

THE ARK IS FINALLY SUNK

The Sinking of HMS Ark Royal

MAIN PICTURE:

A view of the sinking HMS Ark Royal, with a heavy list to starboard, taken from the decks of HMS Hermione on 13 November 1941. (ALL IMAGES HISTORIC MILITARY PRESS UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE)

IT WAS with the Home Fleet that the 27,720-ton aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal first went into combat in the Second World War. Capable of carrying fifty aircraft, she was one of the German Navy's most formidable opponents, and one the *Kriegsmarine* sought to eliminate. On 14 September 1939, the Germans had their first shot at sinking the carrier after Ark Royal had responded to a distress call from the SS *Fanard Head* which

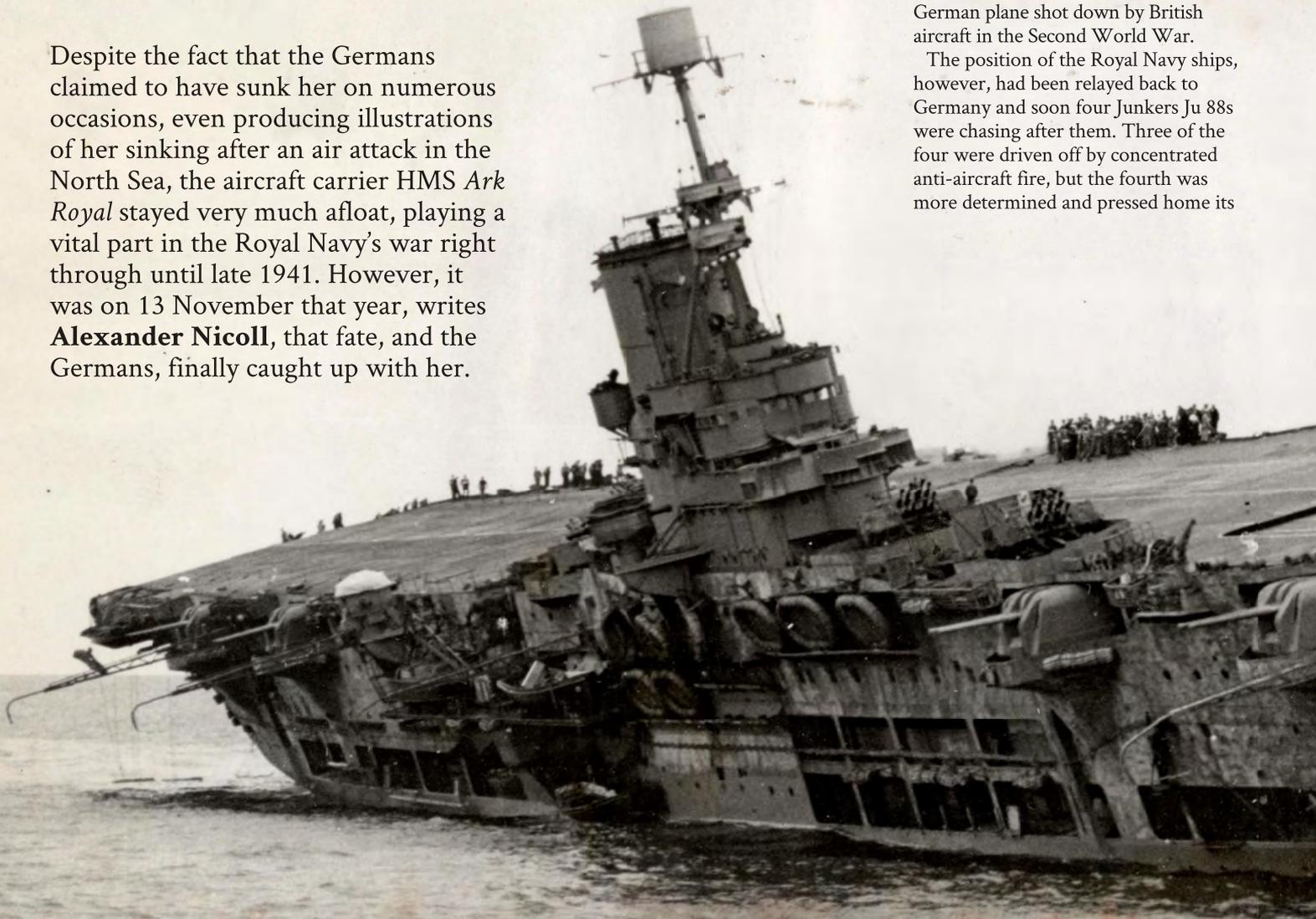
was being pursued by the German submarine U-30.

