



HUNTING

THE

TROP



CHURCHILL CHRISTENED IT 'THE BEAST' AND DEMANDED IT BE DESTROYED, YET TIRPITZ REMAINED A SOLITARY AND MALEVOLENT PRESENCE IN 1944 NORWAY

WORDS LARRY PATERSON

Tirpitz was launched on 1 April 1939, the second of two Bismarck-class battleships for the Kriegsmarine. By the time of its commissioning in February 1941, its sister-ship Bismarck was only three months from being hunted to extinction within the North Atlantic. Tirpitz, though built to the same dimensional specifications, bested its sister in size; displacing 51,800 long tons at full load due to modifications made after construction – notable were increased flak weaponry and torpedo tube installations. The largest battleship ever constructed by a European nation, Tirpitz had served briefly as flagship to a Baltic Fleet assembled to support Operation Barbarossa before despatch to Norway in November 1941. From there it could operate against Allied convoy traffic bound for the Soviet Union and serve as a 'fleet in being' requiring a countering commitment of Royal Navy units that could have been utilised elsewhere. Furthermore Hitler's paranoia of a potential Allied invasion of occupied Norway never abated, and he considered Tirpitz a major deterrent to any such attempt.

Tirpitz arrived in Trondheim during January, moving to Fættenfjord and mooring close to the fjord's cliffside in order to minimise danger from air attack. There she waited, camouflaged by netting and tree branches, protected by smoke screen generators, torpedo nets and extra anti-aircraft guns established ashore. However the battleship's activities were hindered by a perpetual shortage of fuel, several planned deployments cancelled or aborted. One such brief aborted foray against PQ12 in March used 8,230 metric tons of fuel oil, which took the Kriegsmarine three months to recoup.

Aware of its threatening presence, RAF Bomber Command made two attempts in March and April 1942 to attack Tirpitz, achieving no success for the loss of 12 aircraft. Meanwhile, after repeated successful Allied Arctic convoys, the Germans planned a show of Kriegsmarine force against PQ17, code-named Operation Rösselsprung and activated on 5 July. It was, however, short-lived. Tirpitz and cruisers Admiral Hipper and Admiral Scheer briefly sailed before being recalled, to avoid

becoming the target of British carrier aircraft. However the sheer threat of Tirpitz being at sea had caused the British Admiralty to scatter PQ17 – 21 of the convoy's 34 merchant ships were sunk by U-boats and aircraft.

Following Rösselsprung, Tirpitz underwent major overhaul in Trondheim, forbidden by Hitler to return to Germany for fear of interception at sea. However she was not safe in Norway either and the Royal Navy designed a daring operation to neutralise Tirpitz that took place during October 1942. Operation Title comprised two Chariot 'human torpedoes' transported to Norway by the trawler Arthur under the command of Leif Larsen, a Norwegian who had escaped to England in 1940.

Towed submerged beneath the trawler's keel for the last leg of the journey through Norwegian fjords, only 16 kilometres from Tirpitz's anchorage, the Chariots broke loose in bad weather and were lost, Arthur scuttled and its personnel escaped to neutral Sweden.

By 28 December Tirpitz's overhaul had been completed and the ship engaged in sea trials, an active threat once more. Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz had decided to form a powerful surface group comprising Tirpitz, battleship Scharnhorst and cruiser Lützow with attached destroyers, for Norwegian defence and the threatening of PQ convoys. Recurrent diesel problems had forced Lützow to return to Germany for repairs, leaving only Scharnhorst and Tirpitz as the only capital ships present in Norwegian waters from September onwards. On 8 September they took part in Operation Zitronella, the sole offensive action in which Tirpitz fired its guns at a surface target. Tirpitz, Scharnhorst and nine destroyers carried an infantry regiment in a raid on Spitsbergen, the battleships shelling targets ashore and covering the landing party that successfully destroyed Norwegian installations and took 31 prisoners.

