

remembrance ni



In Arctic waters - 2

The loss of Glorious

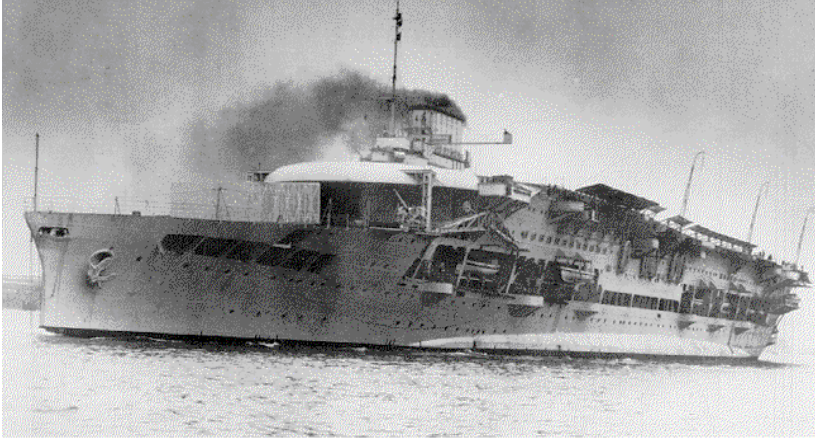
On the afternoon of Saturday 8th June, 1940, the aircraft carrier HMS Glorious and her escorting destroyers HMS Acasta and HMS Ardent were intercepted in the Norwegian Sea by the German battlecruisers Gneisenau

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Shortage of aircraft carriers

In view of the important role played by aircraft carriers in WW2 it is a deplorable fact that the Royal Navy at the outbreak of war found itself shorter of these ships than those of any other category. At the start it possessed five large carriers, HMS Ark Royal, Furious, Courageous, Glorious and Eagle. Only the first named was modern. Courageous was lost whilst on anti-submarine patrol in the Western Approaches a fortnight after the declaration of war. She had been escorted by two destroyers. Over 500 men



HMS Glorious

were lost. Many naval air specialists are of the view that this was a case of an expensive asset being thrown away through being assigned to a duty for which she was not suitable.

After this loss it might have been thought that the utmost care would be taken to provide adequate escort for any other large carrier likely to be exposed to unusual risk. Yet in June 1940 the Navy learned with surprise and dismay that HMS Glorious, sister ship, of the Courageous, had been intercepted by a superior enemy force while returning from Norway practically unescorted. The lack of a German reaction to British operations in the Norwegian Sea lulled the Admiralty and the fleet into a dangerous sense of complacency. The carriers Ark Royal,

Furious, and Glorious had, in the weeks preceding the action, repeatedly made the 2000 mile return trip to the Narvik area with only a destroyer escort. This was Glorious' fifth trip. The Admiralty appears to have taken the safety of these valuable and vulnerable ships for granted.

The Admiralty did not pass on their knowledge of German movements to operational forces at sea. Bletchley Park had warned the Admiralty that analysis of wireless intercepts indicated that German heavy units had left the Baltic and might be moving north into the Norwegian Sea. The Admiralty did not pass this information on to the fleet or RAF Coastal Command. Receipt of this information might have led Vice Admiral Air to refuse Glorious' request to proceed independently.

Glorious did not exercise adequate measures to protect herself and her escort from unexpected attack. Glorious should have had at least one aircraft aloft during the day. This would have given the ship visibility of at least 40 miles, allowing her to avoid interception and warn the fleet by W/T long before the Germans could have threatened her. At the very least, Glorious should have been prepared to launch aircraft on short notice once German forces were detected.

Operation Alphabet - The evacuation of Narvik

In the first four weeks of the Norwegian campaign almost the whole of our naval strength in home waters was engaged in escorting and carrying troops to and from Norway. With such efficiency was this work done that not a single soldier out of the thousands transported lost his life as the result of submarine or surface ship attack, and very few from air attack at sea.

With the invasion of France on May 10, and the heavy demands of the Navy for help to that country, Belgium and the Netherlands, a sharp change came over the situation. With the evacuation of the British Army from Boulogne and Dunkirk, an exceptional strain was imposed on naval material, the majority of the available destroyers being either sunk or put out of action in these operations. Obviously, too, the threat of an enemy invasion attempt could not be ignored, imposing a further burden.

It was in these circumstances that plans had to be prepared for the evacuation of Northern Norway.

