of fighting sail, sent a boarding party charging onto the deck of the *Altmark*. In the bright glare of the *Cossack*'s searchlight, there was a spattering of small arms fire. Eight members of the German crew were killed, and the rest fled inland across the ice. The boarding party then began a search of the ship. Opening a hatchway down into the hold, Lieutenant Bradwell Turner called out, "Any British down there?" which elicited a rousing cry of "Yes! We're all British!" "Come on up then," Turner called back, "the Navy's here." Years later, Vian remembered the scene vividly: "The long shadows on the ice and snow cast by *Altmark*'s upper works; in the foreground her brightly lit decks, on which there began to emerge the prisoners, laughing, cheering, and waving in satisfaction at the turn of events."³⁵

Hitler was infuriated ("indignant" was the word Raeder used) that Langsdorff had decided to blow up his ship instead of going out to fight. Had he done so, Hitler insisted, he at least might have taken some British ships down with him. Unconsciously echoing Langsdorff's last words, the Führer told Raeder that using battleships, even pocket battleships, for commerce raiding was a waste of resources; U-boats could do it cheaper and more effectively. Somewhat defensively, Raeder suggested that Langsdorff's cruise had yielded significant secondary benefits by keeping a large number of Royal Navy warships busy looking for him, which was true enough. Hitler was not to be mollified, however, and Raeder was compelled to issue a new general order to the fleet: "The German warship," the new orders read, "fights with the full deployment of its crew until the last shell, until it is victorious or goes down with flag flying." It was, as Raeder had predicted two years earlier, to "die gallantly."³⁶

Hitler was also infuriated that the Norwegians had stood by and done nothing to stop HMS *Cossack* when she had so flagrantly violated their neutrality by boarding the *Altmark*. On this, at least, Raeder was in complete agreement. The Norwegians had failed to live up to their obligations as neutrals. There would be consequences.³⁷

NORWAY

ADMIRAL RAEDER HAD BEEN URGING HITLER to authorize the occupation of Norway for months, almost since the war began. One reason was that basing Dönitz's U-boats out of Norwegian ports would put them several hundred miles closer to the passage around the north of Scotland to gain the Atlantic sea-lanes, which would greatly extend their time on station. Raeder was also eager to demonstrate the importance of his beloved Kriegsmarine to the burgeoning war effort.

The main reason, however, was iron, the principal ingredient of steel, used to make everything from tanks to warships. Germany's economy consumed thirty million tons of iron ore annually—a number that was sure to rise with the onset of hostilities, and despite dramatic increases during the 1930s less than half of that iron came from domestic sources. Prior to September 1939, Germany imported ore from France, Spain, Luxembourg, and even Newfoundland, and all these sources were cut off once the war began. Most of the rest came from northern Sweden—over nine million tons of it in 1939. With the onset of war, it was vital for Germany to increase

its own domestic ore production and to guarantee the security of its imports from neutral Sweden.¹

During the summer months, ships carried Swedish ore from Luleå down the length of the Gulf of Bothnia to German ports on the Baltic Sea (see map page 44). In winter, however, the northern half of the gulf was frozen, and the ore was transported westward by rail to the Norwegian port of Narvik, which thanks to the Gulf Stream was ice-free all winter. From there, German ships carried the ore southward along the coast. Norway's neutrality protected them from hostile interference as long as they stayed within territorial waters. That protection was a thin reed, however. The *Altmark* incident underscored the fact that, in Raeder's words, Norway "did not have the requisite firmness to resist British violations of her neutrality." If the British decided to interfere with those ore shipments, Norwegian neutrality would not deter them. Raeder convinced Hitler that



Winston Churchill twice served as First Lord of the Admiralty prior to becoming prime minister. During his first tour (1911–1915) he sponsored the ill-fated invasion of Turkey at Gallipoli; in his second, in 1940, he directed the campaign in Norway.

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the occupation of Norway was essential as a defensive move, and in March, the Führer approved what was named Operation Weserübung. Raeder ordered the invasion to begin during the dark of the new moon in the first week of April 1940.²

Raeder's concerns about British intentions in Norway were justified. Even as the German admiral secured Hitler's approval to seize Norway by force, the new British First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was urging the British government to conduct its own intervention. Almost the first decision that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made once the war began was to recall Churchill to his old post as First Lord, a position he had held during the first fifteen months of the First World War.* Churchill had lost that job in November 1915 because of his role in promoting the Gallipoli campaign, which had been an unmitigated disaster for French, Australian, and British forces. That misadventure notwithstanding, his eloquent pleas for British rearmament throughout the 1930s, along with his instinctive love of the Royal Navy, made him popular with officers and enlisted men alike, and when the news of his reappointment was sent out to the fleet, the message read simply: "Winston is back."

