

# THE STRINGBAGS

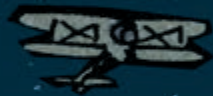
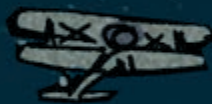








# THE STRINGBAGS



Written by Garth ENNIS

Drawn by PJ HOLDEN

Colored by Kelly FITZPATRICK

Lettered by Rob STEEN

**DEAD**  
RECKONING

Annapolis, Maryland



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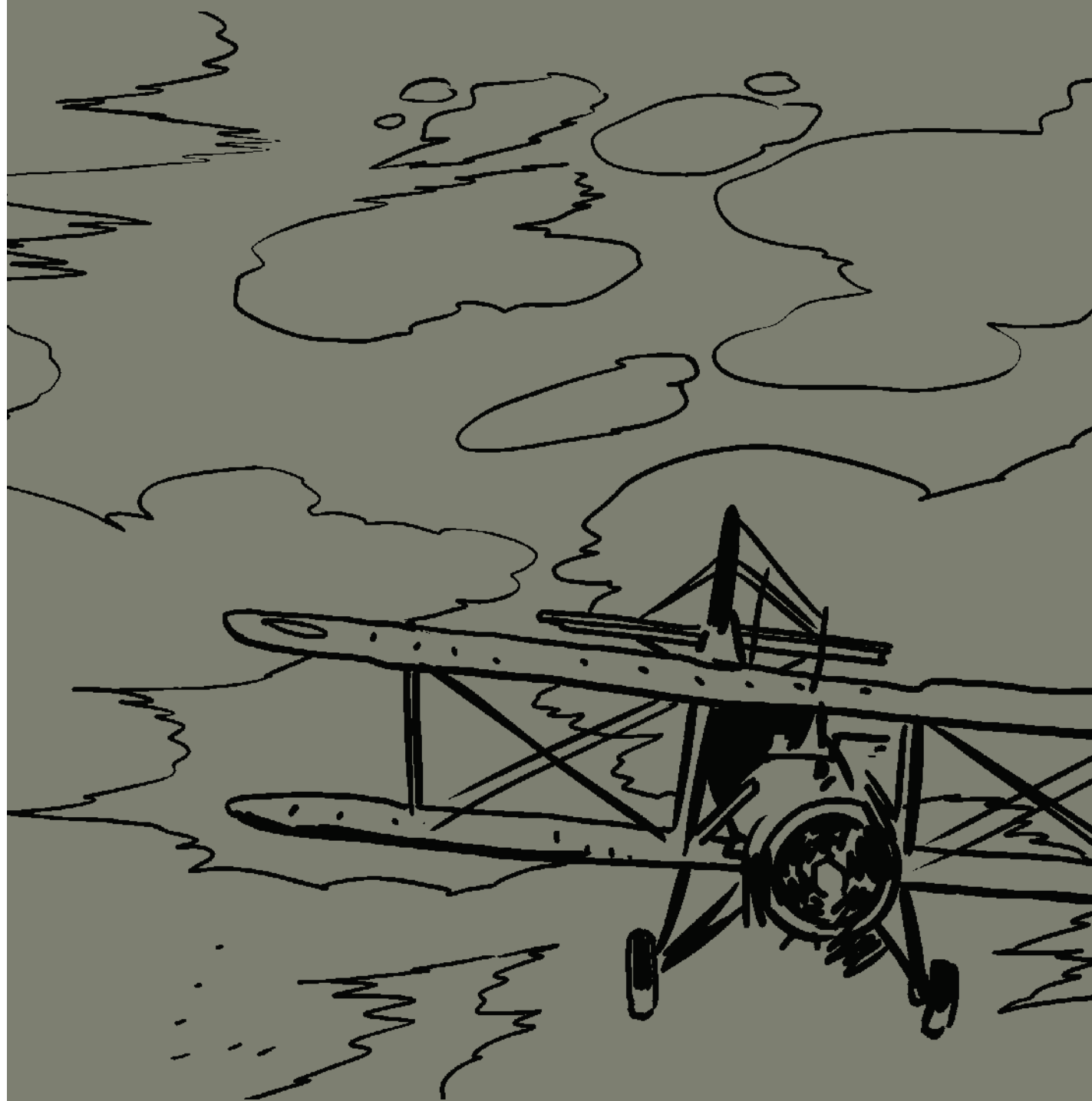
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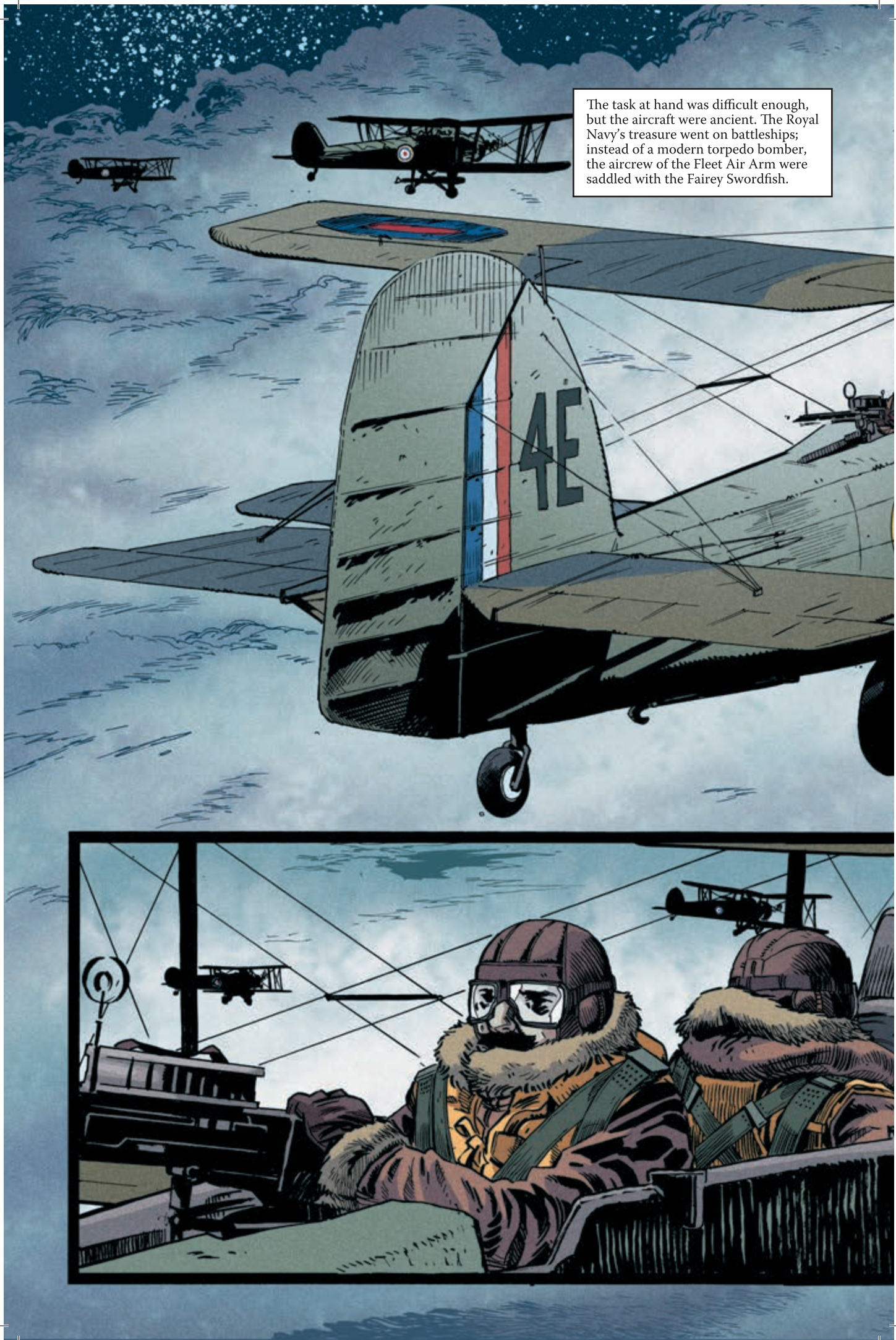









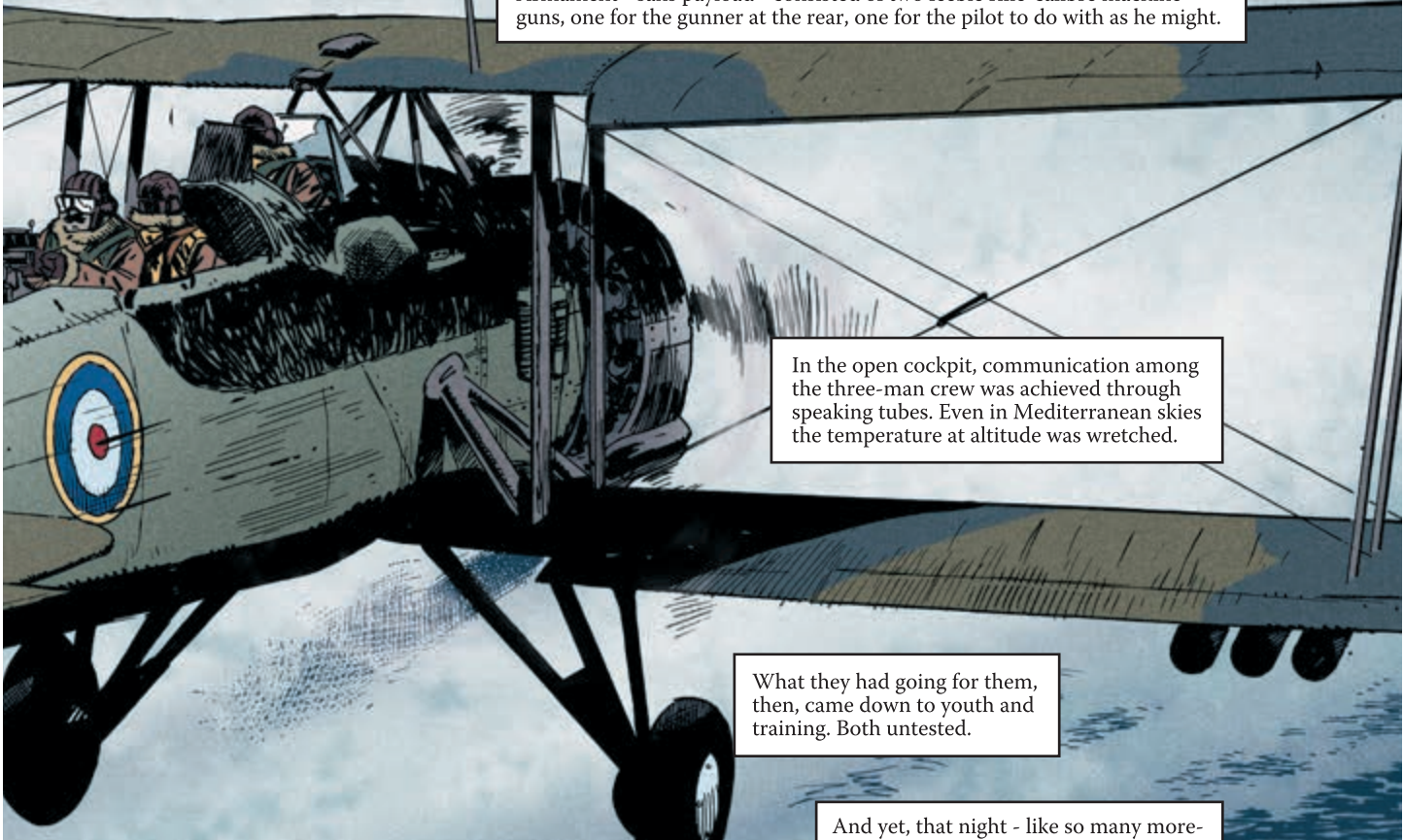
The task at hand was difficult enough, but the aircraft were ancient. The Royal Navy's treasure went on battleships; instead of a modern torpedo bomber, the aircrew of the Fleet Air Arm were saddled with the Fairey Swordfish.







Introduced in 1935, it seemed like some relic of an earlier war, and might well have found a home in those skies ruled by biplanes and triplanes. A wood and metal frame skinned with fabric, its maximum speed was reckoned at a hundred miles an hour - half that of the slowest enemy fighter. Armament - sans payload - consisted of two feeble rifle-calibre machine guns, one for the gunner at the rear, one for the pilot to do with as he might.



In the open cockpit, communication among the three-man crew was achieved through speaking tubes. Even in Mediterranean skies the temperature at altitude was wretched.

What they had going for them, then, came down to youth and training. Both untested.

And yet, that night - like so many more-



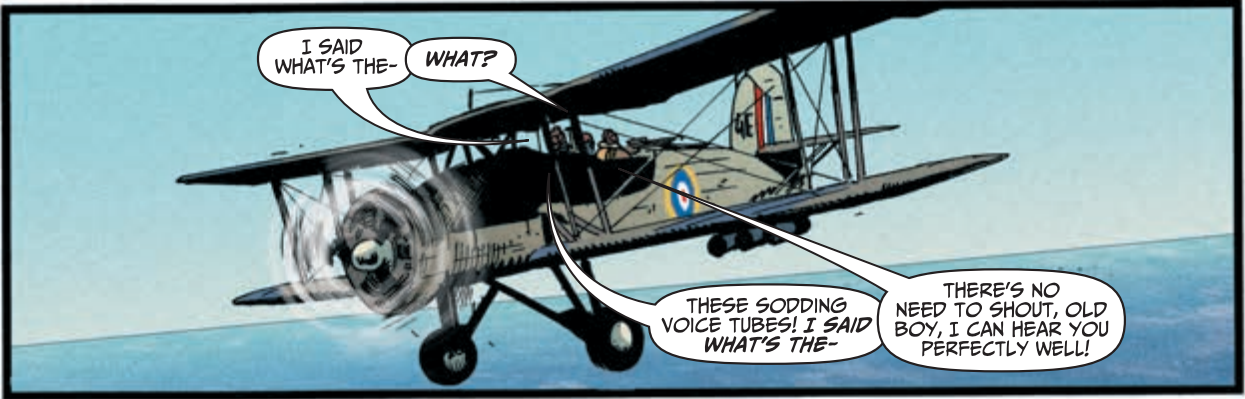
They climbed aboard, took off, and went.

# 1: To Your Lads In Their Enterprise





WHAT?



I SAID  
WHAT'S THE- WHAT?

THESE SODDING  
VOICE TUBES! I SAID  
WHAT'S THE-

THERE'S NO  
NEED TO SHOUT, OLD  
BOY, I CAN HEAR YOU  
PERFECTLY WELL!



OH, YOU ABSOLUTE  
HORSE'S ARSE! WHY  
CAN'T YOU STOP TAKING  
THE PISS, JUST  
ONCE?

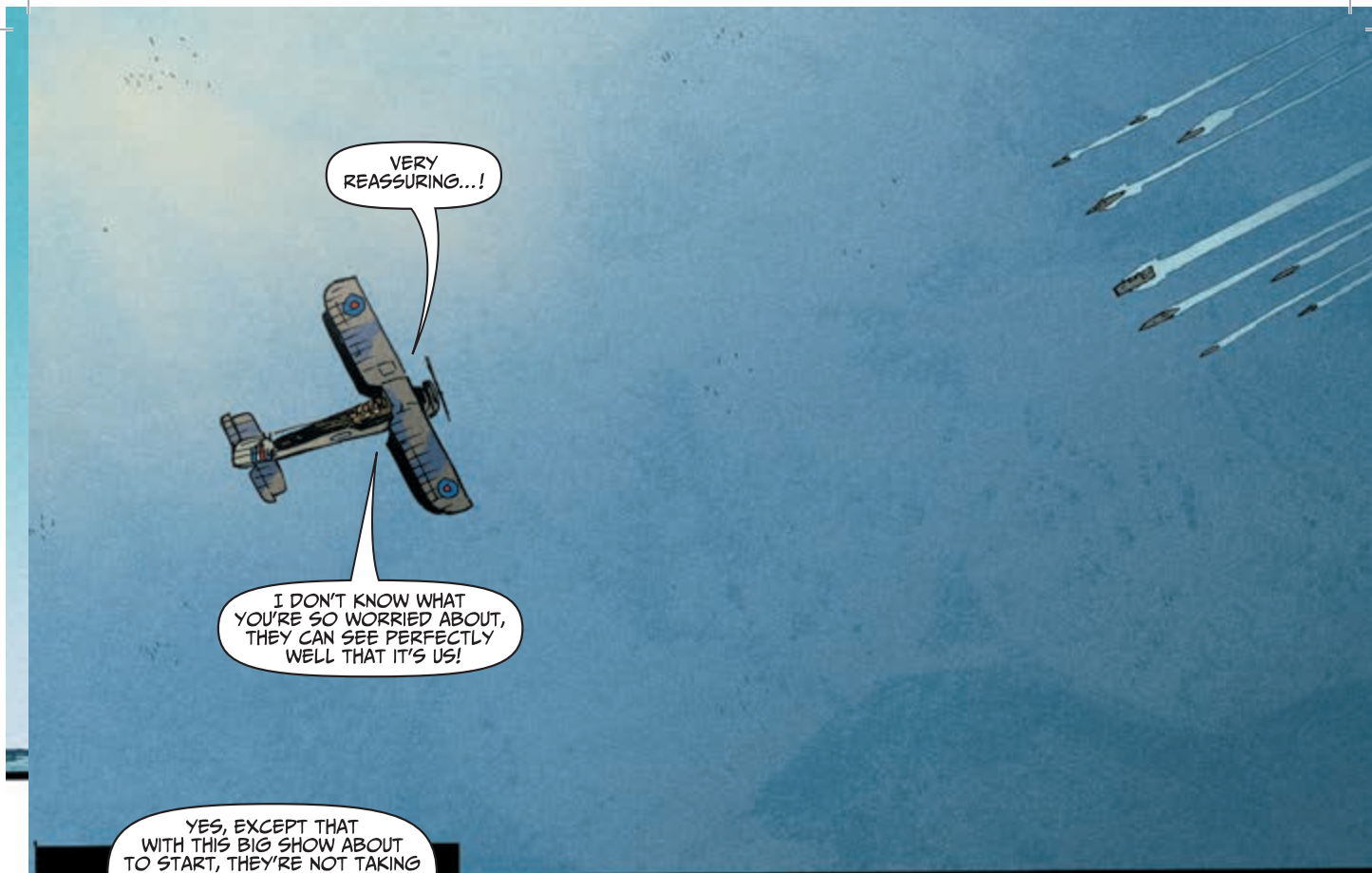
BECAUSE  
YOU TAKE THE  
WAR TOO SERIOUSLY,  
ARCHIE! YOU KNOW  
YOU DO!



POPS, OLLIE'S  
BEING AN ARSE AGAIN!  
DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE  
RECOGNITION SIGNAL  
IS TODAY?

GREEN,  
I THINK.  
BUT I  
WOULDN'T  
SWEAR  
TO IT.





YES, EXCEPT THAT WITH THIS BIG SHOW ABOUT TO START, THEY'RE NOT TAKING ANY CHANCES! THEY DON'T LIKE THE LOOK OF US, THEY'LL BLOW US OUT OF THE SKY!

OH, I SEE! WE TAKE OFF ON A TEST FLIGHT, AND HALF AN HOUR LATER WHAT *MUST* BE COMING BACK ARE THREE SPIES IN A CAPTURED STRINGBAG?

LOOK, JUST FIRE OFF A GREEN, WILL YOU?

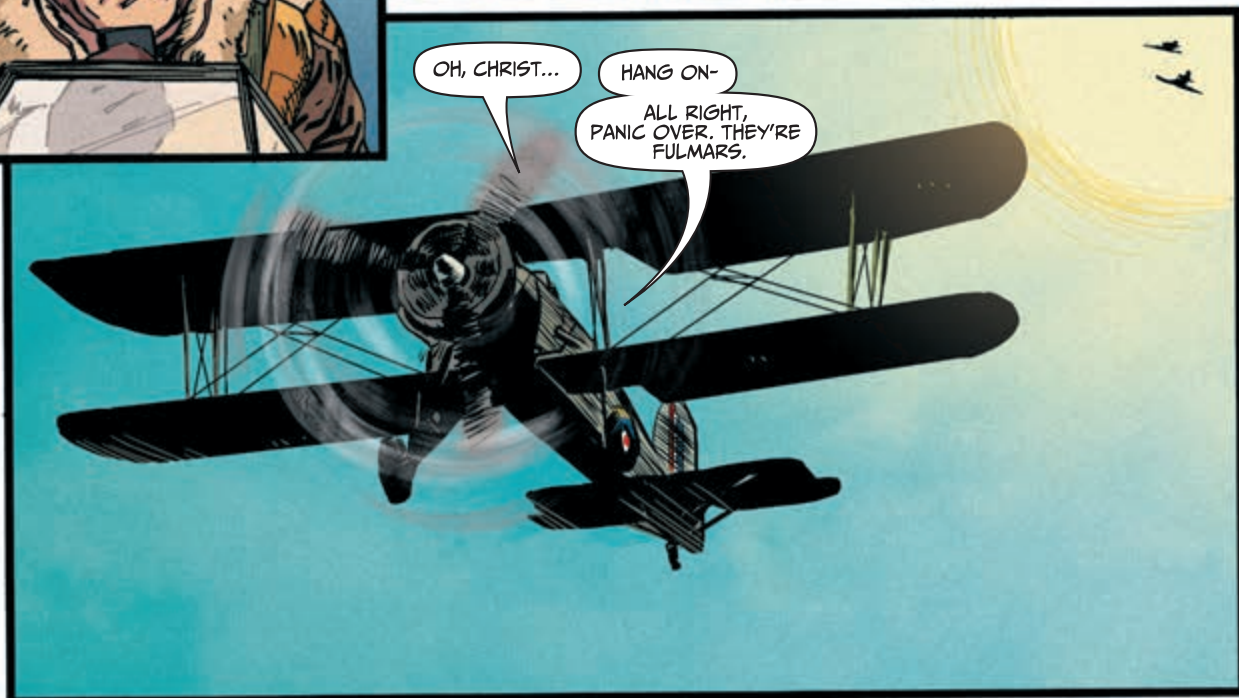
YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN ABOUT THAT?

AIRCRAFT IN THE SUN.

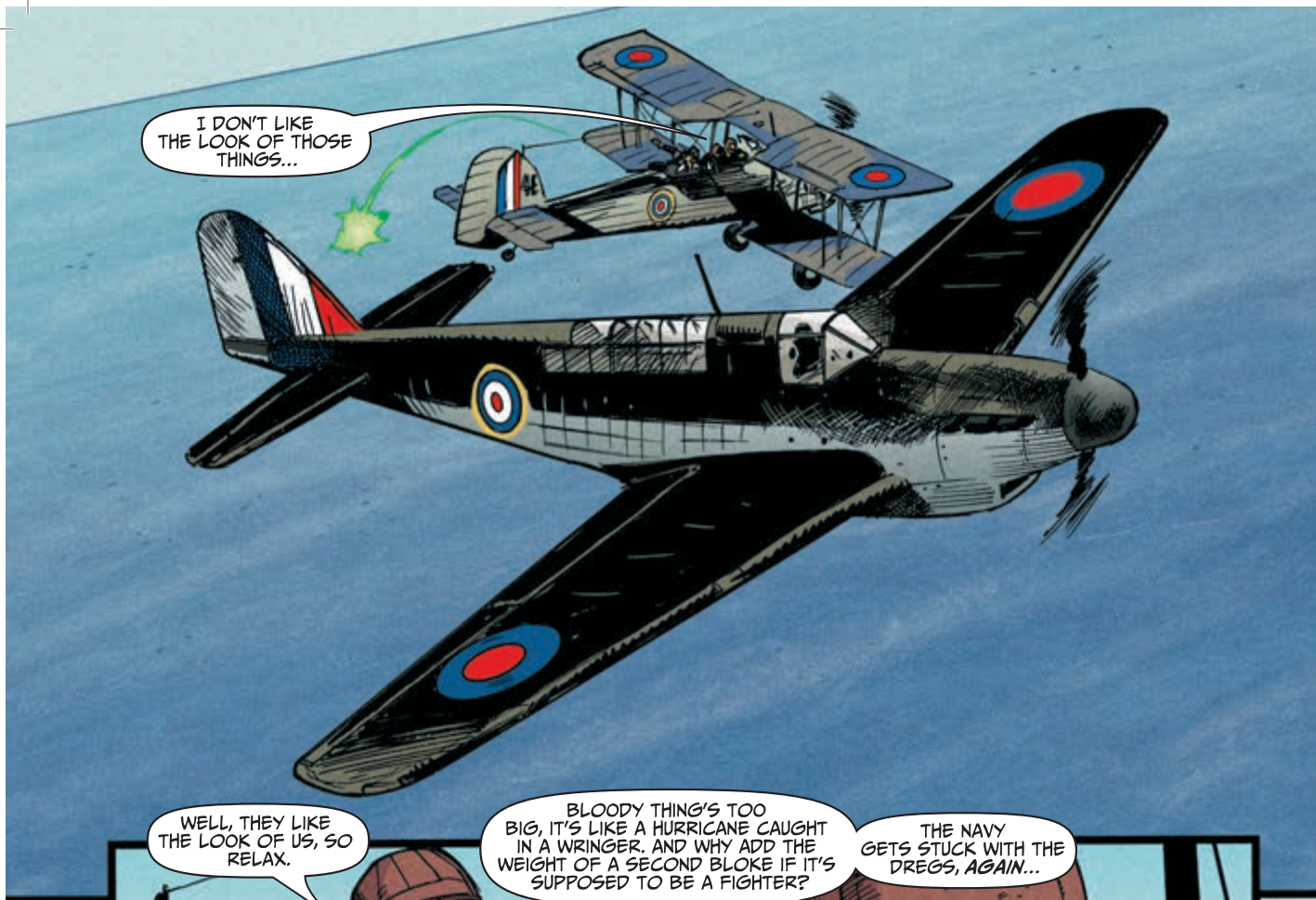
OH, CHRIST...

HANG ON-

ALL RIGHT, PANIC OVER. THEY'RE FULMARS.







I DON'T LIKE THE LOOK OF THOSE THINGS...



WELL, THEY LIKE THE LOOK OF US, SO RELAX.

BLOODY THING'S TOO BIG, IT'S LIKE A HURRICANE CAUGHT IN A WRINGER. AND WHY ADD THE WEIGHT OF A SECOND BLOKE IF IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A FIGHTER?



THE NAVY GETS STUCK WITH THE DREGS, AGAIN...



AT LEAST THEY'VE GOT EIGHT GUNS. I MAY AS WELL HAVE A BOW AND ARROW, STUCK WITH THIS THING.

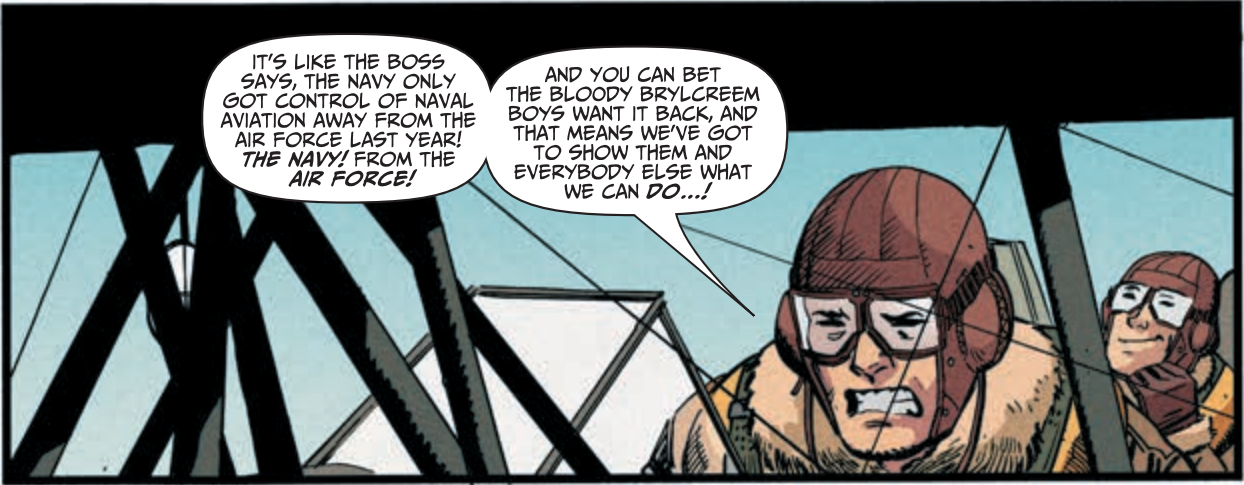
OR A CROSSBOW, WITH WHICH YOU MIGHT CLOBBER AN ALBATROSS. THUS CURSING US FOR ALL TIME.



YOU BEING A STUDENT OF THE CLASSICS, POPS...

LOOK HERE, IT'S NOT A LAUGHING MATTER!

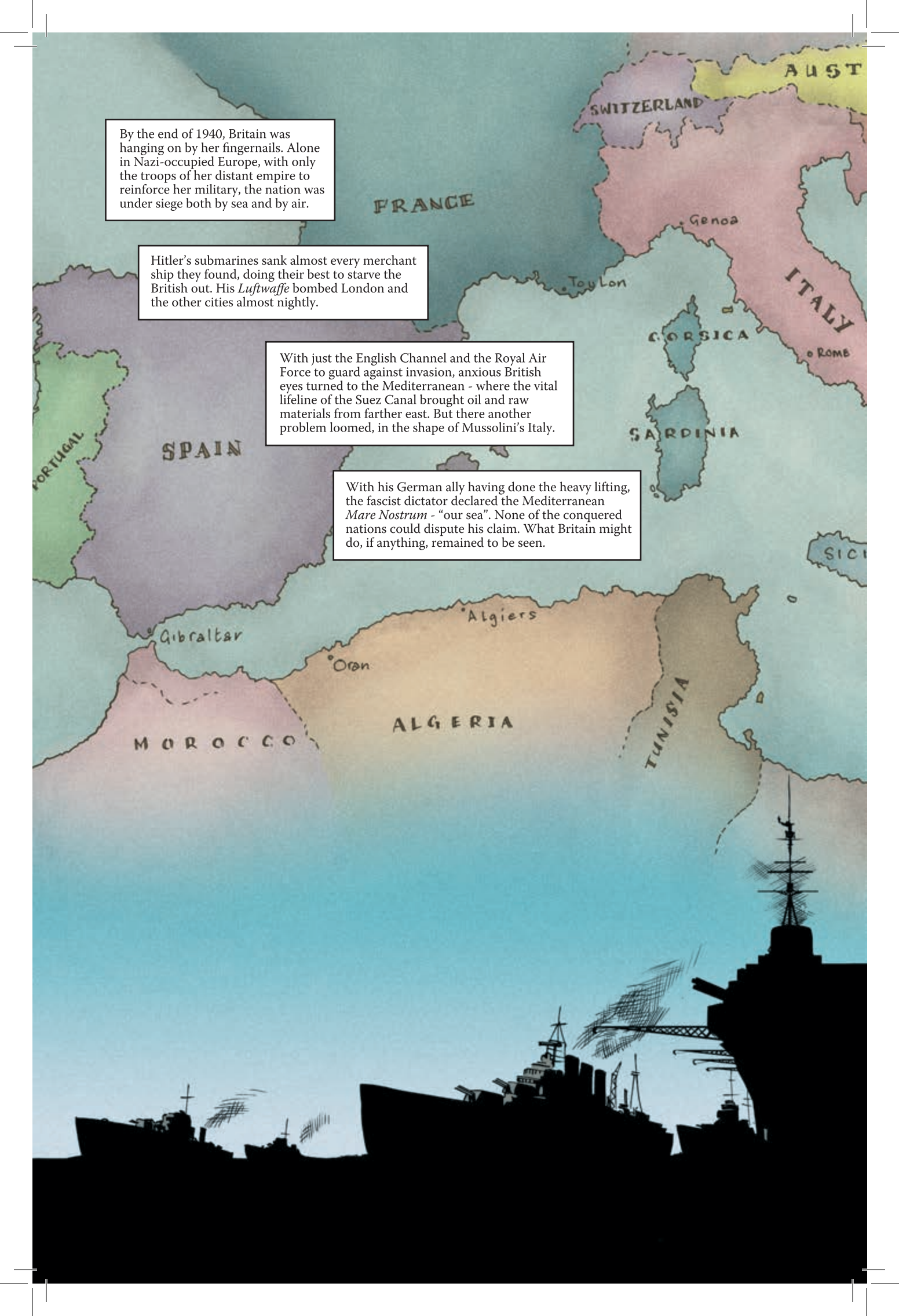




HERE COMES YOUR CHANCE TO SHINE, MAESTRO!







By the end of 1940, Britain was hanging on by her fingernails. Alone in Nazi-occupied Europe, with only the troops of her distant empire to reinforce her military, the nation was under siege both by sea and by air.

Hitler's submarines sank almost every merchant ship they found, doing their best to starve the British out. His *Luftwaffe* bombed London and the other cities almost nightly.

With just the English Channel and the Royal Air Force to guard against invasion, anxious British eyes turned to the Mediterranean - where the vital lifeline of the Suez Canal brought oil and raw materials from farther east. But there another problem loomed, in the shape of Mussolini's Italy.

With his German ally having done the heavy lifting, the fascist dictator declared the Mediterranean *Mare Nostrum* - "our sea". None of the conquered nations could dispute his claim. What Britain might do, if anything, remained to be seen.



Occupying Libya, Italy's forces menaced British troops in Egypt, outnumbering them four to one. In the air the odds were even worse. At sea, the latest Italian battleships outclassed the older vessels of the Royal Navy, who - as usual - had too much work to do and too much space to do it in.

At stake were the canal, the naval base at Malta, and the crucial convoy routes across the Med. To cede such treasures to the enemy could not be countenanced. With the odds so poor, almost any scheme was on the table, no matter how bizarre or harebrained.

The one the Navy chose was Operation *Judgement*: which ensured that the night of 11th November, 1940, would be one for the history books.





FOUR ATTEMPTS...



IT TOOK YOU  
FOUR ATTEMPTS TO  
LAND ON THIS AFTERNOON,  
YOU HAD TO GO ROUND  
FOUR TIMES...

SIR, IT JUST  
DIDN'T LOOK  
RIGHT, I-  
SHUT UP.



DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT  
MAKES US LOOK LIKE TO THE OTHER  
SQUADRONS? TO THE ENTIRE SHIP'S  
COMPANY, COME TO THAT?


IT'S CLOWNS LIKE YOU  
THAT GIVE NAVAL FLIERS A  
BAD NAME. YOU'RE THE REASON  
WE GET STUCK WITH KITES THAT  
OUGHT TO BE IN A MUSEUM,  
THE REASON WE'RE A BLOODY  
LAUGHING STOCK-!



CAPTAIN SHANKS,  
I- I REALLY MUST  
PROTEST-!


YOU MUSTN'T.  
BELIEVE ME, YOU  
ABSOLUTELY  
MUSTN'T.






EVEN THE REST OF THE NAVY THINK WE'RE A JOKE. OH, THEY'LL PUT A CARRIER OR TWO TO SEA, BUT REALLY THEY'D RATHER WE JUST PISSSED OFF SO THEY CAN PLAY WITH THEIR NICE SHINY BATTLESHIPS.

"THE **FLEET AIR ARM**, WHAT'S THAT? OH, YOU MEAN THE AIR BRANCH - OR WHAT IS IT IT'S CALLED AGAIN...?"