On 22 September 1943 Tirpitz, lying in Kåfjord, was disabled by charges laid beneath the ship using newly developed British X-Craft midget submarines in Operation Source. Ten X-Craft were allocated to Source, eight of them successfully reaching Kåfjord under tow by submarines. Three of the midgets – X5, X6, and X7 – successfully breached the



Hitler at the launching of the battleship Tirpitz (also right) in Wilhelmshaven, 1 April 1939



German defences, the latter two laying their 4,400 lb detachable amatol charges beneath Tirpitz. Though five of the deployed X-Craft were destroyed, nine crew members killed, and six others taken prisoner, the attack was a success and Tirpitz suffered significant damage. Extensive repairs were required although Dönitz again firmly resisted any plans to return the ship to Germany; Danzig and Kiel shipyards were already at capacity and ports further west were too vulnerable. Tirpitz was ordered to repair in situ and, after exceptional efforts from technicians aboard the repair ship Neumark, she was returned to fighting strength by April 1944. While Tirpitz remained out of service, Scharnhorst was lost in the disastrous Battle of the North Cape on 26 December 1943. Tirpitz, once again, remained the solitary surface threat in the north of Norway.

During April, aware of Tirpitz's serviceability, the British tested the capabilities of the developing Fleet Air Arm by launching the

first of several carrier operations against the battleship in its Kåfjord anchorage. Operation Tungsten took place on 3 April and the attacking aircraft achieved complete surprise. Twenty-one Fairey Barracudas bombed with mixed-weight armour piercing, semi-armour piercing and anti-submarine bombs, the latter capable of causing concussion damage below the waterline. Two Fleet Carriers, HMS Furious and Victorious, despatched the Barracudas escorted by Wildcat and Hellcat fighters from four accompanying escort carriers.

A full-scale bombing and firing range had been constructed at Loch Eriboll, Scotland, for rehearsing the attack and the well-prepared strike went perfectly to plan, with no sign of covering Luftwaffe fighters. In total 14 direct hits were scored despite low cloud, a smoke screen and difficulties presented by the fjord's confined airspace. While Tirpitz's main armour was not penetrated, significant damage was caused with two 15cm gun turrets destroyed,

starboard turbine disabled, fires breaking out and fire-fighting efforts adding to 2,000 tons of water that flooded through the splinter damaged hull side. All four of the ship's Arado Ar 196A-5 reconnaissance aircraft were destroyed, killing one aircraft crew member while at least 121 of Tirpitz's crew were killed and around 300 others wounded. Four British aircraft were lost and nine men killed while Tirpitz was incapacitated for three months.

Dönitz again ordered repairs made, beginning in early May. Although the British had determined that the Fairey Barracuda lacked the bomb-carrying capacity to destroy Tirpitz, efforts to disable the ship continued, despite several planned strikes being cancelled due to poor weather conditions. By early June Tirpitz was again able to steam under its own power and further air strikes mounted by the Fleet Air Arm took place on 17 July (Mascot), 22, 24 and 29 August (the latter all encompassed in Operation Goodwood). Minor damage was

“WHILE TIRPITZ REMAINED OUT OF SERVICE, SCHARNHORST WAS LOST IN THE DISASTROUS BATTLE OF THE NORTH CAPE ON 26 DECEMBER 1943”



TIRPITZ'S FINAL HOURS

BOMBING RAIDS RARELY RAN AS CLOSE TO THE ORIGINAL PLAN AS OPERATION CATECHISM – THE THIRD TALLBOY RAID ON TIRPITZ BY 9 AND 617 SQUADRONS

2.59am:

- 617 Squadron Lancasters begin taking off from RAF Woodhall Spa, Lincolnshire, the last of the squadron's 18 bombers airborne within 26 minutes.

3.00am:

- Eleven miles to the north at RAF Bardney, the first of 13 9-Squadron Lancasters take off; seven planned aircraft are unable to participate due to severe icing overnight.

3.24am:

- A single 463 RAAF Squadron Film Unit Lancaster takes off from RAF Waddington, carrying no bomb load.

3.25am:

- All Lancasters proceed over the North Sea individually, crossing the Norwegian coast near Namos in a plotted gap in German radar coverage. All but two successfully rendezvous over Torneträsk lake, Sweden, 138 kilometres south of Tirpitz. Two late arrivals abort their missions and return to base. Wing Commander 'Willie' Tait signals by flare gun the remainder to head to target, increasing altitude to clear mountain tops. Photo aircraft drops to 2,000 feet once past Tromsø.

