

Lt. P.V.Bouquet – Royal Navy

Peter Vivian Bouquet was born in 1917, the son of Bernard and Edith Bouquet (nee Colam) of Pound House on the Westcott Road. He entered the Navy through the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth and passed out as a Midshipman (Engineer) in 1935. While at Dartmouth he won The Harold Tennyson Memorial Prize for English Literature. He was promoted Sub-Lt (E) on 1st May 1938 when serving on HMS *Dorsetshire*.

In May 1941 Peter Bouquet was an Engineer Lieutenant on *Dorsetshire* escorting a convoy when she was ordered to join other ships pursuing the German battleship *Bismarck* after it had sunk HMS *Hood*. After a lengthy action the German ship was caught, hit repeatedly and reduced to a blazing wreck. *Dorsetshire* was ordered to sink her with torpedoes. Writing to his parents Peter Bouquet vividly described what followed:

'The loss of the Hood came as a shock to us. At that time we were a long way off and little thought we should see anything of the action. It wasn't until many hours later that we knew we had a chance of getting in. We arrived just as the firing started. It was grey and very misty, with a high wind so that much spray was driving over the ship. Very soon we started firing and when later on I came up on deck I could just see the ship (the Bismarck) out on the horizon, already there was some smoke streaming out and, as I watched, vast columns of water towered around her as a salvo of shells fell close, almost hiding her from sight. When next I had a glimpse she was much closer and we were about to fire torpedoes. A great pall of smoke hung overhead and you could see flames inside her hull – there was a burst of water as our torpedoes hit and shortly she turned right over and then sank. We steamed for the spot and suddenly there were hundreds of her men swimming around in patches of oil. It was too rough to lower boats but with lines and ropes over the side we did our best; but it was a hard job as they were mostly helpless with cold or exhaustion and when we got them inboard they could only be laid under blankets while we helped others. Then came a report of bombing a short way off and so we had to leave the rest and make off at high speed – we had no other choice though it was beastly to think of the poor fellows left behind. We got 84 altogether – mostly young and subdued – only too thankful to be still alive – it took some time to bring them all round but we managed it in the end.'

In early April 1942 *Dorsetshire* and her sister ship *Cornwall* escorted the aircraft carrier *Hermes* to Trincomalee in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) for repairs. While in harbour they were warned of an approaching Japanese carrier force. They sailed to meet the enemy but it was a one-sided contest.

On 5th April 1942 the two British cruisers were attacked by a force of over 50 dive bombers and sank within half an hour. One of *Dorsetshire's* company later recalled what happened:

'About mid-morning we learned a Jap scout plane had been sighted. About 1 pm we heard that more enemy planes were near. At 1.40 pm we heard the muffled roll of pom-pom guns and other AA fire. Gunfire ceased, then started again in slow bursts. The lamp bulbs flickered off and on, and then dimmed. When we were hit the explosions felt as if some giant hand had seized the ship and shaken her bodily. In the pause that followed I felt the vibration of the engines falter and slow down. I learned later that Jap bombers from carriers had come at us in waves of seven, out of the sun. The guns had not much chance; they were just overwhelmed and we got two direct hits.

These waves of bombers were followed by fighters which dived, machine-gunning the decks and gun stations and shattering most of the lifeboats. A bomb came clean through the deck, passed through the dispensary and exploded in the marines' mess deck. The next moment I found myself on my back outside the sick bay door, where I had been flung by the blast. All the lights went out and the place was full of fumes, smoke and dust.

By now we could feel the ship listing heavily. The engines had stopped and the deck seemed to be falling away beneath our feet. Since the power system had gone off we could not get any orders through the loudspeakers. I heard some men calling "she's going." Quite unhurriedly the Surgeon-Commander gave orders to get the wounded up and clear the sick bay. We got them up.

The thing that struck me was the coolness of everyone. There we were, one side listing almost into the water, and you might have thought they were cheerfully waiting for shore leave. No panic, no pushing and shoving, less rush and excitement than at a normal 'action stations.' The order came to abandon ship and the men began throwing Carley floats, Denton rafts and any other floatable wreckage overboard. Except for two whalers and a skiff the boats were useless. We got the wounded into those. I saw Cmdr Byas on the upper deck calmly giving orders and getting the men away.

We got to rafts and wreckage, swimming away from the suction as the ship went down. She slid under easily. She was a grand ship with a great record.'

Over 1100 men from both ships survived in the water or on rafts before being rescued, but Peter Bouquet was not among them. He is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Memorial which records the names of 23,000 naval personnel of both World Wars who have no known grave.