

Why Hitler Never Built a Battleship Fleet



At first glance, the Battle of the Barents Sea seems insignificant, a minor World War II naval battle in which a couple of destroyers were sunk. Yet the New Year's Eve skirmish in frozen Arctic waters convinced Hitler that he should scrap *all* of his capital ships and had far-reaching consequences on the leadership of Nazi Germany. The reason why points to the dilemmas inherent to being an underdog in naval warfare.

During World War I, the Imperial German Navy had disposed of dozens of massive battleships, dreadnoughts and battlecruisers—but due to their numerical inferiority vis-à-vis the British Royal Navy, almost never committed them to battle, with the notable exception of the inconclusive clash at Jutland.

In 1939 Hitler conceived of an ambitious “Plan Z” to build a large fleet to rival the British Royal Navy—one that would reach full strength in 1945, the year World War II *ended*. Instead, the German Kriegsmarine entered the war with around sixteen modern cruisers and battleships and twenty destroyers. The successful invasion of Norway in February 1940 cost the German Navy two light cruisers and half its destroyers, as well as many ships damaged.

Two large surface combatants—the *Admiral Graf Spee* and *Bismarck*—embarked on hit-and-run commerce raids. Like swaggering villains in a Tarantino film, the powerful warships inspired terror and wreaked havoc, but attracted too much attention to themselves and [met violent, ignominious ends](#).

German submarines were cheaper to build and far more capable of evading detection and picking their battles than cruisers and battleships, and thus they reaped a steady and heavy toll on Allied

shipping, while German battleships and cruisers mostly remained sheltered at port. But the Royal Navy still kept it guard up in the event the warships *did* go on the attack.

On December 22, 1942, Allied convoy JW-51B left from port in Loch Ewe, Scotland, bound for the Soviet port of Murmansk. It consisted of fifteen transport ships carrying 202 tanks, 120 warplanes, twenty-four thousand tons of fuel and fifty-four thousand additional tons of supplies—all desperately needed by the Soviet Union as it prosecuted its epic encirclement of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The arctic convoys were a notoriously dangerous endeavor, however.

Earlier that summer, the convoy PQ-17 was ordered to scatter when Britain's First Sea Lord Alfred Pound grew convinced (incorrectly) that the battleship *Tirpitz* was on an intercept course. The lost and isolated freighters were picked off one by one by German submarines and aircraft.

The loss of twenty-four out of thirty-five transports was so catastrophic, the Soviets thought the Allies were lying about how many they had sent in the first place.

JW-51B was expected to be different, however. Sailing far to north in the dead of winter, the ships would be bathed in perpetual polar night, protecting them from air attack. A close escort of six destroyers commanded by Capt. Robert Sherbrooke onboard the *Onslow* would guard the transports from submarine attack, supplemented by a minesweeper, two corvettes and two trawlers. As JW-51B approached the Russian harbor of Murmansk, it would be joined by two Royal Navy light cruisers of Force R, HMS *Sheffield* and *Jamaica*, which had accompanied an earlier inbound convoy.

However, JW-51B did *not* experience smooth sailing. A week into the voyage, gale-force winds scattered many of the ships out of formation, some of them losing their way on the stormy seas and others falling behind. Snow squalls combined with the persistent nightfall in the Arctic caused visibility to drop sharply. Five transports, a trawler and the destroyer *Oribi* became completely separated from the convoy. The minesweeper *Bramble*, equipped with an effective radar, was detached to search for the stragglers and sheepdog them back into the fold. Even the cruisers in Force R couldn't find the convoy.

On December 30, the German submarine *U-354* spotted the Allied convoy, prompting the Kriesgmarine to prepare an ambush named Operation Regenbogen ("Rainbow"). This time, the Germans *would* dispatch capital ships from Norway to attack the convoy: the cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and the pocket battleship *Lützow* with its eleven-inch guns, escorted by six destroyers. Grand Admiral Raeder planned a cunning trap: the *Hipper* and *Lützow* would split up in the pincer, with the former intercepting the convoy from the north. This would draw away its escorts, and cause the transports to flee southward—straight in the waiting guns of the *Lützow*.