Aircraft were despatched to help the cargo ship but whilst the operation to assist *Fanard Head* was underway, another U-boat, U-39, spotted the carrier and fired two torpedoes. Fortunately look-outs spotted the approaching missiles in time for Ark Royal to turn to face the torpedoes which sped safely by. Ark Royal's escorting destroyers sank the hostile submarine.

It was in the North Sea where Ark Royal's next close encounter took place, just eleven days later. The Royal Navy submarine HMS *Spearfish* was in trouble having been damaged off the Horns Reef by German warships and Ark Royal, with the battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson*, helped to shepherd her back to UK waters. The little group was spotted by German aircraft, and Ark Royal immediately sent three Blackburn Skuas to intercept the enemy aircraft, actually three Dornier Do 18 seaplanes. One of the Dorniers was shot down – the first German plane shot down by British aircraft in the Second World War.

The position of the Royal Navy ships, however, had been relayed back to Germany and soon four Junkers Ju 88s were chasing after them. Three of the four were driven off by concentrated anti-aircraft fire, but the fourth was more determined and pressed home its

Despite the fact that the Germans claimed to have sunk her on numerous occasions, even producing illustrations of her sinking after an air attack in the North Sea, the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal stayed very much afloat, playing a vital part in the Royal Navy's war right through until late 1941. However, it was on 13 November that year, writes Alexander Nicoll, that fate, and the Germans, finally caught up with her.



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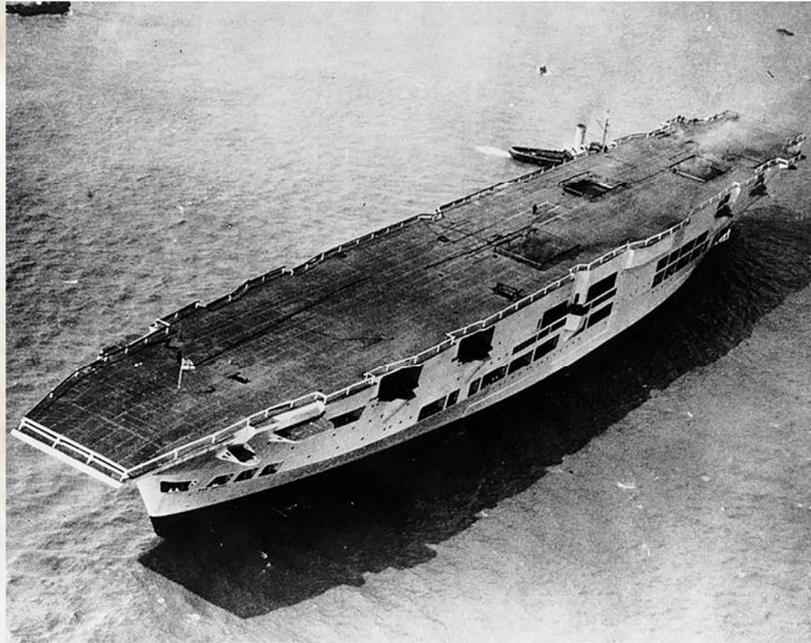
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attack, dropping a 1,000kg bomb which exploded into the sea just thirty yards off the carrier's starboard bow.

So great was the spout of water thrown up by the bomb the crew of the Junkers could not see whether or not they had hit *Ark Royal*. When a reconnaissance flight later sighted *Rodney* and *Nelson* together, but with the notable absence of the aircraft carrier, it was assumed that *Ark Royal* had been hit and sunk. As can be imagined, the Germans announced their 'success' to the world. It took the personal intervention of Winston Churchill to convince President Roosevelt that *Ark Royal* was indeed still in service and afloat.

