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WHY WAS THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN CELEBRATED BUT THE BISMARCK ACTION IGNORED?

WARSHIPS IFR EDITOR IAIN BALLANTYNE PONDERES THE REASONS BEHIND A LACK OF NATIONAL EVENTS TO MARK THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BISMARCK ACTION. IT IS AN EPISODE THAT RESONATES STRONGLY IN THE PRESENT, ESPECIALLY IN LIGHT OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH LEADERS AFFIRMING THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE SO-CALLED 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP', WHICH MIGHT NEVER HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED, HAD THE ROYAL NAVY FAILED TO SINK BISMARCK.

It was just as crucial to the future of the United Kingdom as the heroic efforts of 3,000 young RAF aviators in the summer of 1940. However, there was - unlike previous milestone WW2 anniversaries - no major Ministry of Defence (MoD) or RN sponsored event upon which to hang what was surely the last opportunity to salute the surviving veterans. They are old and frail and soon none will be left. There were one or two small events - warship association reunions, memorial services and low-key mess dinners in the Navy itself - but in contrast to the huge attention lavished on the Battle of Britain spread across several months, there was nothing. That is, in my view, a sad indictment of modern Britain's

incredible lack of respect for sea warriors. A similar number of young sailors, marines and aviators were involved in the pursuit and destruction of the Bismarck between May 22 and May 27 1941, with more than 1,400 boys and men killed on the British side and 2,200 on the German. The 70th anniversary fell - as is pointed out in commentaries elsewhere in this magazine - simultaneously with the visit of President Barack Obama to the UK, during which he celebrated and reinforced with Prime Minister David Cameron the

much-vaunted 'Special Relationship'. Marking the Bismarck Action would have provided an ideal platform to cement that remarkable bond between two nations. As I point out in my recent book 'Killing the Bismarck', one of the vessels that played a leading role in stopping Bismarck from savaging British maritime trade, the new battleship HMS Prince of Wales, was in the summer of 1941, sent to America carrying Winston Churchill on a mission to establish the Special Relationship. The destruction of Bismarck came at a time when Britons arguably had their backs to the wall, with the Nazis triumphant on land and also causing havoc in the Battle of Crete - a fight that cost the Royal Navy 2,000 sailors

and marines due to a lack of RAF air cover or available carriers. This is also touched upon elsewhere in this magazine. Following on from the public relations victory of the Battle of Britain, the grim and brutal few days in May 1941 that saw the loss of battle-cruiser Hood in the Denmark Strait followed by the destruction of Bismarck, around 300 miles to the west of Brest, demonstrated to the Americans the British cause was worth backing. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, like Churchill a navalist who understood the importance of seapower, was mightily impressed with Prince of Wales when he visited her during talks to establish the Special Relationship via the Atlantic Charter. That agreement was also the foundation for the United Nations and its belief in freedom, democracy and security from genocide for the nations of the world. The UN has not always lived up to the lofty ideals established aboard HMS Prince of Wales, but today David Cameron is clearly determined to see it does happen in the Libyan campaign, which he has played a key role in instigating. This makes it all doubly strange that there was, in comparison to the Battle of Britain, and let's face it events to mark the Luftwaffe's blitz on UK cities, nothing much of note.

A claim made in my book that some sailors in Bismarck may have been trying to surrender did receive some coverage in UK national newspapers. As I make clear in the book, the British had no choice but to sink Bismarck - the fate of their nation was at stake. The desperate efforts of some Germans to give up were rather undermined by their shipmates elsewhere in Bismarck



The most recent Ark Royal returns in triumph to Portsmouth from her key role in the 2003 Iraq War. Photo: Jonathan Eastland/AJAX. Right: The WW2-era Ark launches Swordfish. Photo: US Naval Heritage and History Command.



DID CONTEMPORARY UK POLITICS PREVENT PRESIDENT OBAMA AND PRIME MINISTER CAMERON FROM SALUTING THE BRAVE MEN WHO LAID THE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE US-UK 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP'?

continuing to fire at the battleships Rodney and King George V, and cruisers Norfolk and Dorsetshire. It would have been impossible to take Bismarck's surrender and with U-boats possibly lurking below and the Luftwaffe expected to appear in strength overhead at any moment, potentially an act of suicide by the Home Fleet, which was already desperately low on fuel.