However, Hitler—an infamous micromanager—could not resist personally [conveying orders](#) to the squadron's commander, Vice Admiral Oskar Kummetz, that he should not put his valuable ships at risk. "Procedure on meeting the enemy: avoid a superior force, otherwise destroy

according to tactical situation.” The German squadron promptly set sail from Altenfjord, Norway, and intercepted the Allied ships convoy roughly 120 miles north of Kirkenes, Norway.

Due to persistent snowfall, when the crew of the corvette *Hyderabad* spotted two ships in the distance at 8:30 a.m. on New Year’s Eve, they were unable to identify them—and assumed they were a friendly Russian ships coming to escort them. A half hour later, the destroyer *Obdurate* peeled off to determine the identity of the newcomers, signaling a challenge with its lamp—and received the flash of gunfire amidst the squalling snow in reply.

Captain Sherbrooke ordered the *Aichen*, an older A-class destroyer, to lay a smoke screen in a line to conceal the transports as they made their escape. Meanwhile, the four remaining O-class destroyers returned fire with their radar-targeted 4.7-inch guns and positioned themselves as if preparing for a torpedo run. The 1,500-ton destroyers were vastly outgunned by the sixteenth-thousand-ton *Hipper* and its four eight-inch twin-gun turrets. However, the British ships *did* have torpedoes; though notoriously difficult to deliver on target, it was not unheard of for just one or two to sink even large capital ships.

This time, the British destroyers didn’t actually *launch* their torpedoes, as they were likely to miss at a distance and, once expended, would leave the *Hipper* free to wade in and finish them off at close range. Instead, they made mock torpedo runs in attempt to persuade the *Hipper*’s captain to keep his distance.

The ploy worked—Kummetz, fearing torpedo attacks, backed away repeatedly from the destroyers. The low visibility reduced the effectiveness of the *Hipper*’s guns, but it was able to concentrate on a clear target: the *Achates* and its stacks boiling with smoke. The destroyer was struck several times and was ordered to disengage as it began to take on water. Shortly afterwards, a shell struck the *Achates*’s bridge, killing its captain and all but two of the command crew. 1st Lt. Loftus Peyton-Jones scrambled up to take control of the shattered vessel, and decided to disregard orders and continue laying the smoke screen to protect the transports even as the stricken ship listed further into the water, until it capsized at 1:15. The trawler *Sea Gem* rushed to the doomed ship, and managed to rescue eighty-one of the crew in a frantic rescue operation [remembered by its coxswain](#).

The remaining destroyers kept trading shots with the *Hipper* until four shells battered the flagship *Onslow*, killing forty-seven of the crew. Shrapnel raked the bridge, bursting Captain Sherbrooke’s eyeball from its socket. The steadfast Brit continued to issue orders to his fleet until the captain of the *Obdurate* assumed command of the destroyer squadron and the *Onslow* managed to disengage.

Meanwhile, the minesweeper *Bramble*, still searching for convoy stragglers, bumped into the *Hipper* at 10:40. The little ship, confronted with a German cruiser twenty-five times its weight, tersely reported the cruiser’s location and loosed a single volleys from its four-inch deck guns before the *Hipper* and the destroyer *Friedrich Eckoldt* annihilated it in six minutes of cannon fire, leaving no survivors.

So far, however, none of the transports had been hit—and the flashes of gunfire had attracted the attention of Force R, which sailed towards the fray at maximum speed. The British light cruisers did not have heavy guns, because they had been designed in compliance with the Washington Naval Treaty; instead, they made do with *triple* six-inch guns on each of their four main gun turrets. Three shells struck the *Hipper* in rapid succession. With two cruisers bearing on him from the north and destroyers closing on him from the south, Kummetz concluded this was exactly the kind of risky situation the führer had ordered him to avoid. He laid his own smoke screen and disengaged.

