

Between a Rock and A Hard Place

In May 1941 the cry "SINK THE BISMARCK" echoed across the Atlantic. The battle between the German battleship Bismarck, then the world's largest warship, and the pursuing British forces gripped the world for more than a week. Unknown at the time and unmentioned in the numerous accounts of this historic sea battle is the fact that two US Coast Guard cutters were caught in the middle when the forces finally met.¹

Through the spring of 1941 the Battle of the North Atlantic increased in ferocity and each encounter left wounded and abandoned men from torpedoed ships in its wake. U-boats weren't the only threat to the convoys. German warships ran sorties from bases in Norway to wreck havoc among the thin-skinned merchant ships, the British and Canadian escorts were no match for their heavier armed and armored adversaries. German raiders, disguised as harmless merchant ships, preyed upon unwary Allied ships. Along the coasts of the British Isles, German aircraft rained death upon the slow merchant ships, sinking 116 in April.

For the escorts, protecting the convoy came first and often there was little time for humanitarian efforts. It was a cruel reality that any ship stopping for survivors was likely to become the next victim. Despite gallant rescue efforts by many a ship's crew, men got left behind.

As an ever-increasing number of distress calls from torpedoed ships filled the air, Coast Guard Headquarters directed the cutters to combine searches for

¹ From Bloodstained Sea, The U.S. Coast Guard in the Battle of the Atlantic, 1941-1945, (McGraw-Hill, 2004) Chapter 1, Loomings.

survivors with their other missions. Rescue at sea is inherently dangerous but, at times, these missions now carried far more than the normal risks. On one mission, Northland and Modoc got caught in a man-made maelstrom.

It started on May 21, 1941 when the two cutters were ordered by Coast Guard Headquarters in Greenland to search for survivors from the British freighter Marconi, torpedoed the day before. The cutters headed to the scene of the sinking with lights blazing, U.S. flags flying, broadcasting their positions and purpose every hour. Soon they were engulfed in fog and battered by high winds and seas; rarely was visibility greater than two miles in any direction.

Early in the afternoon of May 22, Northland's crew sighted several bodies floating in a large oil slick. A charred and abandoned British tanker with a gaping torpedo hole in her side was spotted a few miles away. Edward H. "Iceberg" Smith, Commanding Officer of the Northland, decided to expand the search area when a British escort reported eight ships had been sunk and 120 men rescued, but 140 were still unaccounted for. The Modoc communicated with a tanker that reported receiving signals from survivors of one of the ships in the convoy. They were said to be about 100 miles to the south and Modoc's Captain, Harold Belford, headed in that direction to investigate. They found two rafts and a boat, all empty. On May 23, Belford expanded the search eastward. In blizzard conditions and heavy swells, Modoc's crew found no one. Complicating the situation was a radio report the German battleship Bismarck had been seen only 100 miles eastward with British battleships, cruisers and aircraft carriers in pursuit.

In the early morning of May 24, HMS Hood and the Bismarck met in battle. After slightly less than twenty-five minutes of action, Bismarck's shells found their mark and Hood burst into two pieces with a tremendous explosion and sank. Only three men, out of a crew of over fourteen hundred were rescued.

Two days later, on May 25, Modoc was trapped between the Bismarck and the pursuing British forces. The snows subsided the previous night and visibility was up to six miles in calm seas. As usual on Sundays, there was a movie shown on the mess deck at 2:00 and all off-duty hands attended. Lieutenant J.G. Richard Bacchus, officer of the watch, was guiding the Modoc slowly towards the north-northeast into the wind. Twilight was approaching. The ship was making no attempt to conceal itself.

At 7:35 PM, Modoc spotted an "unidentified biplane approaching from north". They signaled the plane with flashes from the blinker light. Two minutes later they saw a large unidentified man-of-war bearing 310 degrees True approximately ten miles away.

When the giant battleship appeared it was not recognized by everyone as the Bismarck. The quartermaster of the watch, Art Gibbs, flashed a signal to the Bismarck asking "What ship?" There was no reply. The Modoc attempted radio contact. Some of the cutter's crew said there was no reply from the Bismarck, that she was too smart to break radio silence. Others say there was a reply ordering the cutter to change course immediately, or the Bismarck wouldn't be responsible for anything that happened.

