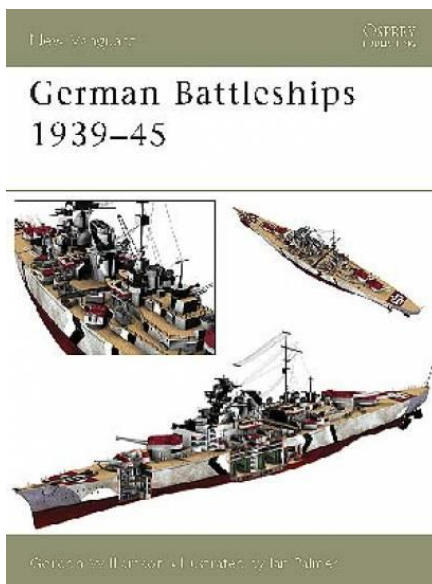


German Battleships 1939-45
Osprey New Vanguard series No. 71 (2003)
Text by Gordon Williamson; illustrations by Ian Palmer

Review by Rob Morgan

This is the lead book in the Osprey range of titles dealing with the units of the *Kriegsmarine* during World War II, and deals with the few capital warships the Germans possessed. *Bismarck*, *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, as well as the two WWI pre-dreadnought survivors, *Schleisen* and *Schleswig-Holstein* (which was the warship to fire the opening shot in World War II, against the Polish defences in the Baltic). I've only recently acquired it, as it was on offer at a mere £3.99 in the local hobby shop, and worth the price.



There are six chapters, brief naturally, covering the initial design, the development and the rather short operational histories of these six warships. Their activities were, to say the least, limited -- if all too frequently steeped in the acceptance of invincibility by writers and historians. Williamson does, I think, tend toward the lingering 'Nazi Super Ship' school of thought on some occasions in the text, sadly.

The opening shots of the old battleship, the disastrous campaigns of Norway -- at least as far as the German fleet was concerned -- the Atlantic cruises of *Bismarck* and of *Scharnhorst* and her sister; the faultless sinking of '*Bismarck*', clinically undertaken after *Hood's* loss; then the North Cape encounter and

sinking of *Scharnhorst* in 1943; and the consistent and finally conclusive pounding of *Tirpitz* in the fjords. The other three suffered inglorious fates, *Gneisenau*, of course, never recovered from damage suffered in the 'Channel Dash'. Her war was over very early on.

There are chapters and notes on radar, range-finding and fire control, which will be useful to the naval wargamer. The plates are delightful, and well described, with colour schemes, cutaway drawings and a painting of *Bismarck* in action. There are plenty of well selected photographs and other text illustrations too. One or two errors creep in to the book, the guns of *HMS Duke of York* were not 15", and *Bismarck's* armour was ineffective. Despite Williamson's assertions, the armour was easily split asunder by the guns of *HMS Rodney*, a far older British battleship!

