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The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II

James P. Levy

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To Sara and Kristine

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JAMES P. LEVY

List of Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
ACNS	Assistant Chiefs of Naval Staff
AMC	Armed merchant cruiser
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AP	Armour piercing
ASDIC	Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee
ASW	Anti-Submarine warfare
BCS	Battlecruiser squadron
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
C-in-C	Commander in Chief
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CVE	Escort carrier
D/F	Direction finding
DCNS	Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
OIC	Operational Intelligence Centre
RA	Rear Admiral
RAF	Royal Air Force
RN	Royal Navy
SAP	Semi-armour piercing
SONAR	So(und) na(vigation and) r(anging)
TSR	Torpedo-Spotter-Reconnaissance
UP	Unguided projectile
VA	Vice Admiral
VCNS	Vice Chief of the Naval Staff

Introduction

*Thus it was that the strategic role played by the Royal Navy against Germany was a mere repetition of that of the years 1914–1918: holding the line.*¹

Enemies and their strategies create the opportunities whereby naval glory is earned. In this regard, the Royal Navy in the 20th century was largely robbed, for want of the proper enemy, of the kudos and curtain calls associated with victories in great battles. From Howard's duel with the Spanish Armada up the English Channel, through the bitter battles of the Dutch Wars, and on to the epic victories at Finisterre, Lagos, Quiberon Bay, The Saints, the Glorious First of June, Cape St Vincent, Camperdown, the Nile, Copenhagen, Trafalgar, and Navarino – the Royal Navy has enjoyed its share of naval triumphs. And naval history, as written, has been in large part the study and description of great fleet clashes. This may partially explain the fixation among historians of the modern British navy on the Battle of Jutland. But those of us who study the Second World War are not blessed with so massive an encounter as the meeting of the Grand Fleet and the High Seas Fleet on that hazy day in May 1916. In fact, and quite surprisingly, the largest battle fought by the Royal Navy in World War II, in terms of ships present, was the action off Calabria on 9 July, 1940: Andrew Cunningham had a carrier, three battleships, five cruisers, and 16 destroyers at sea with him that day facing (or, should one say, chasing) two Italian battleships, 14 cruisers, and 20 destroyers.² The one 'decisive battle', the second Trafalgar, eluded the Royal Navy throughout the 20th century. The British were always prepared to fight it but Italy, and in two world wars Germany, refused the invitation.

When starting on this project, I was asked by my father, a US Navy veteran, in which battles the Home Fleet had engaged. I gave him a vague answer about Norway and mentioned the *Bismarck*, but from that day forward I had to contend with how my compatriots would read and interpret the story of the Home Fleet. Americans think of naval actions in the Second World War and the names of major battles trip off their tongues: Coral Sea, Midway, the 'Marianas Turkey Shoot', Leyte Gulf. It can be pointed out, rudely but correctly, that the US Navy's international reputation, before its brilliant World War II victories, rested

largely on three successful frigate duels from the War of 1812 (the loss of *Chesapeake* and *President* being conveniently forgotten) and the slaughter of the decrepit Spanish Navy at Manila Bay and Santiago de Cuba. But a clash of fleets captures the popular imagination, and the war in the Pacific was more reminiscent of the great sea battles of the past than the Battle of the Barents Sea or that of North Cape. The Imperial Japanese Navy, steeped in the doctrine of 'decisive battle' was willing and able to throw itself at the US Navy, thus leading to a reputation-building string of US victories. The Royal Navy's opponents were not so generous. In this regard, and unlike the great battles of the US-Japanese conflict, the story of the Home Fleet is more about struggle than battle, about holding the line.

That is not to say that the Home Fleet fought no battles. Captain Warburton-Lee fought an excellent destroyer action against heavy odds at the First Battle of Narvik. Rear Admiral Whitworth won a crushing victory at Second Narvik. The sinking of the aircraft carrier *Glorious* by two German battlecruisers, though a grave and avoidable disaster, was partially offset by the heroic actions of her two attendant destroyers, *Ardent* and *Acasta*. The Battle of the Denmark Strait pitted the world's biggest operational capital ships, the battlecruiser *Hood* and the battleship *Bismarck*, against each other in one of the shortest yet most dramatic encounters in maritime history. Within days, Admiral Tovey with the battleships *Rodney* and *King George V* tracked down *Bismarck*, *Ark Royal* crippled her in a daring air strike by Swordfish biplanes, and British battleships pounded her into submission, avenging the loss of *Hood*. Nineteen months later a grossly outnumbered Captain Sherbrooke with his destroyer screen escorting convoy JW51B would, at the Battle of the Barents Sea, hold off a vastly superior German force containing one pocket battleship, one heavy cruiser, and six destroyers until Rear Admiral Burnett could come up with the light cruisers *Sheffield* and *Jamaica* and put the Germans to rout. A year later, on Boxing Day 1943, Admiral Fraser, in the last big-gun duel fought in European waters, sank the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* at the Battle of North Cape. Finally, in 1944, carriers of the Home Fleet would deliver a crippling blow to the battleship *Tirpitz* during Operation 'Tungsten'. Therefore, it is obvious that the Home Fleet enjoyed its share of combat. However, these encounters tended to be small compared to the immense clashes going on in the Pacific. They can best be seen as punctuation marks in the course of a long struggle, a struggle to prevent a German invasion of Britain, keep the Germans bottled up in their coastal waters, cut off their overseas trade, protect the Atlantic lifeline to Britain, and fight

the convoys through to the Soviet Union. Much about the exercise of seapower is unromantic, even boring, but vital nevertheless. There is always much more convoying, patrolling, and blockading than ship-to-ship action in any age.