SOME OF US BELIEVE THAT AIRCRAFT AT SEA ARE THE FUTURE. **SOME OF US** WOULD LIKE TO **PROVE OUR WORTH...**



WHICH IS EXACTLY WHERE YOU THREE DON'T COME IN.

YOU SEE... I'VE BEEN KEEPING AN EYE ON YOU, THESE LAST COUPLE OF MONTHS...



YOU'RE HERE, BUT YOU'RE NEVER **REALLY** WITH US, ARE YOU? YOU ONLY EVER DO SO MUCH - ENOUGH NOT TO GET BOOTED OUT, BUT NOTHING MORE THAN THAT. NOTHING SPECIAL.

WHERE WILL WE FIND YOU, I WONDER, WHEN THE TIME COMES FOR AN ALL-OUT MAXIMUM EFFORT? WHEN WE NEED CHAPS WHO AREN'T AFRAID OF THE RISKS?





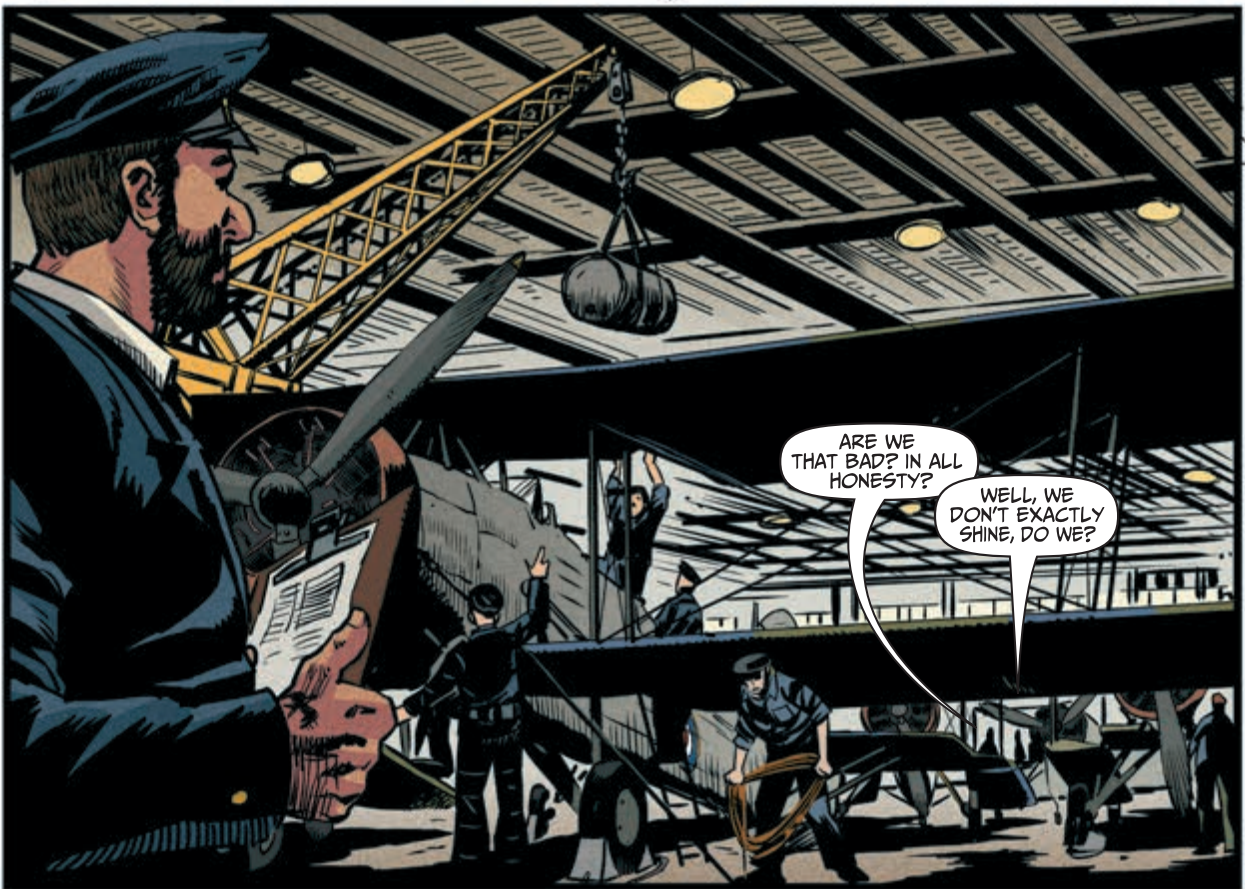






















THE REST OF THE  
FLEET HAVE BROKEN OFF,  
THEY HAVE BUSINESS OF THEIR  
OWN TO ATTEND TO.

IT'S JUST  
*ILLUSTRIOUS* AND HER  
ESCORTS NOW.

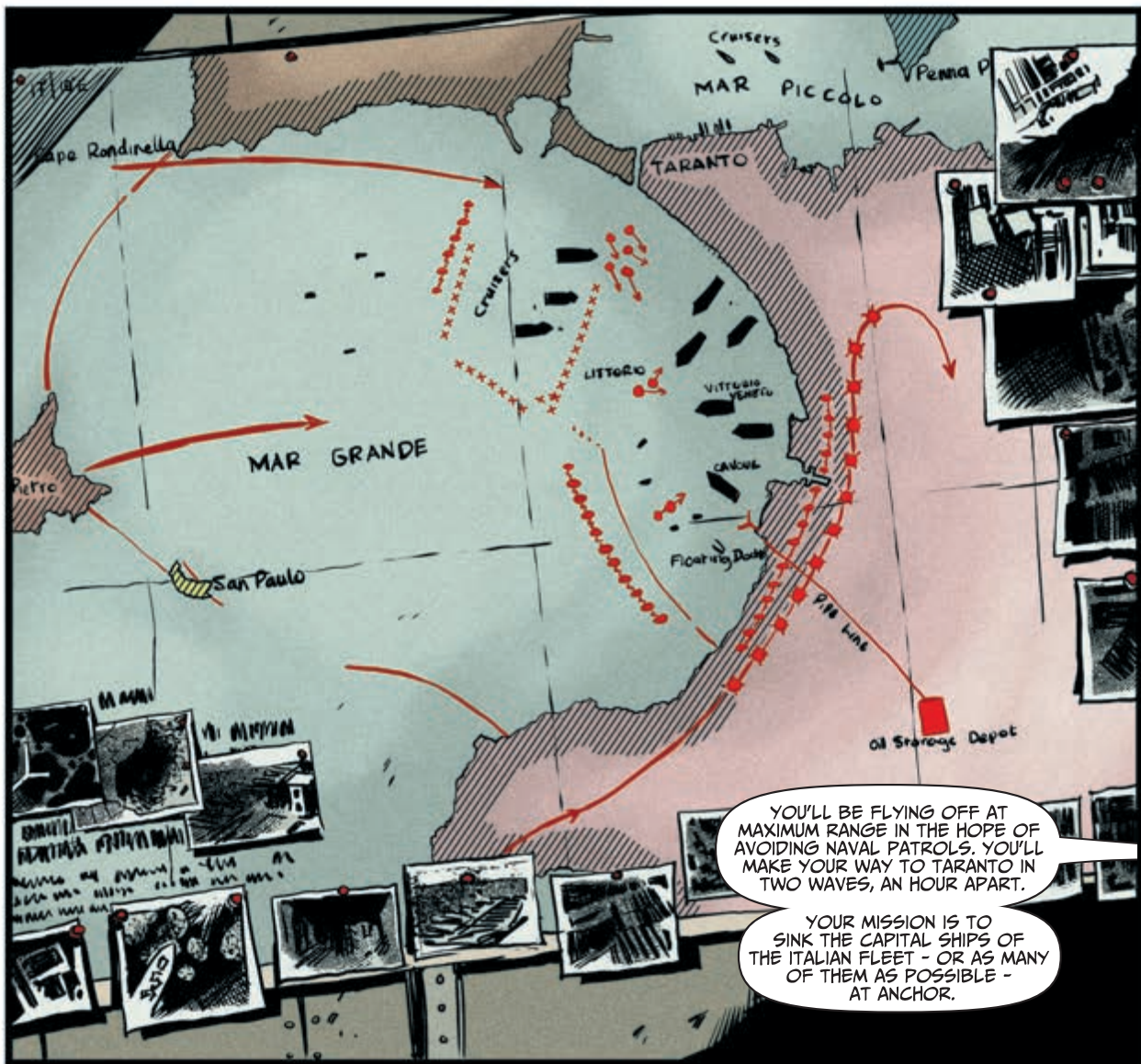
WE'RE HOPING  
THIS OTHER ACTIVITY  
WILL KEEP THE ENEMY  
FROM NOTICING US, AND  
INDEED WHAT WE'RE UP TO  
TONIGHT. ONCE WE REACH  
POINT X - IN ABOUT AN  
HOUR FROM NOW - WE  
WILL BEGIN LAUNCHING  
THE SWORDFISH.

A LOT OF PEOPLE  
DON'T THINK THIS IS  
POSSIBLE, OR ARE PERHAPS  
UNABLE EVEN TO IMAGINE IT.  
YOU'RE GOING TO PROVE  
THEM WRONG.

GENTLEMEN:  
*OPERATION  
JUDGEMENT.*







YOU'LL BE FLYING OFF AT MAXIMUM RANGE IN THE HOPE OF AVOIDING NAVAL PATROLS. YOU'LL MAKE YOUR WAY TO TARANTO IN TWO WAVES, AN HOUR APART.

YOUR MISSION IS TO SINK THE CAPITAL SHIPS OF THE ITALIAN FLEET - OR AS MANY OF THEM AS POSSIBLE - AT ANCHOR.



NOW, YOU'VE ALL BEEN OVER THE OPERATION A DOZEN TIMES, I'M WELL AWARE OF THAT. YOU KNOW YOUR OWN PARTICULAR JOBS INSIDE OUT.

BUT ONE MORE TIME NEVER HURTS. SO:



PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE LAYOUT OF THE TARGET. THE MAR PICCOLO, THE INNER HARBOR, *HERE...* AND THE MAR GRANDE, THE OUTER HARBOR, *HERE...*

THEY DIDN'T JUST THINK THIS UP ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT, DID THEY?

I DOUBT IT.







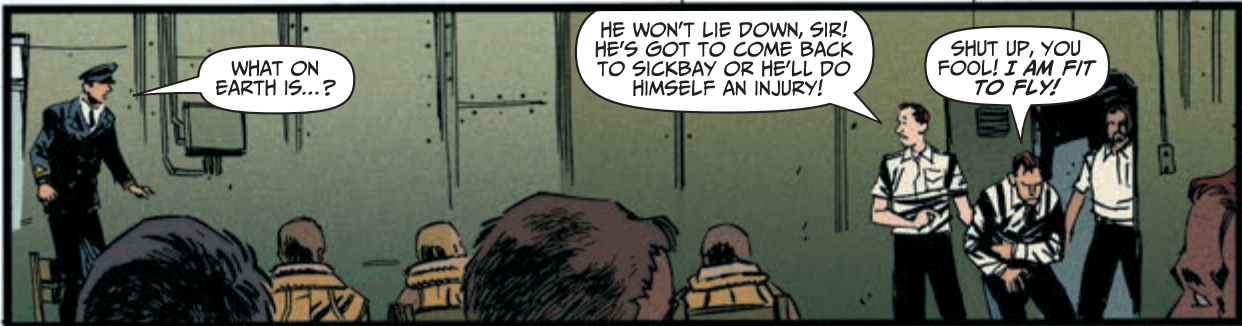


VERY DROLL.

WE'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU AT POINT Y. DO PLEASE TRY NOT TO DAWDLE, WE-

AAAAAAH!

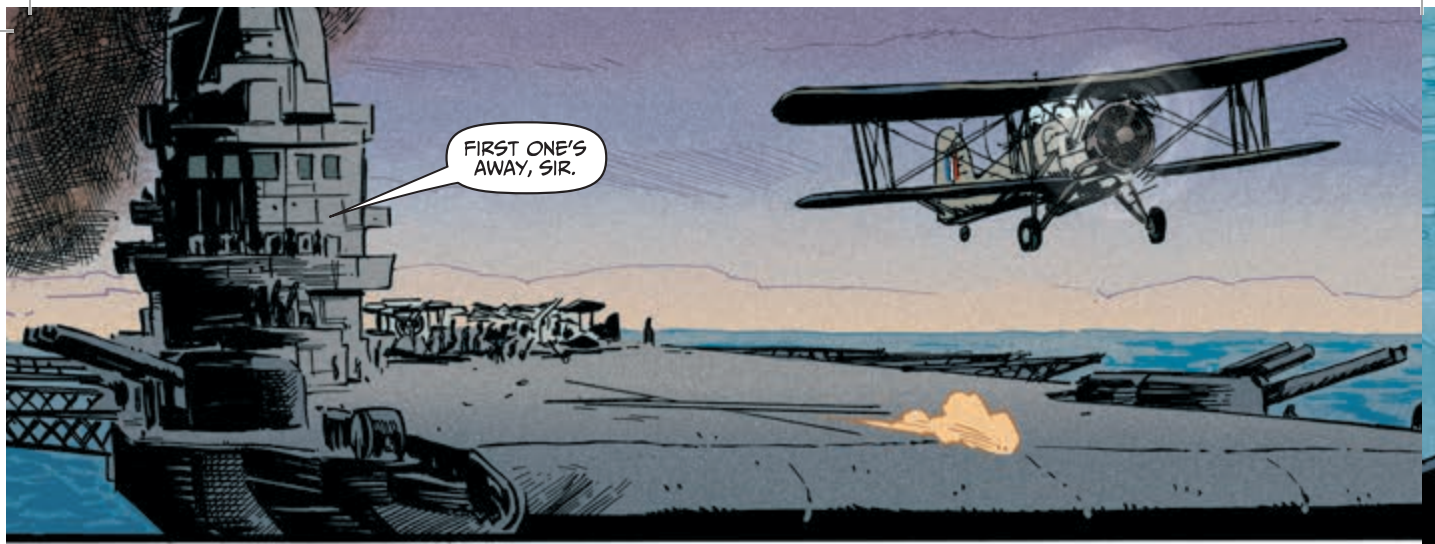






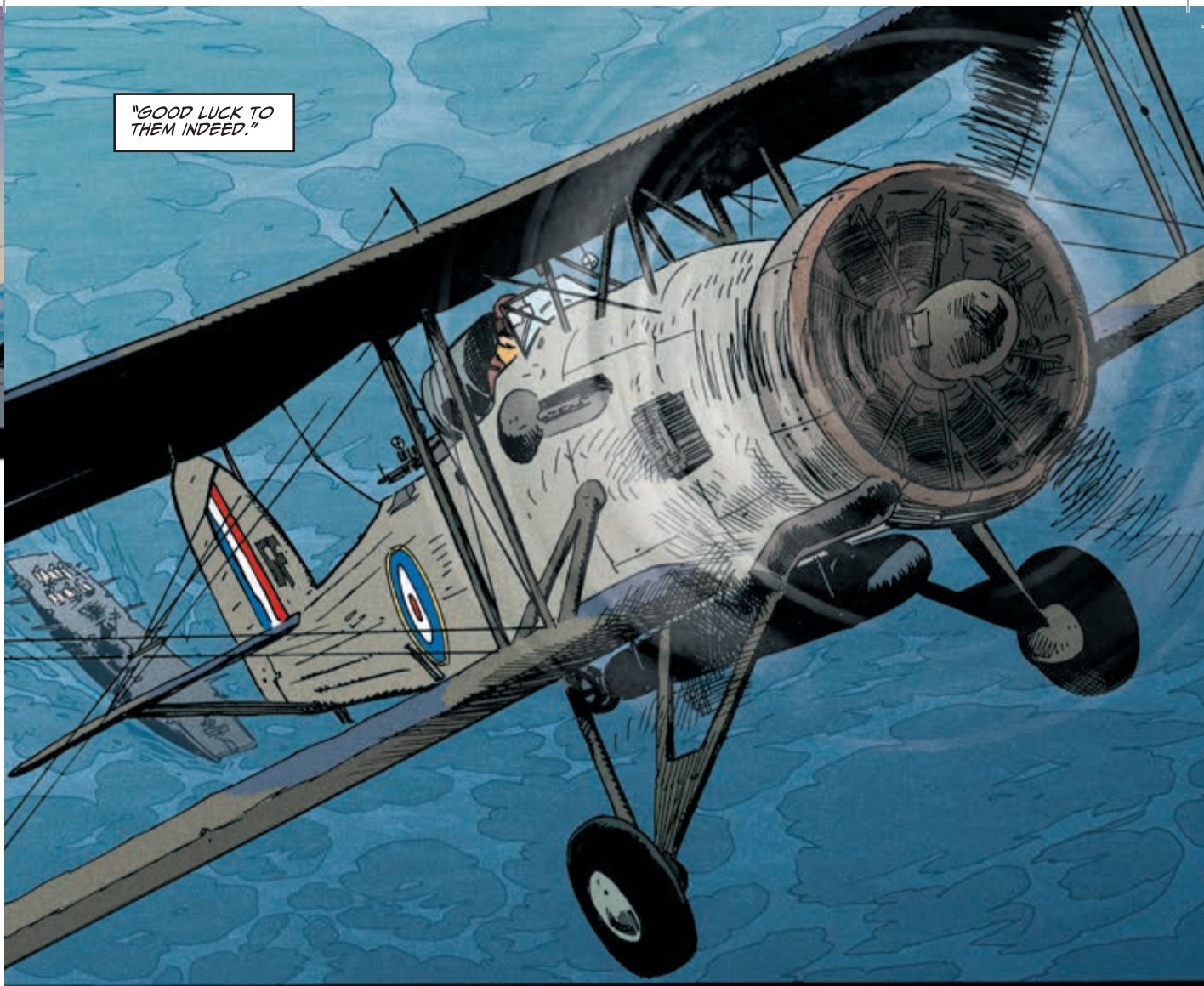




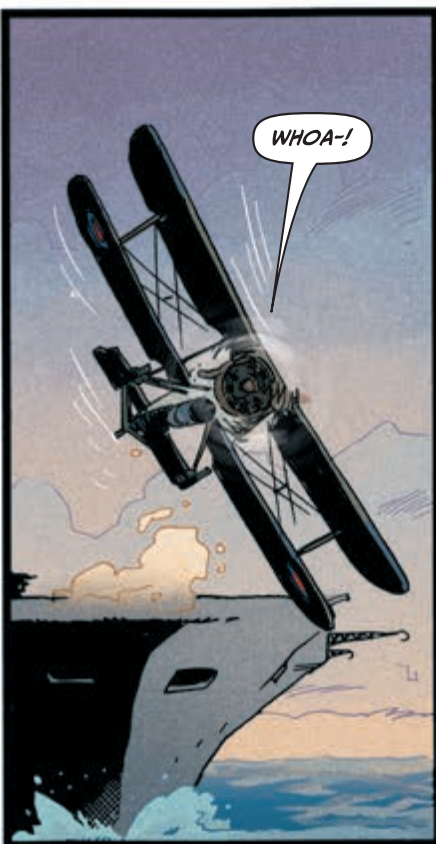




"GOOD LUCK TO  
THEM INDEED."



WHOA-!



WHAT THE  
HELL WAS THAT?  
THAT GREAT  
BLOODY LURCH  
SHE JUST  
GAVE?



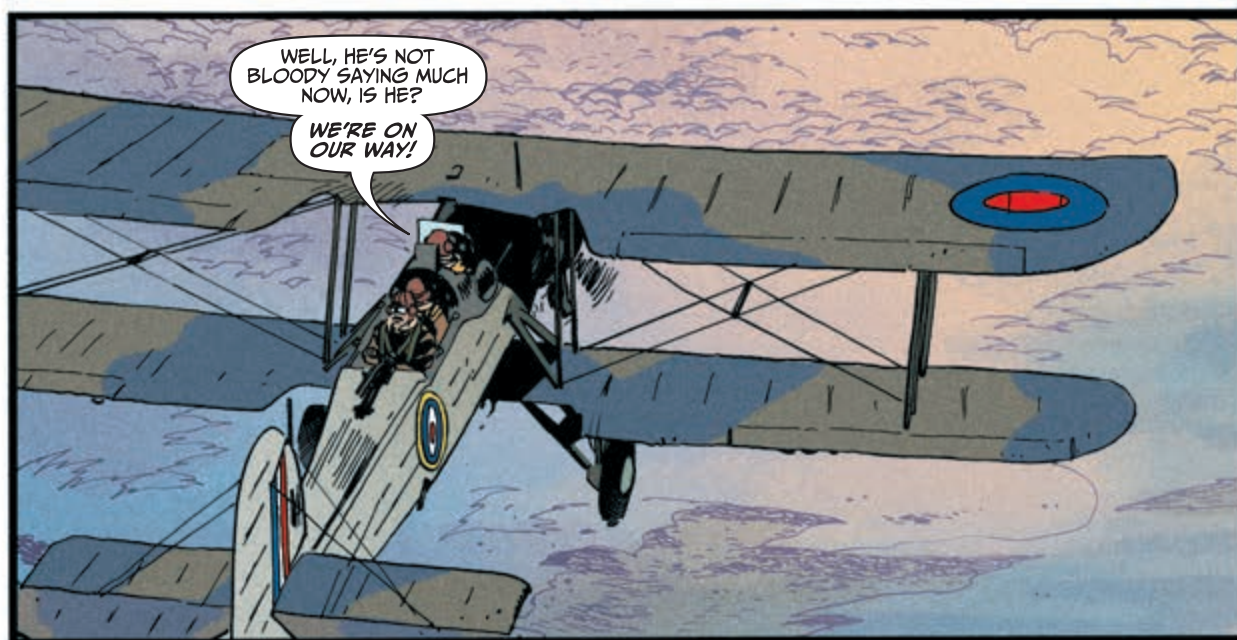
I THINK IT  
MIGHT HAVE BEEN  
THE AUXILIARY TANK  
BREAKING LOOSE...

YEP, THAT  
WAS IT. STRAPS  
MUST HAVE  
GONE.

BUT-  
BUT THAT  
MEANS-













EVEN IF WE DON'T GET BACK, EVEN IF WE'RE CAPTURED OR WHATEVER, IT'S STILL WORTH IT. ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT WHAT WE'RE CAPABLE OF AND MAXIMUM EFFORT AND SO ON - THAT'S NOT JUST HOT AIR...



EITHER WE CAN DO THIS JOB OR WE CAN'T. THERE ARE TOO MANY NAYSAYERS WATCHING THE FLEET AIR ARM - AND US IN PARTICULAR, SUCH AS THAT SOD SHANKS - FOR ANY HALF MEASURES NOW.

WE PRESS ON REGARDLESS, OLLIE. WE KNEW WHAT WE WERE DOING WHEN WE VOLUNTEERED.

Mmm



AND WHAT'S MORE, I'M-

♪♪♪♪♪

WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?

RADIO ROME. SPOT OF OPERA, BY THE SOUND OF THINGS.



RADIO SILENCE, YOU FOOL-!

I'M RECEIVING, NOT TRANSMITTING, YOU BERK!

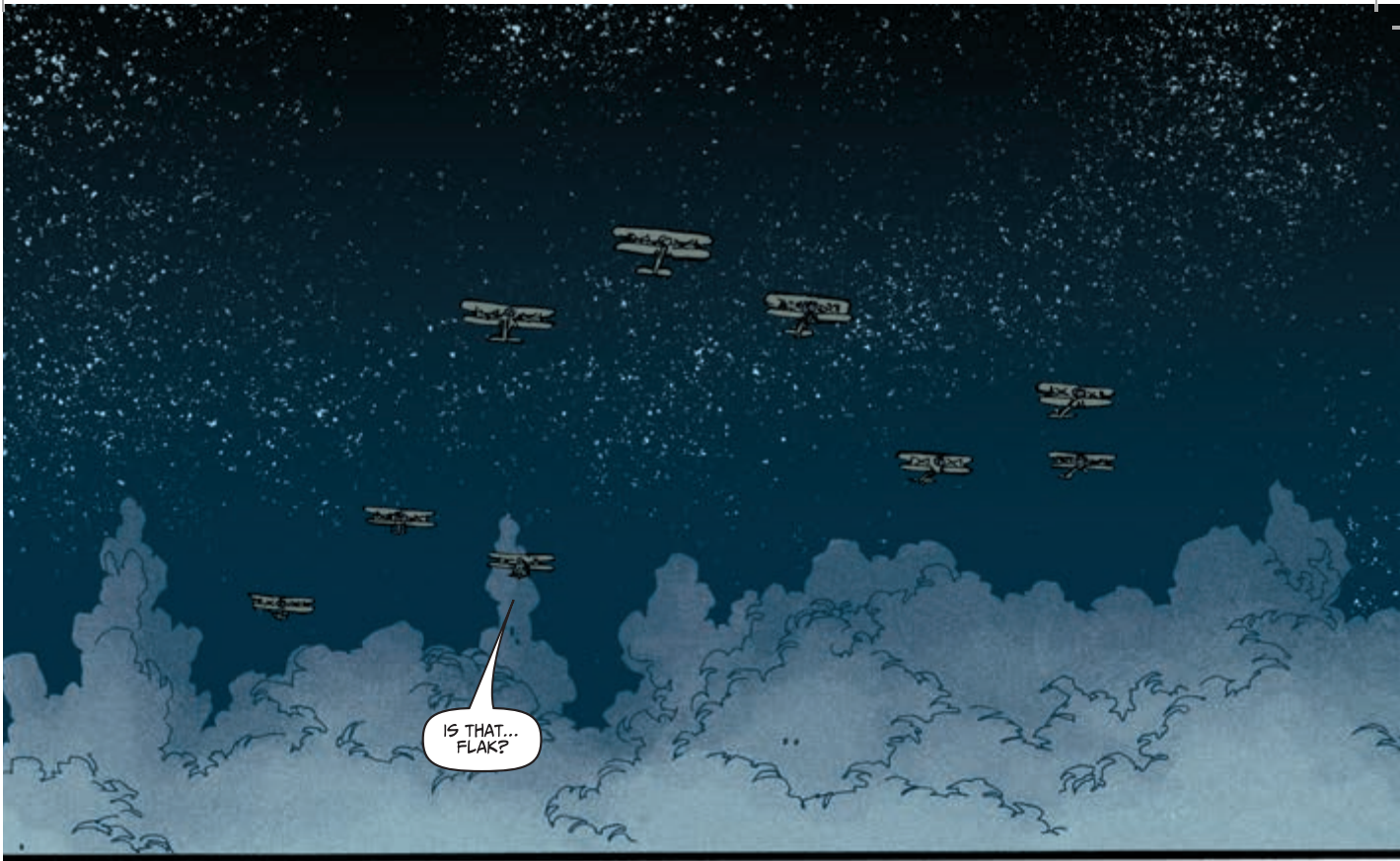
WHAT IS IT, ANYWAY?



RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES.

JUST THE THING FOR A NICE LITTLE TRIP TO VALHALLA, MM?





IS THAT...  
FLAK?



CHRIST, I THINK  
THAT MIGHT BE TARANTO.  
TIMING'S RIGHT.

WHAT THE HELL  
ARE THEY SHOOTING  
AT, WE'RE NOT EVEN  
THERE YET...



NO IDEA. AWFULLY  
NICE OF THEM TO LIGHT  
THE WAY FOR US, DON'T  
YOU THINK?

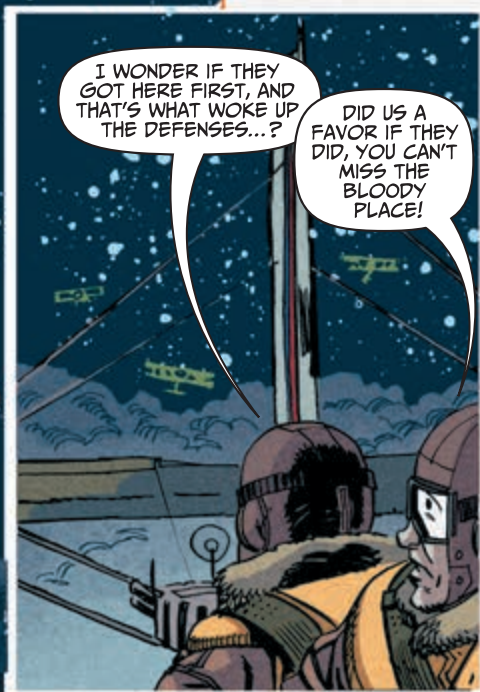
AIRCRAFT  
ASTERN. TWO  
STRINGBAGS.



CERTAIN?

MAKE THAT THREE.  
THEY'RE JOINING THE  
FORMATION, IT MUST BE  
OUR LOST SHEEP.









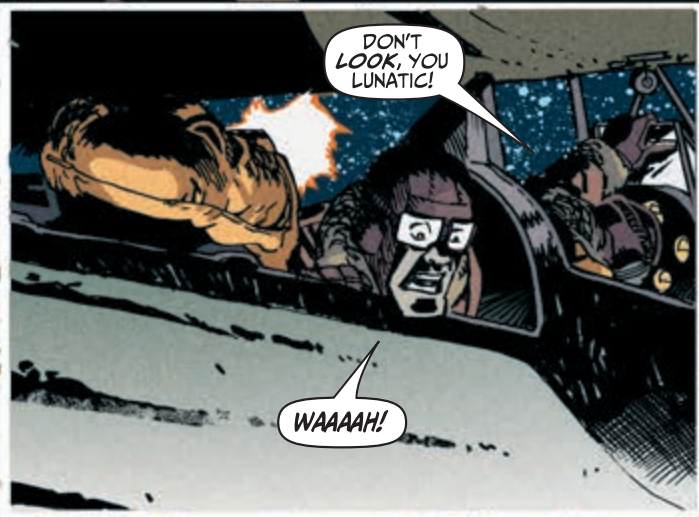
OH, JESUS.  
HERE  
GOES BLOODY  
NOTHING.

IT'S LIKE  
GUY FAWKES NIGHT  
DOWN THERE-!

YEAH, WELL,  
YOU AIN'T SEEN  
NOTHIN' YET!



FLARES  
AWAY!



DON'T  
LOOK, YOU  
LUNATIC!

WAAAAH!













OH, GOD, THEY'RE  
HEADING STRAIGHT FOR  
THE BALLOONS - THEY'LL  
GET THEIR WINGS-



"THEY-"

"JESUS CHRIST  
ALMIGHTY."



SHIT,  
LOOK AT THE  
FLAK-!

YOU CAN'T  
BLOODY MISS  
IT, WE'VE GOT A  
GRANDSTAND  
SEAT!

LOOK HOW  
LOW THEY ARE...



"COME ON, LADS...  
COME ON..."





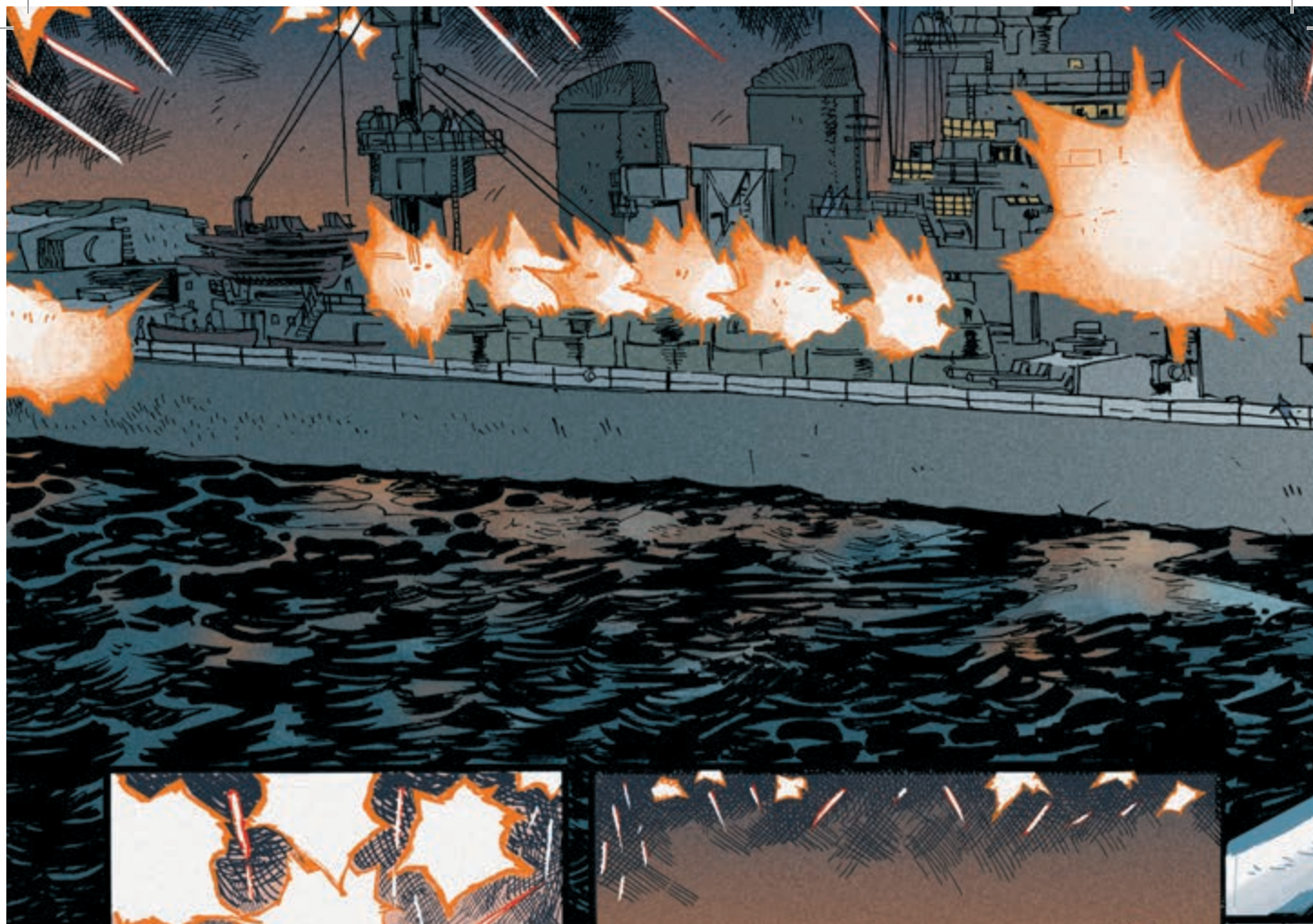
"THEY SHOULD  
HAVE BEEN SHOT  
TO BITS BY NOW!"