9.15am:

- Tirpitz requests JG 5 scramble fighters.

German battleship Tirpitz was one of two Bismarck-class ships – among the largest at sea at the time



9.18am:

Scramble order issued.

9.32am:

Due to delays caused by landing aircraft, Ehrler takes off in the first Fw 190, headed north from Bardufoss toward Tromsø but unsure of Tirpitz's exact location.

9.38am:

Tirpitz's main guns opened fire at approaching Lancasters.

9.41am:

Wing Commander Tait drops the first Tallboy that hits amidships to port. Within 11 minutes the bombing is over.

9.45am:

The final direct hit by the 9 Squadron aircraft piloted by Flying Officer Dougie Tweddle, acknowledged as the fatal blow.

9.50am:

'Caesar' turret magazine explodes.

9.52am:

Tirpitz capsizes as the photo Lancaster flies 50 feet above the wreck to film. One 9 Squadron Lancaster is hit by anti-aircraft fire and forced to belly land in Sweden, the remainder land that afternoon in the UK, with strong winds and fuel shortages forcing several to alternate airfields.

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inflicted by each attack, but German observer posts established in the outer fjord gave a minimum 14-minute warning of each attack, allowing watertight doors to be closed and prearranged 'box-fire' anti-aircraft barrages to be prepared. Thick smoke screens were generally well established by the time of the British arrival and both heavy anti-aircraft fire and low cloud ceiling reduced the effectiveness of each attack – several bombs that did strike the ship were also found to be duds.

Though Goodwood was unsuccessful, the Kriegsmarine acknowledged that the string of attacks had been mounted with great determination, dexterity, and skill. The Fleet Air Arm had also destroyed two of Tirpitz's replacement Arado floatplanes, strafed in Bukta harbour. In Berlin the threat posed to Tirpitz by enemy aircraft was now considered extreme and Luftflotte 5 was requested to urgently increase fighter coverage, but with aircraft desperately required elsewhere, the request was denied.

Meanwhile in Britain the task of destroying Tirpitz had been passed to Royal Air Force Bomber Command during August. The shortcomings of Barracuda – its slow speed and limited bomb load – was now plainly evident and initial plans were laid to utilise Mosquitos for a raid, though these came to nothing as the requisite aircraft were unavailable, fully committed to the Western Front. Instead Lancaster bombers of 9 and 617 Squadrons (both Bomber Command No. 5 Group) were earmarked for the operation; to be carried out using a combination of 12,000 lb Tallboy bombs and (initially) 'Johnny Walker' diving mines. Due to the sheer distance and heavy payloads involved, the 38 RAF bombers assigned were instructed to stage through Yagodnik airfield in the Soviet Union near Arkhangelsk, flying directly there from the United Kingdom from where accurate weather forecasts could be made before the actual raid.

Operation Paravane took place on 15 September. Group Captain Colin Campbell McMullen, commander of 9 Squadron's home airfield of RAF Bardney, was appointed overall leader of the detached Lancasters, while 617 Squadron's commanding officer, Wing Commander James Brian 'Willie' Tait, led the strike force. One 9 Squadron Lancaster was forced to abort its flight over the North Sea, another was damaged by anti-aircraft fire, and only 26 aircraft found Yagodnik in thick clouds as the remainder diverted to other airfields. Six aircraft were written off in accidents. Eventually 27 armed Lancasters and one from the Film Unit (463 Squadron) took off for Kåfjord, detected by German radar ten minutes before reaching Tirpitz. They approached at high altitude from the southeast, descending to 12,000 feet for the bomb run as the defensive smoke screen obscured most of the target below. Ferocious AA fire arced skywards, including shells fired from Tirpitz's main guns.

Leutnant Willibald Völsing remembered the attack, "We had devised 'zone shooting' for the defence and opened fire on this day with 38cm calibres at 25km. Through this, we disrupted the attack; the enemy had not expected bombardment at this distance. They scored a near hit, which damaged the forecastle

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Lancaster of Operation Paravane over the smoke shrouded target. The attack disabled Tirpitz and removed it as an ocean-going threat



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severely. From that point onwards, we could only operate at a speed of three knots – the Tirpitz could no longer be used as a battleship on the open sea. During this attack, a nine-metre-long dud dropped on the spit in front of where we were trying to anchor. At the sight of this six-ton bomb, we realised that a direct hit would mean the end for our ship.”