The presence of the sixty-four-year-old Churchill in Admiralty House infused new energy and purpose into the Royal Navy and reenergized the cabinet as well, though his assertive personality and aggressive instinct often alarmed its members. Moreover, Churchill had a penchant for getting personally involved in operational planning down to and including the tactical level, a tendency his critics labeled as meddling. Churchill's orders to board the *Altmark* were but one example of that. Such behavior naturally caused occasional friction with the First Sea Lord, Dudley Pound. Interestingly, both Churchill and Pound had American mothers and both had been raised in privileged circumstances. Pound also shared with Churchill a capacity for long hours and hard work, but unlike Churchill he was tolerant of and even receptive to divergent opinions.

* The First Lord of the Admiralty is the civilian head of the service and a member of the cabinet, a position akin to that of secretary of the navy in the United States. The First Sea Lord, by contrast, is an active-duty naval officer who commands the operational navy, much like the American chief of naval operations.

As a result, Churchill generally overbore the accommodating Pound, who was relegated to acting as a kind of naval chief of staff to the uncompromising force of nature that was Winston Churchill.³

To interdict the ore shipments, Churchill's first instinct was to send a powerful Royal Navy surface fleet through the narrow passage between Denmark and Sweden (the Kattegat) and into the Baltic Sea to shut down the trade altogether. The whole idea was completely unrealistic both tactically and logistically, and Pound was horrified. For once, Pound stood up to Churchill, arguing that a sortie into the Baltic would almost certainly result in the loss of most or all of the warships involved, losses that could jeopardize Britain's naval superiority in the North Sea and elsewhere. Churchill next urged a landing at Narvik and a ground campaign along the railroad line to seize the Swedish ore fields themselves. The pretext for this would be the need to deliver supplies to the embattled Finns, who were resisting a Russian invasion in the so-called Winter War. The cabinet toyed with that notion until Finland's capitulation in March, which rendered the idea moot. Churchill then asserted that at the very least they should mine the inlets and fjords of coastal Norway. "British control of the Norwegian coast-line," he insisted, was "a strategic objective of first-class importance." Mining the fjords would violate Norway's neutrality, but it would also force the German ore ships to venture out into the North Sea, where they could be seized or sunk. With some trepidation, the cabinet agreed, and Churchill issued orders for a mine-laying expedition to set out on April 5.⁴

Thus it was that in the first week of April 1940, both Germany and Britain prepared to launch nearly simultaneous naval expeditions to neutral Norway. The German plan was by far the more ambitious—even audacious, for it was nothing less than a full-scale invasion and occupation of the entire country, and of Denmark as well, which was included mainly on the urging of Hermann Göring, the head of the German air force or *Luftwaffe*, who wanted the airfields in Jutland. German occupation of Denmark would also have an effect on the war at sea, especially if Germany somehow managed to gain control of Iceland, which, though officially independent, was linked historically and culturally to Denmark. Raeder knew, however, that seizing Norway would be challenge enough for the *Kriegsmarine* and that

Iceland was, for now, beyond its reach.* Germany shared a land border with Denmark, so the occupation of that country was primarily a matter of marching. Norway, however, was necessarily the responsibility of Raeder's Kriegsmarine.