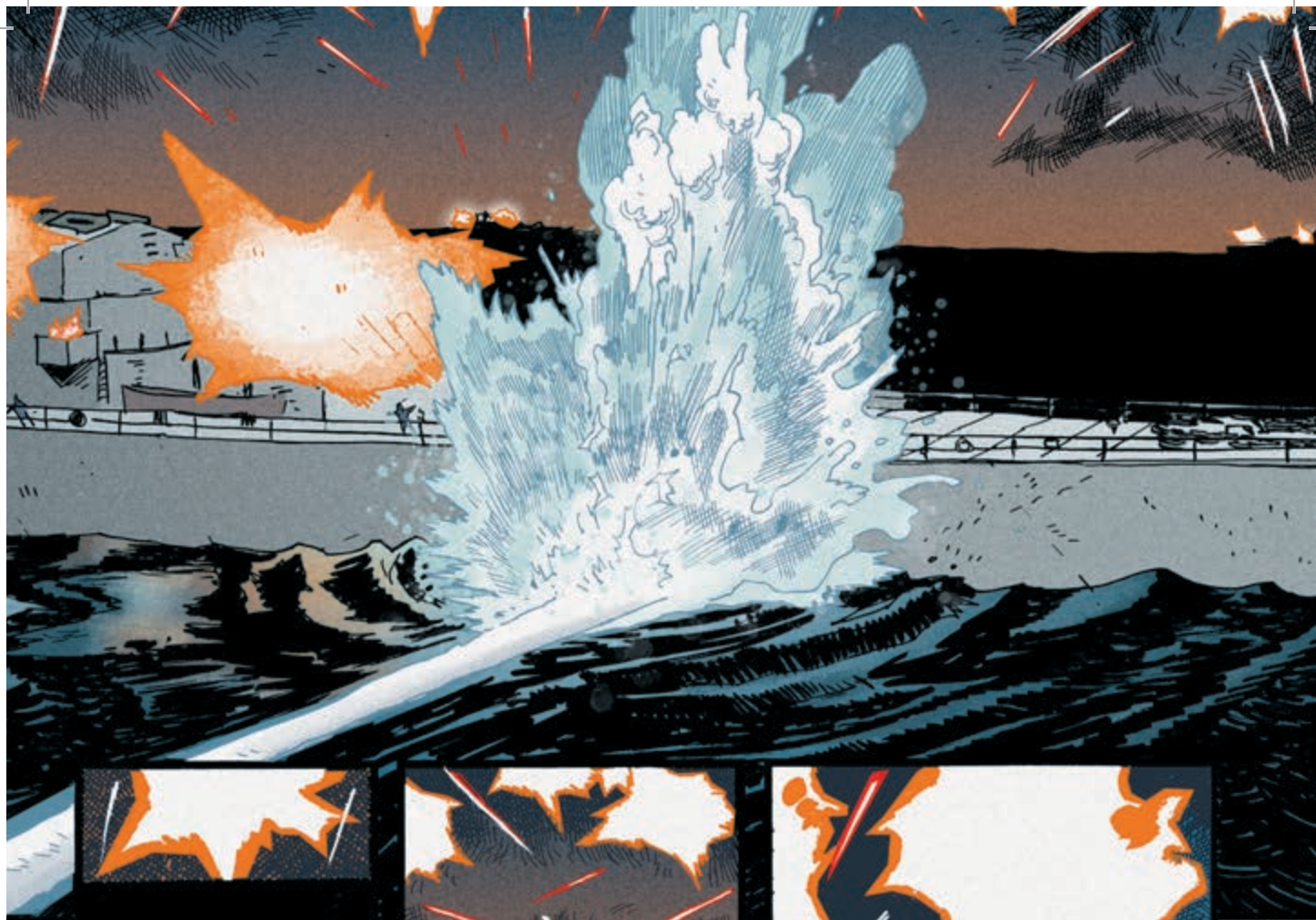
"COME ON...!"











WILLIAMSON  
AND SCARLETT,  
GOD HELP  
THEM...!

NOT BLOODY  
STOPPING THE  
OTHERS!



ANY HITS?

COULDN'T  
SEE.

YOU COULD GET  
OUT AND WALK ON  
THAT SODDING TRACER,  
I CAN'T UNDERSTAND  
WHY THEY HAVEN'T BEEN  
BLASTED OUT OF  
THE SKY...

YOU TWO ENJOY  
THE SHOW. I'M KEEPING  
AN EYE OUT FOR TROUBLE,  
JUST IN CASE.





BLOODY  
HELL, SOMEONE'S  
A BIT KEEN, AREN'T  
THEY?

HOW  
MANY'S THAT  
NOW?

OLLIE!  
HOW MANY  
HITS?



UM, NOT SURE.  
BUT WE HAVEN'T  
LOST ANY MORE  
STRINGBAGS.

ONLY  
ONE STILL  
TO MAKE ITS  
RUN, ARCHIE.  
REST ARE  
REFORMING  
FOR THE TRIP  
HOME.







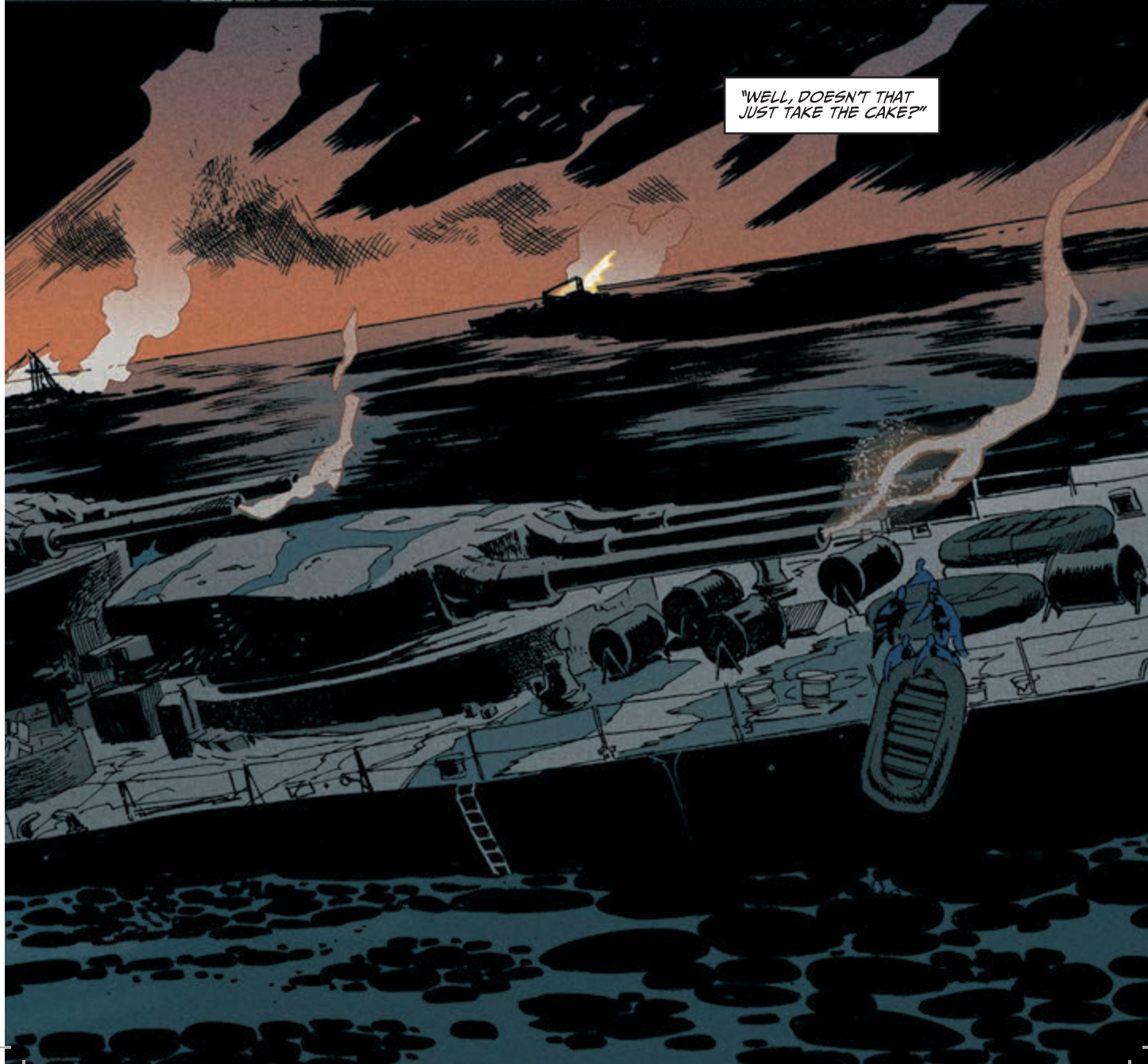
ALL RIGHT, LET'S  
DROP OUR LAST FLARES TO SHOW  
HIM THE WAY - THEN WE CAN GET  
GOING OURSELVES...

I JUST DON'T  
UNDERSTAND IT, THE  
FLAK'S *STILL* GOING  
FAR TOO HIGH...!



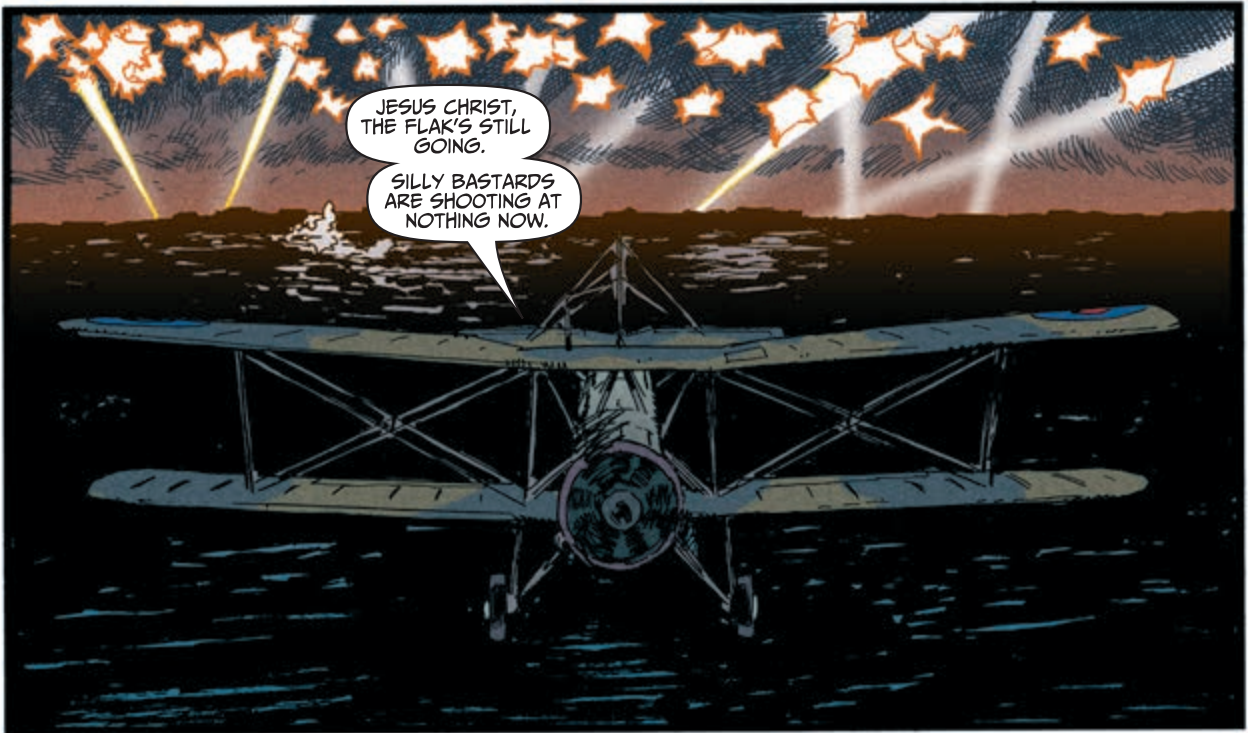
YOU DON'T  
SUPPOSE OUR CHAPS  
ARE GOING IN SO LOW,  
THE GUNNERS ARE SCARED  
OF HITTING THEIR  
OWN SHIPS?

HA! NO!  
SERIOUSLY...?

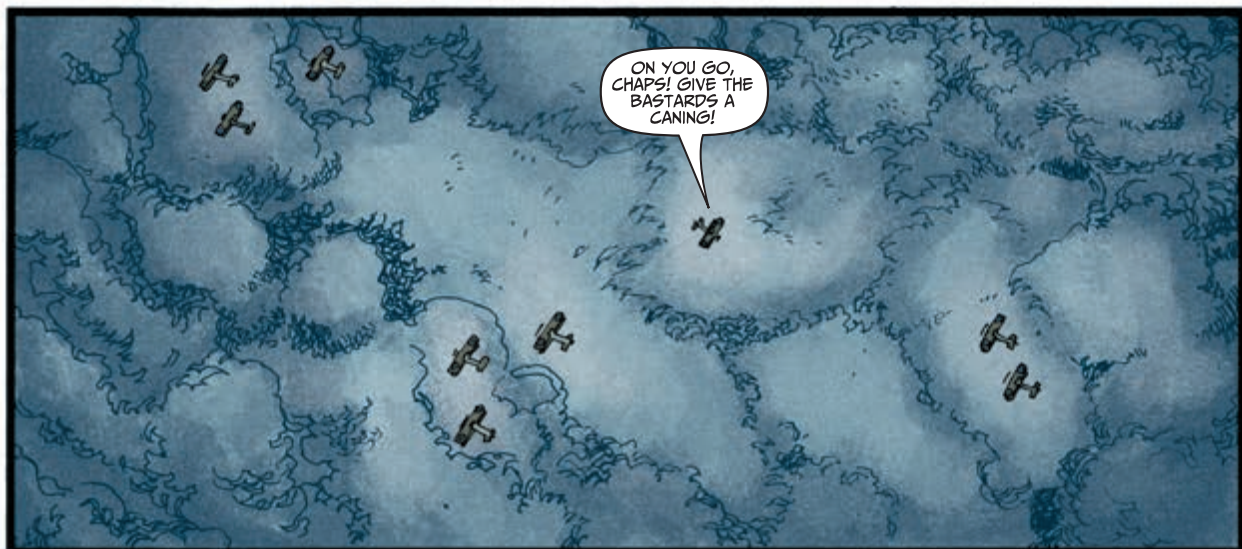


"WELL, DOESN'T THAT  
JUST TAKE THE CAKE?"

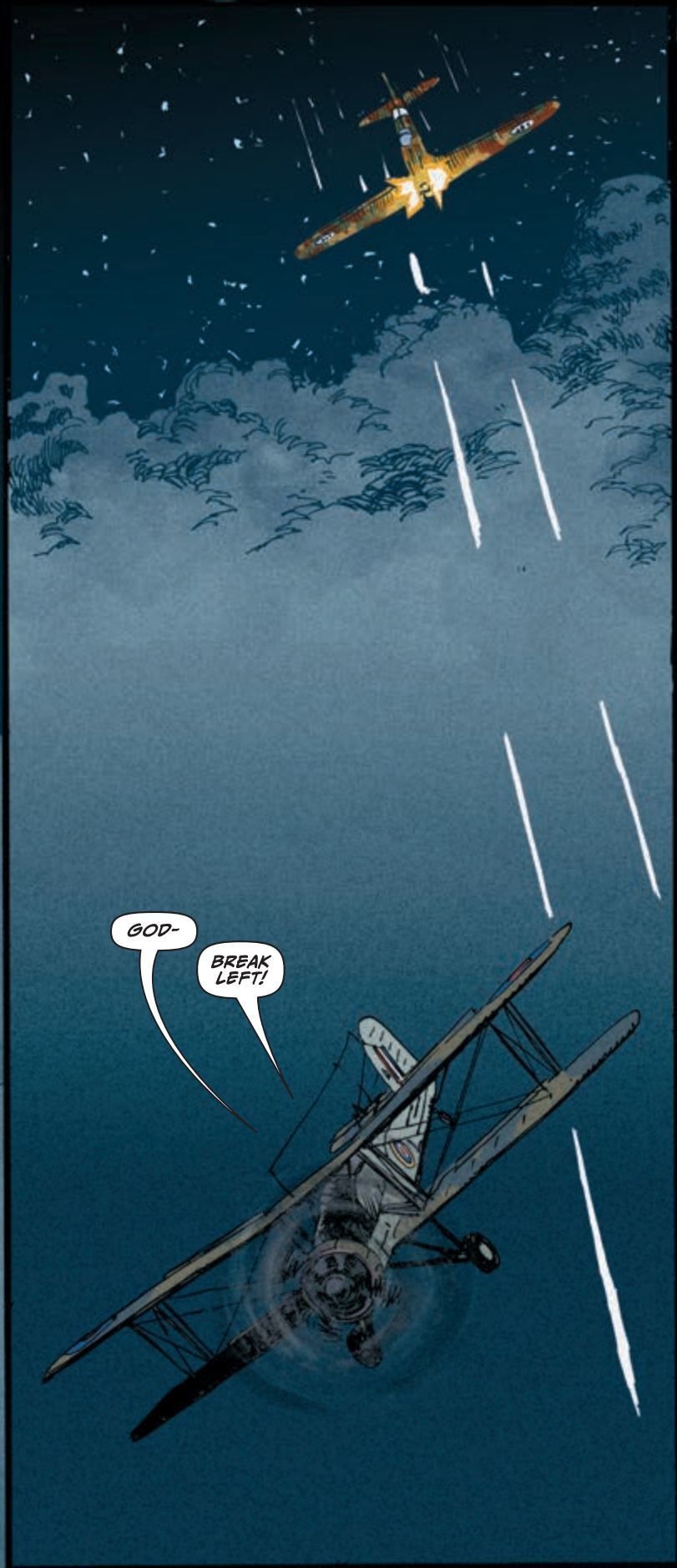












GOD-

BREAK  
LEFT!



KEEP TURNING,  
ARCHIE! KEEP  
TURNING!

YAAAH-!





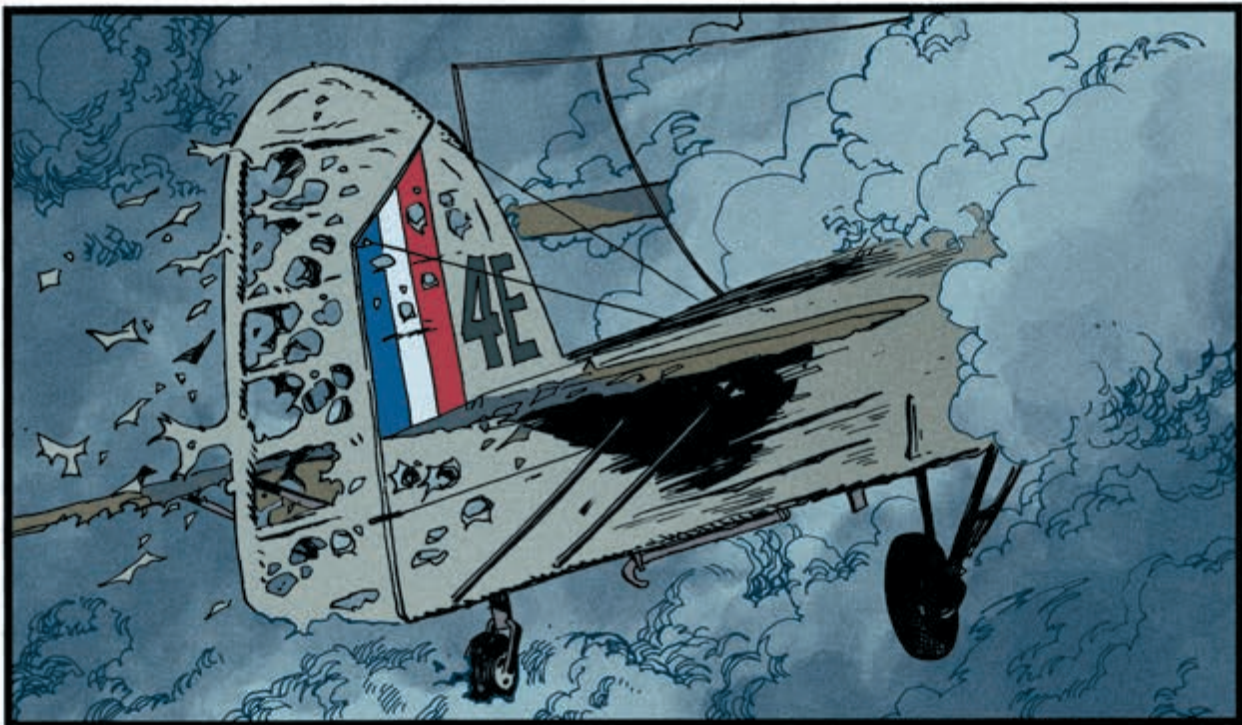


COME ON, POPS, HIT THE BLIGHTER!

I AM! HE DOESN'T GIVE A MONKEY'S!



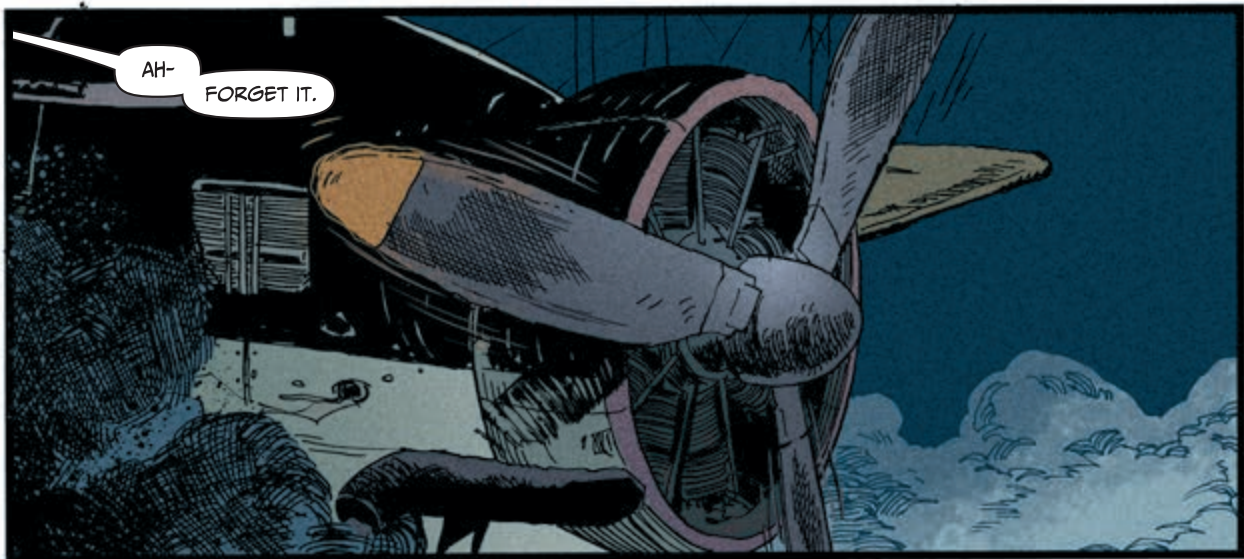




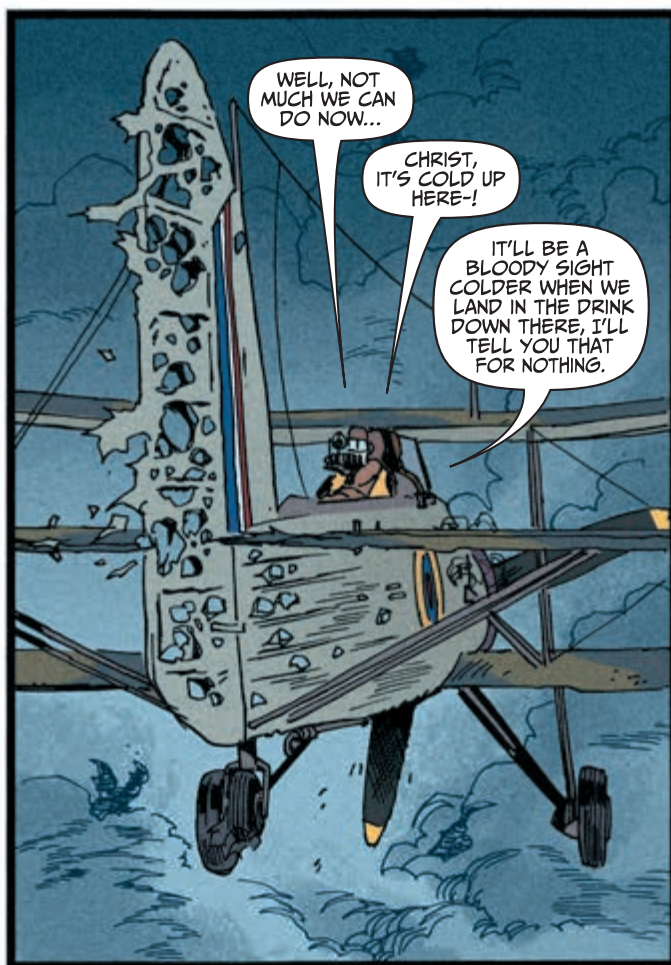

















By morning, three great battleships - half the *Regia Marina's* total complement - lay crippled in the waters of Taranto harbor.

Months would pass before the *Caio Duilio* and the *Littorio* were back in action. The older *Conte di Cavour* spent the war in Trieste, reduced to a hulk. In two raids, spaced an hour apart, the British had changed the balance of power in the Mediterranean overnight.

The cost was two Swordfish shot down, with two men killed and two more captured.





Though few could see it at the time, that one night's work meant the beginning of the end for the battleship. Naval air power - the aircraft carrier and its squadrons - had begun its rise to ascendancy.

For many on both sides, mighty warships - seaborne castles bristling with turreted guns - possessed a majesty which aircraft that stung like gnats could never have. Operation *Judgement* was the writing on the wall: its issue most unpopular in some surprising quarters.


Six months later, a Japanese military mission visited Taranto, its officers showing great interest in the horror that befell their Axis cousin's navy. Questions were asked, and notes were taken.

Six months after that, half a world away, they would undertake a similar operation of their own.









From the Arctic to the tropics, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, Stringbags and their crews fought against the forces of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. They depth-charged U-boats and torpedoed merchant vessels loaded with munitions; flying from ragtag escort carriers they shepherded convoys over the oceans; they flew in howling gales and tempests that kept more modern aircraft trapped in their hangar decks.

Ultimately, the Swordfish would outlast its own replacement: the Albacore, another Fairey product, lacking both performance and charisma. At least one squadron quite happily replaced its Albacores with Stringbags.

Incredibly, the notion of a second strike was mentioned to the crews when they returned, before aerial reconnaissance revealed the carnage wrought in the Italian harbor. *Good God*, came the reply, *they only asked the Light Brigade to do it once.*

Once was enough. To this day, on October 21st, the Royal Navy celebrates Trafalgar Night, in commemoration of their 1805 triumph over the French and Spanish. Every November 11th, however, the Fleet Air Arm conducts a celebration of its own.

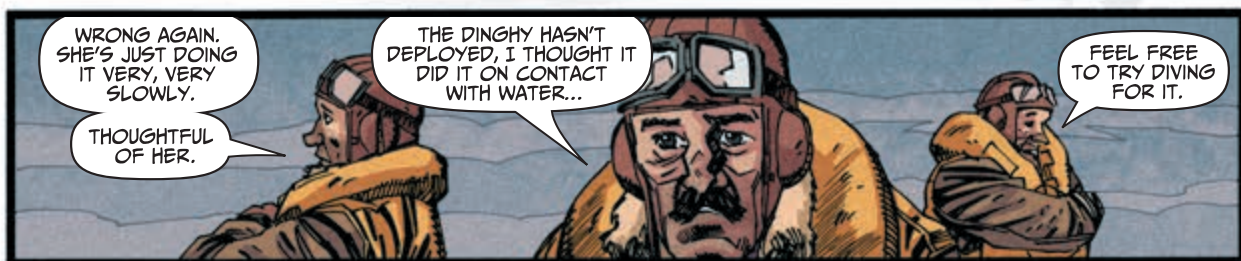


Taranto Night.





I DON'T  
THINK SHE'S  
SINKING...



WRONG AGAIN.  
SHE'S JUST DOING  
IT VERY, VERY  
SLOWLY.

THE DINGHY HASN'T  
DEPLOYED, I THOUGHT IT  
DID IT ON CONTACT  
WITH WATER...

FEEL FREE  
TO TRY DIVING  
FOR IT.

THOUGHTFUL  
OF HER.



WHERE ARE  
WE, ANYWAY?

WELL, WE WERE  
HEADED SOUTHEAST  
TOWARDS THE RENDEZVOUS,  
SO WE'RE SOMEWHERE  
IN THE IONIAN SEA.

IT'S FAIRLY BUSY,  
I IMAGINE THE EYETIES'LL  
PICK US UP SOONER  
OR LATER...



I BET THEY'LL BE  
DELIGHTED TO SEE  
US, TOO.

AFTER ALL THE  
IRONMONGERY I SAW  
SINKING LAST NIGHT?  
NO BET.

WHAT WAS  
THAT?





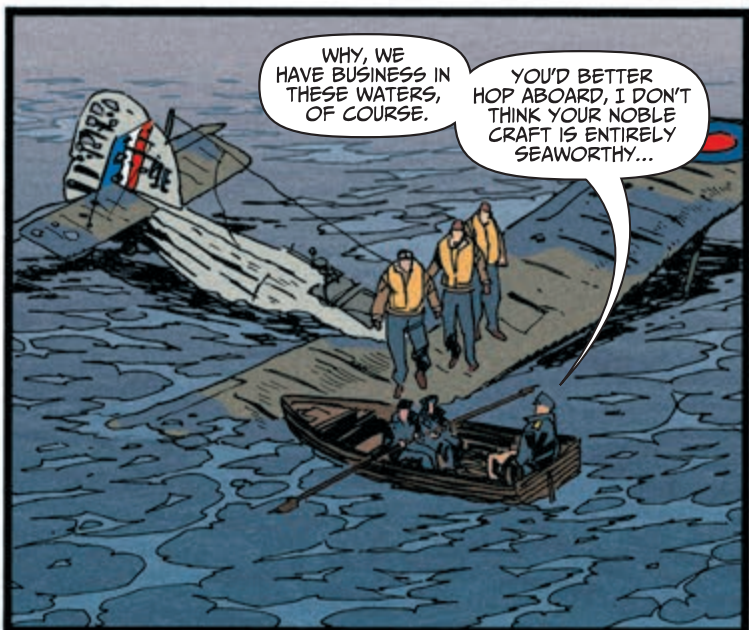
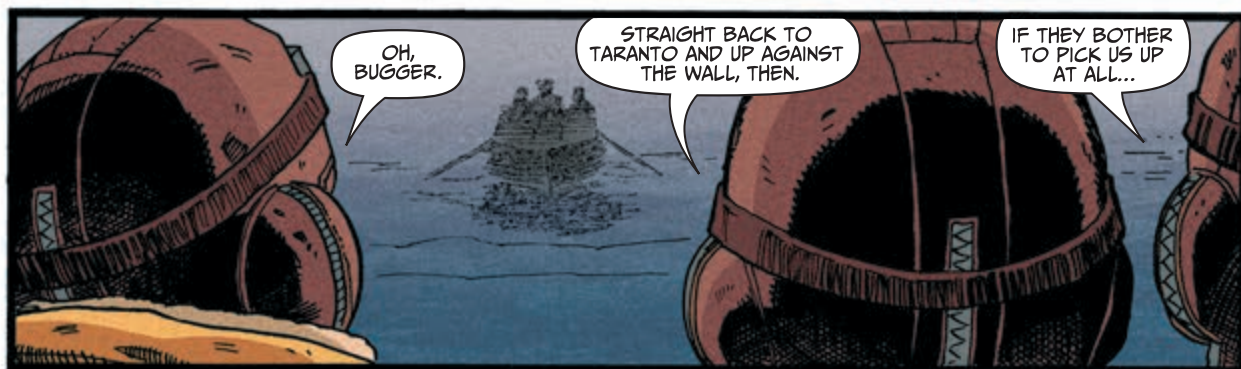
I KNOW IT WAS MY BRIGHT BLOODY IDEA TO KEEP GOING WITHOUT THE EXTRA FUEL. I JUST COULDN'T STAND THE THOUGHT OF BEING LEFT OUT, OF NOT DOING WHAT NEEDED TO BE DONE.

BUT STUCK HERE NOW, COLD LIGHT OF DAY AND SO ON, I CAN SEE THAT IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN SUCH A-

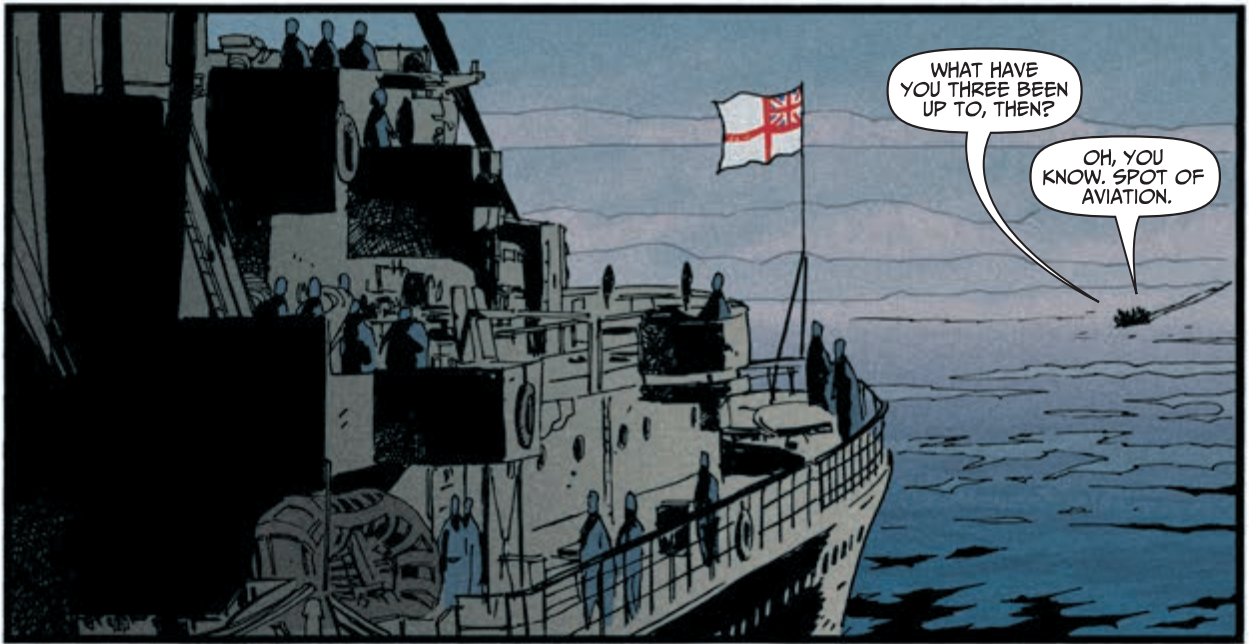
ARCHIE?





















