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Robert J. Winklareth, *The Battle of the Denmark Strait: A Critical Analysis of the Bismarck's Singular Triumph*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2012. Pp. 336. ISBN 978-1-61200-123-4.

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The German battleship *Bismarck* is the most famous warship of the Second World War, despite its career of just nine days. Robert Winklareth, a mechanical engineer who has worked for the US Defense Department, joins a long parade of historians and veterans, both German and British, who have written about the events between the battleship's departure from German waters on 19 May 1941 and its sinking in the North Atlantic on the 27th. *The Battle of the Denmark Strait* is a frustrating book. It adds useful details to the story, but fails to broach some of the most interesting questions about the episode and much of the technical information it provides is simply not germane.

To begin with the positive, Winklareth presents a comprehensive account of the battle of the Denmark Strait. He first situates each of the four involved ships—besides the *Bismarck*, the German heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* and the battlecruiser HMS *Hood* and battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*—in their relative positions west of Iceland. He then explains, salvo by salvo, turn after turn, how the engagement transpired, often from moment to moment. Despite such impressive accuracy, a few details remain uncertain, chiefly because the *Hood* sank, leaving only three survivors, and the *Bismarck* itself went down with its senior officers and log books a week later. But, by using records from the *Prince of Wales* and *Prinz Eugen*, government documents, and later written accounts, Winklareth produces the most detailed chronology of this action that I have read.

Laid to rest here are some previous theories about the relative positions of the *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen*: the battleship, the author confirms, changed course to shield the cruiser from enemy attacks. Photographs appear to contradict this only because the negatives were reversed during printing. Winklareth gives unprecedentedly meticulous detail on the movements and equipment of the ships. But his treatment of the specific damage to the *Bismarck*, *Prince of Wales*, and *Hood* is, surprisingly, rather perfunctory.¹ It is odd that, in book on a battle where only about a dozen shells found their marks, the hits are not described in detail.

Besides the timing of events and the course changes of the ships, Winklareth is concerned with the all-important matter of fuel supplies, especially during the pursuit of the *Bismarck* by Royal Navy forces summoned from Great Britain, Gibraltar, and across the Atlantic. First, the *Bismarck* parted company with the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, which steamed out into the ocean, where it accomplished absolutely nothing as a raider. The battleship, leaking oil from a hit by the *Prince of Wales*, managed to cleverly elude British cruisers and head toward France for repairs. Fuel lost through a hole near the bow, along with that consumed by much high-speed steaming, caused the *Bismarck* to run short. At the same time, the converging armada of British vessels also had to be conscious of their fuel reserves.

This careful attention to logistics is a plus in the book, but, annoyingly, Winklareth too often interrupts his narrative to offer unnecessary information. For example, we are given needlessly thorough details about exact armaments of each new ship or aircraft that enters the stage, including those that never fired a shot. At an exciting juncture, as the *Bismarck* has detached its cruiser escort and is about to suffer its first air attack, we read that

The torpedo bombers arrived at the scene at around midnight and they immediately began their attack. When one Swordfish came down out of the clouds, however, the pilot observed a strange-looking ship ahead of him

1. Despite the work of William H. Garzke Jr. and Robert O. Dulin Jr., *Battleships: Allied Battleships in World War II and Battleships: Axis and Neutral Battleships in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1980, 1985).

and he withheld dropping his torpedo. It turned out to be the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Modoc*, which was on patrol in the area. The *Modoc* was a cutter of the Tampa class, 240 feet long, having a beam of 39 feet, and displacing 1,506 tons. She carried two 5-inch deck guns and had a maximum speed of 16 knots. The *Modoc* was built in 1922 by the Union Construction Company in Oakland, California, and served on the International Ice Patrol, established after the sinking of the *Titanic*, before being transferred to the U.S. Navy in November 1941. Since then it had been on the Greenland Patrol rescuing seamen from torpedoed merchant ships. (195)

The USS *Modoc* did not take part in the battle; it merely bumped into the area. Readers do not need to know its dimensions, or where it was built. The ship enters and exits the story during the pursuit phase of the action. The Swordfish from HMS *Victorious* did find the battleship and slightly damage it with one hit. Shortly afterward, the *Bismarck* evaded its British shadowers and turned toward the port of St. Nazaire, France. Then came the frantic search for the battleship, its rediscovery on 26 May, the fateful torpedo attack by Swordfish from HMS *Ark Royal*, and the final battle that sank the *Bismarck*. Winklareth covers each episode with greater detail than most other books on the subject. In one case, however, he waffles, as many other historians do: during the night before HMS *King George V* and HMS *Rodney* arrived to sink the German vessel, British destroyers attacked the *Bismarck* with torpedoes. Winklareth notes that they claimed hits, but concludes that none were in fact made. His description of the final battle is adequate, though fuller accounts are available.²

The Battle of the Denmark Strait is not solely or even mainly a study of the battle itself, which lasted less than twenty minutes; Winklareth devotes only about sixty of his 320 pages to it. What else does he include? He begins with a history of the German navy from 1888 to 1939, including the Battle of Jutland and the scuttling of the Kaiser's fleet at Scapa Flow. Interwar naval developments, including the building of the *Hood*, also figure in his account. After the *Bismarck* is sunk and action ends, the book tracks the later history of the other German and British ships until they were sunk or the war ended. It concludes with thirty-three pages of appendices, mostly on technical details, especially the German still and movie photography of the battle. Readers interested in these photos—used in many books—will be well served here, as will those who wish to learn about the exact timing of the salvos fired in the battle and the fuel problems all the ships faced.

On the other hand, Winklareth neglects questions that have received much attention from other writers: there is little on precisely where the fatal shell may have struck the *Hood*³ or the individual hits suffered by the German vessels or just how the *Bismarck* was destroyed by the hundreds of shells that struck it during the final battle. Finally, there is nothing on the enduring controversy over whether its crew scuttled the *Bismarck*. To be fair, anyone writing about the battle must decide whether to address such matters and Winklareth's excellent bibliography shows that he has read most of the huge literature on the subject.⁴

Within the limits of its selected emphases, this well researched book will help any reader interested in the Battle of the Denmark Strait and its cast of characters.

2. E.g., Ludovic Kennedy, *Pursuit: The Chase and Sinking of the Bismarck* (NY: Viking, 1974), and Burkard Baron von Müllenheim-Rechberg, *Battleship Bismarck: A Survivor's Story*, trans. J. Sweetman (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1980; rev. 1990).

3. Cf. William Jurens, "The Loss of HMS *Hood*: A Re-Examination," *Warship International* (1987.2) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1315.htm. See also "Modern Theories on the Sinking," in *Wikipedia*, s.v. "HMS *Hood* (51)" – www.miwsr.com/rd/1316.htm.

4. There are only a few outright mistakes: the German "pocket battleships" were not "armored cruisers"; the British fighter plane used by the carriers in these actions was the Fairey Fulmar; and, during what Winklareth calls HMS *Hood's* "illustrious career," the big battlecruiser only fired its guns in anger twice: in July 1940 to help destroy the French fleet anchored in Mers-el-Kébir and then in falling victim to the *Bismarck*. Both actions could be seen as tragedies.