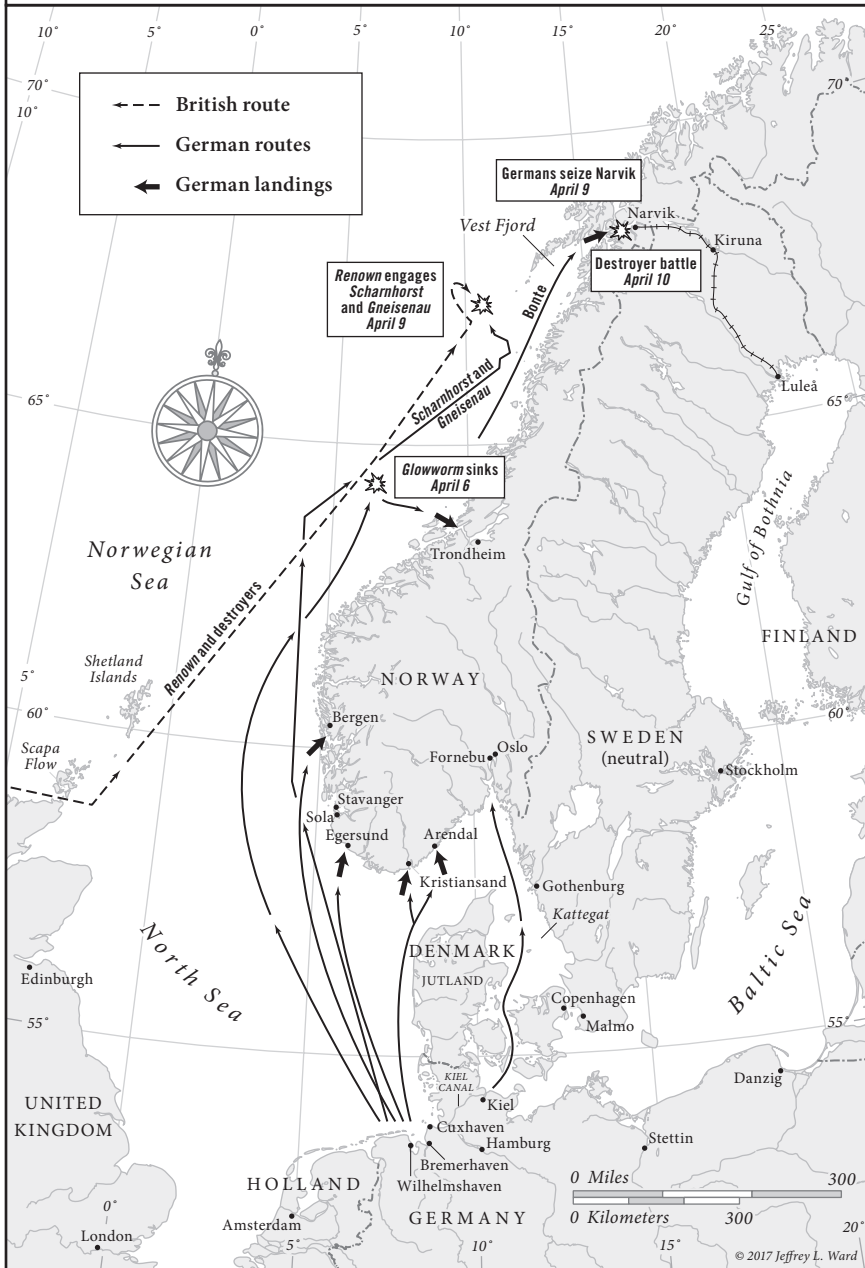
Unlike Pound, who was loath to risk Britain's naval supremacy by sending a substantial part of the fleet into the cul-de-sac of the Baltic, Raeder was willing to commit virtually all of the Kriegsmarine to a campaign in the North Sea, which was very nearly a British lake. It was an audacious, even foolhardy risk. Raeder acknowledged that it was "a bitter decision," but he insisted that "Germany had no other choice." The success of the operation would depend almost entirely on secrecy, surprise, and precise timing, plus more than a little luck.⁵

The invasion plan was both detailed and complex. During the first week of April, scores of German ships would sail both independently and in groups in an intricate maritime quadrille. Some were supply ships disguised as merchant vessels that would be pre-positioned inside various Norwegian ports to support the invasion forces after they arrived. The soldiers themselves would be crowded aboard warships, mostly destroyers, that would sail in six groups and rendezvous at five widely separated Norwegian ports simultaneously. The idea was to present the British (and the Norwegians) with a swift *fait accompli* before the British Home Fleet could sortie from Scapa Flow to interfere. Of course, even if the plan worked to perfection, the British were certain to react swiftly afterward, and because of that Raeder wanted all the warships to return to Germany immediately after delivering the invasion forces. Otherwise, he feared, many of them might not get back at all.⁶

A central element of the plan was the dual role Raeder scripted for Germany's two new battlecruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. Raeder had

* A month after the German strike at Norway, a contingent of British Royal Marines occupied Iceland. Since they had not been invited, it was technically an invasion and the local government protested. Because the British offered financial compensation and promised to evacuate the troops as soon as the war ended, the Icelanders resigned themselves to occupation. A year later, after Pearl Harbor, American forces replaced the British, and Iceland remained in Allied hands throughout the war, playing an important role in the Battle of the Atlantic.

THE CAMPAIGN IN NORWAY April 1940



noted that whenever German surface units sortied, the British responded quickly by sending forces in pursuit. In November, for example, when Raeder dispatched the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* into the North Sea to draw British attention away from the *Graf Spee*, it had provoked a swift response by the Royal Navy. On that occasion, the German battlecruisers had sunk the British armed merchant cruiser *Rawalpindi* north of the Faroe Islands, triggering a massive, though ultimately unsuccessful, search for them by the Home Fleet. Raeder counted on a similar reaction this time. After covering the invasion force for Narvik, therefore, the battlecruisers were to maneuver menacingly in the Norwegian Sea as a kind of decoy.⁷

Other capital ships would spearhead invasions elsewhere in Norway. The heavy cruiser *Hipper* and four destroyers, loaded with 1,700 German soldiers, would execute a landing at Trondheim, and the pocket battleship *Deutschland* would lead the expedition against Oslo. On Hitler's order, the *Deutschland* had been recently rechristened the *Lützow* because the Führer did not want to run the risk that she might be captured or sunk, which, given her name, would provide the British and her allies a major propaganda victory. In addition to the *Deutschland/Lützow*, the Germans also committed the brand-new heavy cruiser *Blücher*, a light cruiser, and various smaller craft to the Oslo expedition. Other cruisers, and quite a few destroyers, were committed to landings at Bergen and Kristianstad. Dönitz also employed his entire U-boat force, even the six smaller coastal boats that were normally used for training, though privately Dönitz considered this a misallocation of resources. Altogether, Raeder devoted almost the entire Kriegsmarine to the operation.⁸