After being deployed to the South Atlantic in the hunt for *Graf Spee*, *Ark Royal* was assigned to the Mediterranean Fleet before taking part in the unsuccessful Norway campaign. >>



LEFT:
HMS Ark Royal pictured immediately after her launching. The island has yet to be fitted. (US NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER)



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BOTTOM:
HMS Ark Royal pictured soon after the aircraft carrier's completion, circa late 1938 or early 1939. (US NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER)



THE DEMISE OF U-39



On 14 September 1939, after only twenty-seven days at sea, U-39 fired two torpedoes at HMS Ark Royal, though both were spotted and avoided. Following the failed attack, three British destroyers in the vicinity of Ark Royal, HM Ships Faulknor, Firedrake, and Foxhound detected U-39. All three destroyers depth-charged the U-boat; seconds after Firedrake dropped her depth charges, the stricken U-39 surfaced. It is the U-boat's conning tower, photographed from HMS Faulknor, which can be seen here.



HMS Foxhound, which was the closest to U-39, picked up twenty-five crew members while Faulknor rescued eleven and Firedrake saved the remaining eight. The crewmen were then taken ashore in Scotland and spent the rest of the war in various prisoner-of-war camps, including the Tower of London, before being shipped to Canada. U-39 was the first of many U-boats to be sunk in the Second World War. The whaler seen here was lowered by HMS Faulknor.

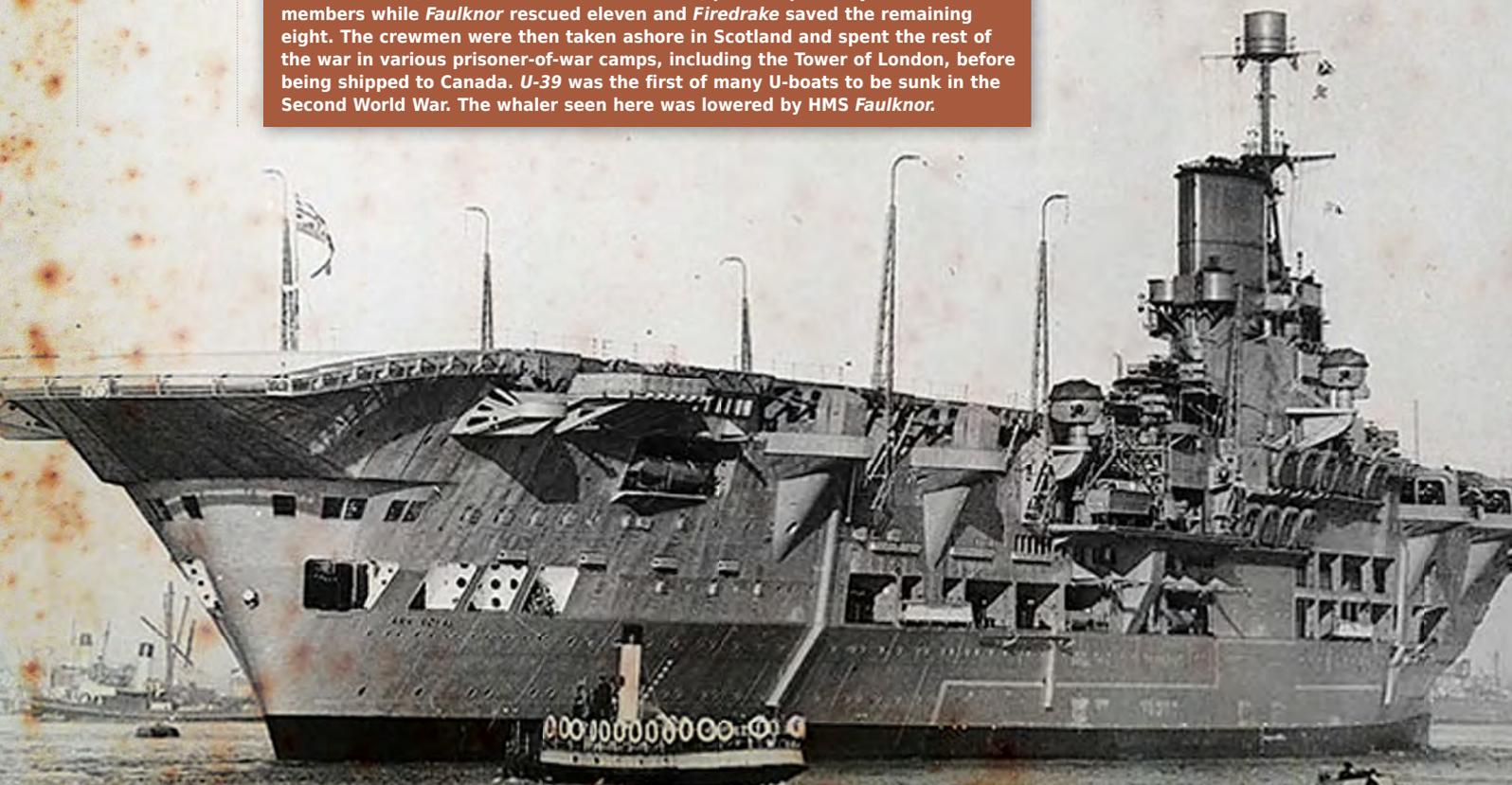
Her aircraft were employed in protecting the withdrawal of the British ships and found herself under aerial attack. Once again Ark Royal survived, and returned to the Mediterranean with Force H, taking part in the numerous convoy operations to Malta.

PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS

On 10 November 1941, Ark Royal ferried aircraft to Malta before returning to Gibraltar. Admiral Somerville had been warned of the presence of U-boats off the Spanish coast, and reminded the ships of Force H to be vigilant.

It was on Thursday, 13 November 1941, that Ark Royal was to operate her aircraft for the last time. That afternoon, the Ark was steering towards Gibraltar in company with the battleship HMS Malaya, the carrier HMS Argus, the light cruiser HMS Hermione and seven escorting destroyers. In fine weather, at 15.25 hours twelve aircraft were flown off for training exercises whilst a further fourteen were awaiting their turn to be landed.

With no indication of what was about to happen, the minutes ticked by, the crew busy dealing with the arriving and departing aircraft. At 15.40 hours, the sonar operator aboard one of the escorts, the destroyer HMS Legion, detected an unidentified sound, but it was assumed it had been caused by the propellers of another nearby destroyer. Sixty seconds later, with the Ark just thirty



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judged to have run deep, striking the bilge keel, and detonating inboard of the side protection system. The hit caused flooding of the starboard boiler room, main switchboard, oil tanks, and over 106 feet (32 m) of the ship's starboard bilge. The starboard power train was knocked out, causing the rear half of the ship to lose power, while communications were severed across the ship.

LISTING TO STARBOARD

Lieutenant-Commander Hector Charles David Maclean was navigating *Ark Royal* at the moment the torpedo struck. 'I was having a cup of tea on the bridge with the signal officer. We had already given notice of what time we were going to get into harbour [at Gibraltar]. We were undoubtedly relaxed and the first thing I remember was a bang and a lot of smoke coming up one of the aircraft lifts on the flight deck.

'[The] Captain was in his cabin having a cup of tea, and immediately all the communications within the ship failed which was one of the difficulties and she began taking a list and it wasn't long before we discovered we had taken a hit underneath us, with one of these magnetic warheads I suppose, and the boiler rooms were flooding and we lost all electric power because the furnaces went out.'⁴ >>

LEFT:
The moment that *Ark Royal* was launched on Merseyside on 13 April 1937. Her huge bows tower up to the flight deck, which is, in turn, 800 feet long and 94 feet wide. The carrier took three years and three months to build and cost £2,330,000.

BELOW:
A stern view of HMS *Ark Royal* with aircraft ranged on her decks.

or so miles from Gibraltar and within sight of the Rock, and the last of the returning Swordfish about to land on, there was a loud explosion under on the starboard side between the fuel bunkers and bomb store and directly below the bridge island.

Below deck the carrier was plunged into darkness. The carrier whipped so violently that five aircraft waiting to be struck to the hangars were flung into the air no less than three times.¹

One of the Fleet Air Arm Swordfish pilots who had just landed back on the carrier was Lieutenant Philip David 'Percy' Gick of 825 Naval Air Squadron.² 'I had landed on first,' he recalled, having brought his squadron in, 'and went up to the bridge. [I] was actually on the bridge reporting when the last aircraft came on, a man called Burgh [sic], did an absolute perfect landing and at that moment the torpedo hit.