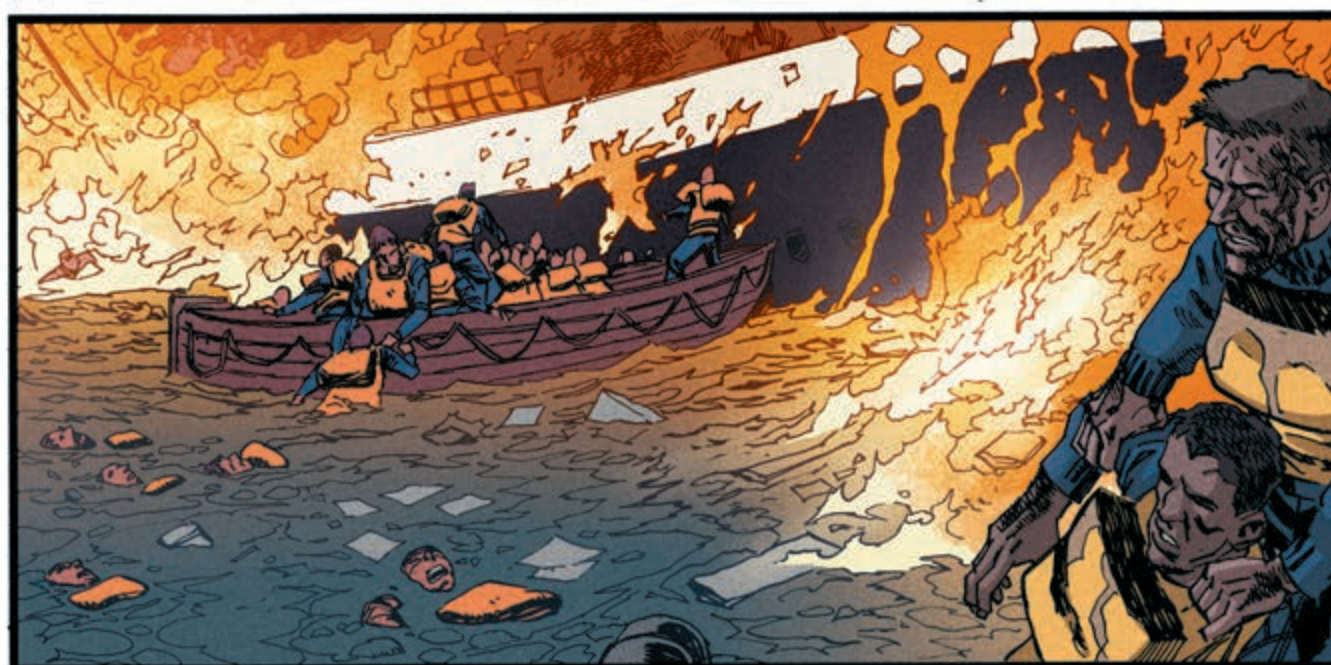
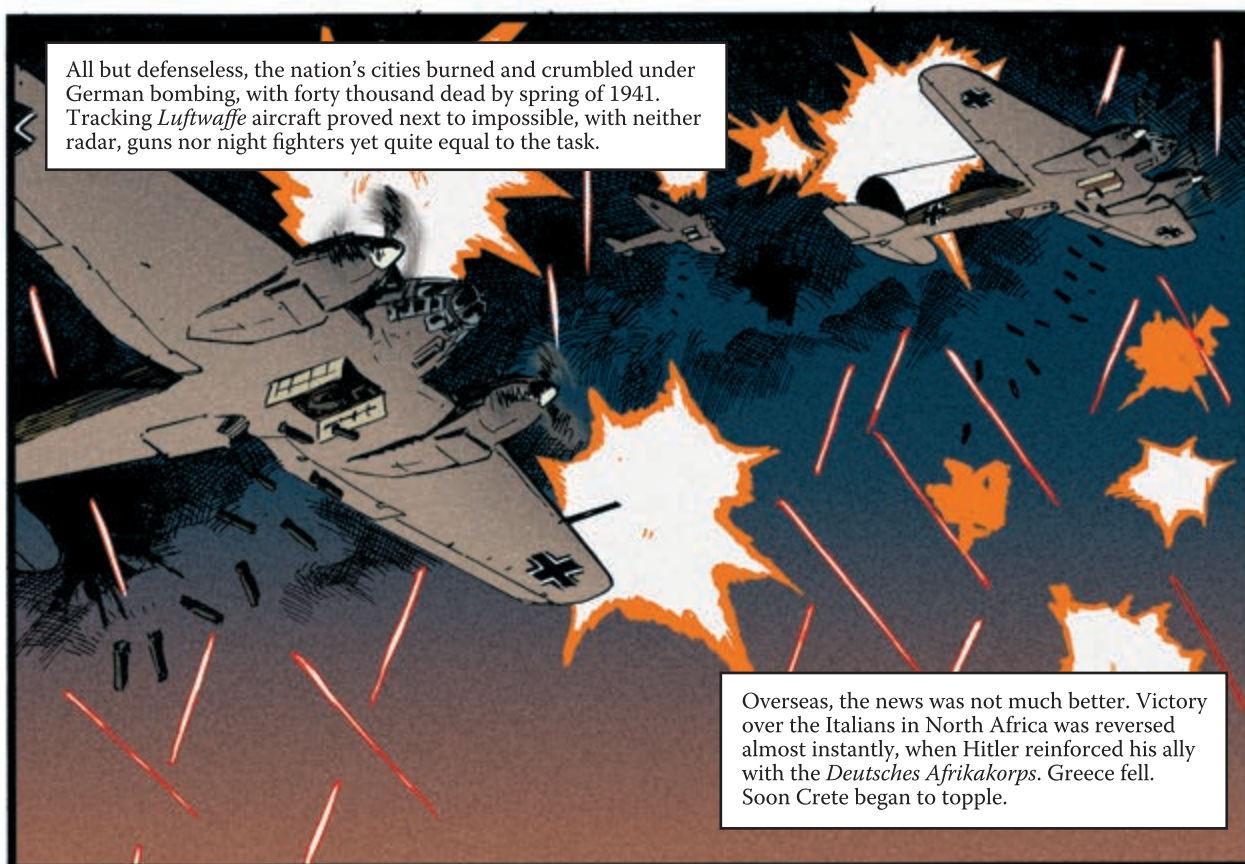




What the British endured  
that dreadful winter became  
a legend called the Blitz.











The British sorely needed victory, any kind of victory. What they got instead was unrestricted commerce warfare.

U-boats did their best to sever the Atlantic lifelines, sending merchantmen and tankers to the bottom almost daily. Slipping past the escorts, either on the surface or beneath it, they descended on the convoy ships like wolves.



Wallowing in the blood of the flock.



And out there on the open ocean, brave men burned.



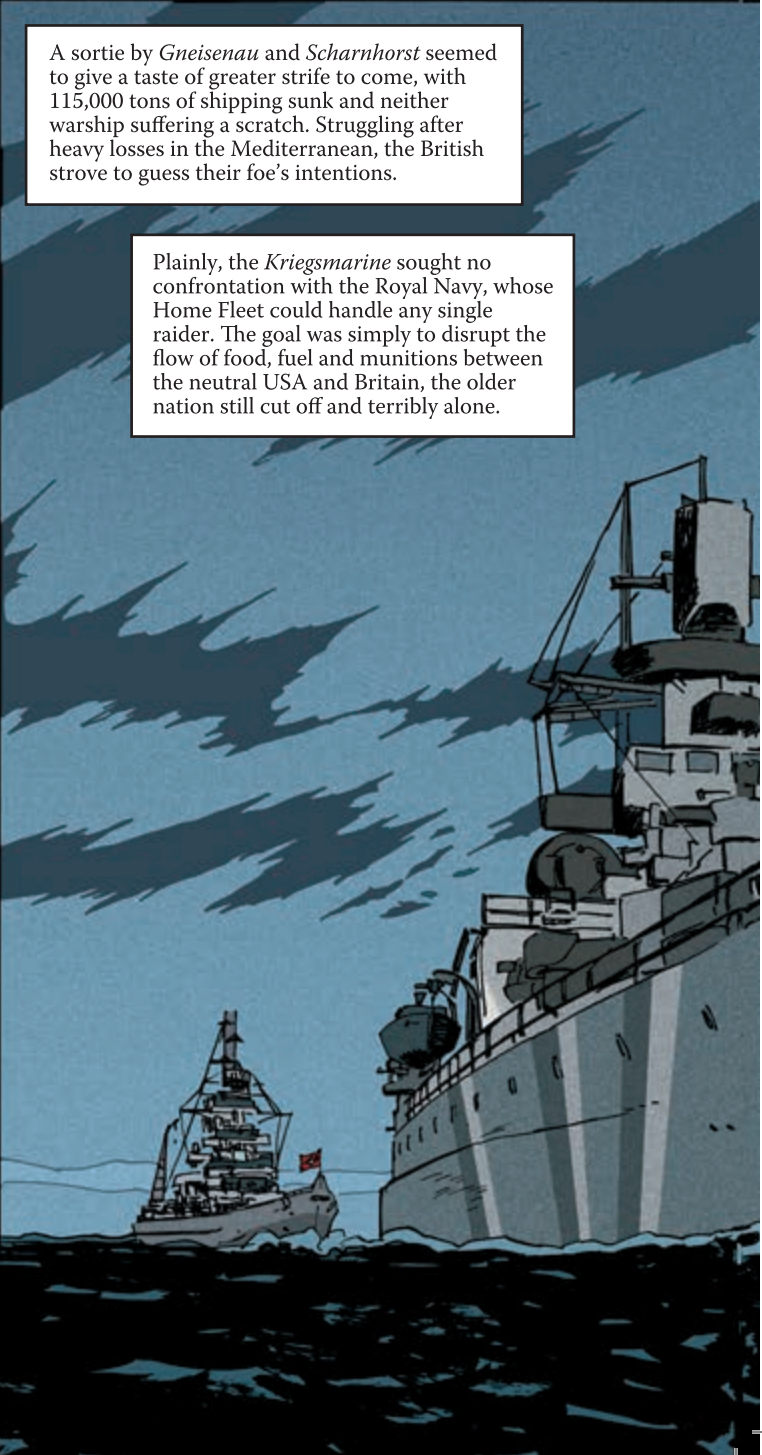


As if all this was not enough, the Germans sent their surface raiders into the Atlantic - heavy cruisers like the *Admiral Scheer* and *Graf Spee*, mighty battlecruisers like the *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*.

Fast, well-armored, with guns whose salvos could cut a merchant ship in half, such beasts were yet another thorn in the Royal Navy's side. Protecting every vessel, every convoy, was impossible.



And all too many lookouts came to know the nightmare of those awful silhouettes on the horizon.



A sortie by *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* seemed to give a taste of greater strife to come, with 115,000 tons of shipping sunk and neither warship suffering a scratch. Struggling after heavy losses in the Mediterranean, the British strove to guess their foe's intentions.

Plainly, the *Kriegsmarine* sought no confrontation with the Royal Navy, whose Home Fleet could handle any single raider. The goal was simply to disrupt the flow of food, fuel and munitions between the neutral USA and Britain, the older nation still cut off and terribly alone.





That meant the merchantmen, plying their trade across an ocean far too large to cover. If two raiders on the loose could claim two dozen vessels, wondered the planners at the British Admiralty, what havoc might a larger force - or larger warships than the *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* - wreak on the hapless merchant fleet?

Their Lordships were right to worry.

For lurking in the waters of Gotenhafen harbor - once Gdynia, in conquered Poland - was something far, far worse.

## 2: Our Belief In You, My Führer





SHE'S JUST A  
GIRL, YOU KNOW, SHE  
ISN'T ANYTHING TO  
BE AFRAID OF...



I'M FINE.

WELL, GO AND  
TALK TO HER, THEN.  
SHE'S AN ABSOLUTE  
CORKER.

I'M FINE...

YOU'RE NOT FINE,  
YOU'RE SO TENSE YOU'RE  
ABOUT TO SNAP  
IN HALF!

LOOK-  
I'M NOT-

I COULD  
PRACTICALLY  
MAKE TOAST ON  
YOUR FACE!

OH, YOU  
ARSE-!

COMING IN  
ON A WING AND  
A PRAYER...!













WHY DON'T YOU BORROW A FEW QUID FROM YOUR BROTHER OFFICERS? BETWEEN THEM THEY MUST MAKE UP HALF THE BLOODY ARISTOCRACY.



THEY DON'T THINK ALL THAT MUCH OF US, OUR FACES NEVER SEEM TO FIT...

THEY DON'T THINK MUCH OF US BECAUSE WE'RE ALWAYS HANGING AROUND WITH A LEADING AIRMAN. WE'VE CROSSED THE CLASS BARRIER, OR SOMETHING.



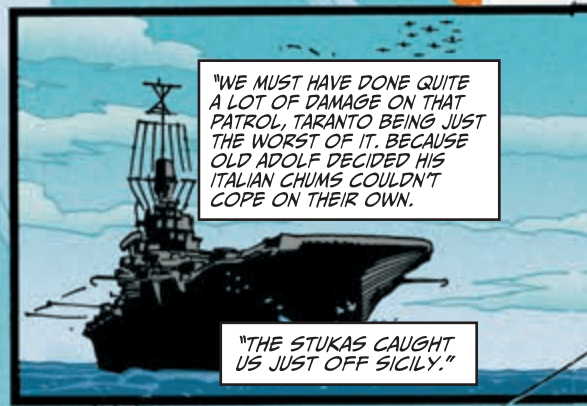




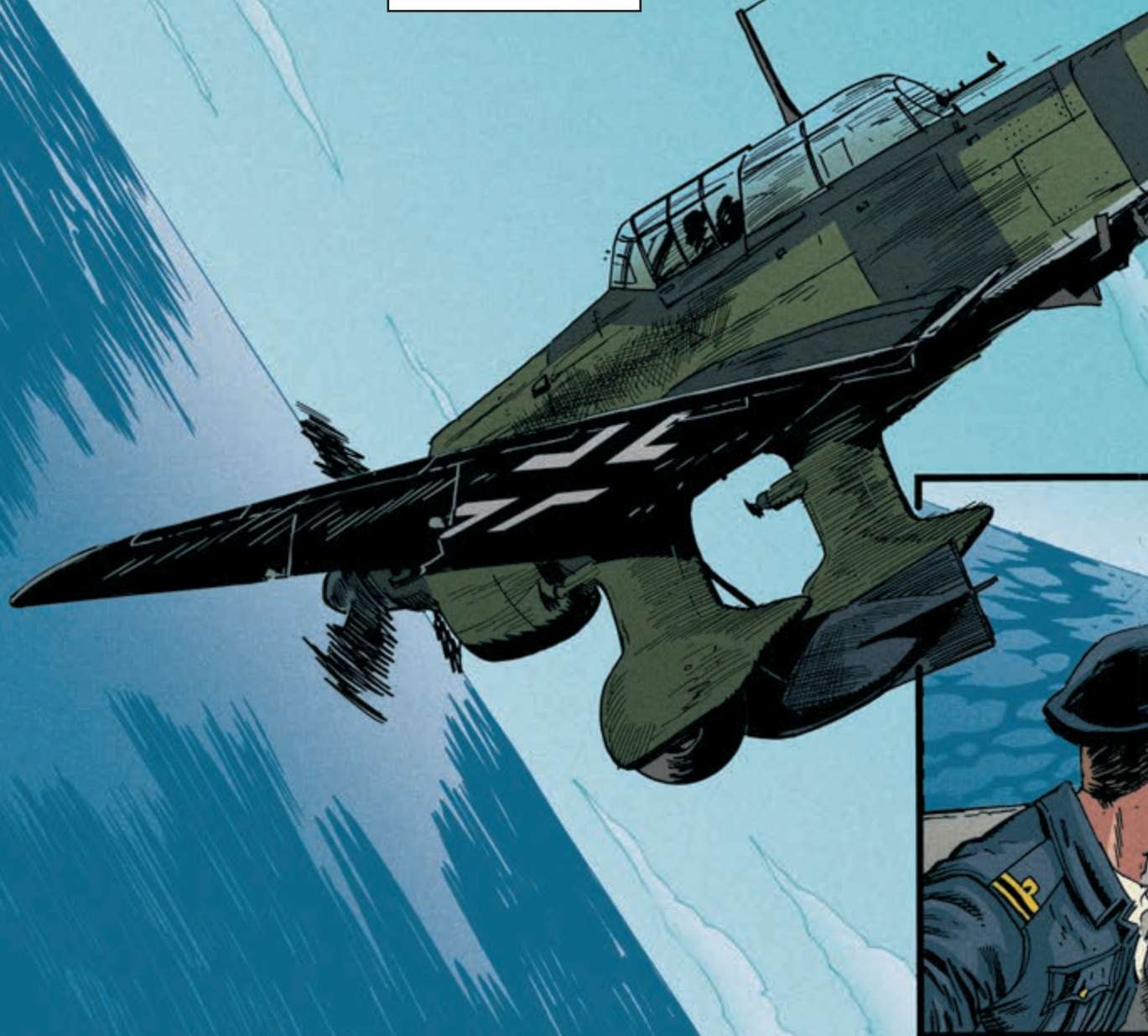








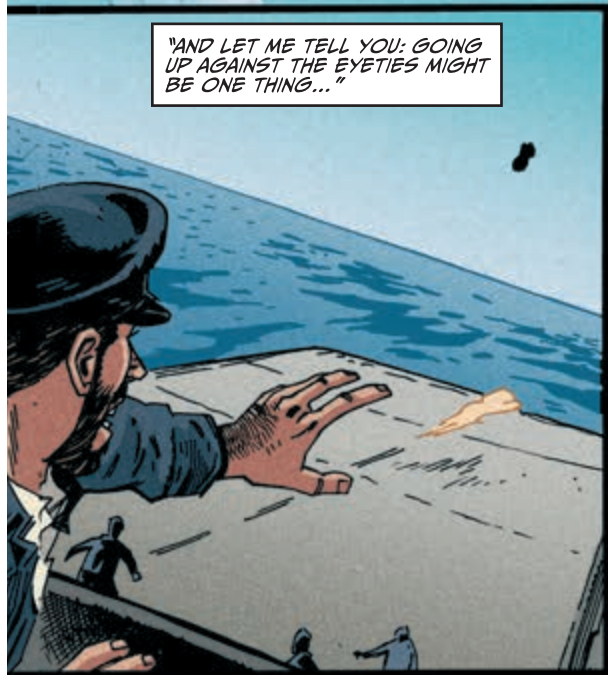
"TENTH OF JANUARY, 1941."







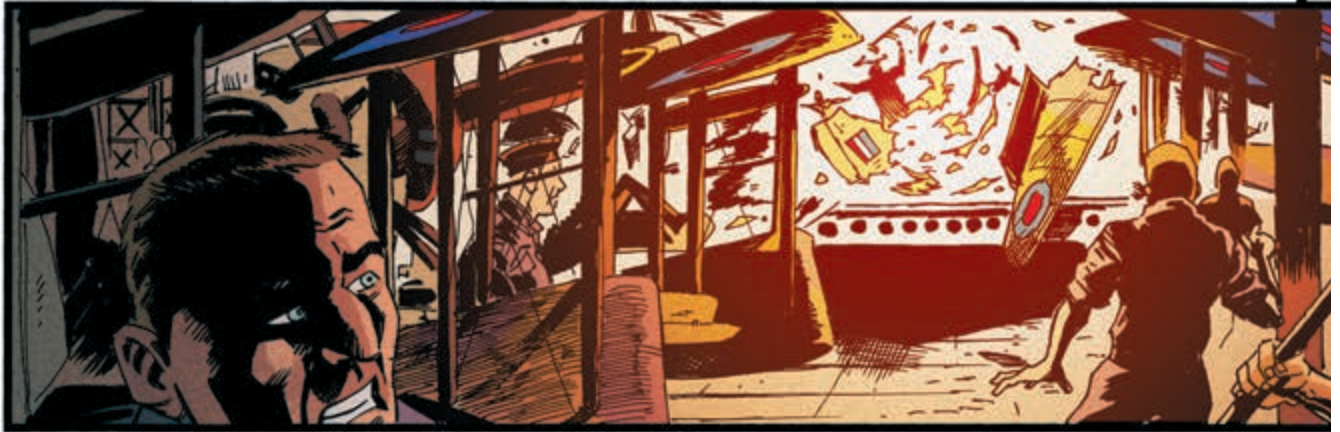
"AND LET ME TELL YOU: GOING  
UP AGAINST THE EYETIES MIGHT  
BE ONE THING..."



"THE HUNS ARE  
SOMETHING  
ELSE AGAIN."







"AND THAT WAS JUST THE FIRST ONE."

THEY GOT US FIVE MORE TIMES.

ONE BOMB PUNCHED ALL THE WAY THROUGH TO THE WARDROOM, KILLED EIGHT PILOTS. MOST OF THEM WOULD HAVE FLOWN WITH YOU THAT NIGHT.

OVERALL WE LOST A HUNDRED AND TWENTY LADS...

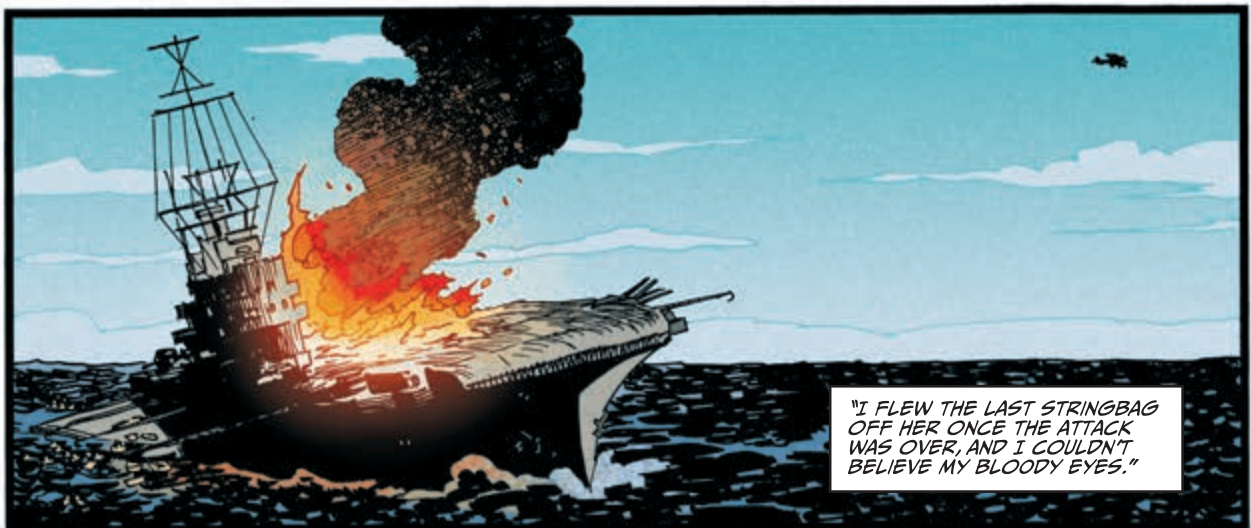


THE HANGAR DECK WAS A SLAUGHTERHOUSE. I WON'T GO INTO DETAIL, I'M STILL TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF IT IN MY HEAD.

WE CAME LIMPING INTO MALTA THAT NIGHT, AND WHAT THEY MUST HAVE THOUGHT IN GRAND HARBOR WHEN THEY SAW US...GOD ONLY KNOWS.







"I FLEW THE LAST STRINGBAG  
OFF HER ONCE THE ATTACK  
WAS OVER, AND I COULDN'T  
BELIEVE MY BLOODY EYES."





THEY BOMBED HER AGAIN IN MALTA AND THEY STILL COULDN'T SINK HER. SHE'S ON HER WAY TO VIRGINIA NOW, THE YANKS ARE GOING TO SORT HER OUT.

I WAS IN ALEX FOR A WHILE, I ONLY JUST GOT HOME LAST WEEK... OH, THANKS AWFULLY.



HHHHHHHHH BUT THAT'S ENOUGH ABOUT ME FOR NOW. HOW ARE THE THREE OF YOU?



OH... WELL...

AH, BY COMPARISON...

WE DIDN'T GET BACK 'TIL AFTER CHRISTMAS, THEY DIDN'T SEEM TO KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH US.



EVENTUALLY THEY ATTACHED US TO A SQUADRON FLYING U-BOAT PATROLS. IT'S A DEAD LOSS, WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING.

BAD LUCK. WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

TWATT.



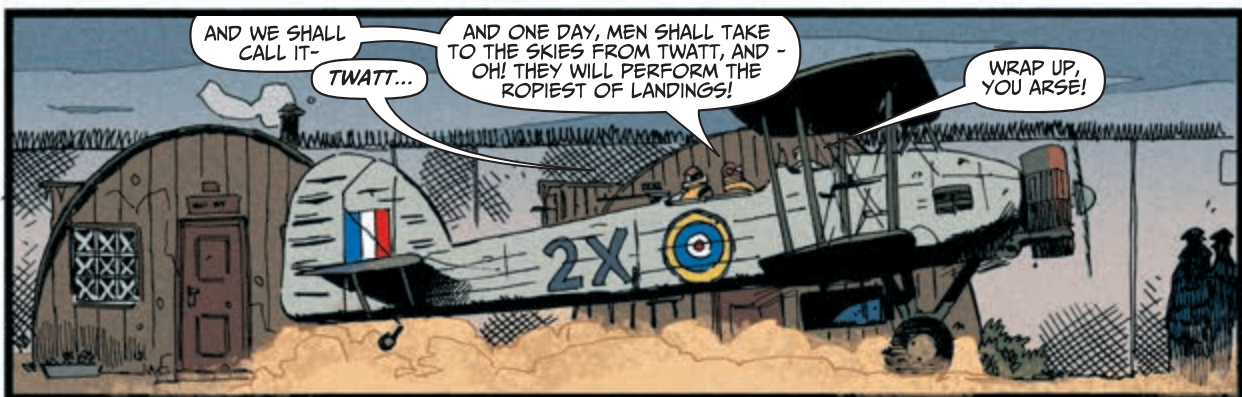
WOULD YOU CARE TO REPEAT THAT?

OH- NO-!



NO, SERIOUSLY!













ALL RIGHT, MOVE YERSELVES! THE DEPTH CHARGES COME OFF, THE TINFISH GOES ON!

AN' TOP THE TANKS OFF, THEY'RE GONNA NEED EVERY DROP...!

THE BISMARCK?

WHY AM I NOT SURPRISED THAT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?



WELL I MEAN I'VE HEARD OF HER... SHE'S SOME SORT OF JERRY BATTLEWAGON, YES...?

SHE'S THE BIGGEST BLOODY BATTLESHIP IN THE WORLD, DUMMY! SHE'S A FLOATING FORTRESS - THEY RECKON HER GUNS CAN SMASH ANYTHING WE'VE GOT, AND HER ARMOR MAKES HER PRACTICALLY UNSTOPPABLE!

THAT, I'M AFRAID, MAY NOT BE HYPERBOLE.



IN FACT, WE'RE NOT SURE WE'VE GOT ANYTHING IN THE FLEET THAT CAN STOP HER.

ARK ROYAL IS PART OF A FORCE ADMIRAL SOMERVILLE'S BRINGING UP FROM GIBRALTAR. I THINK THE HOME FLEET'S COMING IN FROM THE EAST, WITH HMS HOOD IN THE MIX AS WELL.



JESUS, THE HOOD'S THE PRIDE OF THE FLEET...

I HAVE A QUESTION, SIR.

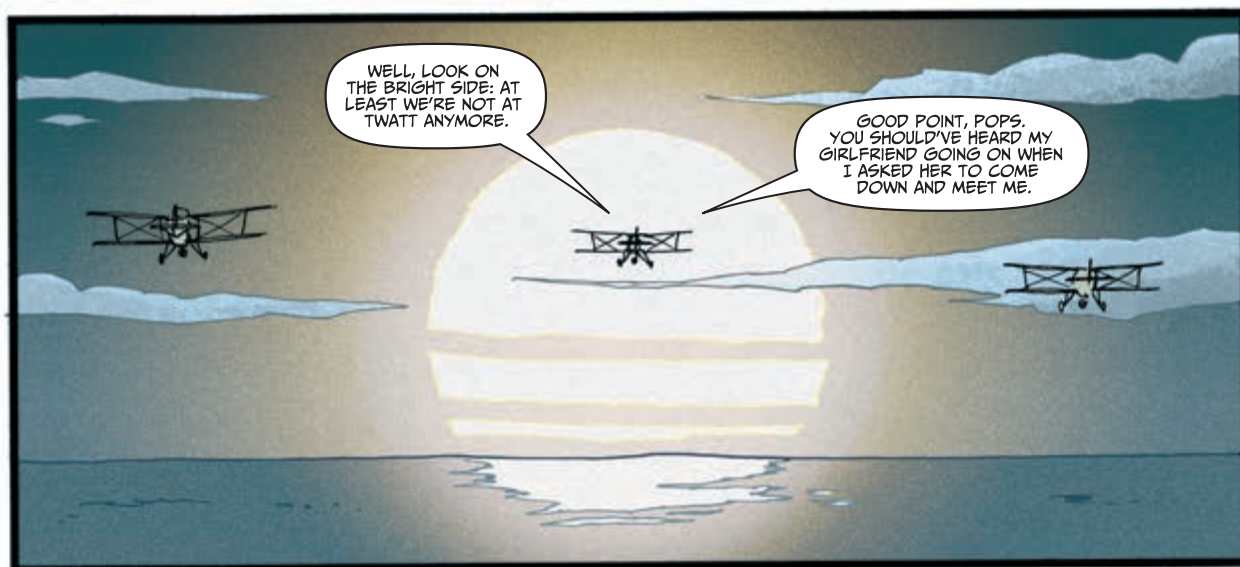
GO ON.

WHY US?

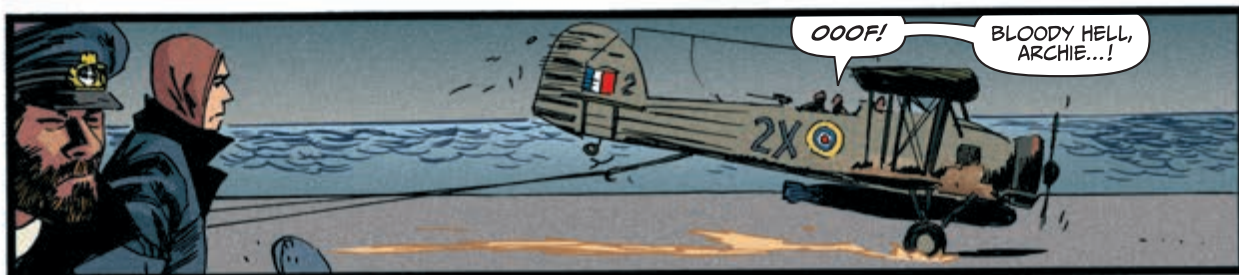
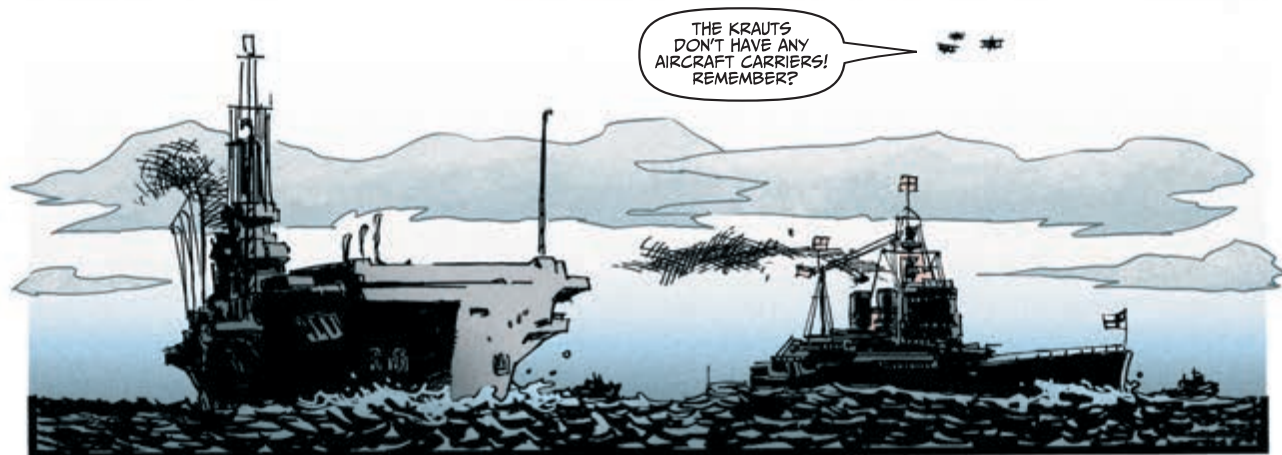




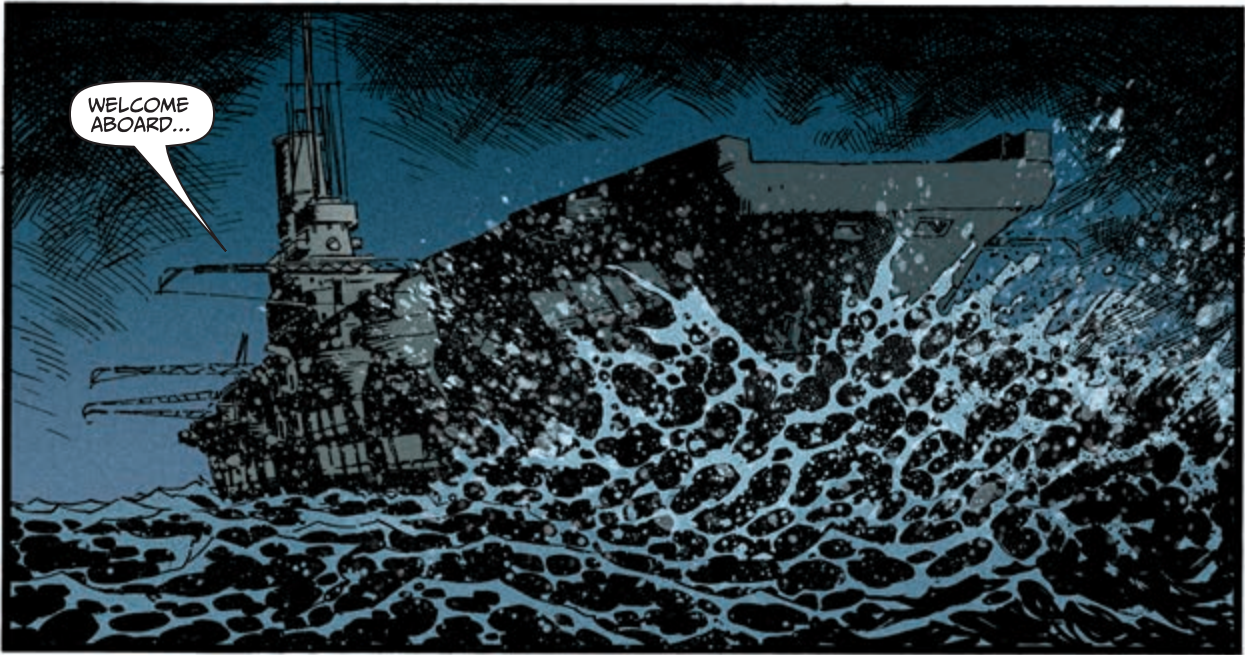










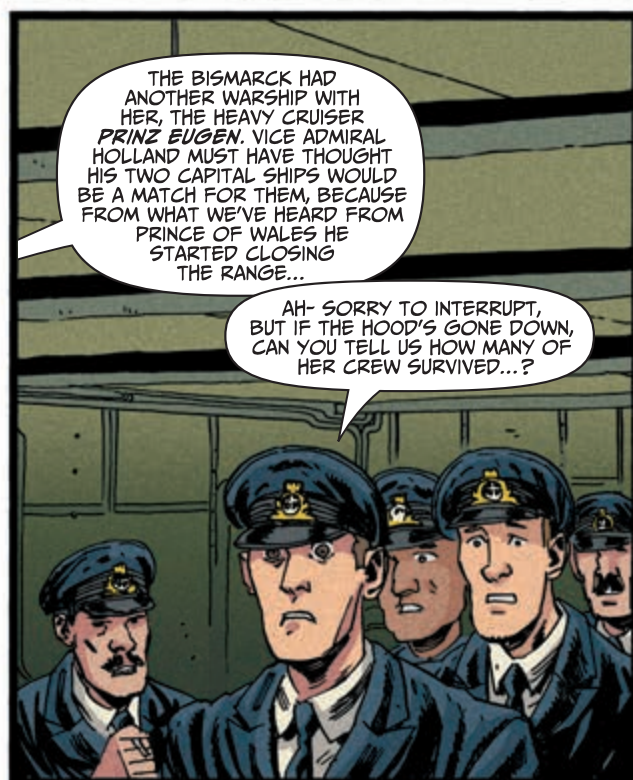






I CAN UNDERSTAND YOUR SURPRISE.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT IS THAT THE HOOD AND THE *PRINCE OF WALES* CAUGHT UP WITH THE *BISMARCK* AROUND DAWN. OUR SHIPS WERE OUT IN FRONT OF THE HOME FLEET, THE HUNS WERE COMING SOUTHWEST OUT OF THE DENMARK STRAIT.