Even as the various elements of the German invasion force departed Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, the British mine-laying force also put to sea. The minelayers themselves were four modified destroyers (without torpedoes to make room for the mines) accompanied by four fully armed destroyers as an escort. These eight destroyers were covered by the battlecruiser *Renown*, now back from the South Atlantic, herself escorted by four more destroyers, all under the command of Vice Admiral Sir William Whitworth, an urbane fifty-six-year-old career officer who was called "Jock" by his friends. Whitworth's orders were straightforward: he was to offer protection to the

mine-laying destroyers off the coast of northern Norway in case the Norwegians felt obliged to intervene.

Almost immediately, however, the simultaneous sortie of the various German invasion groups utterly transformed Whitworth's assignment. Indeed, the new circumstances triggered a frenzied reassessment by the Admiralty, including its energetic First Lord, and over the next several weeks orders and counterorders from Whitehall added a layer of confusion and uncertainty that did much to undermine Britain's response to the German invasion.

SINCE MOST OF THE SHIPS INVOLVED on both sides still lacked radar, and because of the poor visibility in the North Sea in April, it is not surprising that the first encounter between the opposing units occurred by accident. On April 6, the Royal Navy destroyer *Glowworm*, part of *Renown's* escort, lost a man overboard, and turned out of the formation to recover him. Given the sea state, the recovery took some time, and the *Glowworm* soon found herself alone. After completing the rescue, the *Glowworm* had just turned north again when lookouts spotted two destroyers amidst the morning haze and intermittent snow flurries. They were two of the four German destroyers assigned to the invasion group for Trondheim along with the cruiser *Hipper*. Lookouts on the German ships espied the *Glowworm* at about the same time, and the opposing forces exchanged several long-range salvos, though the severe weather conditions resulted in poor marksmanship. Reports of the contact from the German destroyers, however, led Captain Hellmuth Heye on the heavy cruiser *Hipper* to turn back in support.

At 9:00 a.m., with visibility improving, *Hipper* unleashed a full salvo from her 8-inch guns at the *Glowworm*, whose largest guns were 4.7 inches. It was a dramatically unequal contest, and after only a few salvos the *Glowworm's* captain, Commander Gerard B. Roope, fired a spread of torpedoes, laid a smokescreen, and turned away. Believing that the British destroyer was in full flight, Heye pursued. Then, suddenly, the *Glowworm* dashed out from the bank of smoke at point-blank range and smashed into the side of the *Hipper*, ripping off 130 feet of her armor plate. The collision severely damaged the cruiser, but it was fatal to the *Glowworm*, whose bow

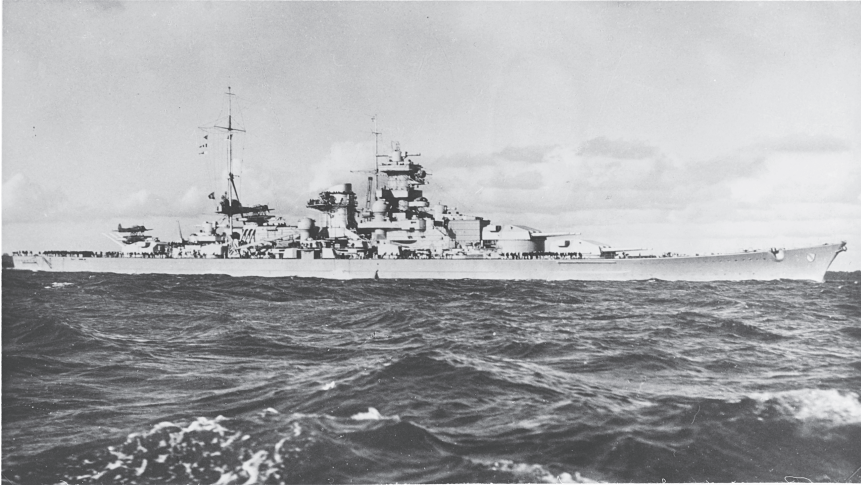
was crushed. Powerless and ravaged by fires, she blew up a few minutes later. The Germans rescued thirty-eight of the *Glowworm*'s crew of 147, though not Roope, who slipped back into the sea while attempting to climb aboard. Heye and the *Hipper* continued to Trondheim and successfully landed the embarked invasion force, though afterward the *Hipper* had to return to Germany for extensive repairs. Years later, after the war was over, Roope was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry.^{9*}

That proved only the opening round. Roope's radio report alerted both Whitworth on the *Renown* and the Admiralty in London that major German surface forces were abroad in the North Sea. Conforming to new orders from Whitehall, Whitworth united his *Renown* task force with the eight destroyers of the mine-laying group and led all of them northward toward Narvik, the strategic objective of the entire campaign. Whitworth's new orders from Churchill, which were labeled "Most Immediate," directed him "to concentrate on preventing any German force proceeding to Narvik."¹⁰

Arriving there in the midst of a blinding snowstorm late on April 8, Whitworth assumed that the Germans would not attempt to enter the narrow fjords under such conditions in the dark, and he maneuvered off the coast to await the dawn. It was a consequential miscalculation, for that very evening, Admiral Günther Lütjens, the grim-faced and humorless German commander of Group One, which included the ten German destroyers headed for Narvik as well as the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, arrived off Vest Fjord, which Lütjens ordered the destroyers, crammed with the invasion troops, to enter at once despite the weather. Then, like Whitworth, he took his two big ships off to the northwest to gain sea room.