WHAT received no coverage as Obama and Cameron conducted their barbecue for veterans of today's wars in the Downing Street garden this May, was the strategic significance of the Bismarck Action in enabling the two leaders to make so much out of the defence alliance between two great nations. On the exact 70th anniversary of HMS Hood's loss in the Denmark Strait, one of our writers was flown out to the American aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush, to see how carriers remain the ultimate guarantors of peace and stability in the modern world.

Oddly, there was no coverage in the national media of this either, which could of course easily have been linked to two aircraft carriers named Ark Royal. One would be the WW2-era ship of the name whose valiant aviators in their Swordfish torpedo-bombers were launched against Bismarck not many miles south of where the US Navy's newest carrier exercised with what remains of the Royal Navy. The Ark and her Swordfish were the fruit of late investment in carriers and suitable aircraft by the UK government of the 1930s, after many years of dreadful defence cuts that sorely weakened the British fleet. The Swordfish stopped Bismarck in her tracks by destroying her steering on May 26. The Nazi battlewagon was sunk on May 27. It helped give Roosevelt the confidence to gradually bring the USA into the war on the UK's side (for the Americans were at war with Germany in the Atlantic months before Pearl Harbor). The other Ark Royal that would have been in the media's mind was the recently decommissioned vessel of the name, discarded by the Cameron government - surely much to the consternation of the UK's American allies - along with the Harriers that formed a formidable 21st Century carrier strike weapon.

As the Bush made a friendship visit to Portsmouth in the wake of President Obama's visit to London, the Prime Minister was giving his assent to deploying a carrier off Libya, but not a strike carrier. Instead the helicopter/assault carrier HMS Ocean was being ordered in close to the Libyan coast to launch Apache helicopters due to the failure of the land-based air campaign to bring about a decisive result on the ground. The fact that one of the new carriers being built with great reluctance by the Cameron government is to be named HMS Prince of Wales and shares a name with the ship on which Churchill and Roosevelt agreed the Atlantic Charter, is of course deeply embarrassing - an uncomfortable reminder that the USA has always seen the Special Relationship as founded on Anglo-US naval co-operation. It is not a popular message for a coalition government packed with former Army officers that also appears to be in thrall to the air power lobby. If your case for getting rid of today's Ark Royal and strike carrier capability is so weak that the commemoration of an event involving a past ship of the name 70 years ago exposes it, then you are a government in a deep crisis of denial, especially if enabling national media coverage of modern day American carriers also exposes the flaw in your decision-making. To a cynic it might appear that the lack of a proper salute to those few surviving veterans of the Bismarck Action - and a national tribute to those men and boys who sacrificed their lives so many years ago - was due to the soft power ideology of the current Con-Dem coalition, which can tolerate no contradiction of its recent, widely criticised, defence review. Major national coverage that points up the value of carrier air power - or indeed maintaining a strong Navy as a whole - either in 1941 or today will be, to borrow a Stalinist phrase, 'not convenient'. In the wake of the anniversary last month I was contacted by a member of the HMS Dorsetshire Association to ask what could be done to make it clear that Swordfish aviator John Moffat - one of the heroes who attacked the German battleship - is not the *only* surviving veteran of the Bismarck Action. Having recently



met some of these men, both from the Dorsetshire and the Cossack, I keenly feel their disappointment at being ignored by their nation. I can suggest no means of redressing the injury in the media, because the anniversary upon which a story could be hung has passed. However, it does strike me that Prime Minister David Cameron could invite some of these remarkable men to 10 Downing Street and thank them in person for all that they did for their country before they are gone. It's worth pointing out that some of the veterans who helped sink the Bismarck were later lucky to survive the loss of their own ships in action - including Prince of

Wales, Ark Royal, Cossack and Dorsetshire - against either the Germans or Japanese. Their familiarity with the cost of wars politicians start, but that young men and women have to fight and finish, is something that perhaps Mr Cameron can learn from? Or if the UK government cannot be bothered to right this wrong and salute the Bismarck Action veterans, perhaps the US Ambassador could step in to thank them for their part in paving the way for what is now described by President Obama as 'The Essential Relationship'?

• *'Killing the Bismarck'* is published by Pen & Sword Books, £25.00, hardback.

Pictured, from top to bottom: Churchill and Roosevelt aboard HMS Prince of Wales as they establish the Special Relationship in 1941; British and American sailors parade on the upper deck of HMS Prince of Wales (US Naval Heritage and History Command photos); surviving Bismarck Action veterans Ken Robinson (left) from HMS Cossack and George Bell (right) from HMS Dorsetshire (photos by Jonathan Eastland/AJAX and Iain Ballantyne).