THE *BISMARCK* HAD ANOTHER WARSHIP WITH HER, THE HEAVY CRUISER *PRINZ EUGEN*. VICE ADMIRAL HOLLAND MUST HAVE THOUGHT HIS TWO CAPITAL SHIPS WOULD BE A MATCH FOR THEM, BECAUSE FROM WHAT WE'VE HEARD FROM *PRINCE OF WALES* HE STARTED CLOSING THE RANGE...

AH- SORRY TO INTERRUPT, BUT IF THE *HOOD*'S GONE DOWN, CAN YOU TELL US HOW MANY OF HER CREW SURVIVED...?



WE BELIEVE... THREE.



OUT OF FOURTEEN HUNDRED?





JESUS CHRIST  
ALMIGHTY-!

NO, THIS JUST  
CAN'T BE-

THIS IS A MISTAKE,  
THIS HAS TO BE A MISTAKE!  
SHE'S THE MOST FAMOUS SHIP  
IN THE FLEET, SHE'S BEEN  
ALL OVER THE WORLD!

THE PRINCE  
OF WALES WAS  
ALSO HIT, AND  
BADLY DAMAGED.  
SHE WAS  
FORCED TO  
DISENGAGE.



SHE RAN  
AWAY-?

AT LEAST TELL US THE  
BASTARDS DIDN'T HAVE IT  
ALL THEIR OWN WAY...!

WE AREN'T SURE.  
THE PRINCE OF WALES  
MAY HAVE SCORED A  
COUPLE OF HITS.

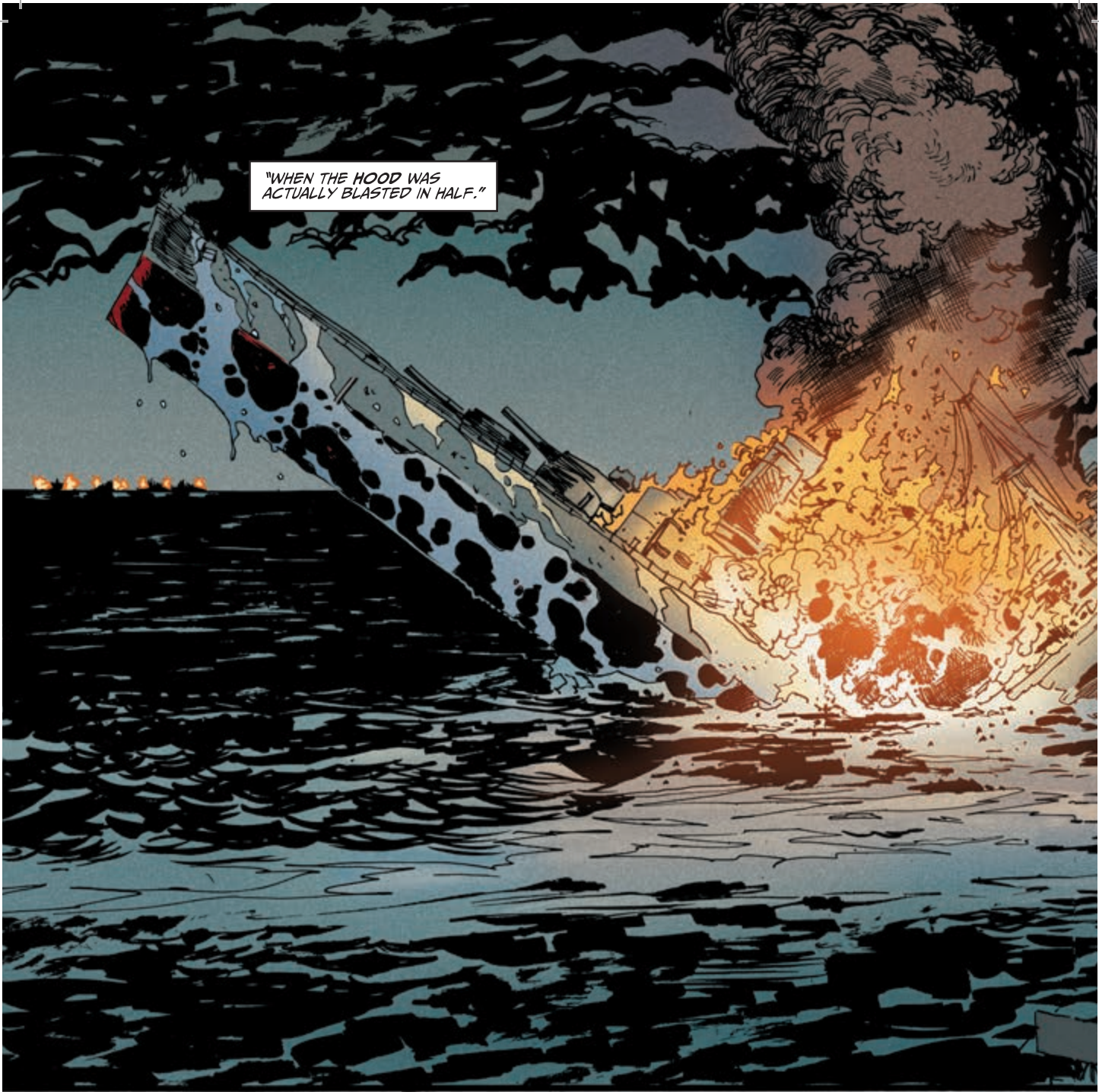
ALL I CAN  
TELL YOU FOR  
CERTAIN IS THAT  
THE PURSUIT  
CONTINUES.



BUT THE BISMARCK'S  
FIRE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN  
QUITE DEVASTATING. THE WHOLE  
THING WAS OVER IN LESS THAN  
FIFTEEN MINUTES.

IN FACT, IT WOULD  
SEEM THE TWO SIDES  
HAD ONLY EXCHANGED  
A FEW SALVOES-





"WHEN THE HOOD WAS  
ACTUALLY BLASTED IN HALF."



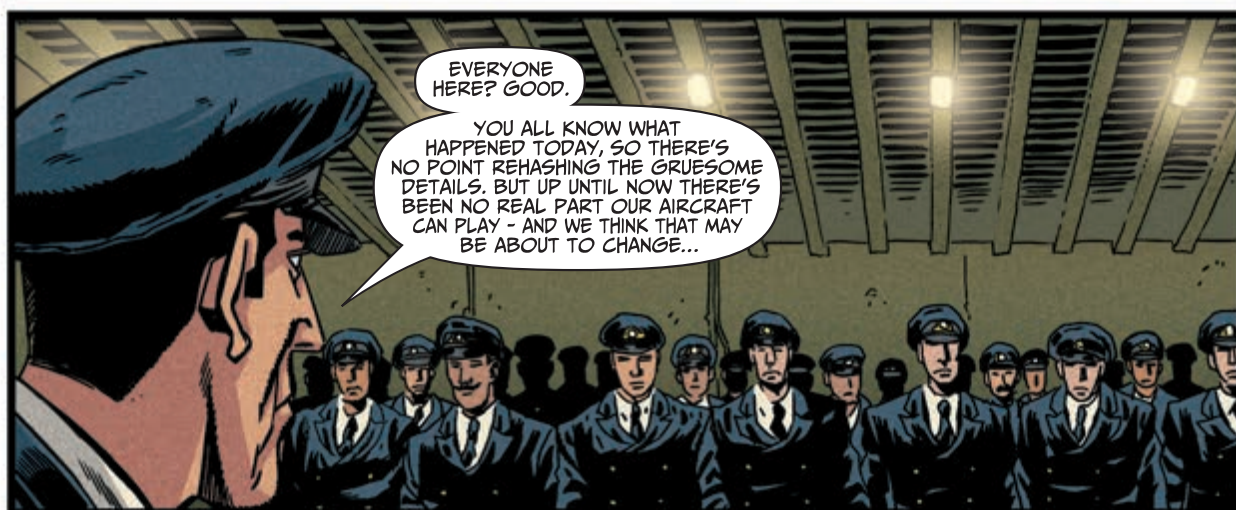
THERE'LL BE A BRIEFING FOR  
ALL AIRCREW IN AN HOUR. WE'LL  
HAVE ALL THE LATEST  
INFORMATION THEN.

WE HAVE TO  
GET THEM!













IF YOU'LL ALL  
DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION  
TO THE CHART-

WHY DO YOU  
KEEP LOOKING AT  
THE DOOR?

ONLY  
WAY OUT.  
U-BOATS.

SHHH!



GOD KNOWS HOW MANY THERE  
ARE LOOKING FOR US. WE COULD BE  
IN SOME BUGGER'S PERISCOPE  
RIGHT THIS SECOND.

THE THOUGHT OF THIS  
THING GETTING A TORPEDO  
IN THE GUTS...WITH US ALL  
THE WAY DOWN HERE...



CHRIST, I BET  
I DON'T GET A  
WINK OF SLEEP  
TONIGHT-

PAY ATTENTION,  
IDIOT!

...HERE, WHERE  
THEY WERE PICKED UP  
AND SHADOWED BY OUR  
CRUISERS *SUFFOLK* AND  
*NORFOLK*. THAT WAS ON  
FRIDAY MORNING.



OBVIOUSLY THE ENEMY'S  
INTENTION WAS TO BREAK OUT INTO  
THE ATLANTIC, WHERE WE CURRENTLY  
HAVE A NUMBER OF CONVOYS HEADED  
BOTH EAST AND WEST. WITH *HOOD*  
GONE, THEY ARE NOW HIGHLY  
VULNERABLE.

BUT, AS YOU CAN  
SEE, ADMIRAL TOVEY IS  
SOUTH OF ICELAND ABOARD  
*KING GEORGE THE FIFTH* -  
ALONG WITH THE *REPULSE*  
AND THE CARRIER *VICTORIOUS*,  
AND ATTENDANT CRUISERS  
AND DESTROYERS...



WE KNOW THE BISMARCK CANNOT BE ALONE, AND I'M NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT THE *PRINZ EUGEN* AND WHATEVER U-BOATS ARE IN THE VICINITY. SHE MUST HAVE TANKERS AND SUPPLY VESSELS WAITING TO RENDEZVOUS WITH HER, TO SUSTAIN HER FOR A PROLONGED CAMPAIGN, AND THE HUNT IS OF COURSE ON FOR THOSE ASSETS AS WE SPEAK.

BUT THAT IS NOT OUR JOB. OUR ONE AND ONLY CONCERN IS THE BEAST HERSELF.



IT IS ADMIRAL TOVEY'S INTENTION TO INTERCEPT HER - IDEALLY CATCHING HER BETWEEN HIS FORCE AND OUR OWN - AND TO SINK HER WITHOUT DELAY.



EASIER SAID THAN BLOODY DONE...!

AS SOON AS SHE COMES WITHIN RANGE - OF EITHER *VICTORIOUS* OR OURSELVES - THE *SWORDFISH* WILL BE LAUNCHED AGAINST HER. THE MORE DAMAGE WE CAN DO THE BETTER, BUT AT THE VERY LEAST WE MUST STRIVE TO SLOW HER DOWN FOR THE REST OF THE FLEET.

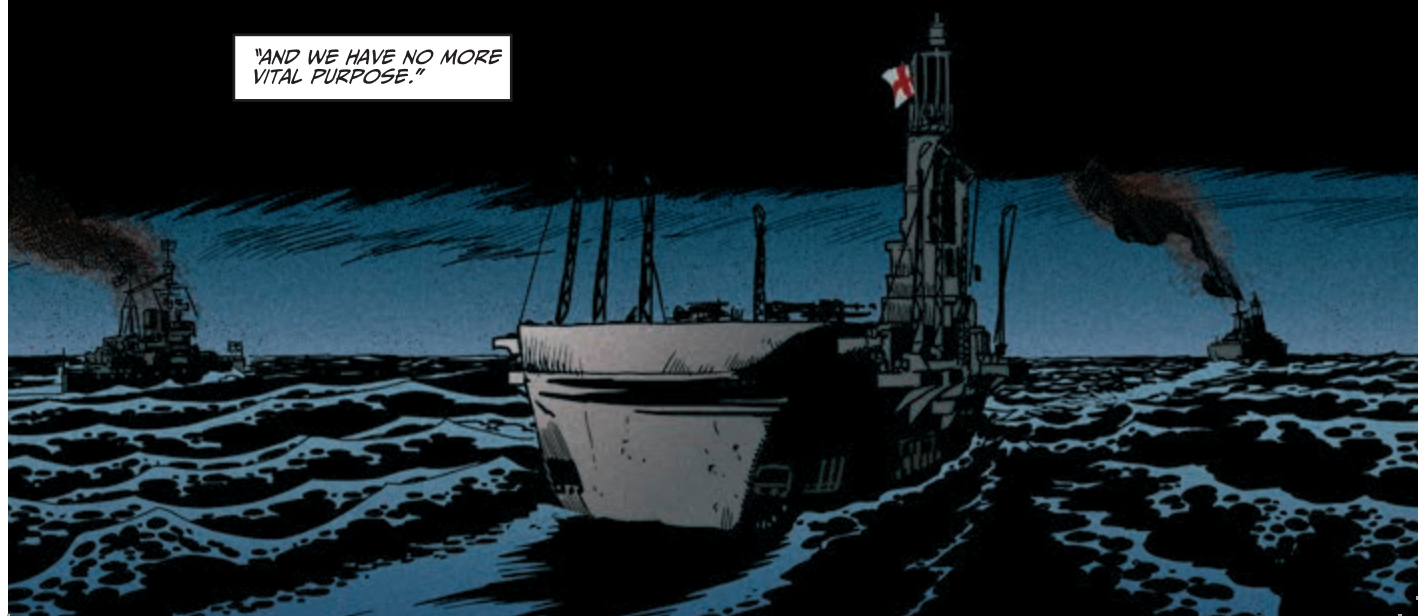


BUT OUR CRUISERS ARE MAINTAINING THE PURSUIT - THEY HAVE THE BISMARCK IN SIGHT AND IN RADAR CONTACT, AND WITH THEIR SPEED THERE'S NOT MUCH SHE CAN DO ABOUT IT. FURTHER, WE OUTNUMBER THE ENEMY. THE *PRINCE OF WALES* IS STILL IN THE FIGHT.

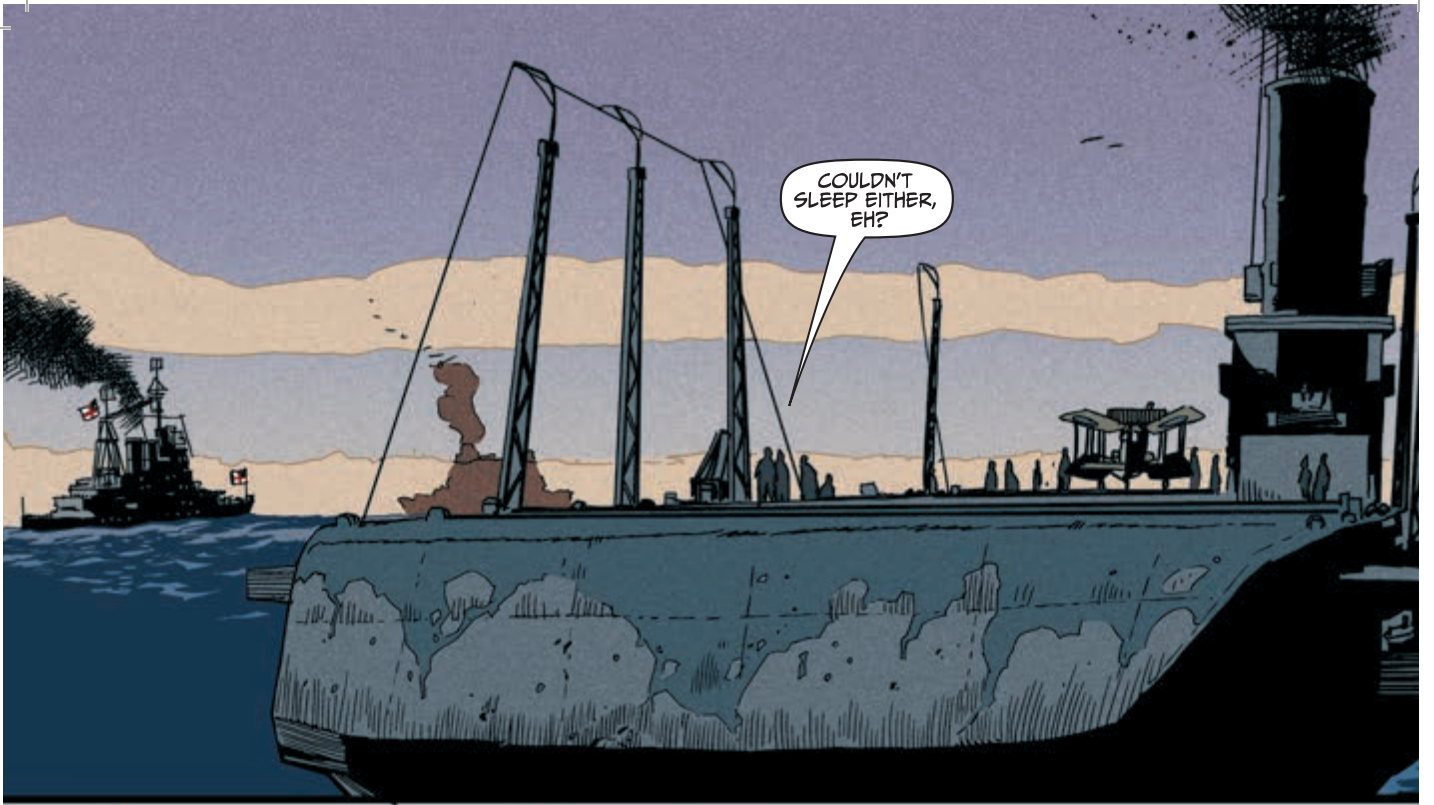
ONE FINAL THING.











BLOODY OLLIE, ALL THAT TALK ABOUT GETTING TORPEDOED...



YES, WELL NOW I'M A LOT MORE WORRIED ABOUT RUNNING INTO THIS SODDING BATTLESHIP. YOU KNOW, THE UNSTOPPABLE BEHEMOTH LURKING OUT THERE SOMEWHERE?

IT'S THE ANTICIPATION, WE NEVER HAD THAT AT TARANTO...



THEN AGAIN, THAT WAS BECAUSE WE DIDN'T KNOW WE'D BE FLYING THE OP, DID WE-?

OH, DRY UP!



WELL, THE LATEST IS THEY'VE LOST THE BISMARCK.

WHAT-?

I WAS TALKING TO THIS PETTY OFFICER, JUST CAME OFF DUTY ON THE BRIDGE. SAID SHE GAVE THEM THE SLIP SOME TIME IN THE WEE SMALL HOURS.

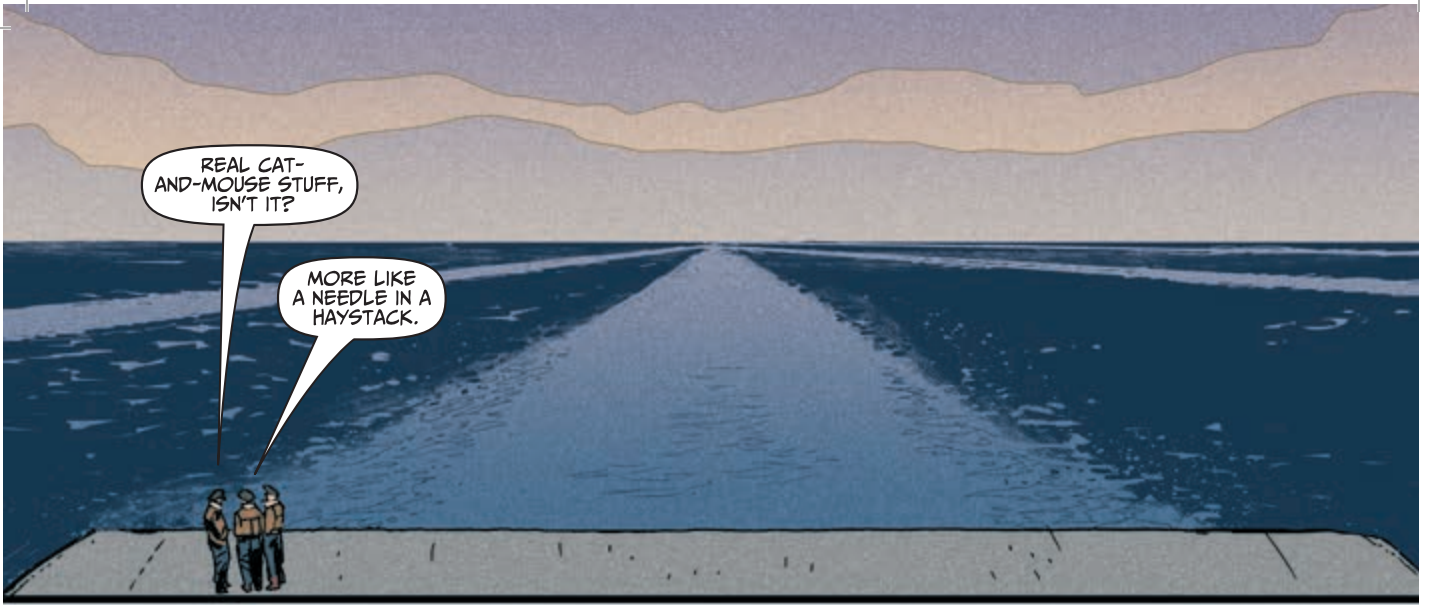
AND HOLD ON TO YOUR HATS: APPARENTLY THE VICTORIOUS LAUNCHED STRINGBAGS AGAINST HER, JUST BEFORE THAT-











REAL CAT-  
AND-MOUSE STUFF,  
ISN'T IT?

MORE LIKE  
A NEEDLE IN A  
HAYSTACK.



BUT SHE'S NOT A NEEDLE, IS SHE? SHE'S ABOUT FORTY THOUSAND  
TONS AND SOMETHING LIKE EIGHT HUNDRED FEET LONG, AND HER  
MAIN ARMAMENT'S A BUNCH OF FIFTEEN INCH GUNS -  
AND THAT'S JUST FOR STARTERS...

HOW CAN THERE BE THIS -  
THIS *MONSTER* OUT THERE, AND THEY'VE  
SOMEHOW MANAGED TO LOSE HER?



AND WHEN ARE *WE*  
GOING TO HAVE A CRACK AT  
THE *DAMN THING*?!



THAT'S YOUR  
FAULT, GETTING HIM  
ALL RILED UP.

AT LEAST  
HE'S KEEN.



AND- MM-  
YOU WERE PRETTY  
KEEN YOURSELF,  
DON'T FORGET, WHEN  
WE WERE FLOATING  
AROUND IN THE MED  
AT THE END OF THE  
LAST SHOW.

YOU SHOWED DANGEROUS SIGNS OF  
HAVING ENJOYED YOURSELF QUITE A BIT.

SO...?



SO WHAT  
YOU OUGHT TO  
REMEMBER, OLLIE,  
IS THEY WON'T  
ALL BE EASY  
AS THAT.





SOUTH-SOUTHEAST, WE SHOULD PICK HER UP ANY TIME NOW!



HOW LONG SINCE THEY LOST CONTACT?

YESTERDAY MORNING! THEY GOT A SIGHTING AGAIN TODAY JUST BEFORE NOON!

AND THAT WAS FOUR HOURS AGO! SO WHY THE HELL IS SHE STILL IN THE AREA AFTER A WHOLE DAY AND A HALF?



SHE COULD BE HALFWAY TO CANADA, SHE COULD HAVE MADE IT HOME TO FRANCE...!

DAMAGED AFTER ALL, MAYBE! EVEN A FUEL LEAK!

JESUS, THIS BLOODY WEATHER'S GETTING WORSE!

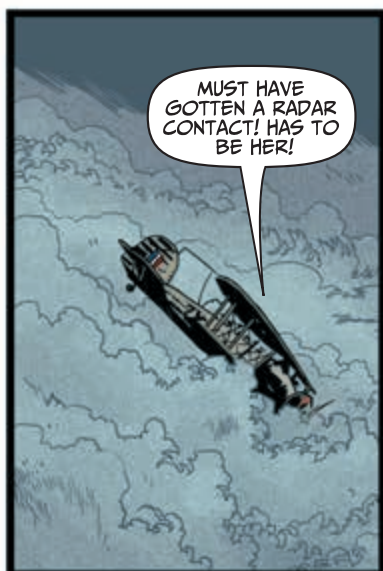


THERE'S NO GOING BACK! WE'RE ALL THERE IS!

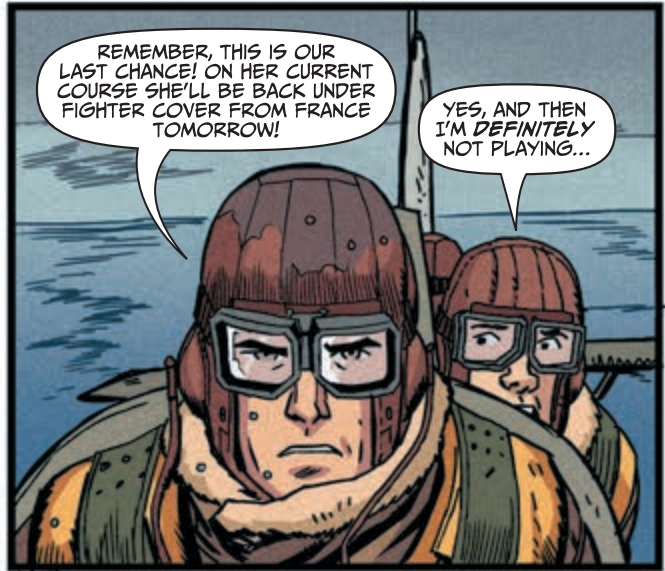
THE VICTORIOUS HAD TO GO BACK TO REFUEL, WE'RE THE ONLY AIR GROUP-

LEADER'S DESCENDING!

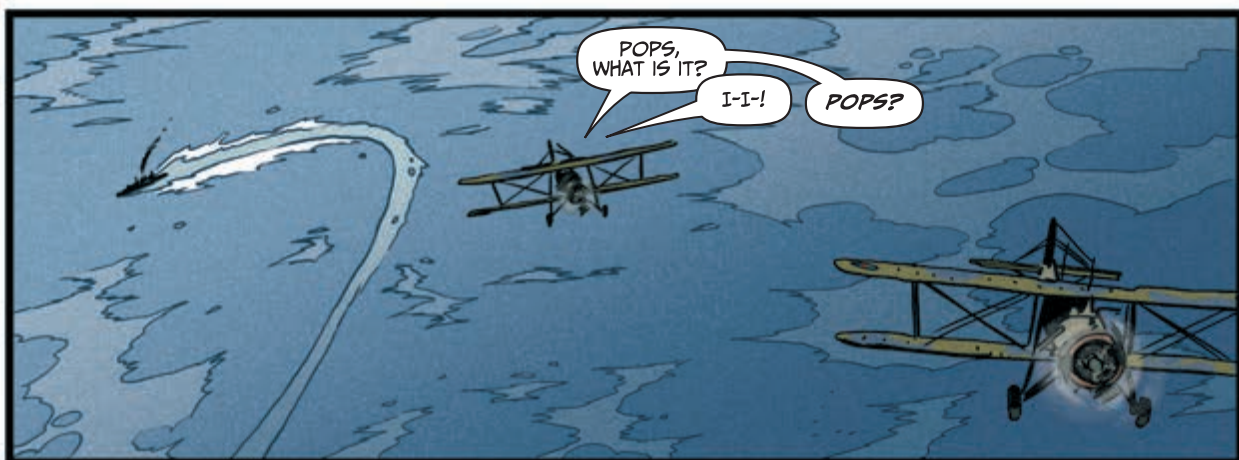




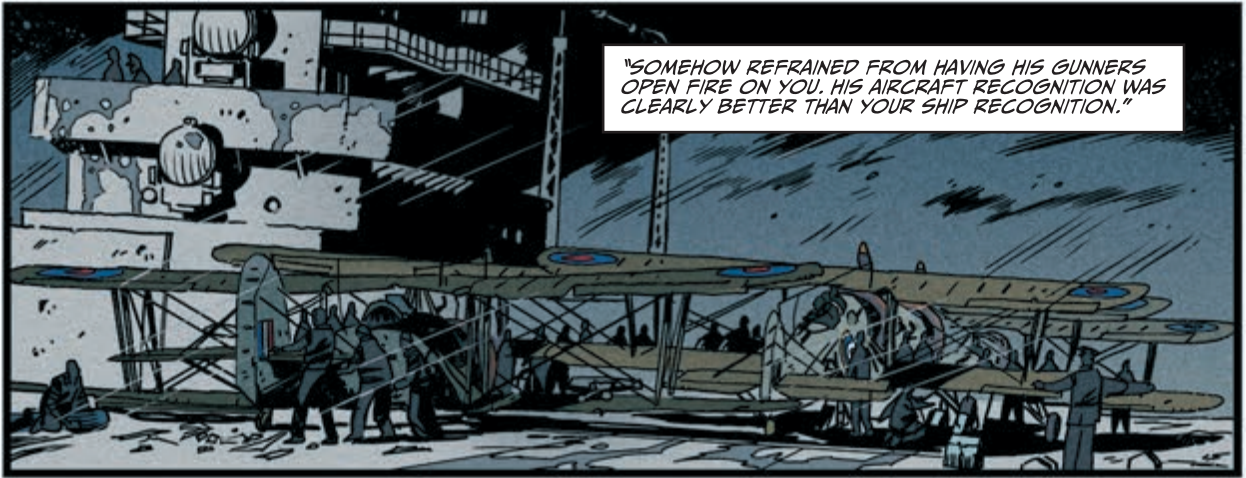




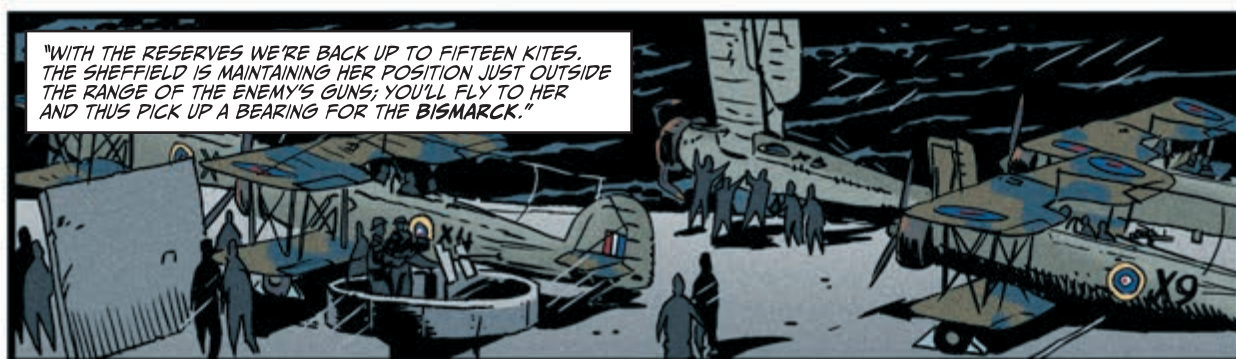
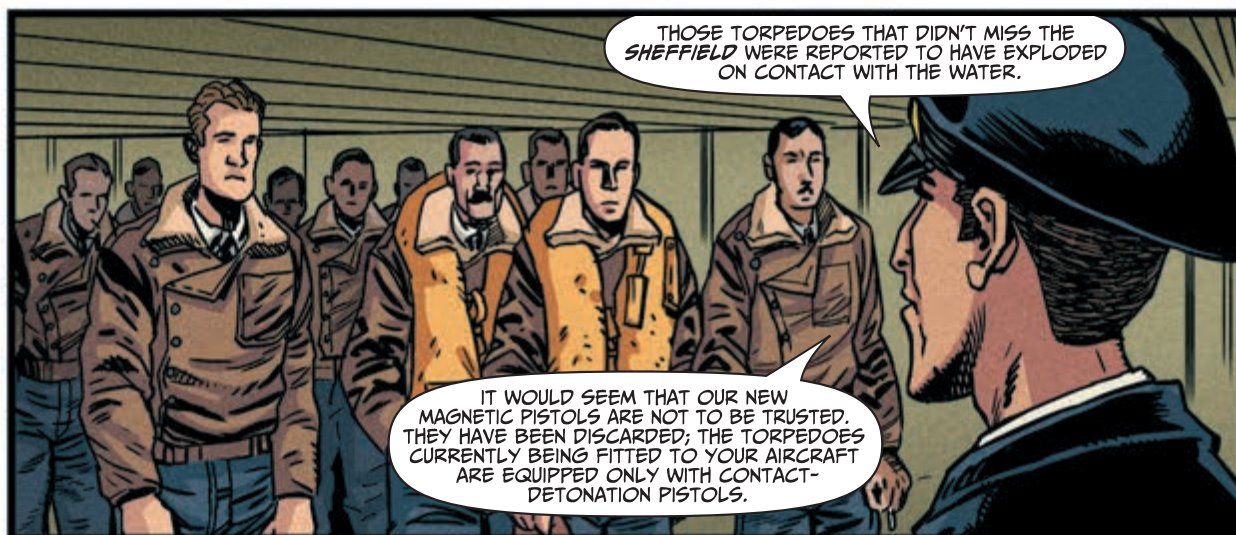




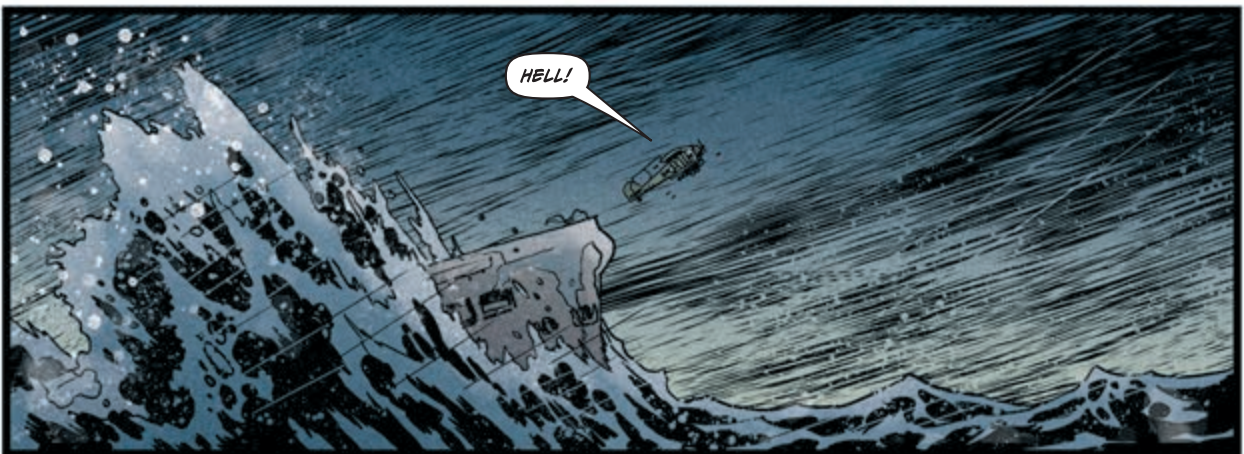
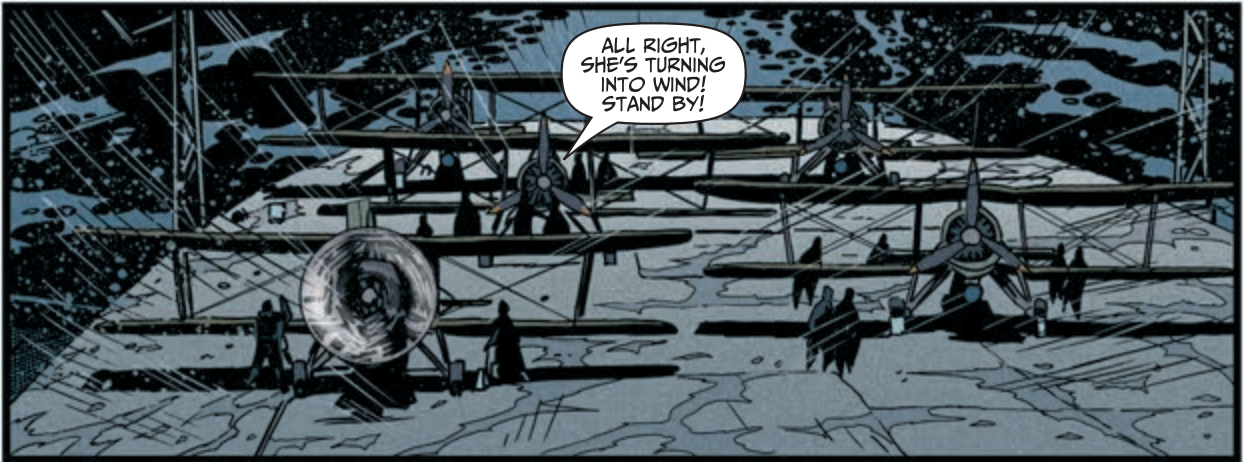
















TWELVE MILES  
AT ONE HUNDRED TEN  
DEGREES - NOW CLIMBING  
TO ANGELS SIX.