Out of the 21 Tallboys dropped only one caused any damage, although it was enough to bring about the end of Tirpitz as a maritime threat. The bomb hit the upper bow deck to starboard, passing out of the hull through the flare of the forecastle and detonating in the water below keel level. The blast destroyed a significant portion of the forecastle, flooding the ship’s forepart. Though no significant damage had been caused to Tirpitz’s machinery, the structural damage could not be repaired without dry dock and thus Tirpitz could no longer take to the open sea.

The great ship was no longer a threat to Arctic convoys and had therefore ceased to be the Germans’ northern ‘fleet in being’.

On 30 October, the Kriegsmarine’s Operations Office (SKL, Seekriegleitung) recorded the total damage suffered by Tirpitz within its War Diary, the ship having taken on, “850m³ of water, both the steering compartments becoming waterlogged but

both under control... According to examination by divers the rudder and propellers have no damage, in manual operation the starboard rudder is difficult to move. The port rudder is jammed, the cause of trouble suspected to be at the steering gear. Probably one shaft support of port shaft has been displaced.

“At any rate, mobility of the ship is very questionable. One must wait to see how far the damage can be repaired. Considering the method of air attack battleship Tirpitz reports that the approach was made in wide formation which under influence of heavy and medium heavy gunfire widened more and more.”

Dönitz realised that Tirpitz could no longer function as a naval threat but could instead be used as a floating battery, its fearsome main armament remaining potent. During September German forces had begun to withdraw from Finnmark following Finland’s armistice with the Soviet Union. Mounting a brutally effective ‘scorched earth’ retreat the Wehrmacht established a new defensive line at Lyngenfjord using the mountain range’s natural barrier east of Tromsø and constructing a line of fortified bunkers by use of Soviet POW forced labourers.

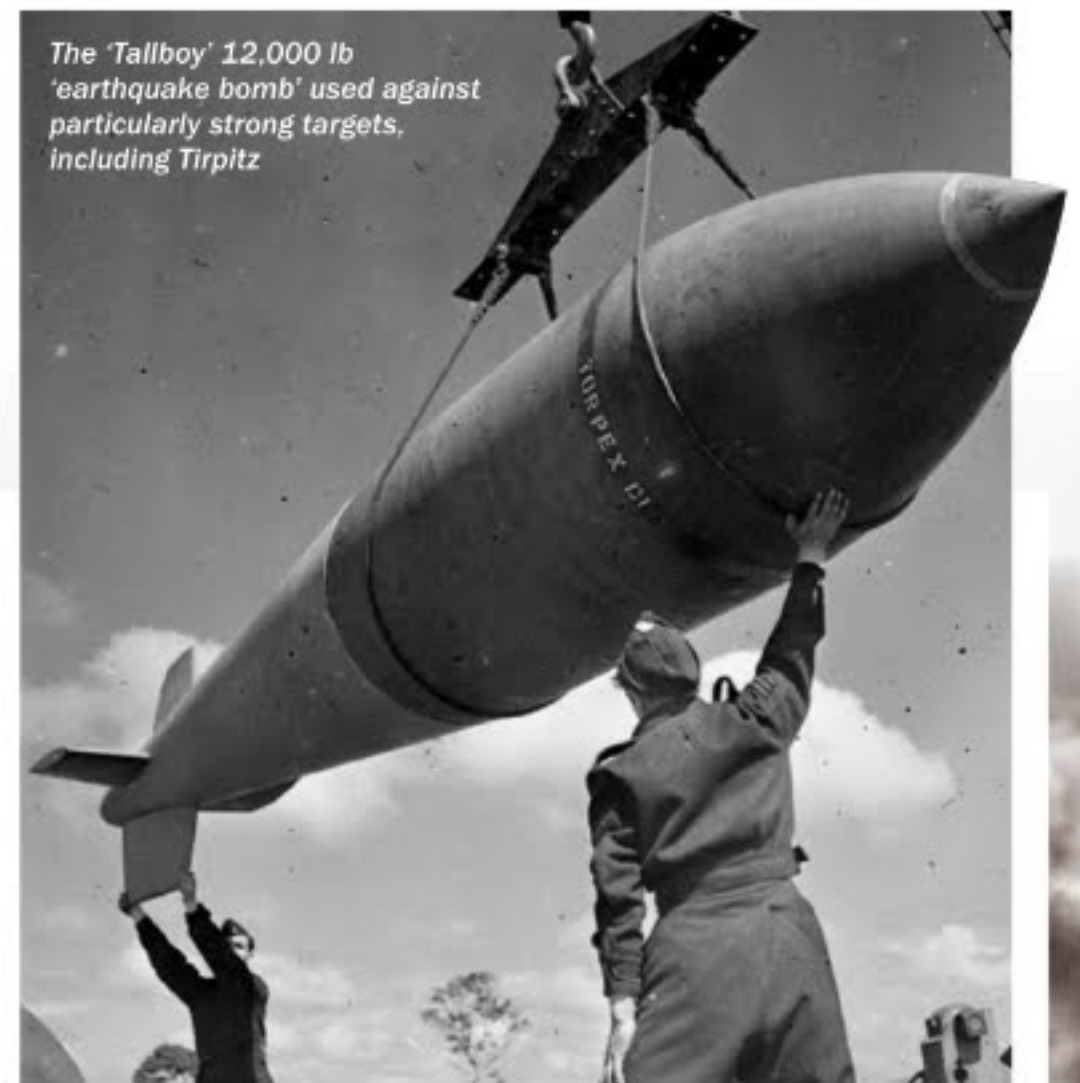
As Tirpitz lay too close to this new front line, during October a different anchorage was to be found, the Kriegsmarine reconnoitring four possible areas before choosing Sandnessundet

