

## A Review Essay: An Atlantic Chase to a Struggle in the Arctic

By Mark R. Condono\*

William Shirer, *The Sinking of the Bismarck: The Deadly Hunt* (New York: Sterling, 2006)

Theodore Taylor, *Battle in the Arctic Seas* (New York: Sterling, 2007)

From an ardent pursuit in the Atlantic to a fatal arctic seas battle, two notable episodes of the Second World War are again brought to light by two prominent authors of military and naval history.

Leading the duo is the momentous seek and destroy encounter between the ships of the British Royal Navy against the pride of the German Fleet, the 42800 ton Battleship *Bismarck*. Authored by reporter-historian William Shirer (*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, The Collapse of the Third Republic*), this updated edition which was first published in 1962 captures in full this significant Battle of Denmark Strait and the sinking of the *Bismarck*.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, commencing with the sortie of the German battleship from its anchorage, its subsequent tracking by reconnaissance aircraft and two Royal Navy's cruisers namely HMS *Norfolk* (C78) and HMS *Suffolk* (C55) with the former making the first contact. It then takes readers through the gun battle between the *Bismarck* and the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* (53) and the flagship of the Royal Navy HMS *Hood* (51) with the disastrous result that ended in the destruction and sinking of the British battle-cruiser with a heavy loss of life. After the debacle the *Bismarck* would again escape the shadowing allied force. The succeeding section of the book covers the search for the warship and the mistaken attack by Swordfish biplanes on the cruiser HMS *Sheffield* (C24). The author then narrates the plans made on both sides as they reassessed the situation.

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The penultimate chapters chronicle the opening of a persistent British attack as more forces were rallied against the German capital ship on all fronts. These included the aerial torpedo strike and a torpedo attack by British destroyers that sealed the fate of the battleship.

The sinking of *Bismarck* had been a primary allied objective as it would be a tremendous threat to Allied convoys and merchant shipping travelling to the British Isles. The leadership, bravery and patriotism exhibited by both sides are developed, as well as the importance of intelligence and decision making in the battle.

From the Atlantic, readers are taken up north as we board the Steam Ship *Troubadour* on its voyage to Russia as part of Convoy PQ 17. The ordeal of the convoy is well told in a number of books. In *Battle in the Arctic Seas*, award winning author and convoy veteran Theodore Taylor (*The Cay*) captures the gauntlet in the *Troubadour's* view. The book details the wartime experience and accounts of US Naval Reserve Ensign Howard Carraway, commanding officer of an armed guard crew aboard the merchant ship.

The book is composed of eighteen chapters. The first six segments take us to the formation of the convoy in Iceland, stepping aboard the *Troubadour*. Then there is a brief look in the battleship *Tirpitz*, whose mission is the destruction of the convoy. The reader then visits the super secret Citadel where vital intelligence notes are sorted out and passed on to the fleet. A few pages further, the ships haul anchor to take a hundred thousand tons of urgently needed military equipment ranging from tanks to fighter aircraft to the Soviet forces fighting German army.

The sections that followed chronicle the conference on board the convoy's flagship, the threat of icebergs, and an air and u-boat attack on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1942. The movement of the *Tirpitz* and its escorts and the sighting of Admiral Louis Hamilton's force by German aircraft raise strategic questions on both sides as to the outcome of their movements. The remaining chapters cover events such as the recall order for the escorting force, the scattering of the convoy, the continuous voyage of the *Troubadour*, and finally the story of the remaining ships of PQ 17 under an ASW escort trawler and their arrival in the port of Archangel, Russia. Afterwards, the Allied headquarters involved in the debacle discussed the lessons learned.

Leadership, determination, innovativeness and ingenuity are well laid out in the book. Vignettes of information on the overall view of the conflict are well embedded on various pages.

The two books are exquisitely written and well researched. *The Sinking of the Bismarck* is well illustrated with 14 photographs and 5 maps. Notes on sources and an index supplement the book. On the other hand, *Battle in the Arctic Seas* comes with a map, a photograph, a layout plan of a merchant ship, composition of the convoy and escorting force, an author's note and a bibliography. A photograph of the *Troubadour*, Ensign Carraway and his crew, key officers of the convoy, and of the Royal and German Navies would be of significant value should an updated edition be planned.

Both books are a paramount addition in the literature of World War Two naval history specifically and of Military History in general. The books will be a valuable gift for the younger generation and for veterans. The books are highly recommended.