Though he was unaware of it, Lütjens and his two battlecruisers were following in the track taken only hours earlier by Whitworth and the *Renown*. At 3:00 a.m., Whitworth had just completed a 180-degree turn to head back toward the Norwegian coast when a lookout spotted the two German battlecruisers emerging out of the heavy snow ten miles away. Whitworth identified them, incorrectly, as a battlecruiser and a cruiser,

* Roope's VC citation was based on the assumption that he deliberately rammed the *Hipper*, which is entirely possible and perhaps even likely. Given the circumstances, however, it is also possible that the two ships merely collided.



The German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* (seen here) and her twin the *Gneisenau* were brand-new when the war began. With their nine 11-inch guns and a speed of thirty-one knots, they were more powerful than a heavy cruiser and faster than most battleships. Note the two seaplanes—one atop the stern turret, and one just forward of the mast.

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mainly because he had seen intelligence reports indicating that two such ships were abroad. That may have encouraged him to accept battle, though he might have done so even if he had known that he was facing two battlecruisers. In either case, it was a bold decision. The *Renown* had 15-inch guns, but only six of them, and the two German battlecruisers had three times that number of 11-inch guns. Whitworth also had nine destroyers in company, while Lütjens had none, though that was unlikely to affect the battle because the British destroyers had only 4.7-inch guns, and in any event, they could not keep up with the battlecruisers in seas with waves so high they occasionally broke over the top of the destroyers' superstructures.

Accepting—even forcing—a battle, Whitworth increased speed from twelve to twenty knots and opened fire. Breasting the heavy seas, which sent icy spray flying as high as the bridge, the *Renown* plunged forward to close the range, and her fifth salvo straddled Lütjens's flagship, the *Gneisenau*. One shell disabled the *Gneisenau*'s range finder and fire-control director, rendering her guns all but useless. Lütjens ordered the *Scharnhorst* to make

smoke to cover their withdrawal, and the Germans fled to the northwest, drawing Whitworth further from Narvik. That may have been Lütjens's intention from the start, or he may have been influenced by the long row of gun flashes from Whitworth's destroyers in the distance, which suggested that there were more heavy ships behind the *Renown*. Whitworth pursued, leaving his laboring destroyers behind, thus creating the odd circumstance of one battlecruiser chasing two others. Nevertheless, by six-fifteen in the morning the German ships were out of sight. Eventually both of them made it safely back to port, arriving in Wilhelmshaven on April 12 along with the damaged *Hipper*.¹¹

There were several British and Norwegian tactical successes in these first few days of the invasion. On that same April 9, during the German attack on Oslo, Norwegian coastal batteries sank the brand-new heavy cruiser *Blücher*, which was only three days into her operational life; the next day, the British submarine *Spearfish* torpedoed the *Lützow*, which barely made it back to Kiel, where she would undergo repairs for nearly a year. Another British sub, the *Truant*, mortally wounded the light cruiser *Karlsruhe*. Finally, British Skua dive-bombers based in the Orkneys sank the cruiser *Königsberg*, the first destruction of a warship by dive-bombers in the history of warfare. These successes against major elements of the *Kriegsmarine* were gratifying. Yet even as Whitworth and the *Renown* chased the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* over the horizon, the ten destroyers that Lütjens had sent into Vest Fjord were securing the principal strategic prize, Narvik.

THE COMMANDER OF THOSE TEN DESTROYERS was Friedrich Bonte, a forty-four-year-old veteran of the First World War, who had been promoted to *Kommodore* just two months before. Bonte was a bold and capable mariner, but he was conflicted, even tormented, by his skepticism about the Nazi regime. Like every other *Kriegsmarine* officer, he had taken the oath of loyalty to the Führer, and he felt honor bound to obedience. There was, however, a hint of fatalism in his orders and actions. That may have made it easier for him to accept with equanimity Lütjens's daunting order to lead his ten destroyers up the narrow Vest Fjord, and then the even narrower Ofot Fjord toward Narvik in a blinding snowstorm in the dark. Surviving

that harrowing passage, Bonte took five of his ships directly into the harbor at Narvik. Two of them stopped to land their troops, while Bonte took the other three into the crowded anchorage, which was filled with twenty-three merchant ships from five countries. The harbor also hosted a pair of forty-year-old Norwegian coastal defense ships, *Eidsvold* and *Norge*, each armed with two 8.2-inch guns and a secondary battery of 5.9-inch guns, though their fire-control systems were badly out of date.¹²