POPS, WATCH OUT  
FOR ANYONE GETTING  
TOO CLOSE, THE LAST  
THING WE WANT NOW  
IS A COLLISION...

IF I SEE THEM  
IN TIME, YOU'LL BE  
THE FIRST TO  
KNOW!



WHAT'S  
RELEASE HEIGHT  
GOING TO BE?

FIFTY FEET,  
THE SAME AS  
LAST TIME!

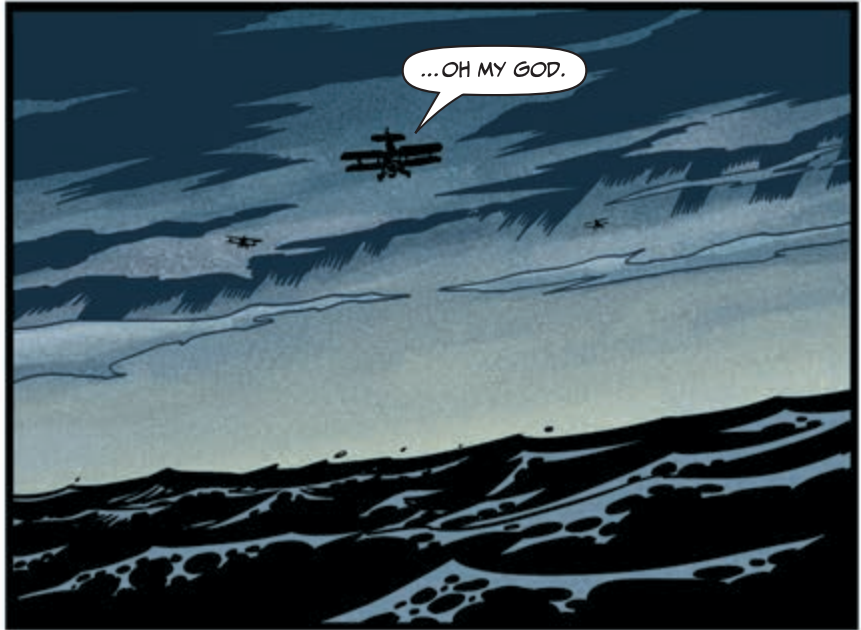
YOU THINK  
THEY'LL RUN  
TRUE IN THESE  
WAVES...?



IF THEY DON'T,  
I'LL WANT MY MONEY  
BACK...RIGHT, HERE  
WE GO.

REAL THING  
THIS TIME.

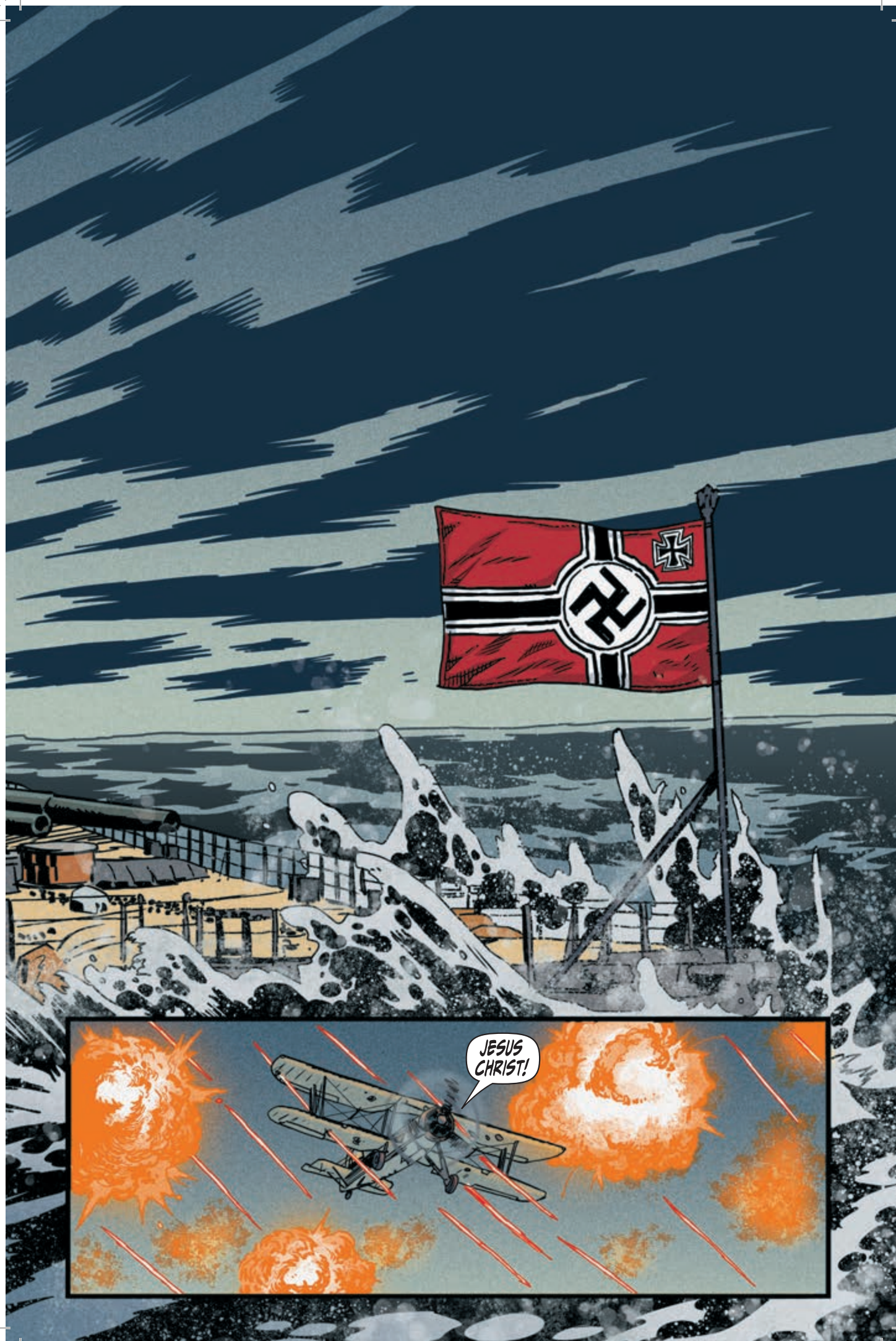








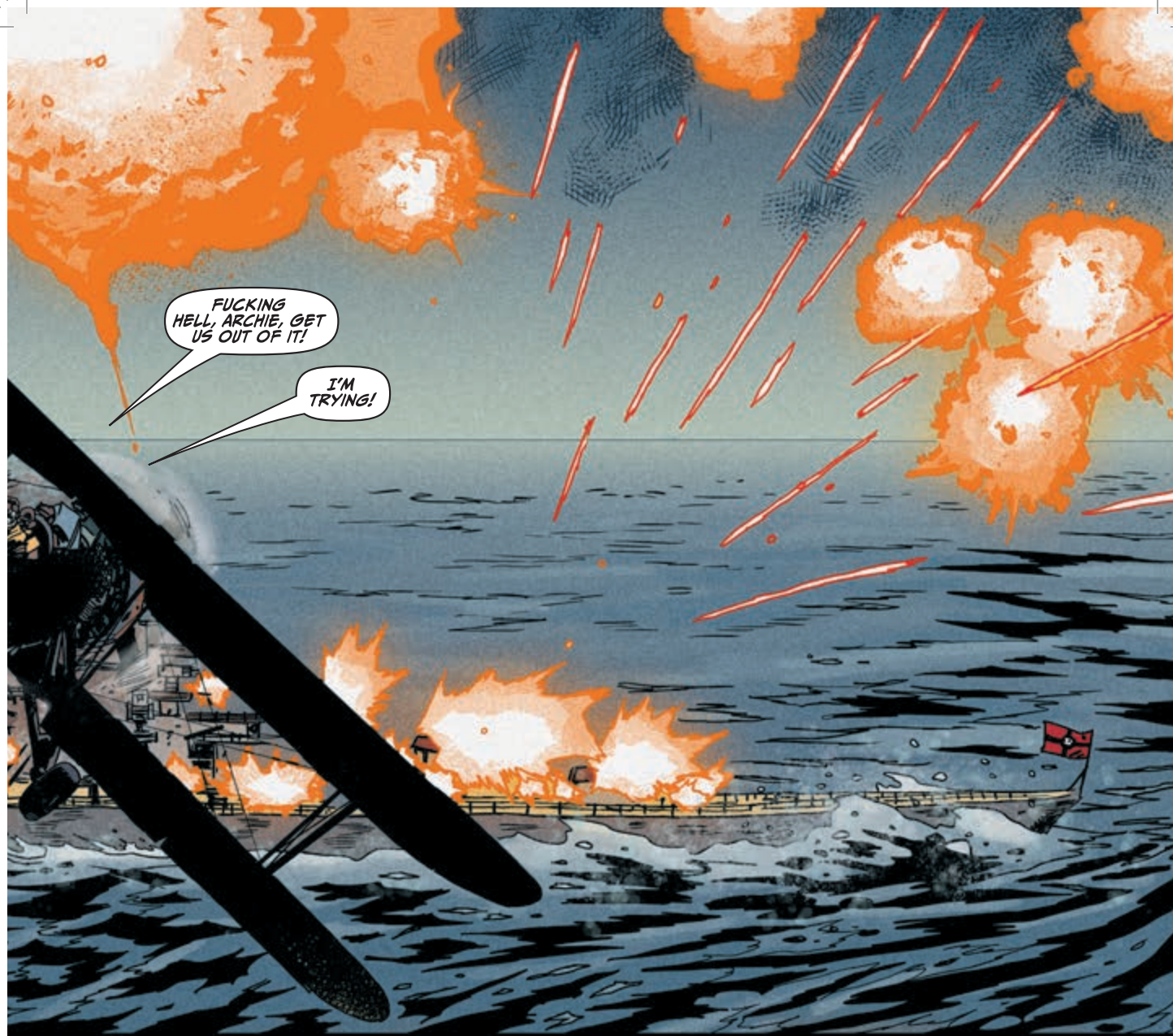












FUCKING  
HELL, ARCHIE, GET  
US OUT OF IT!

I'M  
TRYING!



HOW THE  
HELL ARE THEY  
MISSING US-?

THEY  
AREN'T!



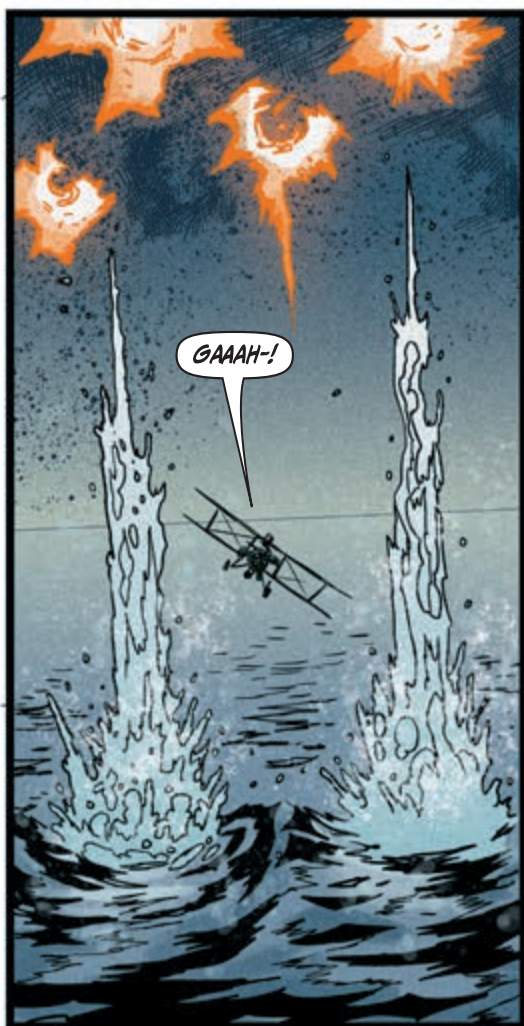
NO, LOOK,  
LOOK! IT'S ALL  
EXPLODING AHEAD  
OF US! LOOK!



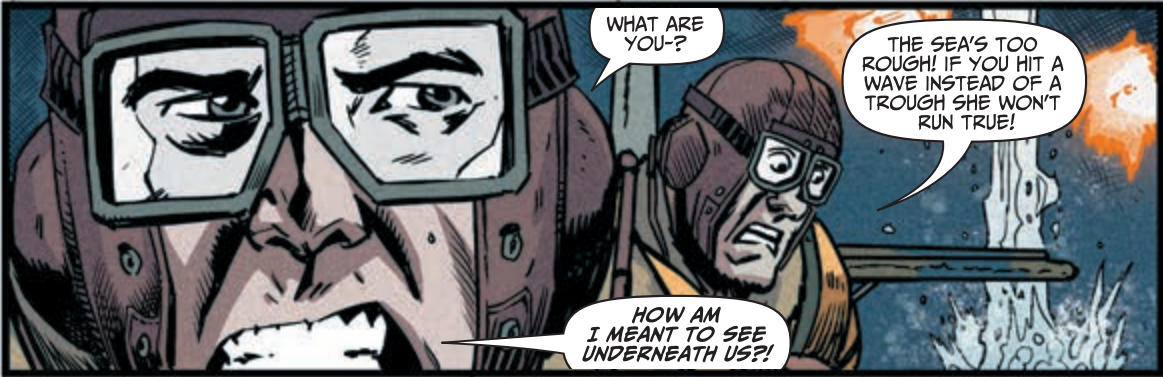
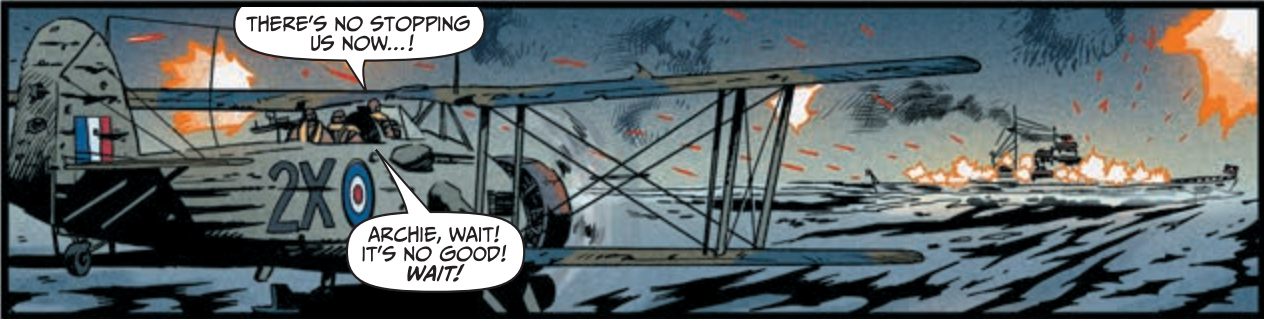
I THINK WE'RE MEANT  
TO FLY INTO IT - BUT WE'RE  
TOO SLOW FOR THEIR  
FIRE PREDICTORS!

I THINK THE  
OLD STRINGBAG'S  
DONE IT AGAIN!

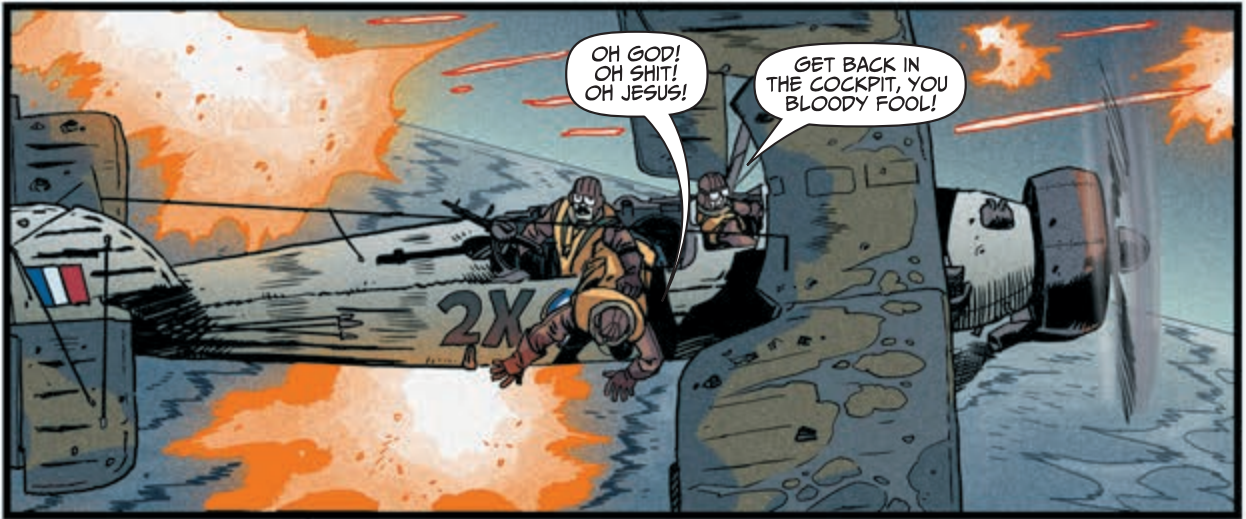




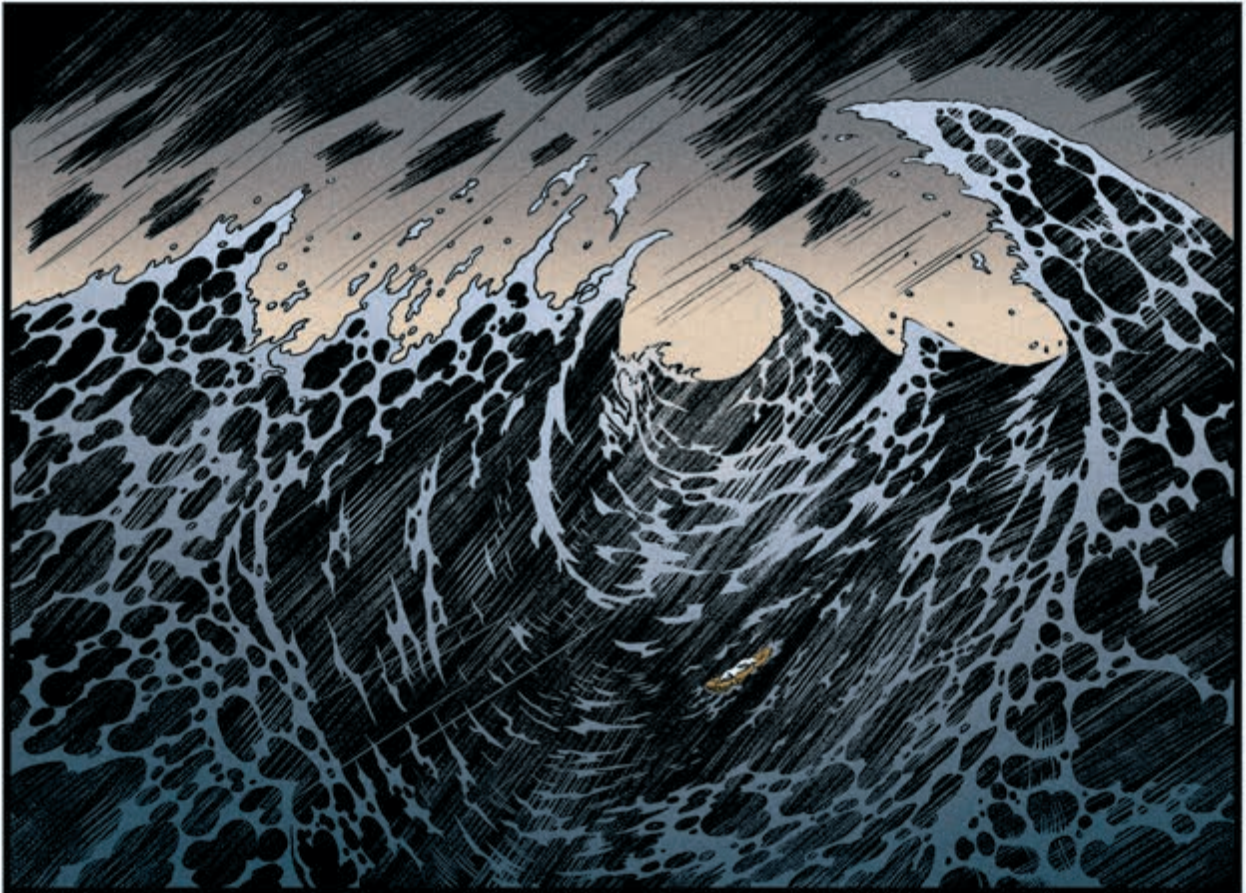












HERE WE  
ARE AGAIN,  
THEN...









I DON'T KNOW,  
WE LASTED ALL  
NIGHT... WE...

OLLIE, HOW'S  
THE LEG, OLD  
SON?



OLLIE?  
OLLIE...?



OLLIE, NO!  
CHRIST! NO!  
OLLIE!

WH-?

OLLIE!



CAN'T A CHAP  
GET A COUPLE  
OF HOURS' SLEEP  
AROUND HERE...?



YOU ARSE!  
YOU ABSOLUTE  
ARSE!

I'M GLAD YOU'RE  
NOT DEAD, BECAUSE  
NOW I'M GOING TO  
BLOODY WELL-

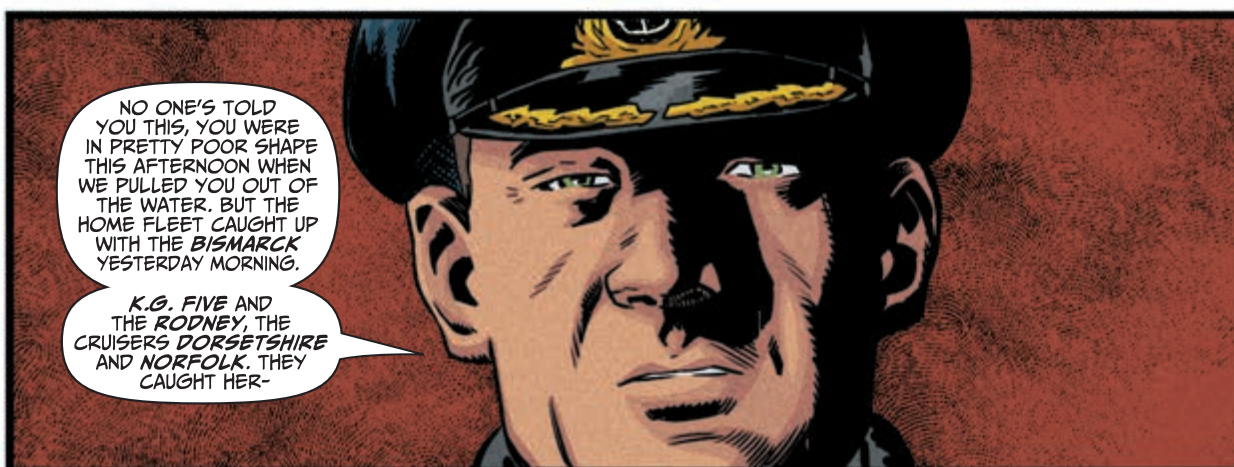
OH,  
FUCK ME.



"WELCOME ABOARD HMS  
SHEFFIELD. I BELIEVE  
WE'VE MET BEFORE, IN A  
MANNER OF SPEAKING."

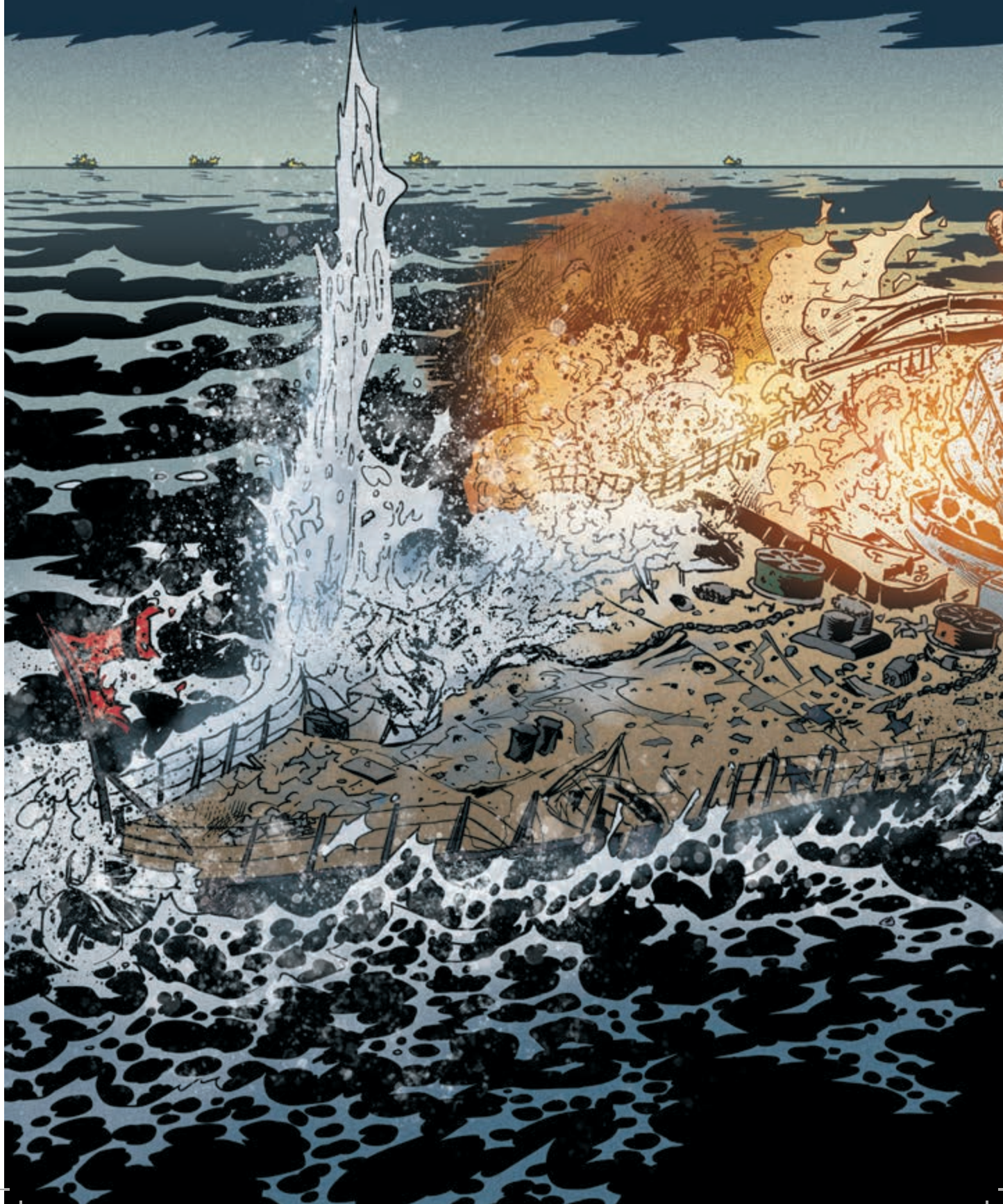








"AND THEY BLEW OUT THE  
BITCH'S BLACK HEART."
















The death ride of the *Bismarck* remains an epic to this day. When she began her final plunge to the Atlantic floor, the Royal Navy breathed a sigh of relief.

Beyond the *Prince of Wales*' few strikes and the vital torpedo hit, beyond the dreadful, pummeling final salvos from the fleet, the great ship's doom was the work of many, not a few. From the reconnaissance flights of RAF Coastal Command to the tacticians back in Whitehall, from the fitters and mechanics toiling on the Stringbags to the soaked and frozen sufferers of every warship's company - even the crew of poor, doomed *Hood* - every airman and sailor played his part.

The Swordfish and the *Bismarck* each make up a small but crucial aspect of the other's story. Yet one was finished there and then, whilst the other lasted out the war.

Three aircraft crashed on *Ark Royal*'s flight deck, one riddled with 175 holes. Among the aircrew there were several injuries. But when they found out what their work had yielded, this meant nothing.

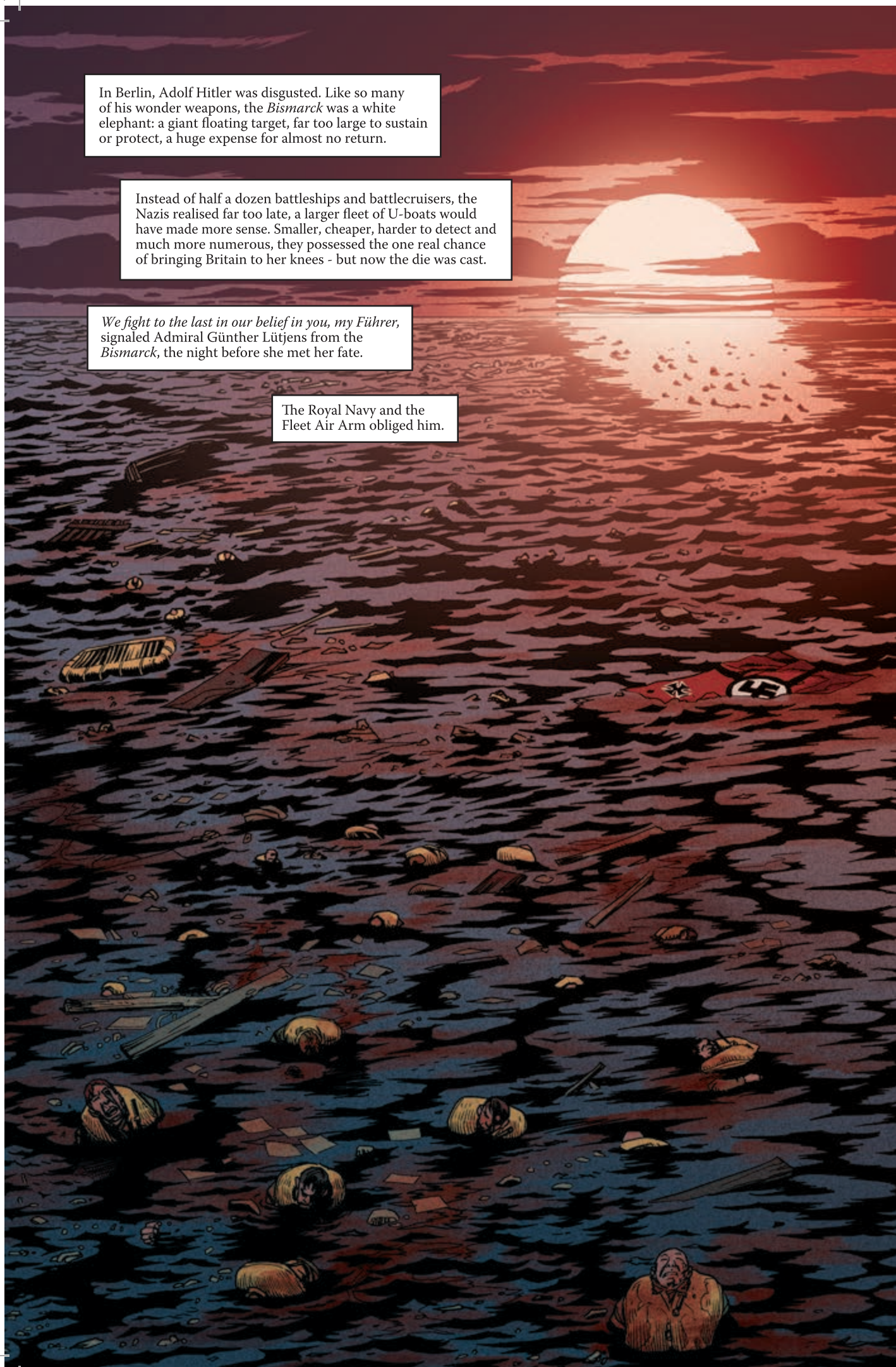


In Berlin, Adolf Hitler was disgusted. Like so many of his wonder weapons, the *Bismarck* was a white elephant: a giant floating target, far too large to sustain or protect, a huge expense for almost no return.

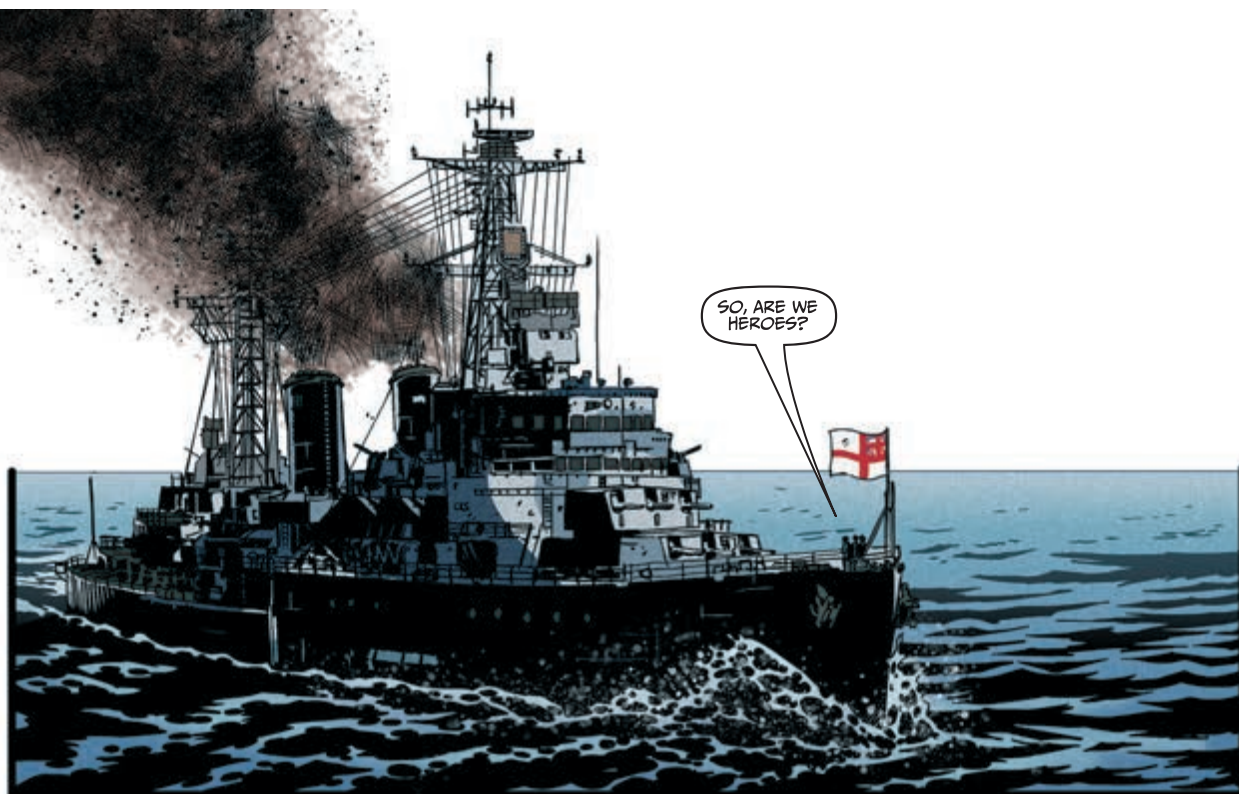
Instead of half a dozen battleships and battlecruisers, the Nazis realised far too late, a larger fleet of U-boats would have made more sense. Smaller, cheaper, harder to detect and much more numerous, they possessed the one real chance of bringing Britain to her knees - but now the die was cast.