'Actually we had given him a hell of a reprimand that day because ... several aircraft had bad landings and he looked out of the aircraft I am told, and said, "My God what have I done this time!" Because, literally as he touched down, the bloody torpedo hit,

[and the] whole ship shook, clouds of smoke everywhere; he was quite convinced he had done something wrong poor chap...

'But I was on the bridge when it hit at the time and we had started turning out of wind when the ship heeled quite a bit with that and she started heeling enormously ... I was still on the bridge when she went past her critical angle which was about 22 degrees.'³

The explosion which tore through HMS *Ark Royal* had been caused by a single torpedo fired by the Type VIIC U-boat *U-81*. Commanded by *Oberleutnant zur See* Friedrich Guggenberger, *U-81* had been en route from Brest to La Spezia in Italy when she encountered the inbound ships of Force H.

No one on *Ark Royal* spotted either the U-boat's periscope or the torpedo's track. The torpedo's explosion, coupled with the 18-knot speed of the ship through the water, caused serious damage below. Remarkably, only one member of the ship's company, Able Seaman E. Mitchell, was killed. A 130-by-30-foot gash was ripped open on the carrier's starboard side and bottom by the torpedo which was



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ABOVE: As some of his shipmates look on, a member of *Ark Royal's* crew descends down a rope to reach the deck of *HMS Legion*.

BELOW: Another of the many pictures released by the British to disclaim the various German claims of having sunk *HMS Ark Royal*.

Immediately after the torpedo's explosion the carrier had taken on a list of ten degrees – within just three minutes this had increased by a further two degrees. The first concern of *Ark Royal's* commander, Captain Loben Maund, was to stop his ship. Maund therefore gave orders to reverse the engines and to midship the helm, but all the telegraphs to the engine-room were jammed, nor was it possible to communicate by telephone with any part of the ship. The bridge was, in effect, isolated.

Maund therefore left the bridge and hastened to the engine control-room, where he gave the necessary orders to bring the carrier to a halt. He found

that the starboard engines were out of action, but that there was no damage to the port or centre engine-rooms. At this point Maund gave order to flood the port compartments and to pump fuel from the starboard to the port tanks in the hope of counteracting the steadily increasing list.

Eager to re-establish controls over all of *Ark Royal's* main departments, Captain Maund ordered a chain of ratings be established between the engine control-room and the flight deck. Preparations were made for telephones to be rigged to replace this human link.

The list which the carrier had taken made it impossible to fly off the aircraft on deck. The remainder of those which were in the air at the time of the explosion landed at Gibraltar. Meanwhile the destroyers were circling round, dropping depth-charges. There was still a danger that a further torpedo might strike the ship at any moment.

By 16.00 hours *Ark Royal* had heeled over to an angle of eighteen degrees, and the list was still increasing. There was no means of knowing how long she would float, and Maund feared she might capsize. If valuable lives were to be saved he considered it essential that every man not required to work the ship should be disembarked at once. He therefore gave orders to bring the ratings up from their action stations below so that those whom he required to remain could be separated from those who were no longer needed.