As Bonte's three destroyers approached the anchorage, Norwegian navy Captain Odd Isaksen Willoch in the *Eidsvold* fired a warning shot. That caused Bonte to stop, though another of his destroyers continued toward the jetty to land its embarked soldiers. Meanwhile, Bonte sent an envoy to the *Eidsvold* in a small boat. The only message he carried, however, was an assertion that the Germans had come to protect the Norwegians from the British and that "all resistance was useless." When Willoch peremptorily refused the demand to turn his ships over to the Germans, the envoy departed, and as soon as he was clear of the target, he fired a red flare, the signal for Bonte to fire a spread of torpedoes. Two of them struck the *Eitsveld*, breaking her in half, and she went down in a matter of seconds, taking 177 men down with her. Only eight survived. The other Norwegian defense vessel, the *Norge*, traded salvos with the German destroyers amidst the crowded anchorage until she, too, was hit by torpedoes, going down almost as quickly as the *Eitsveld* with the loss of more than a hundred men. That effectively ended the battle, and the Germans took control of both the harbor and the city.¹³

The German seizure of Narvik changed Whitworth's assignment yet again. Instead of keeping the Germans from getting in, he was now tasked with preventing them from getting out. Indeed, the news that the Germans were in Narvik provoked alarm and not a little confusion up and down the British chain of command. The Admiralty sent out a flurry of orders (most of them dictated by Churchill) that bypassed Whitworth and went directly to two of his subordinates: Captain George D. Yates, who commanded the light cruiser *Penelope*, and Captain Bernard Warburton-Lee, commander of the Second Destroyer Flotilla. Boyish-looking at forty-four, Warburton-Lee was known as "Wash-Lee" or simply "Wash," and his orders were especially fateful. Noting that "press reports" indicated that a German ship had



Two German destroyers are moored next to the pier in Narvik harbor in April 1940 prior to the attack by Warburton-Lee's destroyers. Two German minesweepers are moored at right. By the time British forces arrived at Narvik, the Germans were already in possession of both the town and the harbor.

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reached Narvik Harbor, Churchill ordered Wash-Lee to “proceed Narvik and sink or harass enemy ship. It is at your discretion to land force and capture Narvik from enemy present.”¹⁴

For both Whitworth, who received an information copy of those orders, and Warburton-Lee, it should have been evident that, press reports notwithstanding, the orders had been composed with incomplete knowledge. For one thing, there was clearly more than one German ship at Narvik, and Warburton-Lee's small command of five H-class destroyers was only a small portion of the Royal Navy forces that were available. Better coordination within the chain of command might have assembled a more suitable attack force. As it was, dispatching Warburton-Lee's flotilla of small destroyers into the narrow fjords to ferret out the German invaders was like sending a beagle into a wolf's lair. Whitworth did not intervene, for he assumed the Admiralty knew what it was doing.

In receipt of the orders to “capture Narvik” at his discretion, Warburton-Lee conducted a swift reconnaissance of Vest Fjord, learning from a Norwegian pilot station ashore that at least six large German destroyers and one submarine had passed into the fjord, and that a strong German land force held the town. Warburton-Lee’s five ships were all smaller destroyers, displacing less than 1,500 tons each and armed with four 4.7-inch guns, whereas the six German destroyers displaced over 2,200 tons each and had five 5-inch guns. Despite that, Warburton-Lee knew it would have been unseemly for him to protest his orders, so he contented himself with sending the Admiralty the information he had secured along with a statement of intent: “Norwegians report Germans holding Narvik in force, also six destroyers and one U-boat are there and channel is possibly mined. Intend attacking at dawn.” Such a message at least allowed the Admiralty (in this case, Churchill) to reconsider the orders. Warburton-Lee may even have expected a change in orders, but what he got instead was a confirmation: “Attack at dawn, all good luck.”¹⁵

Later that night—actually early the next morning, just past 1:00 a.m.—more orders arrived for Warburton-Lee that emphasized finding out how the Germans had managed to land, and whether they had captured the shore batteries. That suggested that he was to conduct a reconnaissance rather than an attack. Another follow-up message noted that the Germans might also have seized the two Norwegian defense ships in Narvik, in which case, the Admiralty message read, “you alone can judge whether, in these circumstances, attack should be made.” Of course the only way Warburton-Lee could discover whether the Germans had taken possession of either the shore batteries or the Norwegian warships was to go into the harbor and see if they fired at him. The last Admiralty message closed with the assurance that “we shall support whatever decision you make.” Theoretically, that left it up to Wash-Lee. Given the burden of four centuries of Royal Navy tradition, however, it was certain what decision he would make.¹⁶