*We fight to the last in our belief in you, my Führer,* signaled Admiral Günther Lütjens from the *Bismarck*, the night before she met her fate.

The Royal Navy and the Fleet Air Arm obliged him.







SO, ARE WE  
HEROES?



BEG  
PARDON?

WELL, DO YOU THINK IT WAS  
US SCORED THE ONE  
THAT COUNTED?

YOU CAN'T GO  
AROUND DECLARING  
YOURSELF A HERO.  
IT'S BAD FORM.



WHY NOT...?

BESIDES- MM-  
THERE'S NO WAY  
IT WAS US.

BECAUSE SHE WAS  
TURNING TOWARDS US,  
IF WE DID GET A HIT ON HER  
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN  
SMACK AMIDSHIPS.

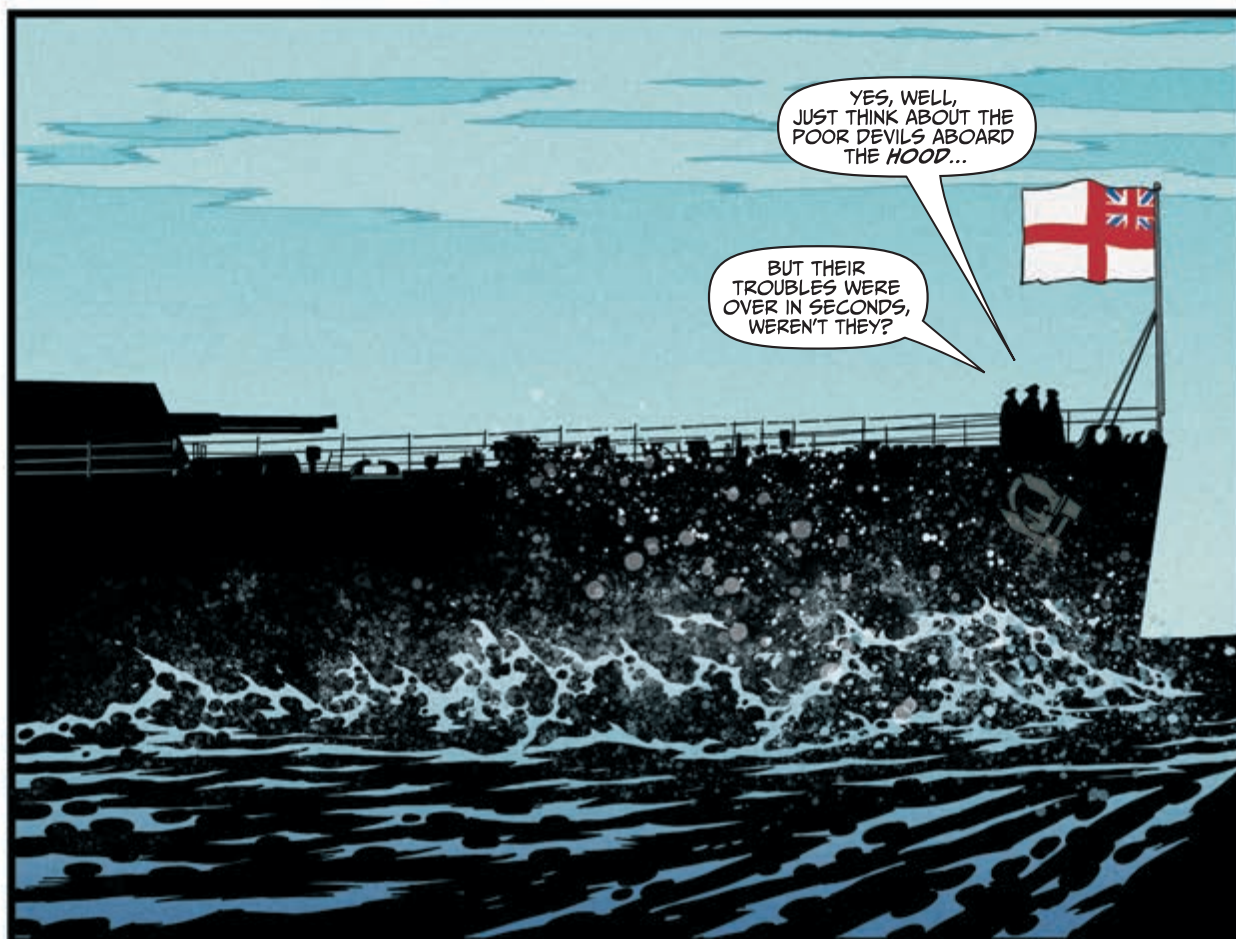
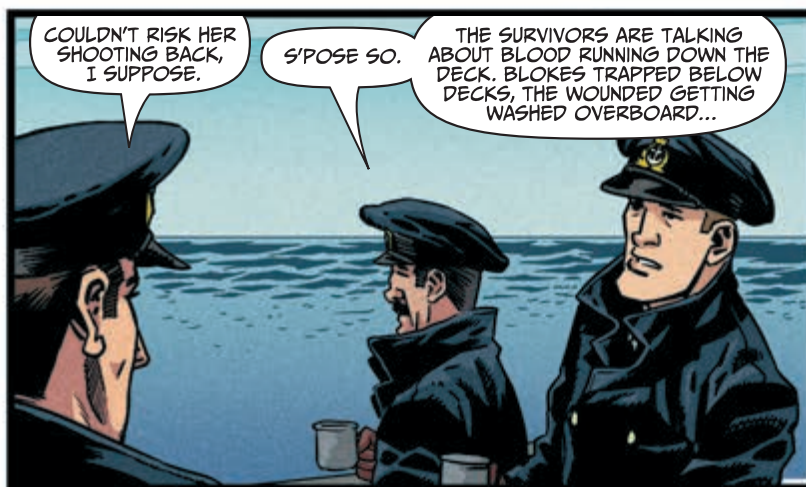
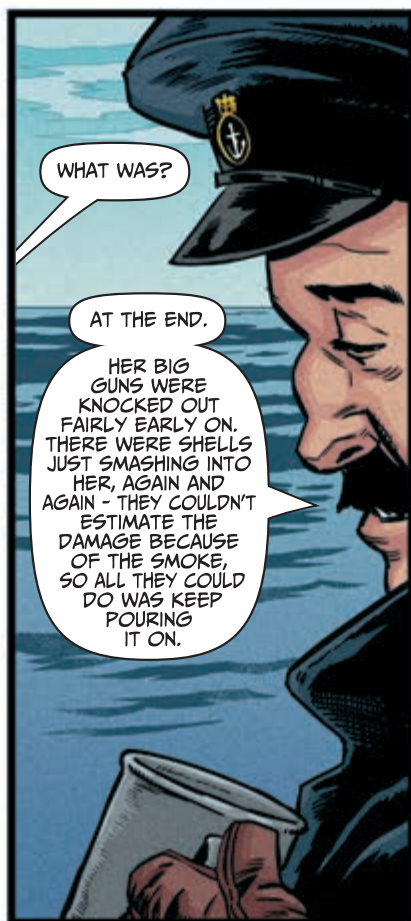


YOU'RE SO STRAIT-  
LACED YOU CAN'T EVEN  
SHOOT A DECENT LINE,  
CAN YOU, ARCHIE?

OH, WELL.

THEY'RE  
SAYING IT WAS  
PRETTY BLOODY  
AWFUL.







I KNOW WE'RE TALKING ABOUT THE *BISMARCK*, ARCHIE. I KNOW THEY WERE NAZIS AND ALL THE REST OF IT.

BUT I THINK ABOUT ALL THE POOR SODS THAT HAD TO BE LEFT IN THE WATER, AND I CAN'T GET OVER THE IDEA THAT IT COULD JUST AS EASILY HAVE BEEN *US*...



I MEAN THAT'S TWICE NOW WE'VE BEEN PULLED OUT OF THE DRINK.

HOW MUCH LONGER D'YOU THINK OUR LUCK CAN LAST?



I SUPPOSE THE ONLY WAY TO THINK OF IT IS EXACTLY THAT: RATHER THEM THAN US.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, SHE HAD TO BE STOPPED. I MEAN YOU IMAGINE ALL THOSE CONVOYS WITH THE MERCHANTMEN, SHE JUST HAD TO BE...



SO WHAT'S TO BE DONE THEN, POPS?

NOT SURE.



MAYBE JUST... CARRY ON 'TIL THE DAMN THING'S OVER AND DONE WITH.

















WHAT  
HAPPENED TO  
YOU THREE,  
THEN?

WE'RE-  
HRRRM.

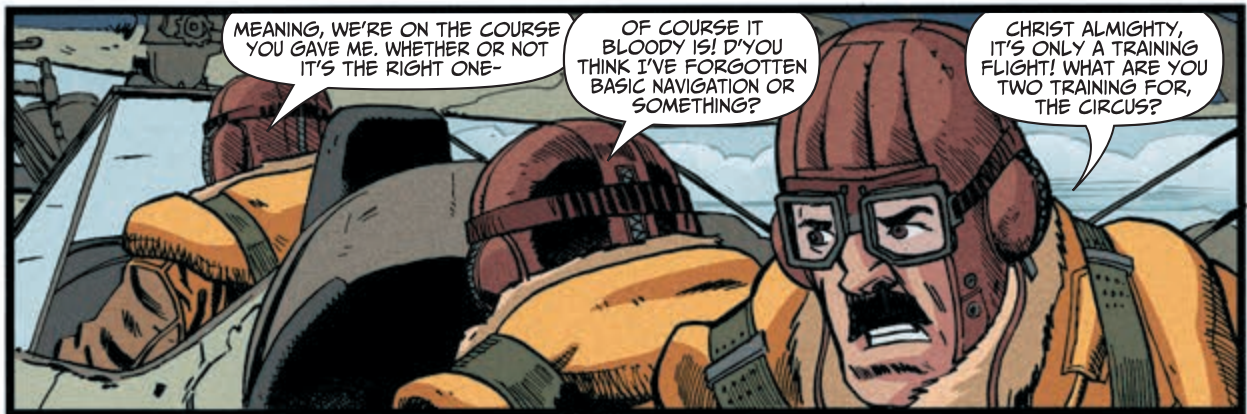
WE'RE  
NOT QUITE SURE  
OURSELVES.



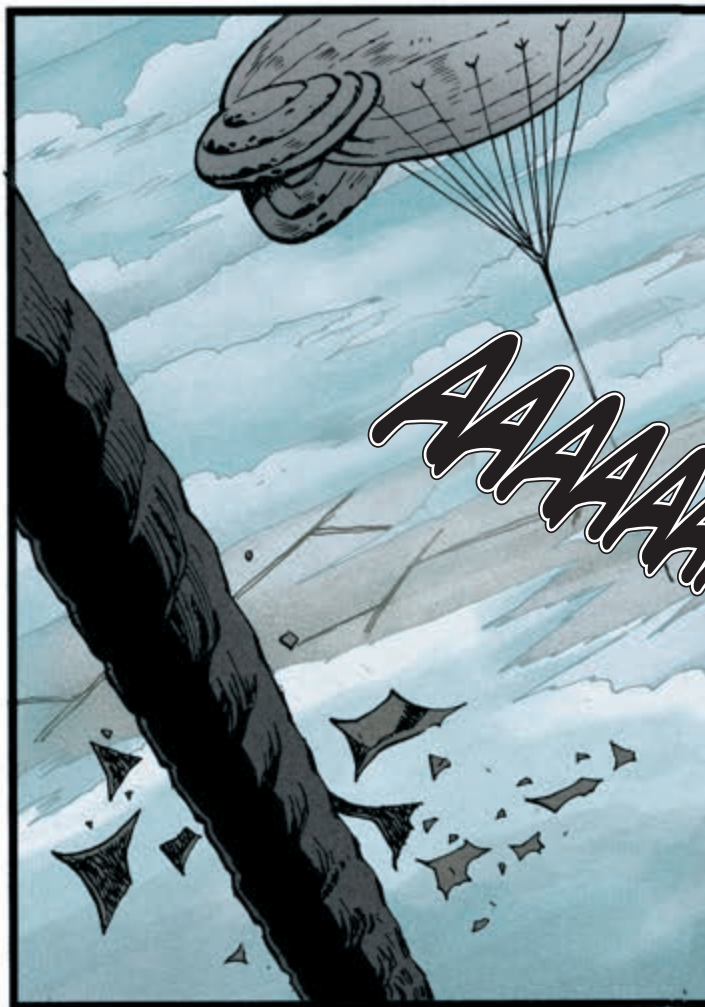
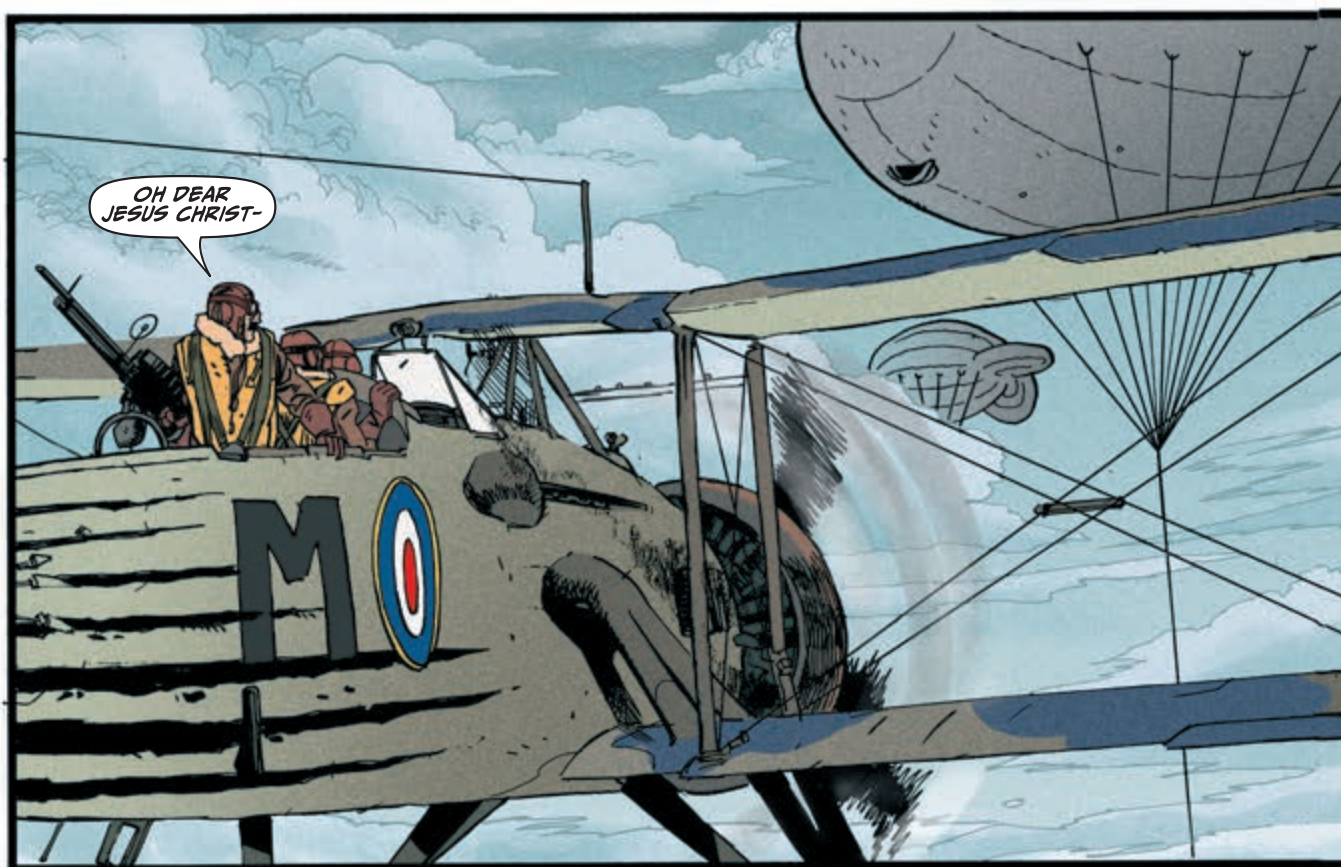




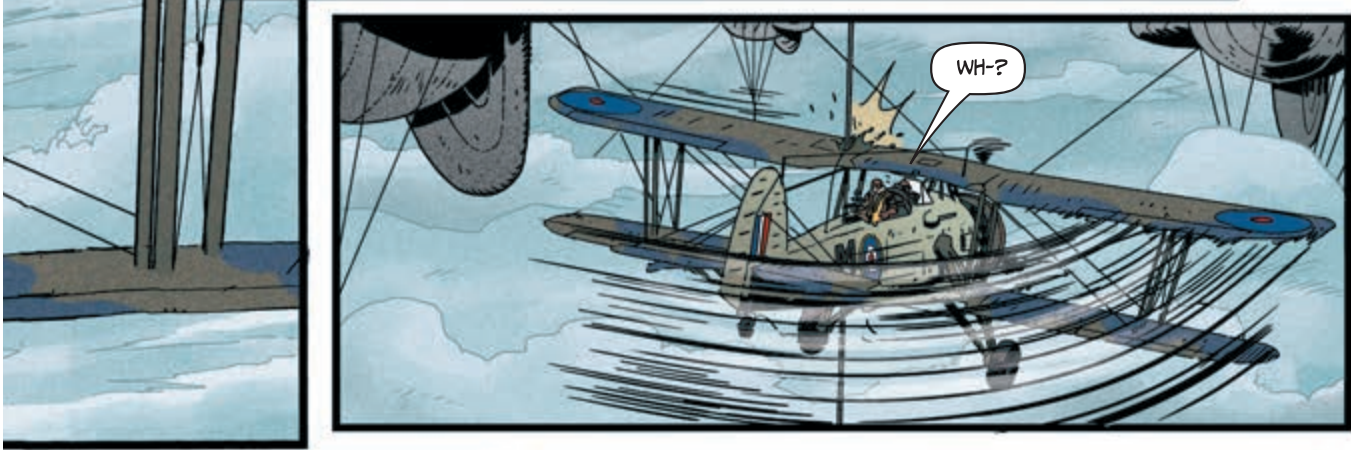




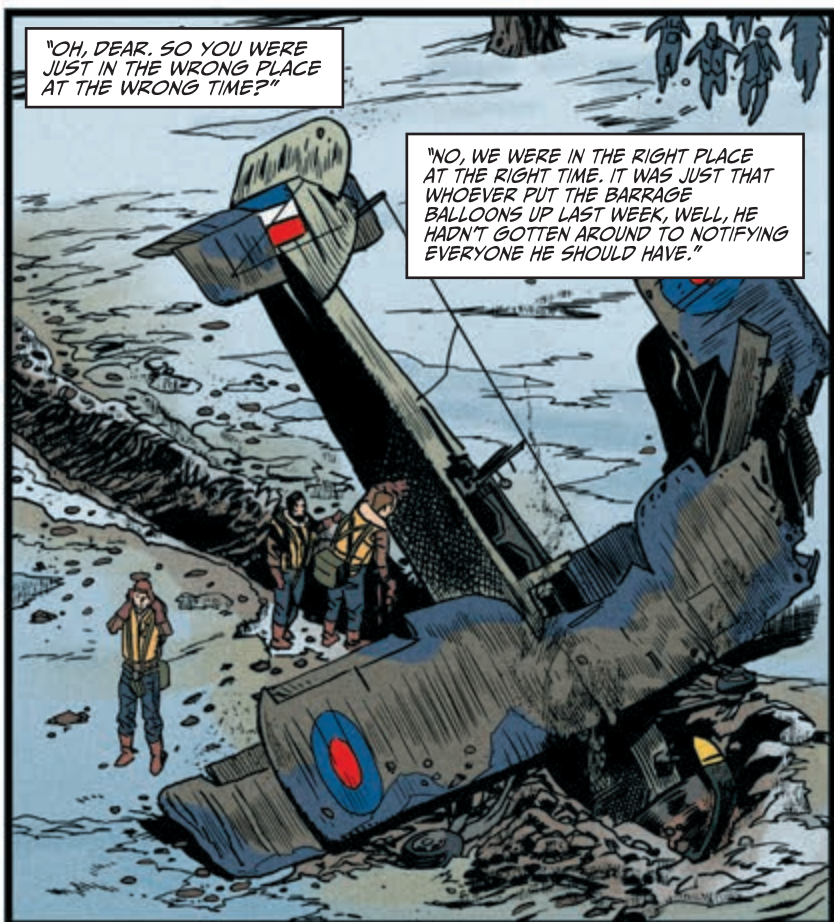
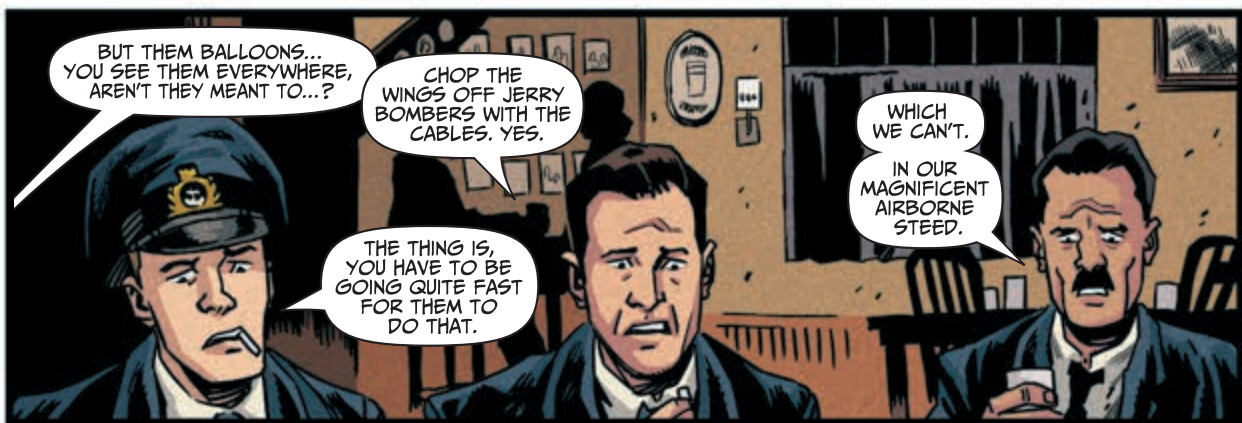








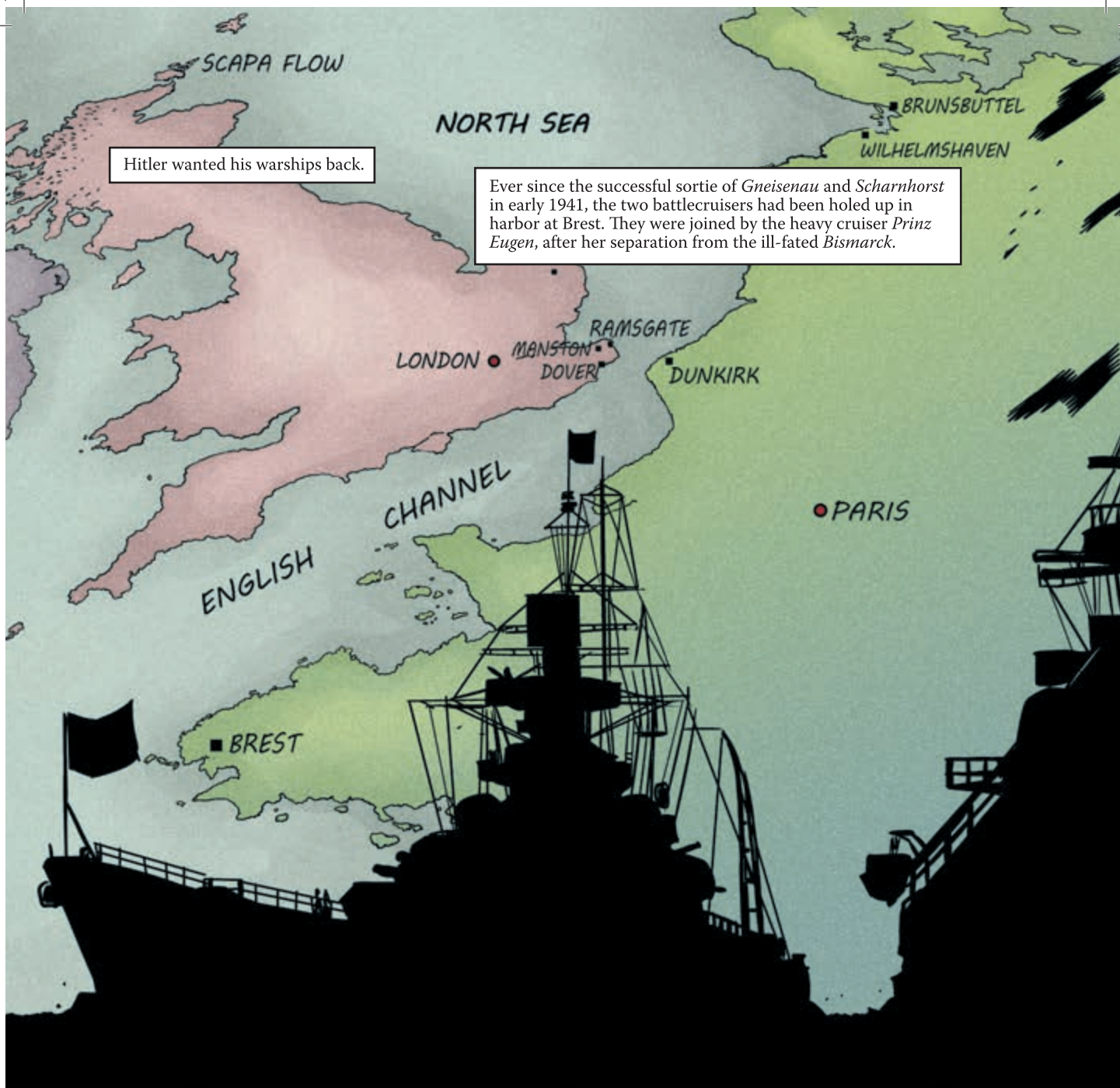













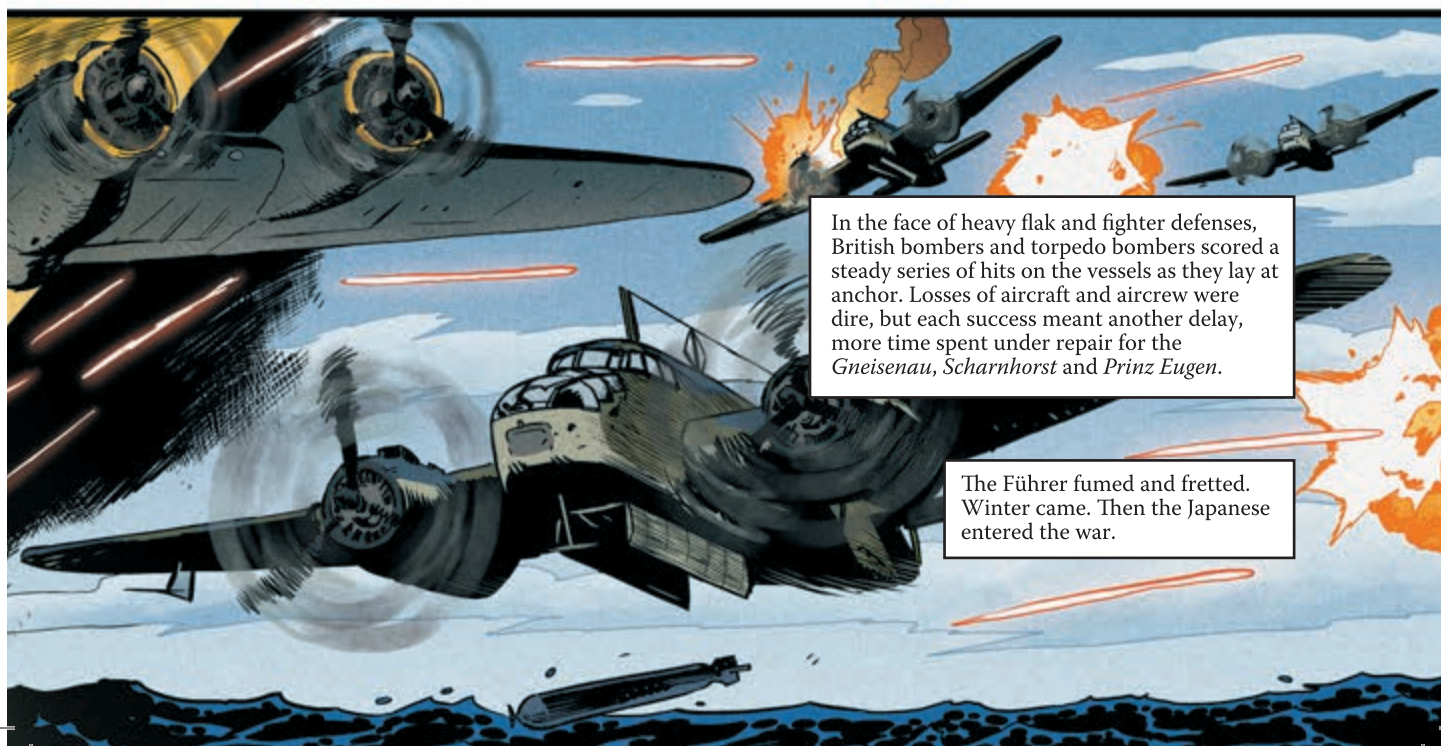




Convinced that Norway was the Reich's Achilles' heel, the Nazi warlord ordered the three great ships brought back to Germany, from whence they could sail to help prevent a Scandinavian invasion. Yet this was easier said than done.

Routing the vessels north around the British Isles would send them towards the Royal Navy's anchorage at Scapa Flow, where the Home Fleet lay in wait at the start of the Western Approaches. The *Bismarck's* doom was still an open wound.

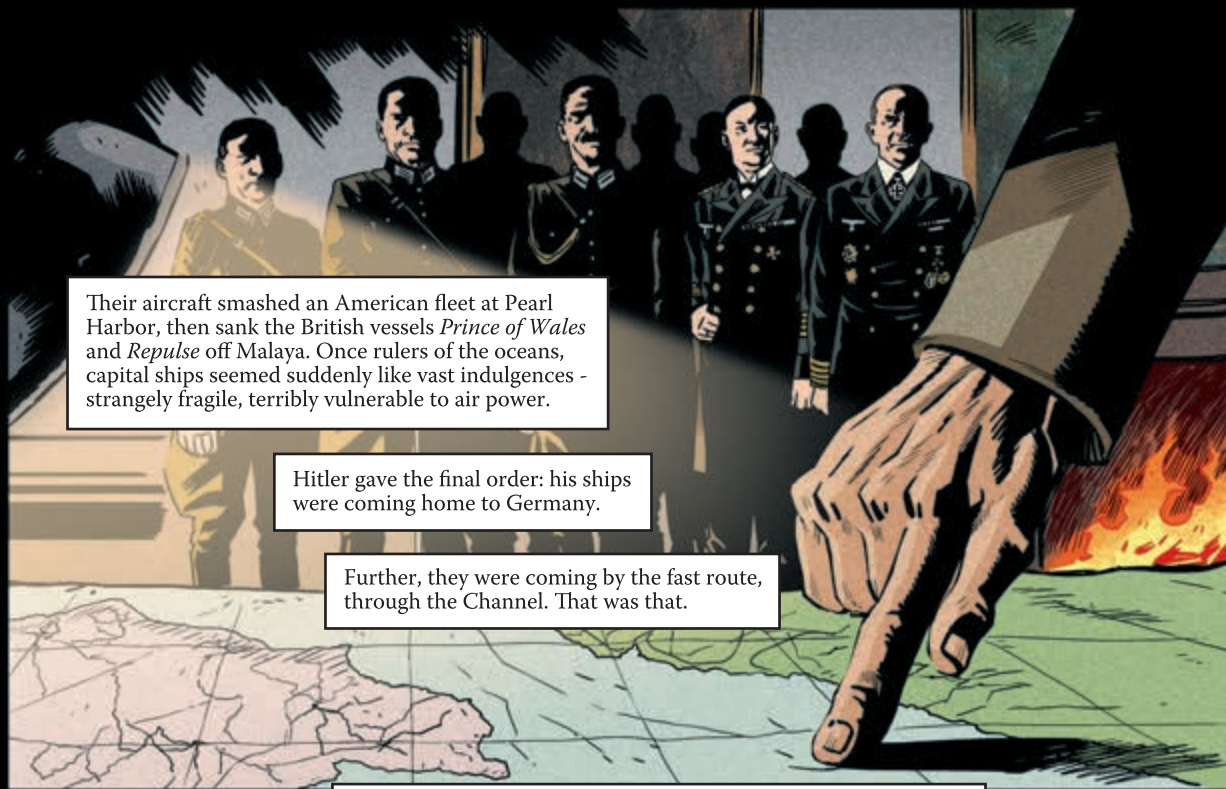
The direct route, east through the English Channel and the Dover Straits, would surely be nothing short of suicide.



In the face of heavy flak and fighter defenses, British bombers and torpedo bombers scored a steady series of hits on the vessels as they lay at anchor. Losses of aircraft and aircrew were dire, but each success meant another delay, more time spent under repair for the *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst* and *Prinz Eugen*.

The Führer fumed and fretted. Winter came. Then the Japanese entered the war.





Their aircraft smashed an American fleet at Pearl Harbor, then sank the British vessels *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* off Malaya. Once rulers of the oceans, capital ships seemed suddenly like vast indulgences - strangely fragile, terribly vulnerable to air power.

Hitler gave the final order: his ships were coming home to Germany.

Further, they were coming by the fast route, through the Channel. That was that.

The man in charge of Operation *Cerberus* was Otto Ciliax, Vice Admiral and veteran of World War I. His planners weighed their options and presented what seemed the least awful.