The evacuation of the Narvik area was mainly carried out in two groups; but owing to the



variety of vessels employed, it proved impossible to concentrate them all in a single body on either occasion, some ships having therefore to rely mainly on diversive routing for their security. Despite these difficulties, the whole military force of 24,000 arrived safely in Great Britain.

The aircraft carriers Ark Royal and Glorious had been sent to Narvik from Scapa on May 31, the

former to provide fighter protection during the evacuation and the latter to bring back from North Norway much-needed Gladiator and Hurricane aircraft of the RAF. There seems to have been a misplaced assumption that the Germans lacked enterprise, presumably because for some months previously carriers and other heavy ships had been crossing the North Sea independently without incident. For this reason the Glorious was not allowed to accompany the second large group of ships returning, as the Ark Royal did, but sailed independently. This unfortunate decision is understood to have been made on the grounds that otherwise Glorious would not have had enough fuel left to get home.

Thus at 0300 on June 8 the Glorious parted from Ark Royal, which wore the flag of the Admiral (Air), in a position 17 degrees N. by 14 degrees 10 minutes E. She was accompanied by the destroyers Acasta and Ardent as an anti-submarine escort. Unfortunately they were sent tight into the jaws of the enemy.

No reconnaissance aircraft up

An enemy squadron, comprising the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, ships of nearly 32,000 tons each, armed with nine 11-in. guns,

and the cruiser Admiral Hipper, of nearly 15,000 tons with eight 8-in. guns, had left Kiel on June 4 and passed Bergen at midnight on June 5-6. Their orders were to attack British convoys proceeding from the Narvik area. No suspicion of their presence seems to have been entertained by British Naval Intelligence; at any rate, neither the Flag Officer, Narvik, nor the C.-in-C., Home Fleet, was aware of it.

At 0800 hours on 08/06 the Admiral Hipper sank the tanker Oil Pioneer and rescued 11 survivors. A little later she did the same with the empty transport Orama and the trawler Juniper, picking up 112 from these ships. Hipper put into Trondheim.

Soon after 16.00 on the same day the Glorious sighted the two German battleships, the Admiral Hipper having put into Trondheim. No reconnaissance aircraft were up, nor had any been flown since parting from the Ark Royal, or the encounter might have been avoided. As it was, the Glorious did her best to escape to the southward under cover of a smoke-screen laid by the two destroyers. Though this caused the enemy to cease fire for a time, the forward upper hangar had already been hit, destroying the Hurricane aircraft and preventing any torpedoes being got out before the fire curtains were

lowered. About an hour after the enemy ships had first been sighted, a salvo hit the bridge of the Glorious, and further heavy hits were sustained about 15 minutes later. Soon after this the order was given to abandon ship, and she sank with a heavy list to starboard about 17.40. The carrier's armament of 4.7-in. guns was, of course, quite useless against two such powerful adversaries.

Both the destroyers were sunk, the Acasta about 17.28 and the Ardent at 18.08. They had duly fired torpedoes, one from the Ardent hitting the Scharnhorst abreast of her after 11-in. turret, inflicting severe damage. As the result of this, the Scharnhorst made for Trondheim under escort of her sister ship, their cruise being abandoned. They took with them an officer and four ratings from the Glorious and one man from the Ardent as prisoner of war.

The Royal Navy knew nothing of the sinking until it was announced on German radio.

No intelligible report of the action was received by any British ship, though at 1720 the cruiser Devonshire nearly 100 miles to the westward picked up the beginning of a wireless signal addressed to the Vice-Admiral (Air) from Glorious. It must have been made as the ship was being abandoned. Unfortunately, with the

exception of the Ark Royal, Southampton and Coventry, other ships in the North Sea were keeping wireless watch on a different wave frequency. This applied to the Valiant, which was then about 470 miles to the south-westward. On the morning of the following day that battleship made contact with the hospital ship Atlantis, which reported having seen a transport being attacked by the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, and the heavy cruiser Hipper.

This information was at once passed to the Commander-in-Chief at Scapa, who sailed with the Rodney, Renown and six destroyers to cover the convoys. First news of the end of the Glorious came from an enemy broadcast on June 9. Though diligent search was made for survivors, aircraft from the Ark Royal actually passed close over a number of men on rafts without seeing them. Owing to the heavy sea, which capsized the Acasta's boats, and the extreme cold, men soon perished, the total death roll in the three ships amounting to 94 officers and 1,380 ratings.

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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