For the ships and men of the Home Fleet, it was a matter of waiting for an opportunity to fight. In this respect, the Home Fleet was hostage to the Germans' intentions. For as in the First World War, it was the Germans who held the initiative and could choose to come out or stay in port as they pleased. British strategy from 1939 through to the sinking of the *Bismarck* in May 1941 sought to force the German surface units into action so that they could be decisively defeated. When Warburton-Lee found that the Germans had reached Narvik, when Whitworth in *Renown* ran into the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, neither commander hesitated to take on a larger enemy force. And although gunnery was still the preferred method of execution, British admirals were just as happy to use the torpedoes of submarines and destroyers, or the Skuas and Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm, to accomplish their mission. Even after *Bismarck* went down, the British were glad to take on any German vessel save her sister ship, *Tirpitz*, which they frankly feared (although no British sailor would ever admit it; terms such as 'much worry', 'bogeyman', and 'concern' are invoked by historians when discussing British attitudes towards *Tirpitz*).³ It was this fear of engaging *Tirpitz* that led to the greatest disaster overseen by the Home Fleet – the destruction of Convoy PQ 17. Winston Churchill summed up the place *Tirpitz* held in the British imagination when he wrote:

The destruction or even crippling of this ship is the greatest event at sea at the present time... The whole strategy of the war turns at this period on this ship, which is holding four times the number of British capital ships paralyzed, to say nothing of the two new American battleships retained in the Atlantic. I regard the matter as of the highest urgency and importance.⁴

The exertions both the Home Fleet carriers and RAF Bomber Command extended to sink her were immense, testament to the unease she generated in British naval circles. From the autumn of 1941 to her sinking in November 1944, *Tirpitz* remained an elusive spectre haunting every action taken by the Home Fleet.

This work is a strategic and operational history. Herein, two major questions are explored: (1) What role did the Home Fleet play in Allied strategy?; (2) How well did the Home Fleet carry out the missions assigned to it within the framework of that strategy? Feeding into these were issues of personnel, equipment, and Intelligence. It will become apparent that, first and foremost, the Home Fleet was charged with holding the line against the German surface fleet, preventing it from disrupting the vital transatlantic sealanes or escorting an invasion force to Britain. We will see that the Home Fleet was also responsible for maintaining a blockade of German overseas trade, and with keeping the passage to north Russia open for Allied supply convoys while harassing German bases in Norway. This multifaceted set of shifting, and at times contradictory, responsibilities was to test the ships and men of the Home Fleet to the utmost.

This work tracks and analyzes the naval actions outlined above, and illuminates the intervals between them, filled as they were with the activities, dull and often gruelling, of keeping a fleet in fighting trim. It attempts to be thorough. It hopes to do justice to the limited time spent in the presence of the enemy, but even here the tale is truncated by the materials at hand. Much of what I have come to know is filtered through 'official' records (some of which may still remain sealed) and the reports and correspondence of the Home Fleet's four Commanders-in-Chief: Charles Forbes, John Tovey, Bruce Fraser, and Henry Moore. Their disputes with the Admiralty, flashes of insight, serious blunders, and constant frustrations fill these pages. Beyond their story, I try to remember that a global war was going on, and that the Home Fleet fought in a context, not a vacuum.

In London, on the Thames, is moored the light cruiser HMS *Belfast*, last surviving ship of the Home Fleet. On a sunny, unseasonably warm weekday in October 1997, I visited her. Only a handful of tourists were aboard. I stopped at all the gun mountings, inspected the crew compartments, the engine room, the forward 6-inch magazine. With no one about, I toured the bridge. I sat in the captain's chair, pondering the responsibility that fell on his shoulders, imagining the swell of Arctic waters and the knowledge that a German torpedo or shell could send my crew and me to an icy death at any moment. I realized then that the story of the Home Fleet was much more than the story of ships and battles. It was and is the story of those men who lived that fear and responsibility, who held the line until victory was won. All their personal stories are beyond my power to recreate. But I can tell their collective story, and try always to recount their history with one foot in their

shoes. If my peacetime thought experiment taught me anything, it was to be true to their memory and humble in the face of their failings. Here, at my desk, I can refight all of their battles and come up with all the right solutions. It is easy to be an armchair Nelson. I only hope that my time on *Belfast* at least partially inoculated me against the worst offences of the know-it-all.

This book aims at an objective telling of an important story. In it, I try to go beyond the limitations imposed on Roskill as the 'official' historian and integrate information that either he had to keep silent about (Ultra) or had not been released in his lifetime. Additionally, this book incorporates the important scholarly work that has been produced since his death twenty years ago. And although this volume owes much to Correlli Barnett, I feel it avoids the worst elements of his persistent attempts to prove that British politicians and technologists were nearly invariably inept.

The following operational history absolves no one. Nor does it have a grand thesis about war, or Britain, or the course of Empire. Reconstructing and evaluating what happened was hard enough. It is, however, tinged with respect, a respect the officers and men of the Home Fleet earned in a great global conflict for freedom.

JAMES P. LEVY