When word spread that the Bismarck was in view, the excited crew scurried to the deck to see the great ship. Harold Wise was playing poker and ran topside. He just got a glimpse of her in the fog.

Ten minutes later, eight small planes appeared in the sky, coming at the cutter. Richard Bacchus said, "Hey, there's an airplane." Then incredulously, "Hey, that's a land plane." He called for General Quarters. Crewmen manned the three anti-aircraft guns, all the firepower the cutter was allowed to carry. Very quickly, two large U.S. flags were spread out onto the decks to let both sides know the neutrality of the Modoc. Other flags were hung over the sides.

The planes were British Swordfish torpedo planes from the carrier Victorious. They came out of the clouds directly above the Modoc, momentarily mistaking the cutter for the Bismarck. Seeing the error in time, they veered off for their true target but the delay was costly, they were spotted by the enemy and therefore lost the crucial element of surprise. The Bismarck's anti-aircraft batteries opened fire first, followed by the battleship's heavy guns. Because some of the planes came from the direction of the Modoc towards the Bismarck, the cutter was in the line of fire. Several shots "whizzed dangerously close to our bows" Belford said. Other crew members said it was a "fourth of July display like nothing ever before seen".

Night was coming swiftly when three other ships appeared on the horizon. "Sail ho, broad on the starboard bow!" yelled a Modoc lookout. "Holy Jesu Cristo, lots of sails ho!" The three were the British battleship Prince of Wales and two cruisers who were preparing to join the battle. As they watched in fear, the crew of the Modoc saw the guns of the largest new arrival being aimed at them.

British officers on the cruiser Norfolk believed the Modoc was the Bismarck and ordered the Prince of Wales to fire a salvo. For the second time in this battle, the Modoc was targeted. A hit from the fourteen-inch guns the Prince of Wales carried would have torn the cutter apart.

Harold Wise was on the helm and heard Belford say to Robert H. Furey, the Executive Officer, "What are we going to do?" Furey told him, "I know what I'd do, I'd change course and get the hell out of here."

"And that's what we did, at full speed," Wise says, "The old thing was shaking. She wasn't doing much, I forget now, but it couldn't have been over twelve or thirteen knots."²

Six miles from the scene, Northland was also caught in the melee when the British gunners also mistook her for an enemy ship and almost opened fire. Deciding this was the wrong part of the ocean to be in; Modoc and Northland increased speed and left the scene.³

The 125 foot Coast Guard Cutter General Greene was on International Ice Patrol when the Marconi was sunk. Chief Boatswain Chester L. Jordan, Greene's commanding officer, intercepted the message from Headquarters to the other two cutters, and, while unable to decode it, had assumed that it instructed them to rescue survivors, and accordingly joined the search. She was assigned an area of

² Adapted with permission from "The Fog of War: The Story of the CGC Modoc's sighting of the Bismarck" by Harold Wise

³ On May 27, 1941, the British Royal Navy succeeded in sinking the Bismarck. Only 110 out of her crew of over 2,200 men survived.

search near the site of MARCONI's sinking, which had not as yet been searched by the British vessels.

With so many men missing and their chances of surviving growing less each hour, Chief Jordan decided to search for Marconi survivors without direct orders from his superiors in Greenland.

The Chief's decision to risk his ship and crew was vindicated on May 26, when General Greene found two lifeboats carrying sixty-four Marconi crewmen. But, having suffered through strong winds, snow, and rough seas for six days, only fifty-six were still alive. After enduring so much, three of these men later died after being taken to St. John's. The dead numbered twenty-five from a crew of seventy-eight. General Greene's crew acted in the best traditions of the Coast Guard and nothing was ever said about Chief Jordan's decision.

The search for survivors continued and by this time 192 had been rescued which, with 25 casualties, left 65 still unaccounted for. Twenty-eight of these were believed to be in Boats 1 and 3 of Marconi. On the 28th, Modoc departed for St. John's to refuel. Weak SOS signals were received on the 29th by Northland. These turned out to be from a British steamer in distress near MODOC's position and that cutter was directed to proceed to the rescue. Later her survivors were taken aboard a Norwegian steamer. On the 31st Northland had to give up the search for the Marconi's boats and returned to St. John's, Newfoundland to refuel. This high-seas rescue operation was typical of numerous actions conducted throughout the war in waters off Greenland.