AN EAR-SPLITTING ROAR

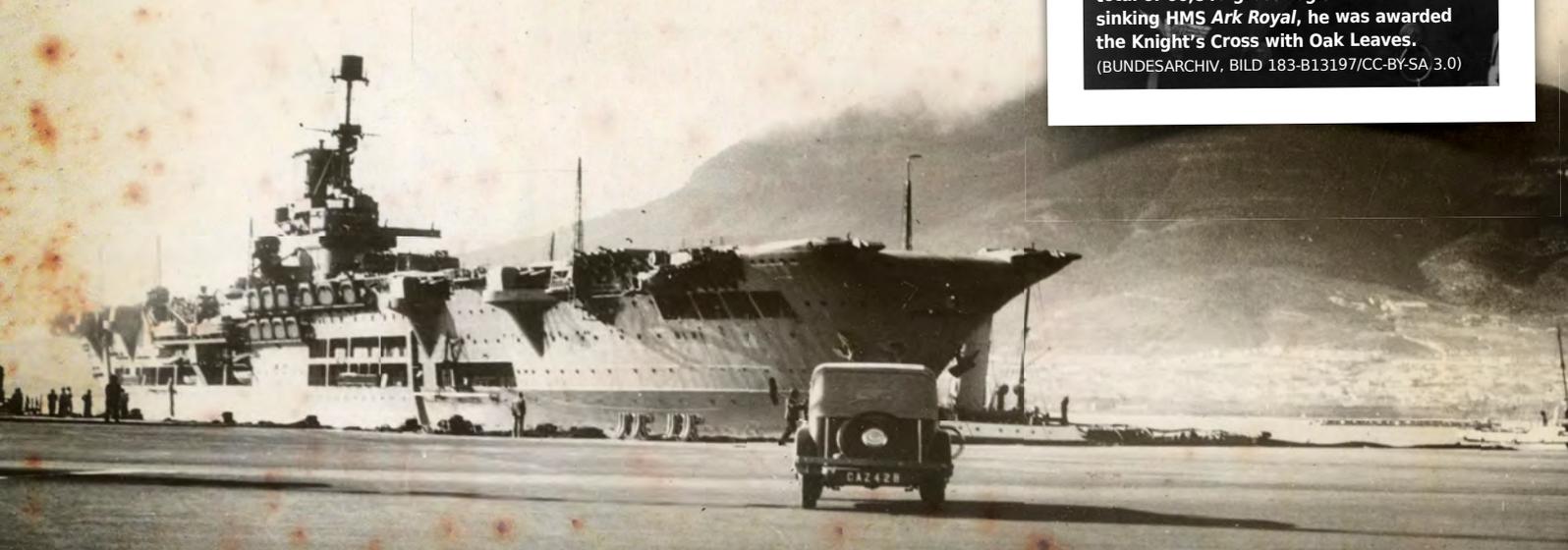
Lieutenant-Commander Maclean recalled the problems on *Ark Royal* at this moment: 'She went on

listing and we had no real order with which to give the ship's company about a situation like this, about abandoning ship, and we had of course an enormous number of aircraft people on board who weren't wanted they were in the way, we wanted to save them and get them out of the ship.

'And so we ordered everybody to muster on the flight deck and owing to lack of communications on the ship this had to be passed by what are called call boys. [These] are boys who went round with the bosun's call saying "do you hear there" and like a game of rumours you know, you pass messages from mouth to mouth, and it ends absolutely different to when you started and the rumour got round that they were ordered to abandon ship and this was discovered and immediately cancelled, but too late to stop the engineers from, as far as I can recollect, from dousing the boilers which they had managed to get going, because the abandon ship required them to put them out.'



ABOVE: Friedrich Guggenberger, seen here on his return from a War Patrol, was the commander of *U-81*. From November 1940 until his capture in July 1943, Guggenberger sank seventeen ships amounting to a total of 66,848 gross registered tons. For sinking *HMS Ark Royal*, he was awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves. (BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 183-B13197/CC-BY-SA, 3.0)



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ABOVE: Another view of the stricken HMS Ark Royal as seen from the decks of HMS Hermione.

I came out of the control room, there was a great queue of men who had come up from below and I couldn't push in, so I went back down through the open hangar and through the hospital – that was eerie, because there were all these beds and not a soul down there but me

'When I came back out on deck, HMS Legion was alongside and a rope was thrown across. I went across the rope upside down, with a queue of people behind me, saying, "Come on, lad, get across". I got going.⁵ >>

LEFT: The L-class destroyer HMS Legion moves in to rescue the crew of Ark Royal. Note how the censor has covered over Legion's pennant number.



One of the many seamen aboard *Ark Royal*, Cliff Wilson recalled the moment he left the stricken carrier: 'When the ship was hit, I was on duty. We had been down the Med and were on our way back, about 30 miles off Gibraltar, when there was this huge bang. It wasn't so much an ear-splitting roar, but it was tremendous and we knew we must have been hit.

'More or less straight away the ship began to list. There were seven of us reading signals but no-one left their station. We just kept working but we all wondered what we would do. The chief telegraphist was there and we were all looking at him and he was looking at us. In no time at all we went over to about 20 degrees and eventually the order came over the intercom to abandon ship.

'We were still looking at the chief and he said, "Ok lads, off you go". When



LEFT: The almost deserted flight deck of HMS Ark Royal is pictured as the carrier's list gradually increases.

