The date was 24 May 1941, and international newspaper headlines were dominated with bulletins from the embattled Greek island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea, where German paratroopers and mountain troops were battling a mixed force of British, New Zealanders, Greeks, and native Cretans for control of that strategic site. Suddenly, Radio Berlin interrupted its regular programming for a startling announcement — preceded by a long, trumpeted fanfare that told listeners something really important was about to be transmitted over the airwaves of the Third Reich during this second year of WWII.

The announcer spoke in the bombastic tones favored by the Nazi high command: “Citizens of the Reich! We interrupt our programming to bring you marvelous news. Our ships in the Atlantic have won a great, marvelous victory. Our Reich Navy is triumphant at sea. The proud British battlecruiser Hood has been blown to atoms, has been sunk with all hands under the guns of our naval forces. The rest of the British Navy has turned and fled, hiding themselves behind a smoke screen from the vengeance of the Reich. Another British battleship has been hit over and over again, and by this time she has probably gone down to join the Hood in the icy waters of Denmark Strait; 10,000 British sailors have paid the price of obedience to the war-mongering Churchill and his Jewish clique. Let us all join in heartfelt congratulations to our Führer, who made this possible. Ein Volk! Ein Reich! Ein Führer!”

In his secret diary entry made the next day, Nazi Propaganda Minister Dr. Josef Goebbels noted: “The British Admiralty has admitted the loss of the Hood. A shell in the magazine — blown to bits with all hands. A real disaster for the enemy! Plus, the serious blows in the Mediterranean...”

In Rome, the same day, Fascist Italian Foreign Minister Count Galiazzo Ciano wrote in his secret, personal diary: “In Crete, military operations are going well and there is great talk in the world on account of the naval victory of the Bismarck,” the ship that had been credited with the sinking of the Hood.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of that triumphant German battleship at sea, a spirited discussion was ensuing between the two German naval officers who were the twin victors in that spectacular engagement. One was...