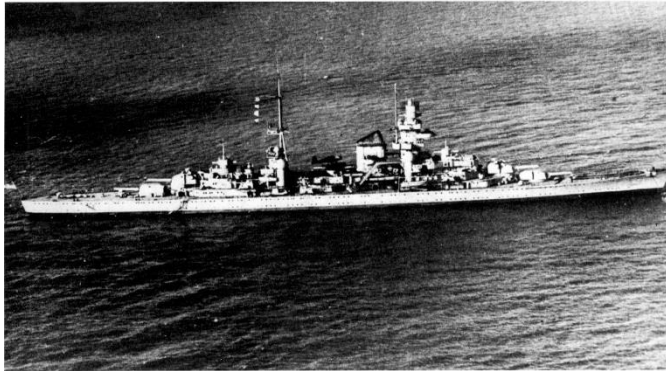


The Channel Dash April 26



The *Prinz Eugen*

On the night of February 11, 1942, two German battleships, the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau*, along with the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* left anchor at Brest, France. This was the beginning of the “Channel Dash” (Operation Thunderbolt-Cerberus) of February 11-13 in which these three ships,

despite pursuit by the British Royal Navy and Air Force (RAF), returned intact to Germany via the English Channel.

The Dash was ordered by German leader Adolf Hitler—against the advice of his admirals, who believed his plan meant certain destruction for these ships. Yet Hitler expressed the following opinion: “The ships must leave port in daytime as we are dependent on the element of surprise...I don’t think the British capable of making and carrying out lightning decisions.” This time, Hitler was correct.

How did the German ships end up in Brest, France? And why was it necessary for them to even make a Channel dash? Germany and Great Britain had been at war since 1939. By the summer of 1940, the seemingly unstoppable Germans had overrun much of the western portion of continental Europe. This included part of France, allowing them use of the port of Brest on the lower end of the English Channel for their surface ships and submarines. The Royal Navy attempted to blockade the Atlantic coast ports, but its resources were stretched thin.

The British had been watching German vessels at Brest carefully. In fact, these three ships had been undergoing repairs there for much of 1941. Hitler needed them for his planned operations in Norway, occupied by Germany in the abovementioned 1940 territorial expansion.

So what went wrong for the British? Although the British had developed an operation of their own—FULLER—to prevent the German breakout from Brest, it was full of flaws. They expected a nighttime breakout and reasoned, furthermore, that the German ships would head for the Atlantic Ocean rather than to try a foolhardy Channel dash. When the breakout actually began, the Admiralty and the RAF were caught unawares. In the six-hour battle that unfurled, British attacks, both by air and sea, were uncoordinated.

British intelligence had failed to give adequate forewarning. Advance planning had been poorly directed and understrength. When the German ships were located in the Channel, British command-and-control broke down and its resources were wasted in piecemeal attacks without any clear direction.

What role did COMINT play? Actually, ULTRA intercepts of Enigma machine messages* in late January had alerted the British that the Germans were sweeping the Channel for mines. Indeed, early February decrypts advised that the English Channel was the “most probable” breakout route. However, due to analytic delays in decrypting the daily naval Enigma messages, this information was not forwarded until the breakout had commenced. In fact, intercepts for February 10-12 were not even decrypted until February 15—after the breakout succeeded. The Channel Dash is a good example of the importance of timely intelligence.

* The information gleaned from exploiting these machines was codenamed ULTRA.

Major Source: *Brilliant Victory: The Channel Dash of 1942*, Operations Security Monograph Series, by Jack Ingram, 1992. (Jack Ingram was curator of the National Cryptologic Museum from 1994 to 2000.)