strait, next to the southern shore of Håkøya island. There it was felt that the full range of Tirpitz’s artillery could be utilised for bombardment in support of nearby ground forces manning the fresh defensive line. Furthermore additional anti-aircraft guns and smoke protection due for installation could benefit the nearby port of Tromsø, while still leaving enough distance between Tirpitz and the port. However, where natural fjord contours of previous anchorages had helped shelter Tirpitz from air attack, Håkøya and the nearby land masses were flat and offered little protection. More critically perhaps, original hopes that the seabed would be shallow and firm enough to support Tirpitz in the event it was ever attacked and flooded by hull damage – allowing the ship to ground on an even keel and remain stable – it was found that not only was the water too deep for this purpose, the seabed was composed of many feet of soft mud covered by a layer of sand.

Nevertheless the transfer of Tirpitz to Sandnessundet began at 11.00am on 15 October, under the codename Operation Comet after the damaged bow had been strengthened to a degree that would allow a maximum speed of eight knots. Luftflotte 5 aircraft reconnoitred the route to be taken and with 4th Destroyer Flotilla on alert in Tver Fjord south of Silda, the



The Fairey Barracuda; too slow and with too small a payload to effectively neutralise Tirpitz



The ‘Tallboy’ 12,000 lb ‘earthquake bomb’ used against particularly strong targets, including Tirpitz

Tirpitz fires its main 38cm guns. The potential threat of the ship tied down Royal Navy units needed elsewhere



A sailor aboard HMS Furious chalks a message on a bomb beneath an aircraft due to take part in the attack on Tirpitz

WHERE WAS THE LUFTWAFFE?

IN THE AFTERMATH OF TIRPITZ'S LOSS, GERMANY'S PILOTS WERE BLAMED FOR FAILING TO PROTECT THE BATTLESHIP – BUT WAS THIS ACCUSATION FAIR?

Major Heinrich Ehrler, commander of JG 5, was accused of dereliction of duty in protecting Tirpitz. He and Oberleutnant Franz Dörr (Gruppenkommandeur of III./JG 5) were subsequently charged and tried for cowardice before the enemy. Ehrler, furthermore, was accused of possessing 'abnormal ambition' – false allegations that he had abandoned his command to claim his 200th aerial victory rather than flying protection over Tirpitz. While Dörr was acquitted, Ehrler was found guilty, initially sentenced to death, commuted on appeal to three years Festungshaft (confinement in a fortress). He was also demoted, and an imminent award of Swords to his Knight's Cross cancelled.