Well before dawn on April 10, with the snow still falling heavily, Warburton-Lee led his five small destroyers through Vest Fjord and into Ofot Fjord. His ships crept into the harbor at six knots at 4:30 a.m. virtually

unseen. Five of the German destroyers were in the harbor, two of them refueling at the oiler *Jan Wellem*, one of the supply ships the Germans had pre-positioned there. The other five German destroyers were anchored up adjacent inlets. Still undiscovered, Warburton-Lee in HMS *Hardy* fired a spread of torpedoes at one German destroyer to starboard, and HMS *Hunter* fired a spread at another to port. Within minutes, both targeted ships exploded and went down. One of them was Bonte's flagship, the *Wilhelm Heidkamp*, and Bonte himself was killed, his reservations about his duty now irrelevant. After that, it became a wild melee in the dark, with 5-inch and 4.7-inch shells flying across the anchorage while torpedoes furrowed the water. There was significant collateral damage to the merchant ships, and the British destroyers sank six of the German supply ships, though not the *Jan Wellem*. The three other German destroyers that were in the harbor were hit as well, some seriously. After forty minutes, it appeared that against all odds Warburton-Lee's audacious predawn sortie had badly crippled the German invasion force, opening the way for a swift British recapture of the town.¹⁷

Alas for Warburton-Lee, there were not five, or even six, German destroyers in Narvik—there were ten. As the British destroyers began their return trip back up Ofot Fjord, the other five German warships darted out from inlets to both port and starboard. One 5-inch shell smashed into the bridge of the *Hardy*, and Warburton-Lee received a mortal head wound. Reportedly, his last words were "Keep on engaging enemy." Soon afterward the burning *Hardy* ran aground and was lost, with members of its crew escaping ashore. HMS *Hunter* was hit so many times no accurate count was possible. Unable to steam or steer amidst the blinding snow, she was rammed by HMS *Hotspur* coming up behind her. The *Hotspur* herself was hit seven times by German shells, though, incredibly, she managed to stay afloat. Bad as it was for the British, it might have been worse. The three U-boats assigned to Vest Fjord conducted multiple attacks on the British destroyers, both on their way in and on their way out, but none of their torpedoes exploded. Dietrich Knorr, captain of the U-51, fired four torpedoes at one of the destroyers from point-blank range. Two exploded prematurely, and two did not explode at all. Clearly, there was something very wrong with the German torpedoes.¹⁸

HMS *Havock*, commanded by the appropriately named Lieutenant Commander Rafe E. Courage, covered the retreat of the two surviving British destroyers, and on the way out *Havock* also destroyed the German ammunition ship *Rauenfels*, which exploded in a spectacular fireball. Afterward, both opposing commanders, Bonte and Warburton-Lee, were posthumously honored with the highest medals their countries offered: Bonte with the Knight's Cross, and Warburton-Lee (like Roope) with the Victoria Cross.¹⁹

ELSEWHERE ALONG THE NORWEGIAN COAST, Admiral Sir Charles Forbes, with the bulk of Britain's Home Fleet, sought to interfere with German landings at Trondheim and Bergen, south of Narvik. Despite his superiority in battleships, he found himself in daily peril of German aircraft flying from captured Norwegian airfields. Göring committed more than seven hundred planes to the campaign, and they harassed British ships daily, sinking the destroyer *Gurkha* and damaging the battleship *Rodney*, which Forbes was using as his flagship. Britain had only one carrier in the area (*Furious*) when the campaign began, and she carried only torpedo planes, no fighters. *Ark Royal* and *Glorious* were quickly ordered from the Mediterranean, but they did not arrive until April 24. In addition, the sea made carrier operations difficult, and in any case the British planes were mostly relatively slow Gloster Gladiator and Swordfish biplanes and Skua fighter-bombers, which were both outnumbered and outperformed by the Germans.²⁰

Initially, Forbes's orders were to prevent the Germans from landing at Trondheim and Bergen, but, as at Narvik, the Germans were well ashore before the Royal Navy arrived, and Forbes's new orders were "to maintain a patrol off the entrance to Bergen to prevent enemy forces from escaping." With so many German threats along the coast, however, Whitehall (that is, Churchill) used Forbes's main body as a pool of reinforcements for operations elsewhere, periodically detaching one ship or another to threatened areas until Forbes's "fleet" consisted of only two battleships, the *Furious*, and six destroyers.²¹

On April 11, in the wake of Warburton-Lee's sortie into Narvik harbor, Forbes received an order to diminish his fleet further by sending the



Admiral Sir Charles Forbes in a formal portrait by Sir Oswald Birley painted in 1947. According to historian Correlli Barnett, Forbes was “the human equivalent of the eighteenth-century 74-gun ship-of-the-line”: stolid, reliable, and very much the product of an earlier era.

