

***The British navy still celebrates a famous World War II aircraft carrier that gave Hitler fits***

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*British Royal Navy Sailors aboard HMS Dragon held a ceremony in December honoring the Royal Navy aircraft carrier Ark Royal.*

*In November 1941, a German U-boat sank HMS Ark Royal, a British aircraft carrier. Ark Royal had been a thorn in the side of the German navy during the early years of World War II.*

*Ark Royal is one of the Royal Navy's best-known ships, and British sailors still commemorate it.*

*In December, as the British Royal Navy destroyer Dragon sailed through the Mediterranean, its crew **paused** for a moment of silence to pay tribute to HMS Ark Royal, a British aircraft carrier sunk by a German U-boat during World War II.*

*The ceremony, done a month after the 80th anniversary of Ark Royal's sinking on November 14, 1941, included Dragon's commanding officer, Cmdr. George Storton, casting a wreath into the water to remember the carrier, which is respected as one of the Royal Navy's most legendary ships.*

*Despite being in service for just over two years, Ark Royal — named for the flagship of the fleet that defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588 — played a pivotal role in some of the most important actions in the early years of the war.  
A modern design*



*US Navy HMS Ark Royal in late 1938 or early 1939.*

*US Navy Laid down in September 1935, launched in April 1937, and commissioned in December 1938, HMS Ark Royal represented a modern approach to carrier design at the time.*

*It was Britain's first purpose-built fleet carrier. Apart from HMS Hermes, which had just about half the displacement of Ark Royal, the Royal Navy's previous carriers had all been converted from other vessels.*

*It was the first carrier in which the hangars and flight deck were an integral part of the ship's hull — rather than added onto the hull after its construction — and the flight deck was equipped with catapults and arresting cables to launch and recover aircraft.*

*Ark Royal was armed with 16 4.5-inch dual-purpose guns in eight double turrets (four on each side), six eight-barreled "pom-pom" guns, and eight four-barreled .50-caliber machine guns.*

*The carrier was designed to carry up to 70 aircraft, but during its construction the biplanes in use on carriers began being replaced by larger, heavier aircraft. By the time World War II started, Ark Royal's air wing numbered between 50 and 60 planes.*

### ***Early action***



*Royal Navy Italian bombs fell astern of HMS Ark Royal during the Battle of Cape Spartivento on November 27, 1940.*

*Royal Navy Ark Royal's first task during the war was to hunt for German U-boats in the Atlantic as part of "hunter-killer" groups.*

*On September 14, 1939, the German U-boat U-39 unsuccessfully attacked the carrier and was then pounced on by the destroyers accompanying Ark Royal. It became the first U-boat kill of the war.*

*After an air attack a few weeks later, the Germans triumphantly claimed to have sunk Ark Royal — the first of many times the Germans would falsely claim to have sunk the carrier.*

*Ark Royal was also involved in the hunt for the imposing German "pocket battleship" Admiral Graf Spee in December 1939. After cornering Graf Spee in Montevideo, Uruguay, the British [spread a rumor](#) that the carrier was on the scene. It was still days away, but the German captain was convinced the British had a superior force and scuttled Graf Spee, [giving the British a much-needed victory](#).*

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*In spring 1940, the carrier helped support the Norway campaign, which failed to stop the German invasion there. That summer, Ark Royal deployed to the Mediterranean as part of Force H, and its air wing joined the [attack on the French warships at Mers-el-Kébir](#) to prevent their capture by the Axis.*

*The carrier proved essential protecting supply convoys to Malta. It also participated in the [failed attack](#) on Vichy-held Dakar, Senegal, and fought in the inconclusive Battle of Cape Spartivento, where it was attacked by Italian aircraft.*

### ***Hunt for Bismarck***



*Royal Navy Six Blackburn Skua fighter-bombers lined up on deck before taking off from HMS Ark Royal in April 1941.*

*Royal Navy Ark Royal's best-known action occurred in the Atlantic in mid-1941, when it helped [hunt down and sink the fearsome German battleship Bismarck](#).*

*As Bismarck and the cruiser Prinz Eugen set sail for a commerce-raiding mission in May 1941, the Royal Navy battlecruiser Hood and battleship Prince of Wales attempted to intercept them at the Denmark Strait.*

*The encounter was a disaster for the British, who lost Hood, then the pride of the Royal Navy, and all but three of its 1,418-man crew. Prince of Wales was also heavily damaged. Shocked and enraged at Hood's loss, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered all of the Royal Navy's capital ships in the area to hunt down the Bismarck.*



*US Navy Ark Royal with a Swordfish aircraft taking off and another approaching from astern in 1939.*

*US Navy Ark Royal and the other ships of Force H steamed north from Gibraltar and found Bismarck as it was sailing to France on May 26. Ark Royal quickly launched 15 Swordfish torpedo-bombers carrying new torpedoes with magnetic detonators.*

*After mistaking the British cruiser Sheffield for Bismarck and attacking it — fortunately the magnetic detonators failed — the Swordfish returned and rearmed with torpedoes that had more reliable contact detonators. They took off again and attacked Bismarck just before sunset.*

*Three torpedoes hit Bismarck. Two struck amidships and caused minor damage while one damaged the rudder, forcing Bismarck into a continuous turn.*

*With Bismarck unable to get away, British warships arrived the next morning and pummeled the battleship relentlessly. The Germans attempted to scuttle it, and a British heavy cruiser finished it off with torpedoes. Only 115 of Bismarck's 2,221-man crew survived.*

### ***Sinking***



*Bettmann/Getty Images Ark Royal shortly before sinking in the Mediterranean on November 14, 1941.*

*Ark Royal repeatedly embarrassed the Germans by disproving their claims about sinking the carrier. But in November 1941, its luck finally ran out.*

*In the afternoon on November 13, as Ark Royal returned to Gibraltar from a convoy mission to Malta, the German submarine U-81 successfully attacked the carrier. A single torpedo struck its starboard side, ripping a 130-foot-by-30-foot hole well below the waterline.*

*Within 20 minutes, the ship had listed 18 degrees. Mindful of how quickly the carriers [Courageous](#) and [Glorious](#) had sunk and the heavy losses — 518 and 1,207 men, respectively — Ark Royal's commanding officer, Capt. Loben Maund, ordered the crew to abandon ship.*



*ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images Ark Royal's crew evacuating to the destroyer Legion 35 miles east of Gibraltar on November 14, 1941.*

*Most of the crew boarded the destroyers escorting Ark Royal, while damage-control teams made an hours-long effort to save the carrier. Their work, and an attempt to tow the carrier to Gibraltar, ultimately proved fruitless. Just after 6 a.m. on November 14, the carrier capsized and broke in two before sinking.*

*Amazingly, only one of Ark Royal's 1,749 crewmen, Able Seaman Edward Mitchell, was killed.*

*In 2002, nearly 61 years after the ship sank, divers hired by [the BBC](#) found the wreck of Ark Royal under 3,500 feet of water some 30 miles east of Gibraltar.*