Ehrler provided a Luftwaffe scapegoat. Starved of many resources, fighter strength in northern Norway was negligible and unwieldy communication between Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe due to petty jurisdictional squabbles complicated an already difficult situation.

Despite assurances to Tirpitz's officers that JG 5 was on hand for fighter cover, none of its pilots, even those with some combat experience, were familiar with their new Fw 190 fighters, and required training. Ehrler had at no point been fully briefed on Tirpitz's requirements or location, but nevertheless held his fighters at three-minute readiness in case of emergency.

As the raid occurred, communications from the scene were so sluggish that, though he



“UNWIELDY COMMUNICATION BETWEEN KRIEGSMARINE AND LUFTWAFFE DUE TO PETTY JURISDICTIONAL SQUABBLES COMPLICATED AN ALREADY DIFFICULT SITUATION”

was airborne as it happened, he was far from Sandnessundet, sighting the distant mushroom cloud of exploding Tallboys too late to intervene.

A further enquiry eventually exonerated Ehrler and on 1 March 1945, Hitler officially pardoned him, offering the chance to "rehabilitate himself" in combat. He was reassigned to a Messerschmitt Me 262 Geschwader (JG 7) and on 4 April 1945 claimed his last three victories shooting down two Allied bombers and destroying a third by ramming after exhausting his ammunition.

Heinrich Ehrler (centre) of JG 5 photographed in 1943 in Finland. He would become the Luftwaffe's scapegoat for the Tirpitz disaster





Tirpitz after receiving serious damage to its forecastle from Lancaster of Operation Paravane

battleship departed in company with heavy floating anti-aircraft artillery batteries *Nymphe* and *Thetis* and under strong escort. The anti-aircraft and smoke defences at *Kåfjord* were to be dismantled and rebuilt at the new anchorage, *Tirpitz* retaining all of its own anti-aircraft artillery aboard. "Thus", the SKL recorded, "the ship is not to be considered as a floating battery, but rather as a Monitor."

Tirpitz reached its new anchorage at 3.00pm on 16 October, whereupon approximately 600 men – the majority of them engine room personnel – were removed, leaving about 1,700 crew members still aboard. Torpedo nets were strung, the space required by them meaning that *Tirpitz* was forced to lay in slightly deeper water offshore of *Håkøya* island than originally planned. A dredger was swiftly despatched to provide material for deposit beneath the keel, but it would prove too little and too late.

Tirpitz's new location was reported by Norwegian resistance, confirmed by RAF *Mosquito* reconnaissance and a second raid by 9 and 617 Squadron Lancasters was mounted on 29 October. Thirty-nine Tallboy-armed Lancasters from the two squadrons, again accompanied by a photo Lancaster of 463 Squadron, launched Operation *Obviate*, ironically foiled by cloud cover over *Tirpitz* whose smoke generators were not yet operational. Not a single bomb hit the concealed battleship, though a near miss off the port quarter damaged the port shaft and rudder and caused some flooding, injuring three men.

"THE NOISE WAS INDESCRIBABLE, AND IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL SHOTS FROM DIFFERENT CALIBRES. THE NOISE INCREASED EVEN MORE AS A GREAT SHAKING RAN THROUGH THE SHIP"

On *Tirpitz* the generally low state of morale raised somewhat as the crew believed their own anti-aircraft fire had prevented British success. Though no Luftwaffe fighters had been present at the time, news also soon reached *Tirpitz* of the arrival of Focke Wulf Fw 190 fighters of Jagdgeschwader 5 moving to *Bardufoss*, under the command of Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves holder Major Heinrich Ehrler. However, unbeknownst to the battleship officers and crew, JG 5 had been evacuated from *Kirkenes* during the retreat from *Finnmark* and was composed of largely inexperienced pilots, unfamiliar with the Focke Wulf.