In the prevailing low visibility, however, the German destroyers *Richard Beitzen* and *Eckoldt* mistook the British cruisers for the German ones, and fell into formation beside them. The gunners on the *Jamaica* and *Sheffield* did not make the same mistake. A broadside of six-inch gunfire broke the *Eckoldt* in two in just two minutes, causing it to sink with all hands, while the *Beitzen* beat a hasty escape.

Nonetheless, the German plan actually worked in one respect—the transports had fled south towards *Lutzow*. The pocket battleship unloaded 161 shells at the Allied ships at ranges of three to seven miles, without scoring a single direct hit, due to the snow and drifting smoke screens. When the *Lutzow*'s Captain Stänge saw the British cruisers approaching, he too decided to withdraw, despite outgunning them with his eleven-inch guns.

In the end, all fourteen transports in convoy JW-51B made it to Russia with their valuable cargoes. News of the defeat was slow to reach Hitler because of a miscommunication: a message that “the sky was on fire”—a reference to the Aurora Borealis—was interpreted by Raeder as news that the *convoy* was on fire. Hitler announced the total destruction of the British convoy on his New Year's Day radio address, and only learned the truth the following morning from the BBC. Enraged, he summoned Admiral Raeder for a meeting at his “Wolf's Lair” redoubt.

There, Raeder was treated to an hour-and-a-half-long rant about the worthlessness of the German Navy, which would have put the [famously memed scene in the movie *Downfall*](#) to shame. German sailors were cowardly, incompetent and disloyal, Hitler raged—only the submarine branch had achieved anything of worth in either World War. Hitler's own role in encouraging the German captains to withdraw in if they encountered significant opposition was overlooked. Fuming, he ordered Raeder to scrap *all* of the Kriesmarine's thirteen capital ships for the metal, their guns repurposed to serve as coast artillery.

Admiral Raeder, who had been building up the Kriegsmarine for more than a *decade*, tendered his resignation rather than follow the order. Appointed in his place was Adm. Karl Dönitz, a submariner who had long criticized the resources expended on the surface fleet. However, even Dönitz insisted that it would be foolish to scrap vessels for minimal economic benefit. The warships could prove useful even if they never left their ports.

Dönitz was right—the mere *possibility* of a German battleship sortie forced the Royal Navy to devote disproportionately large forces in reserve just to protect against the threat. This is a strategy known as having a “fleet in being.” Even if the Germans couldn’t use their surface fleet, they could tie down British forces and constrict their strategy with the threat that they *might* use theirs if the British let down their guard.

Hitler’s orders nonetheless had consequences. Nazi Germany did not commission a single additional capital ship for the remainder of World War II, and a refit of the battleship *Gneisenau* was abandoned halfway through. Many sailors were reassigned to serve in naval infantry divisions. The Kriegsmarine attempted only one more capital ship sortie, which ended with the sinking of the battleship *Scharnhorst*.

Dönitz would ultimately assume leadership of what little remained of the Third Reich after Hitler’s suicide, and saw to its surrender to the Allied powers. Raeder, his former superior, never forgave Dönitz for taking his place, and even testified against him at the Nuremberg tribunal. As for Sherbrooke, the wounded captain of the *Onslow*, he received the Victoria Cross for his bravery, rose to the rank of rear admiral, and was later appointed high sheriff of Nottinghamshire.

The fog of war—and snow squalls and smoke!—spoiled what otherwise was a well-conceived ambush by the German cruisers. The skill and gallantry of the outgunned British destroyer crews, and risk aversion of the German captains, also played their part. Due to Hitler’s vindictive and wrathful nature, he was unable to recognize his own responsibility in a minor military setback, and instead lashed out at his men for following his orders all too well.

[Source: The National Interest | Sebastien Roblin | April 26, 2018 ++]