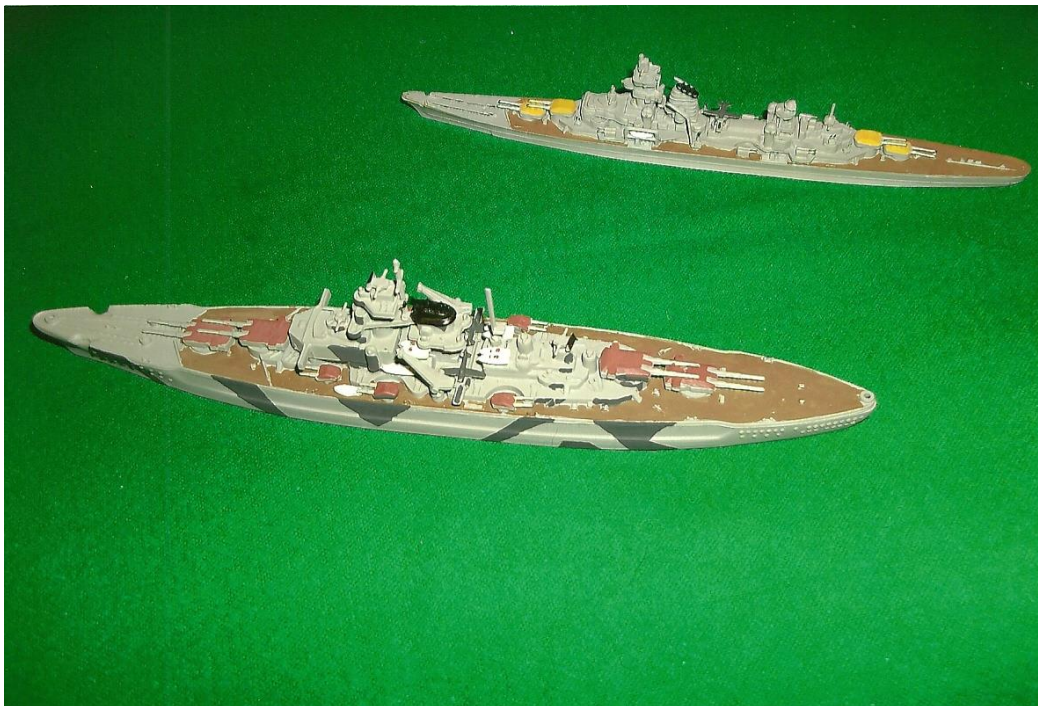
The myth of German invincibility, as far as her capital ships was concerned, laid itself to rest in the deep waters of the North Atlantic when all of her major units bar one, fell victims to the power of the Royal Navy and air attack. An attractive title, but I would read it alongside two of the old *Warship Profiles* -- No.18 on *Bismarck* and No.33 on both *Scharnhorst/Gneisenau* for a complete picture.

An attractive Osprey but with a few faults. 7 out of 10.

As for models, well these are easy to find. It's many a long year since I built the old Airfix full-hull 1/600th scale *Bismarck*, and if what I see in the local model shop's anything to go by, the ship modelmaker, not the naval wargamer, can acquire both *Bismarck* and *Scharnhorst* in some of the odder, much larger scales, some waterline, but at a cost!

Wargamers will find all of the six German capital ships mentioned in this Osprey title in the old Skytrex and Navwar 1/3000th ranges, and of course in Mick Yarrow's expanding list -- all metal models, and they do make for a very reasonably priced wargame indeed. You can fight the *Bismarck's* fatal May 1941 sortie end to end for around 10 pounds or so, and the *Scharnhorst's* North Cape action for even less! Mick's got a range of 1/4800th's with the German vessels in, which means you could fight on the table top.

However, my own favourite remains the Airfix 1/1200th scale *Bismarck*. *Tirpitz* is an easy conversion option from the *Bismarck* kit, which you can see her in the first photograph below. German capital ships and their big cruisers often had turret tops painted for specific sorties or campaign areas, for (would you believe it?) *Luftwaffe* recognition purposes, a feature which adds something to the model, I think. The *Scharnhorst* is a Revell kit, from a few years back. Pyro also made them. The two pre-dreadnoughts are around, and to be found as *Schleisen*, number 1331, an all-metal model, in Mick Yarrow's 1/1200th scale range, an old Trafalgar mould, if I recall.



(Above) The *Bismarck* in the foreground, with her consort, albeit temporary, the *Prinz Eugen*. Both Airfix 1/1200th scale models, these two rate among the best that company ever produced. The turret tops are painted, as was practice for

German capital ships in the early war, as a Luftwaffe identification aid. (Do note: There was virtually no German capital ship activity at all after 1942.)



(Above) The Scharnhorst model by Revell, again 1/1200th scale, painted as early-war Gneisenau. Another stunning, well-detailed wargames model, which fits perfectly with the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen. These three models provide a fleet of several ships.