

Able Seaman F.Wheeler – Royal Navy

Able Seaman Francis William Wheeler was born in Redhill in 1920, the son of William and Frances Helen Wheeler of Lowlands Farm, Newchapel, Lingfield. His mother died when he was only 9 years old; his father later re-married and had seven more children. The family later lived at Durrant's Farm, Westcott. Frank, as he was known, joined the boys' training ship *HMS Ganges* before entering the Navy, and it is believed he was a bugler while undergoing his training. He was lost on *HMS Hood* when it was sunk by the German battleship *Bismarck* on 24th May 1941.



The German Navy had for some time planned to have four major warships available to attack British convoys in the North Atlantic. By April 1941 the new battleship *Bismarck* was ready to sail from its base at Gdynia with the cruiser *Prinz Eugen* and link up with two other battleships, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* which were in port at Brest. This plan had to be aborted and Grand Admiral Raeder, the German Commander, decided that *Bismarck* and her escort would sail out alone.

The two ships left Gdynia on 19th May and on 22nd May RAF aircraft found them at Bergen. *Hood*, *Prince of Wales* and other units of the Home Fleet were ordered to sea to cover a German breakout. The German ships left Bergen late that day and in the evening of 23rd May were sighted by the cruiser *Suffolk* in the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland. The Admiralty picked up *Suffolk's* sighting report and ordered *Hood*, *Prince of Wales* and other units to close with the enemy ships.

At 0552 hours on 24th May the opposing forces exchanged fire at a range of 20 miles. *Hood* was hit by a shell from *Prinz Eugen* which started a large fire. This helped *Bismarck* get the range. Just as *Hood* fired again, she was hit by a salvo from *Bismarck* and a shell penetrated one of her magazines. A huge explosion from the after end of the ship split *Hood* in two and she sank immediately. There were just three survivors from a crew of 1,418.

Prince of Wales received several more hits and, with some gun turrets jammed, it broke off the action. *Bismarck* had been hit several times and

was losing oil as she made for Brest. Contact was lost, but she was picked up again, attacked by Swordfish aircraft from the carrier *Victorious* and hit by a torpedo which reduced her speed. The Home Fleet units were running short on fuel, but another group from Gibraltar, including the battleships *King George V* and *Rodney*, and the carrier *Ark Royal*, were approaching from the south.

On the morning of 26th May *Bismarck* was spotted by an aircraft of RAF Coastal Command and by noon was within range of Swordfish aircraft from *Ark Royal*. Despite heavy seas three attacks were launched through the day. The last was launched at 1910 hrs and was successful. A torpedo jammed her rudder so it was impossible to steer. British destroyers harried her through the night and at 0847 hrs the following morning *Rodney*, *King George V* and others surrounded the stricken ship and opened fire. *Bismarck* was soon a blazing wreck; the cruiser *Dorsetshire* sank her with torpedoes and was able to pick up just 85 members of her crew.

Francis is remembered on the Portsmouth Naval Memorial which records the names of 24,600 seamen who were lost in both world wars and have no known grave. Francis was the brother of Stoker James Wheeler who is also remembered on this memorial. Our memorial also bears the name of Lt Peter Bouquet who was serving on *Dorsetshire* and who died in a later action.