Britannia Royal Naval College Museum

battleship *Warspite* and the *Furious* to Whitworth for another try at Narvik. There would be no surprise in this second attack, though that mattered less now because instead of a beagle the Royal Navy was sending an Irish wolfhound into the harbor. Flying his flag on the *Warspite* with her eight 15-inch guns, Whitworth led his force into the fjords toward Narvik on April 13. As the *Warspite* steamed majestically up the fjord, her spotter aircraft sighted and sank the U-64, which was lying in wait in Ofot Fjord, and then the pilot provided target information for the *Warspite*'s big guns. The surviving German destroyers gamely came out to engage, but they were quickly overwhelmed. After expending most of their torpedoes and virtually all of their 5-inch ammunition, they were driven into Rombaks Fjord, a smaller arm of Ofot Fjord, where they beached themselves, their crews taking to the forest. Damage on the British side was much less severe. The destroyer *Cossack*, commanded now by Robert St. Vincent Sherbrooke, was hit seven times in two minutes and drifted ashore, though she was subsequently salvaged, and a torpedo blew

off most of the bow of the destroyer *Eskimo*, which had to back out of the fjord to avoid further damage.²²

With German naval assets at Narvik destroyed, Churchill laid plans to recapture the town itself. Initially he hoped that Whitworth might be able to land a party of sailors from the warships. Given the presence of two thousand elite Tyrolean mountain troops, augmented now by another two thousand crewmen from the abandoned and scuttled German destroyers, he decided to dispatch a regular landing force. Major General Piers Mackesy commanded the embarked troops, escorted by seven cruisers and five destroyers under Admiral William Boyle (who bore the Irish title of Lord Cork and Orrery and who was known simply as “Lord Cork”). In contrast to the carefully planned German invasion, this expedition was what the British called a “lash-up”—that is, quickly thrown together using whatever resources were close to hand. The troops consisted of a Scots Guards Brigade, units of Irish Borderers and Welshmen, French Foreign Legion troops, and two battalions of expatriate Poles. Moreover, their equipment and supplies were thrown aboard the transport ships as it arrived on the docks rather than being “combat loaded” so that the material needed first was loaded last. Few even knew which ships held what equipment. Even more remarkably, there was no joint commander. Mackesy and Cork were supposed to cooperate even though they never met face-to-face before sailing.²³

Almost at once, the cabinet began to have second thoughts about the expedition. The foreign minister, Lord Halifax, argued that a successful defense of Trondheim would have greater political impact, and insisted that it should be the focus of British efforts. In a swift turnabout, Churchill supported him, and elements of the Narvik invasion force were diverted en route to sites above Trondheim (at Namsos) and below it (at Åndalsnes) with an eye to launching a pincer movement against the city. The troops were successfully landed, but they encountered deep snow and difficult terrain, and they were bombed almost daily by the Luftwaffe, so they made little progress. To support them, Churchill urged Forbes to launch a naval assault on Trondheim itself with his remaining battleship, an effort he code-named, rather optimistically, Operation Hammer. Forbes resisted, largely because of the absence of air cover. Indeed, Forbes dared to lecture the First Lord

on the subject, suggesting that “to carry out an opposed landing...under continued air attack, was hardly feasible.” Grudgingly, Churchill backed down, though he would remember Forbes’s defiance.²⁴

Meanwhile, Mackesy, with the rest of the Narvik invasion force, landed at Harstad, near Narvik, on April 15. There was more than a little confusion getting ashore, and the landings took longer than anticipated. In one case, it took five days to unload two ships, and meanwhile German aircraft continued their harassing attacks. The *Furious*, along with the newly arrived *Glorious*, flew two squadrons of British aircraft ashore, but they had little luck against the Luftwaffe, which claimed six British ships. Pressured by Churchill, Cork urged Mackesy to undertake a land assault, but Mackesy, whose troops were floundering in snow up to their waists, was not to be hurried, and instead began a slow encirclement of the city. As he had with Forbes, Churchill then pressed Cork to undertake a bombardment of the town with his big ships. Cork did so on April 24, though with little effect. By the end of the month the British, French, and Poles had thirty thousand men in the Narvik area, yet the Germans continued to hold the town.²⁵

EVEN AS THE ALLIED BUILDUP CONTINUED, unambiguous intelligence began to arrive in London that a far more serious buildup was taking place on the Continent, where German armored divisions were gathering along the border with France and Belgium. Though the land war in Europe had remained quiescent since the fall of Poland in September, it now appeared that the Germans were about to initiate a major offensive. That led Chamberlain and the rest of the cabinet, including Churchill, to wonder if the Royal Navy was not overextended in Norway. As early as April 24, the day that Cork’s naval forces bombarded Narvik, the cabinet secretly voted to terminate the Norway campaign. The government shared this decision with the French, though they did not tell the Norwegians.

In the first week of May, Chamberlain called for a vote of confidence from the House of Commons. Somewhat defensively, he asked members “not to form any hasty opinions on the result of the Norwegian campaign,” which by now had become an apparent quagmire. Chamberlain narrowly won the vote but, recognizing that a change in government might revitalize