The Geschwader was in a state of disarray and Ehrler himself had not even been fully briefed on *Tirpitz*'s location, nor his apparently key role in its protection.

In Britain news that *Tirpitz* had only been slightly damaged was soon received and determination to launch an identical raid as soon as possible led to Operation *Catechism* mounted by the same two Lancaster squadrons equipped again with Tallboys. Thirty-two Lancasters took off from *Lincolnshire* in early morning darkness

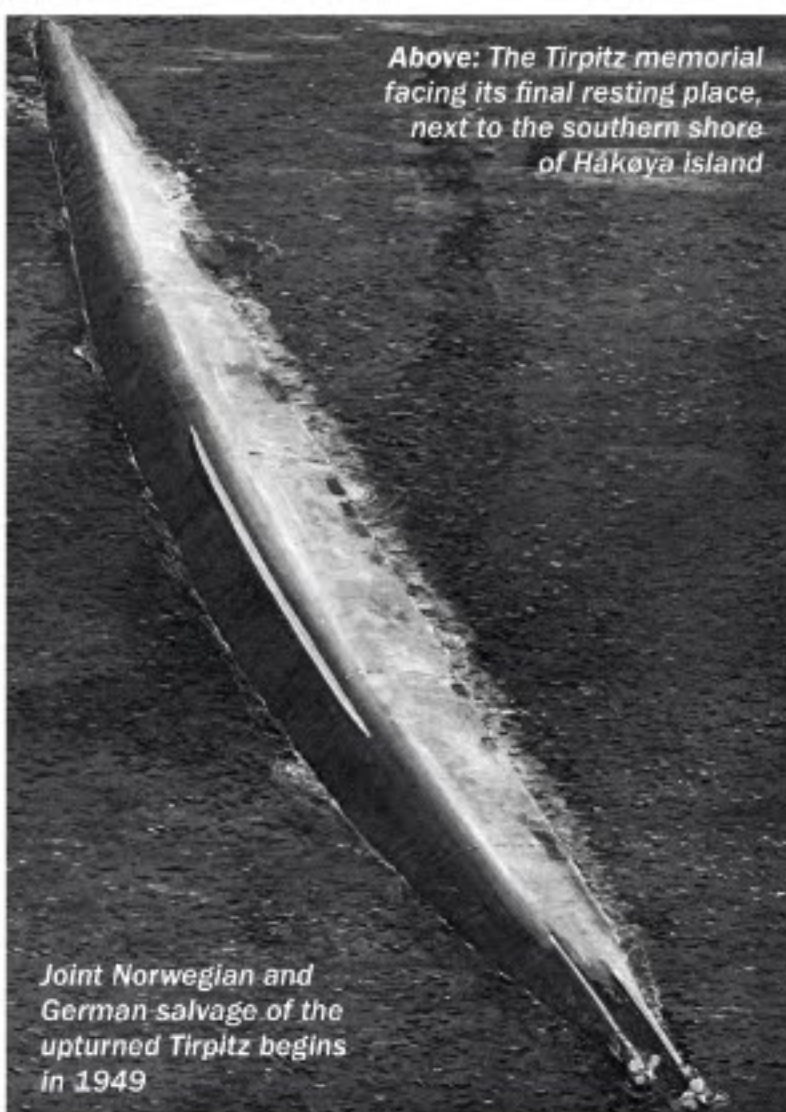
of 12 November 1944 and arrived over *Tirpitz* at 9.41am when the first bombs were dropped. Though heavy anti-aircraft fire greeted the bombers as *Tirpitz* had received ample warning of their approach, there were still no functioning smoke screen generators and visibility was perfect. Eight minutes later, the last bomb had fallen – two direct hits impacting the ship and one landing alongside. Gunner Klaus Rohwedder was beneath the bombs, "The aeroplanes flew in close formation from starboard. We expected the arctic sea fighters from *Bardufoss* to take action against the Lancaster bombers, but nothing happened, even though their take-off had been announced through the ship's loudspeakers. There was fear in everyone's eyes as we sensed that this might be our last day.

"After the heavy artillery had opened fire and the first volley had detonated beneath the enemy formation, the formation drifted apart, though keeping their attack course.