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'UNSINKABLE SAM'

One of the legends surrounding the sinking of HMS *Ark Royal* is the story of 'Unsinkable Sam'.

'Sam' was a black and white patched cat that had been owned by an unknown crewman of the German battleship *Bismarck*. After *Bismarck* had been sunk on 27 May 1941, in an action that coincidentally involved HMS *Ark Royal*, 'Sam' was found floating on a board and plucked from the water by the homeward-bound British destroyer HMS *Cossack*. Unaware of the cat's name, he was at this point christened Oscar.

Oscar remained onboard *Cossack* for the next few months as the ship carried out convoy escort duties in the Mediterranean and North Atlantic. On 24 October 1941, however, *Cossack* was severely damaged by a torpedo fired by *U-563*. Her crew was transferred to the destroyer HMS *Legion* and an attempt was made to tow the badly listing destroyer back to Gibraltar. The tow was subsequently abandoned due to worsening weather conditions and *Cossack* sank to the west of Gibraltar. The initial explosion had blown off one third of the forward section of the ship, killing 159 of the crew, but Oscar survived this. Along with the other survivors he was landed at Gibraltar.

Perhaps unsurprisingly having gained the nickname 'Unsinkable Sam', Oscar was transferred to *Ark Royal*. His luck held and, surviving a third sinking, he soon found himself back at Gibraltar. Described as 'angry but quite unharmed', he was brought ashore once again by HMS *Legion*.

'Unsinkable Sam' never returned to sea again as part of a ship's crew. If his tale is indeed true - and there are some who state that it is little more than a 'sea story' - then Oscar gained the unusual distinction of having served in both the *Kriegsmarine* and the Royal Navy.

RIGHT: Some of the crew of HMS *Ark Royal* pictured after being landed safely at Gibraltar.

BELOW: HMS *Legion* at work during its rescue of the crew of HMS *Ark Royal*. Note how many of the latter are lining the tilted edge of the flight deck.

It had only been through 'skilful handling' that Commander R.S. Jessel, HMS *Legion's* captain, had managed to bring the destroyer alongside the carrier's port quarter, taking care to keep her stern clear of *Ark Royal's* huge port propeller, which, owing to the list, was visible near the surface of the water. Jessel also had to avoid the carrier's wireless masts, which were projecting horizontally from her side with no power available to raise them.

So severe had the list become by this time it was only possible to crawl along the decks and the ratings were told to slip down the deck towards the destroyer. The men left the ship calmly, taking their time. Captain Maund was the last to leave, sliding down a rope.

Three ratings gave their skipper three cheers as he slid down to join them.

Despite the difficulties the angle of the carrier presented, in a remarkably short time, some 1,540 officers and ratings were transferred to HMS *Legion*. Some jumped on to hammocks in the fo'c'sle, others used lines rigged from the ship. At one point, *Ark's* Paymaster-Commander appeared on deck carrying two suit-cases containing the carrier's money -£10,000 in each! There was also a number of canaries on board. Since there was no chance of taking them, their owners opened the cages and flew them off the ship. Nor were the ship's cats forgotten. One, an enormous ginger tom, was carried aboard the destroyer in the arms of a marine.

THE SQUEAKING OF THE RATS

Lieutenant Gick had also heeded his CO's instructions to abandon ship. 'She had completely lost power and

I collected a few people together and lowered a cutter and went off in it with my observer and these artificers and when we realised the ship didn't seem to be sinking so we came back and shinned back on board again ... While we were in the boat a lot of people had got out of the ship into a destroyer which was astern of her and as I had these four or five skilled artificers on board we thought it made sense to go back and see if we could do anything to help and got back. They then decided to bring a destroyer alongside to see if he could get some electric power because the problem with that ship, which was a shattering one really, was you couldn't get electric power without steam, you couldn't raise steam without electric power and there was no diesel generator.

