



Information sheet no 021

John Tovey

John Tovey was born on 7 March 1885 at Borley Hill, Rochester in Kent and entered the navy as a Cadet in January 1900. His first sea appointment was Midshipman in the battleship HMS *Majestic*, flagship of the Channel Squadron. This was followed by three years in the cruiser HMS *Ariadne*, flagship of the North America and West Indies station, under Vice Admiral Douglas. In 1905 he attended courses in gunnery, torpedo, navigation and pilotage. Tovey received his first command on 13 January 1915 when he was appointed to the destroyer HMS *Jackal*. On 28 March 1916, Tovey married Aida Rowe. He was appointed to command the destroyer HMS *Onslow* on 7 May 1916. He showed great courage during the Battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916 and was Mentioned in Despatches by Jellicoe for 'the persistent and determined manner in which he attacked enemy ships' during the battle. He was also promoted Commander and in 1919 received the Distinguished Service Order for this action.

In October 1917, he commanded the destroyer HMS *Ursa* and subsequently HMS *Wolfhound*. He joined the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich in May 1919 and later, in June 1920, transferred to the Admiralty Operations Division. Promoted to Captain in December 1923, he served in a number of shore appointments interspersed with further active service as Captain of Destroyers. In 1925, his flotilla was based at HMS Lochinvar at Port Edgar in the Firth of Forth. With Captain Andrew Cunningham (later Admiral), he developed a scheme that increased exercises at sea and improved training.

In 1927, he spent a year at the Imperial Defence College, followed by two years as Naval Assistant to the Second Sea Lord at the Admiralty. In April 1932, he commanded the battleship HMS *Rodney* and later appointed Commodore of the RN Barracks at Chatham in 1935. This was followed by promotion to Rear-Admiral and in 1937, award of the Companion of the Bath.

In March 1938, Tovey was appointed Rear Admiral (Destroyers), Mediterranean Fleet with HMS *Galatea* as his flagship. In May 1939, he was promoted to Vice-Admiral. In June 1940, Tovey commanded Allied light forces in the Mediterranean and made Second-in-Command. He led British forces into the successful action against the Italian fleet off Calabria on 9 July 1940 and ten days later sank the Italian submarine *Bartolomeo Colleoni*.

At the end of 1940, Tovey was promoted to the rank of acting Admiral and transferred to the Home Fleet as Commander-in-Chief. In April 1941, the British were aware of Admiral Raeder's plan for the battleships *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* to escape unseen from the Baltic and join forces in the Atlantic with the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. This would pose a powerful threat to Britain's Atlantic lifeline. On 22 May 1941, *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* were reported to have left Bergen. A day later, they were sighted in the Denmark Strait. Early on 24 May, an engagement took place between the two German ships and Admiral Holland's flagship HMS *Hood* and HMS *Prince of Wales*. Within ten minutes of the first salvo being fired, HMS *Hood* was blown up and sunk with the damaged HMS *Prince of Wales* withdrawing from the battle. The *Bismarck* had also been hit, sustaining a fuel leak, and set off for a friendly port. The chase continued across the Atlantic and finally on 27 May, after several further attacks, the stricken German battleship was sunk.

© National Museum of the Royal Navy, 2014

The information contained in this sheet is correct as far as we are able to ascertain from our sources. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete history of the subject. Please contact the library for a list of further reading materials, if available

John Tovey



Information sheet no 021

Tovey was appointed Knight Commander of the British Empire (KBE) and Knight Commander of the Bath following the action. He was confirmed as a full Admiral in 1942.

In 1943, he relinquished the Home Fleet command and became Commander-in-Chief at the Nore, where preparations were underway for invasion of Sicily (1943) and Europe (1944). He was also advanced to Knight Grand Cross Bath (GCB), and promoted Admiral of the Fleet. He was raised to the peerage in 1946 when he retired.

Tovey died at Funchal, Madeira on the 12 January 1971.

NB: A more detailed account of the loss of HMS Hood and Bismarck can be found in Information Sheet no. 68