"We received permission to fire as the formation came closer and the anxiety I had experienced disappeared. I caught a glimpse of a large bomb being released from the lower



Above: The Tirpitz memorial facing its final resting place, next to the southern shore of Håkøya Island



Joint Norwegian and German salvage of the upturned Tirpitz begins in 1949



Wing Commander James Brian 'Willie' Tait of RAF 617 Squadron gives his account of the sinking of Tirpitz in a press conference

body of an aircraft, following the path of the aircraft for a short while and then disappearing from view. It then reappeared as a shadow, quite a distance from the ship, dived into the sea with a splash and sent an enormous wall of water skywards. I could not see the effect of our defensive fire. The light anti-aircraft guns were now also firing at the enemy formation, although it was beyond their reach.

"The noise was indescribable, and it was impossible to distinguish between individual shots from different calibres. The noise increased even more as a great shaking ran through the ship. This was the first strike on port side. Large amounts of water came down on us. The second strike I did not even notice as the ship immediately tilted to port side.

"The ammunition men also could no longer reach the gun. In the meantime, the heeling had become so strong that I could not load the pipe anymore. The ammunition fell out of the standby locker and tumbled over the aeroplane deck into the water. By this time, we were no longer able to stand upright on deck and had to hold on to the rail. The gunfire died away and, only occasional shots were still being fired."

One Tallboy landed to the port of 'Bruno' turret and did not explode, the second – dropped by Tait's aircraft – striking amidships to port and detonating over the boiler room causing severe damage and extensive flooding which produced a strong list. A third may have hit the armoured deck near 'Caesar' turret, possibly detonating a magazine as the entire

huge armoured structure was blown clear of the ship onto men already overboard and struggling in the water. The remainder were near misses, almost all to port of the ship, blowing away the dredged material that had been placed below the keel. Tirpitz's captain, 39-year-old Kapitän zur See Robert Weber, ordered the lower ship evacuated as the list to port reached nearly 40 degrees. Five minutes later, at 9.50am, as the list worsened, he ordered the ship abandoned, Tirpitz finally rolling over and capsizing within the next two minutes.

Petty Officer Ernst Renner was in the ammunition room of a 15cm turret, "A giant column of water pushed into the tower and the man in front of me fell right into this surge. He was carried away by the water, washed into the tower and did not make another sound. He died instantly. Horrified, I screamed to the others, 'Quick, quick, back to the ammunition room'. We climbed back as fast as we could – now upwards since the ship had turned by 180 degrees. The emergency lighting was still on – that was quite a feeling. We crouched in a room that was half filled with water. Then the light went out. Someone had a torch, so we were able to find our orientation in an emergency. We were afraid that the steam boilers in the nearby boiler room could explode. One comrade hugged me and said, 'Ernst, now we all have to die – now I will never see my mum again'. Above us there was an empty fuel cell. An oval manhole cover was located directly above us. We were now in an air bubble above the water level.

"Fortunately for us, the fuel cell was empty. With a lot of effort and an adjustable screw wrench, a so-called 'French', we managed to open the manhole cover. When all screws had finally been loosened, the cover fell with a terrible bang. Then a few comrades climbed into the cell and started knocking against the walls. After some time we heard knocking and steps from outside. When the knocking was directly above us, we were just about able to communicate with our saviours.

"They told us to remain calm and not to talk, so as to save air. Outside, our saviours were working feverishly. It took ages for the flame cutters to penetrate the steel wall."

Tirpitz was no more. Of the crew, 596 swam to shore or were picked up, while a further 87 were later cut free from the upturned hull. Emergency lighting within the capsized ship only lasted for six hours, any remaining time spent in darkness with rising cold water and dwindling oxygen. Such rescue efforts were suspended after 24 hours as available oxygen inside the hull was considered expended. The exact number of casualties remains unknown, estimates ranging between 940 and 1,204 men killed, including the captain. The following morning, British Air Vice Marshal R. A. Cochrane – head of Bomber Command No. 5 Group which had destroyed Tirpitz – announced to his staff that "the 'beast' had finally been slain after five years of tremendous efforts". The last German surface threat in Norway had been removed; Churchill's mortal menace removed.