'So without electric power the senior engineer, Oliver, who was still on board with a few chaps down in the engine room could do nothing and *Legion*, I think, the destroyer, came



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LEFT: The war was just twenty-three days old when, on 26 September, aircraft operating from *Ark Royal* opened their tally. A Dornier Do 18D flying boat of 2/Küstenfliegergruppe 506, piloted by *Leutnant zur See* Freiherr von Reitenstein, was intercepted by a Blackburn Skua flown by Lieutenant B.S. McEwen and air-gunner Petty Officer Airman B.M. Seymour of 803 Naval Air Squadron. Von Reitenstein was forced to land his aircraft on the choppy waters of the North Sea near the Great Fisher Bank. Subsequently rescued by Tribal-class destroyer HMS *Somali*; his aircraft, still afloat, was sunk by *Somali's* guns. Depicted here slipping beneath the waves, this Do 18 was the first German aircraft to be downed by the British in the Second World War.



alongside. At this time it was just my observer and I and we chucked [a] line down, pulled some enormous great wires with hooks on the end – hadn't the slightest idea what to do with them – and finally we found some enormous great studs somewhere and one of the officers in the *Legion* shouted, "Well have a go at those", and we put them on and sure enough on came some lights ... Oliver got some power and was able to raise steam and we were at one moment actually under our own power doing about three or four knots back towards Gibraltar.

'At this time because she was in danger of bumping alongside, there was a bit of a swell running, *Legion* had cast off. We were sitting there very happily; two or three other people had joined us and my observer had managed to kick open the wardroom bar and got some cans of beer and we were quietly sitting there drinking those and throwing the empty cans at the rats when there was a terrific lurch and the power went again. This was because the funnel uptake went down and across to the boiler room under the hangar deck and up – that elbow was under water and had collapsed and cut the power off ...

'Anyhow, we went on quite a long time. Then they got a tug out from Gib and she was being towed back and finally she was listing further and further and Maund ... decided he must get everyone out the only people we forgot where the gunnery officer and four chaps up on the fo'c'sle.

'I think it was one of the most terrifying moments of my life because

we got the destroyer alongside and the last few of us were sliding across the rope to that and Maund said, "I wonder if anyone is left". And I said, "Oh, I will go and have a look".

'Walking round that ship at the angle she was at and the only noise was the rats squeaking and the ticking of the clocks and suddenly every now and again there was a crunch and a lurch and fortunately I did because there was some bloke down there and he duly heard the buzz and came up.'

Gick was one of the last men to leave *Ark Royal*. 'We eventually slid off into the destroyer,' he continued. '[The] Captain came down last, followed me down, and suddenly realised we had forgotten the unfortunate gunnery officer and his four chaps up forward and we had to nip up and get them.

'So that was it and finally she went. Very sad.'

Captain Maund watched the last moments of the carrier. For a time she hung over the water at an angle of forty-five degrees. Then, momentarily, the flight deck hung vertically above the surface, like a great table on its side. At 06.13 hours she turned over, remained bottom upwards for a few minutes, then, fourteen hours after she had been torpedoed, she disappeared from sight.

As soon as it was light a sub-flight of the *Ark Royal's* Swordfish flew out from Gibraltar in the expectation of escorting their carrier back to port. When they reached the position where she should have been, all they saw from the sky was a great patch of oil upon the water.



The loss of *Ark Royal* was announced in London at 13.00 hours that afternoon. It proved as much a triumph for Germany as an embarrassment, for Berlin had claimed many times that the carrier had been sunk. It took twenty-four hours for the Ministry of Propaganda in the German capital to select carefully the words of its communiqué. Finally the Germans decided to quote the British Admiralty's announcement – it was the only way that the world would believe that the resilient warship had at last succumbed. ☉

NOTES

1. *Ark Royal: The Admiralty Record of her Achievement* (HMSO, London, 1942).
2. Later Rear-Admiral Gick. By the end of the war, Gick had served on a total of eight aircraft carriers and been awarded a Distinguished Service Cross and Bar and twice Mentioned in Despatches.
3. Imperial War Museum, Department of Sound, Interview No.12097.
4. Imperial War Museum, Department of Sound, Interview No.12044.
5. *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 November 2010.
6. Lieutenant-Commander (E) A.G. Oliver RN.

ABOVE: Dated 14 November 1939, this press photograph was titled 'The Picture That Kills Germany's Biggest Lie'. The caption continues: 'Sunk so often by German wireless, this exclusive picture which reached London last night buries the oft-killed Nazi falsehood that the *Ark Royal* has been sunk.'

ABOVE LEFT: A page from German paper *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 October 1939. The drawing depicts the 'sinking' of *Ark Royal* in the North Sea on 26 September 1939.