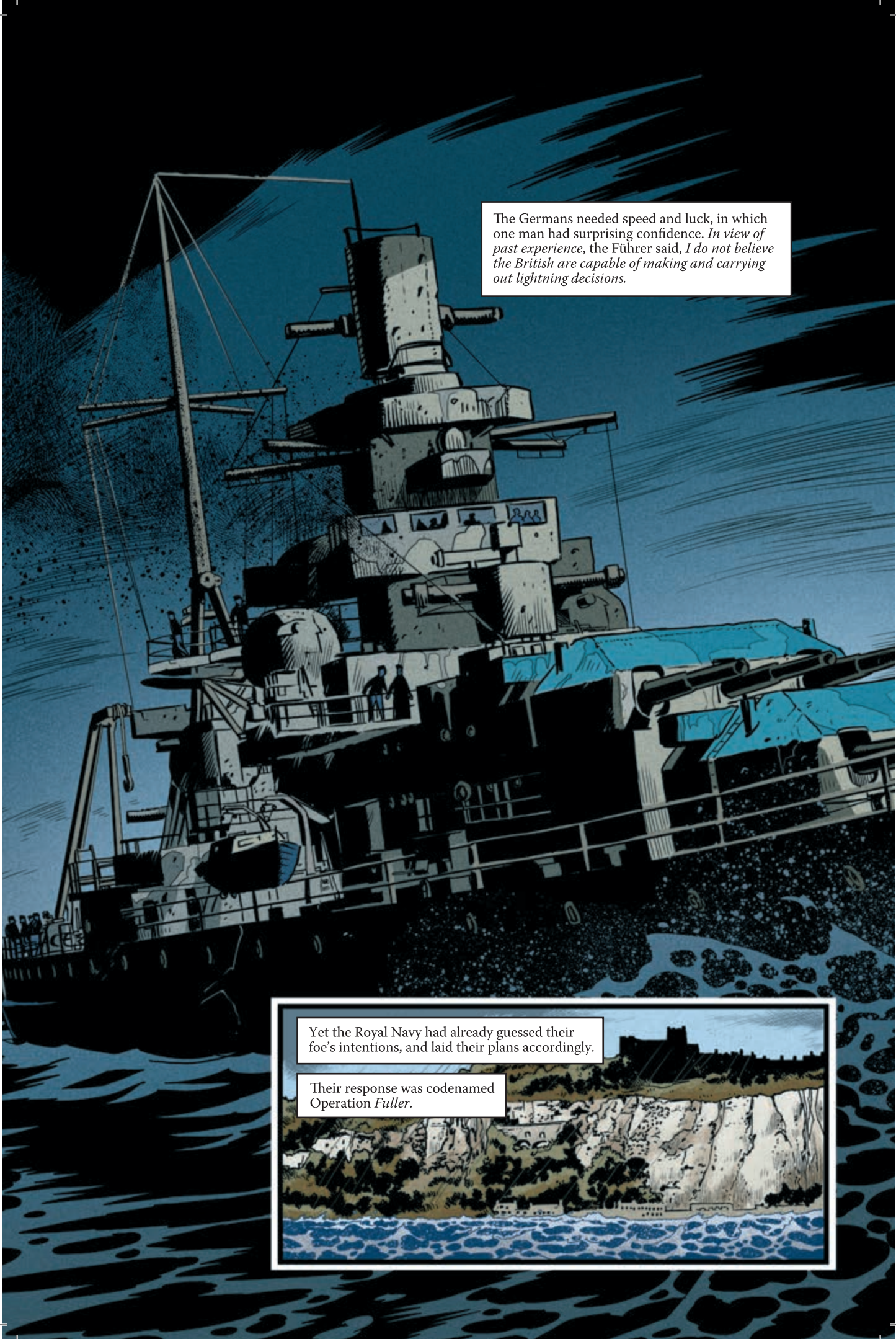


The ships would leave Brest at night and travel through the lethal Dover Straits in daylight - a massive risk, but one that guaranteed maximum fighter cover from the *Luftwaffe*. British radar would be jammed. Minesweepers would strive to clear the way.


Destroyers and torpedo boats would accompany the mighty trio. Even the coastal batteries of the Pas de Calais would engage the British gunners just across the channel.







The Germans needed speed and luck, in which one man had surprising confidence. *In view of past experience, the Führer said, I do not believe the British are capable of making and carrying out lightning decisions.*



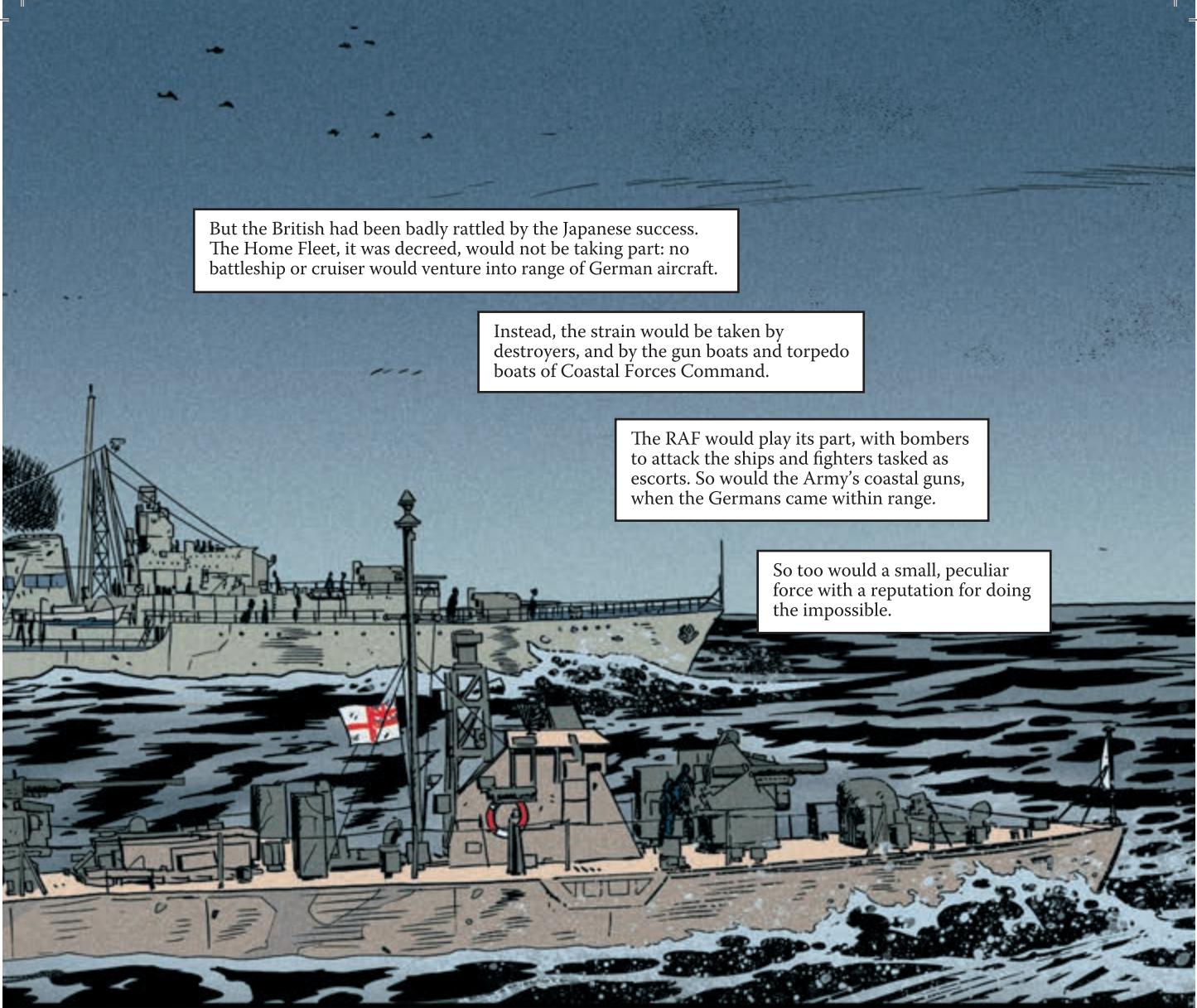
Yet the Royal Navy had already guessed their foe's intentions, and laid their plans accordingly.

Their response was codenamed *Operation Fuller*.









But the British had been badly rattled by the Japanese success. The Home Fleet, it was decreed, would not be taking part: no battleship or cruiser would venture into range of German aircraft.

Instead, the strain would be taken by destroyers, and by the gun boats and torpedo boats of Coastal Forces Command.

The RAF would play its part, with bombers to attack the ships and fighters tasked as escorts. So would the Army's coastal guns, when the Germans came within range.

So too would a small, peculiar force with a reputation for doing the impossible.



That was in February, 1942.

## 3: By Either Side That Day













COME ON, BUCK UP, YOU TWO. THE JOB'S GOT TO BE DONE, THERE'S NO POINT WHINGEING ABOUT IT.

ALL RIGHT, WE'LL WHINGE ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE, THEN. WHY IS IT THAT AFTER ALL THIS TIME, YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE OF US WHO'S BEEN PROMOTED?



UM...

I THOUGHT WAR WAS MEANT TO BE GOOD FOR PROMOTION. APPARENTLY NOT.

AND WE'RE STILL BEING SHUFFLED AROUND LIKE SOMETHING THEY FOUND DOWN THE BACK OF A FILING CABINET. WE'RE WITH 810, WE'RE WITH 825...



WELL, AT LEAST WE'RE NOT AT TWATT ANYMORE.

AND 825'S A CRACK SQUADRON, DON'T FORGET. EUGENE ESMONDE'S IN CHARGE - HE ONLY BROUGHT THE BEST CREWS DOWN HERE WITH HIM FROM LEE-ON-SOLENT, HE TOLD US THAT HIMSELF...



YES, BECAUSE 825'S ONLY JUST BEEN REFORMED. THE CHAPS HE LEFT BEHIND HAVE BARELY EVEN FINISHED THEIR TRAINING.

FOR BEST CREWS READ ALL THERE BLOODY WAS...





CHRIST, YOU TWO ARE HARD WORK...!

FUNNY THING.  
I KEEP THINKING ABOUT THE BISMARCK.



ALL THOSE LADS HAVING TO JUST SIT AND TAKE IT, WHILE SHE WAS POUNDED TO PIECES.

AND THE ONES WHO WERE LEFT IN THE WATER AFTERWARDS.



I THOUGHT YOU SAID-

I KNOW. IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF FEELING SORRY FOR THEM.

IT'S MORE... WHAT WE'RE HAVING TO DO, AND THEN JUST SORT OF WALK AWAY FROM.



IT TAKES ITS TOLL, ARCHIE. AND THAT BLOODY SILLY CARRY-ON WITH THE BALLOON, AND EVERYTHING ELSE WE'VE BEEN ON ABOUT - THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY BETTER.



I DON'T KNOW, I SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE MY LIFE'S RUSHING PAST WITHOUT ME NOTICING, LIKE I'M ALREADY AN OLD MAN...

EVENING, TOMMY!

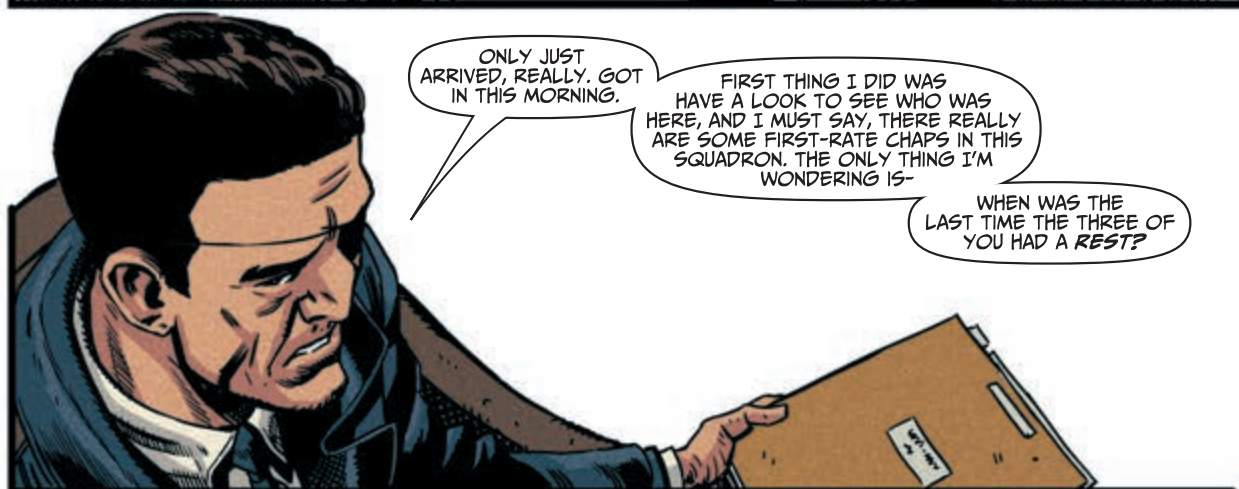
















SIR?

A REST. FROM  
OPERATIONS.

A PROPER REST,  
NOT JUST A WEEK'S  
LEAVE TO POP HOME  
AND SEE MUM  
AND DAD.



WELL-

UM...

I'LL TELL  
YOU, SHALL I?  
I CHECKED.

IT WAS THE  
SUMMER BEFORE  
TARANTO.



COME AGAIN-?

YOU SEE, YOU THREE  
BEING HERE WAS MY ONE  
GENUINE SURPRISE WHEN I ARRIVED.  
I THOUGHT - *THEM? AGAIN?*  
IT CAN'T BE...

BUT IT TURNS OUT IT CAN;  
YOU'VE BEEN POSTED FROM  
SQUADRON TO SQUADRON AND  
SHIP TO SHIP SO MANY TIMES, NO  
ONE'S BEEN KEEPING AN EYE ON  
YOUR ACTUAL RECORDS  
OF SERVICE.



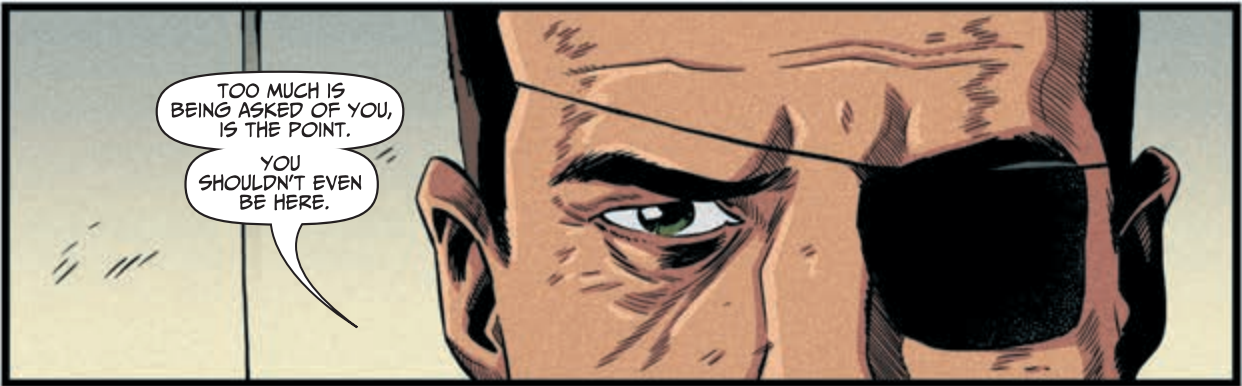
BLOODY  
HELL.

THIS IS MORE  
OR LESS WHAT  
I WAS SAYING  
EARLIER ON..

D'YOU THINK IT  
MIGHT ALSO HAVE  
SOMETHING TO DO  
WITH US ALWAYS ENDING  
UP IN THE DRINK? NOT  
COMING HOME WITH  
EVERYONE ELSE?

THE REASON WE  
REST PEOPLE - SORRY,  
DOES ANYONE HAVE  
A LIGHT?













SIR, WHAT  
IN GOD'S NAME IS  
GOING ON...?



WE'VE HAD IT  
CONFIRMED THAT THE  
GERMAN SHIPS ARE OUT.  
SCHARNHORST, GNEISENAU AND  
PRINZ EUGEN - DESTROYERS  
AND E-BOATS ESCORTING.

IN THE  
CHANNEL?

IN THE  
STRAITS.



JESUS...

COMMANDER  
ESMONDE IS SPEAKING  
TO DOVER CASTLE  
RIGHT NOW.

THE  
INVASION-?

UNLIKELY,  
TO SAY THE  
LEAST.



... THEN PLEASE LET  
ADMIRAL RAMSAY KNOW  
THAT 825 SQUADRON  
WILL GO IN.

THANK YOU.





RIGHT THEN. THESE JERRY BATTLEWAGONS HAVE HAD THE CHEEK TO PUT THEIR NOSES INTO THE CHANNEL, SO WE'RE GOING OUT TO DEAL WITH THEM.

FLY AT FIFTY FEET IN LOOSE LINE ASTERN, MAKE INDIVIDUAL ATTACKS AND FIND YOUR OWN WAY HOME.



IN DAYLIGHT...?

WE WILL HAVE FIGHTER PROTECTION.

SEE YOU OUT THERE.



LET HIM KNOW YOU'LL GO IN, THAT ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE HE GAVE YOU A CHOICE...

WELL, HE DID, IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING.



THE CHAP I SPOKE TO SAID THE ADMIRAL ONLY WANTED ME TO GO AHEAD IF I WAS SATISFIED WITH OUR FIGHTER COVER. SAID HE'D BEEN IN TOUCH WITH THE ADMIRALTY, ASKING NOT TO HAVE TO SEND US IN.

BUT WE'RE ALL THERE IS UNTIL THE RAF GET THEIR ACT TOGETHER, APPARENTLY. SO THE ANSWER HE GOT WAS NO.





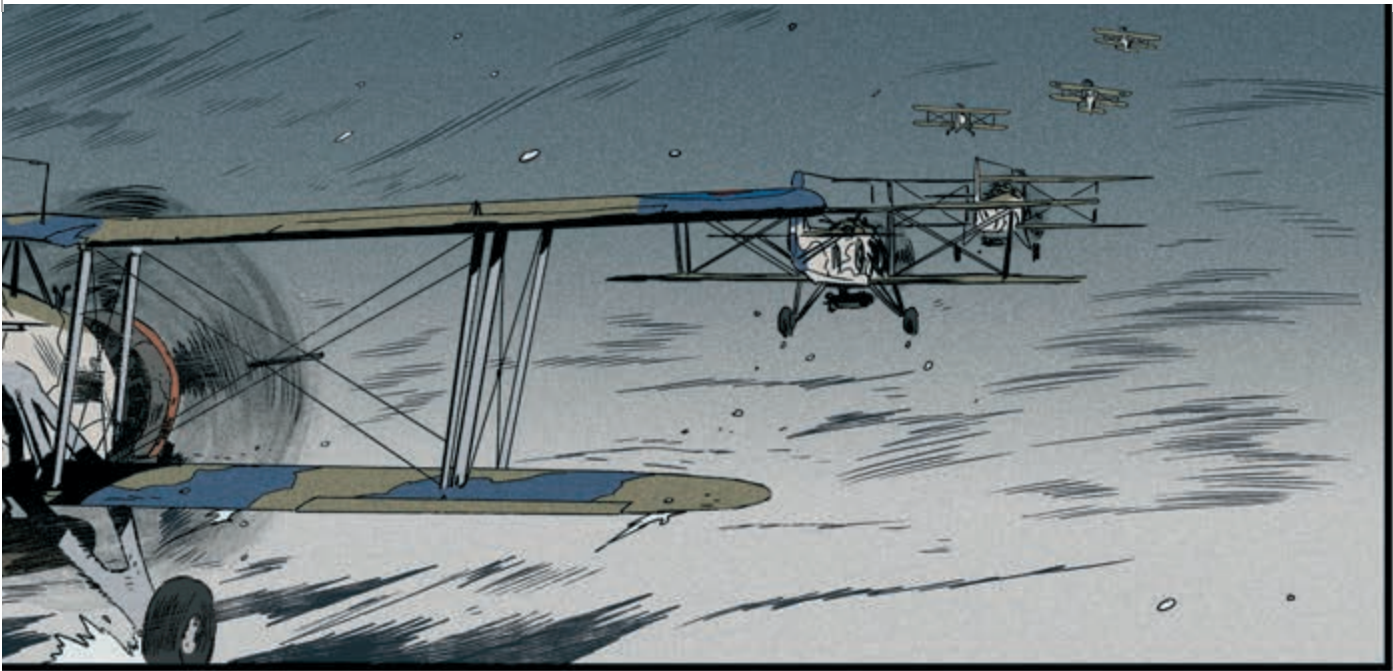




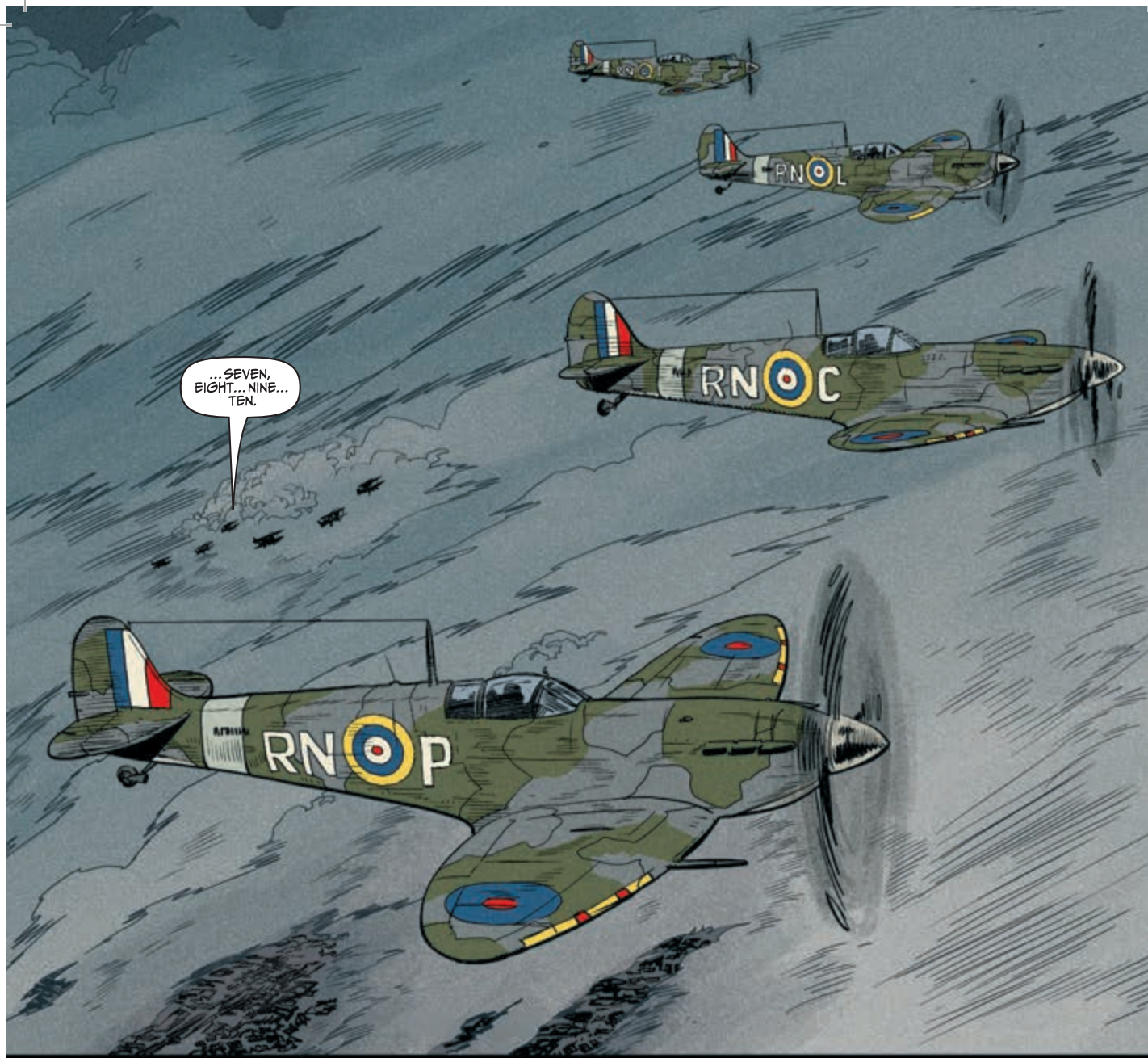




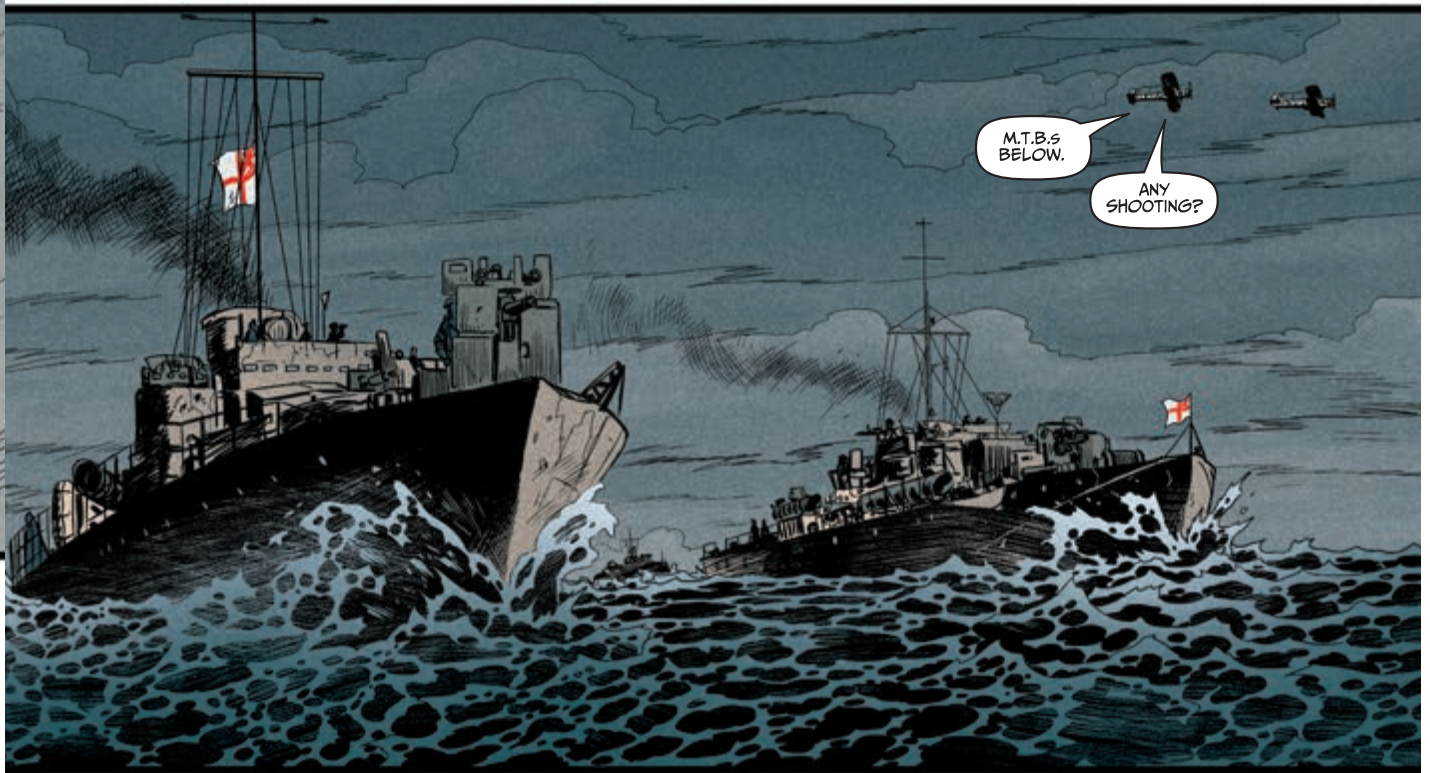
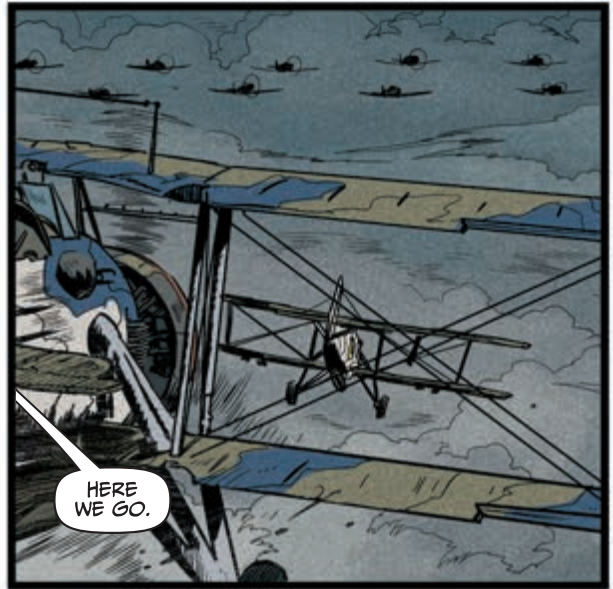




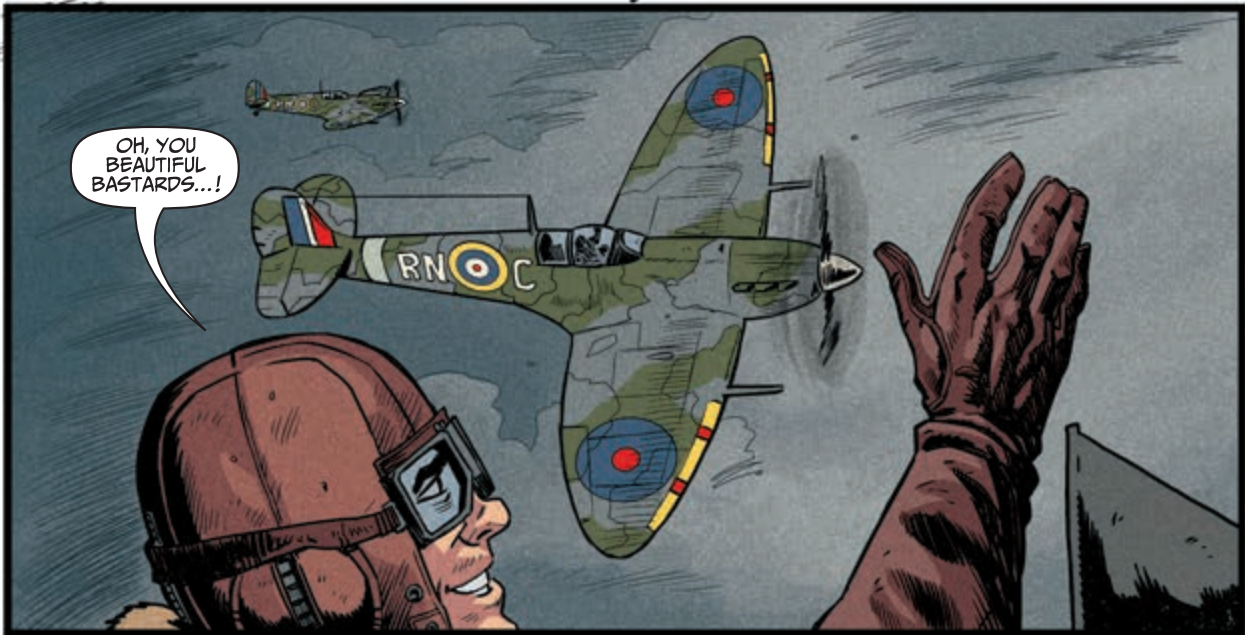
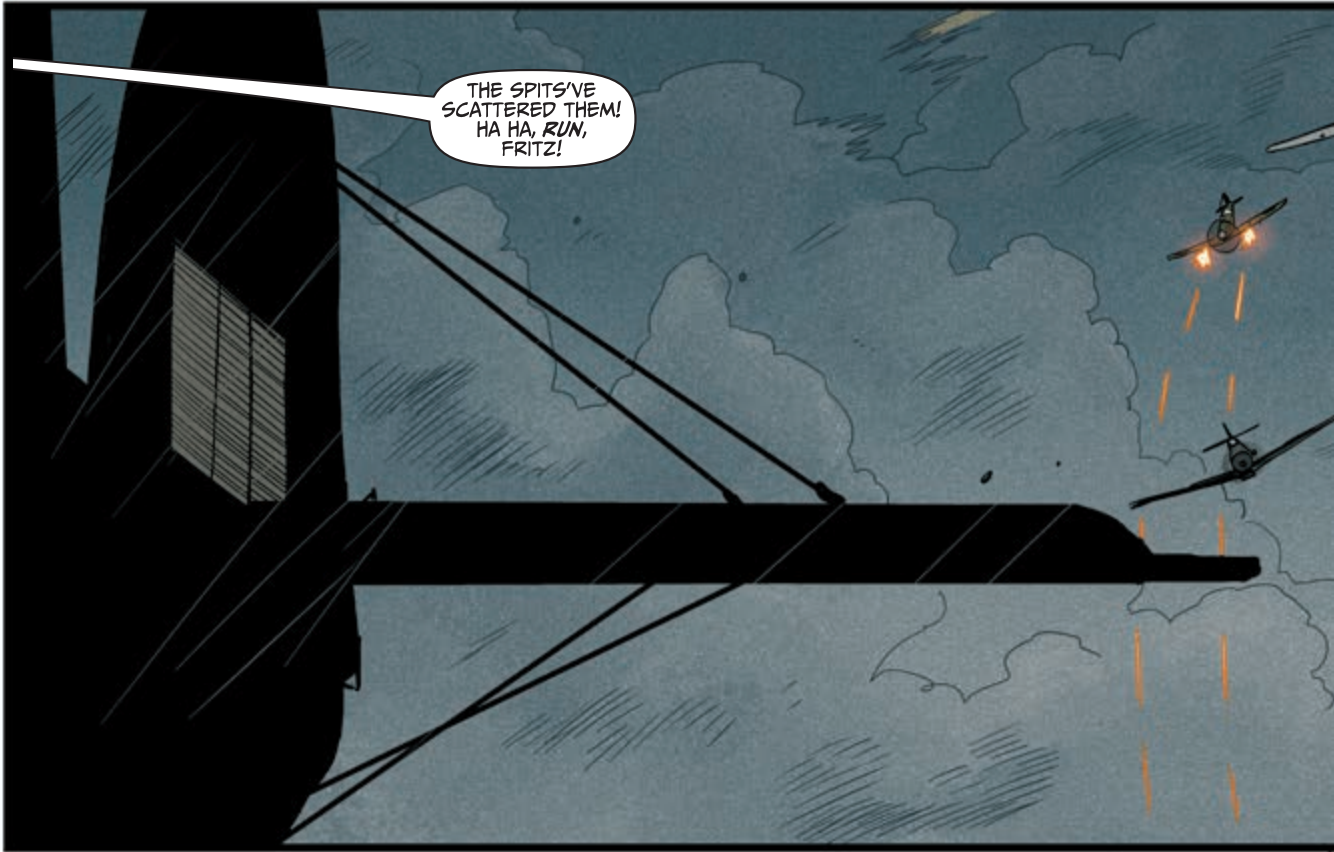
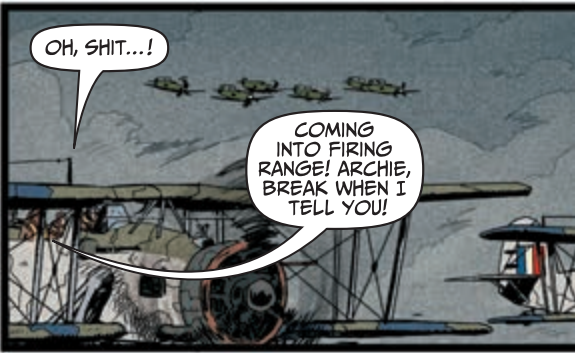








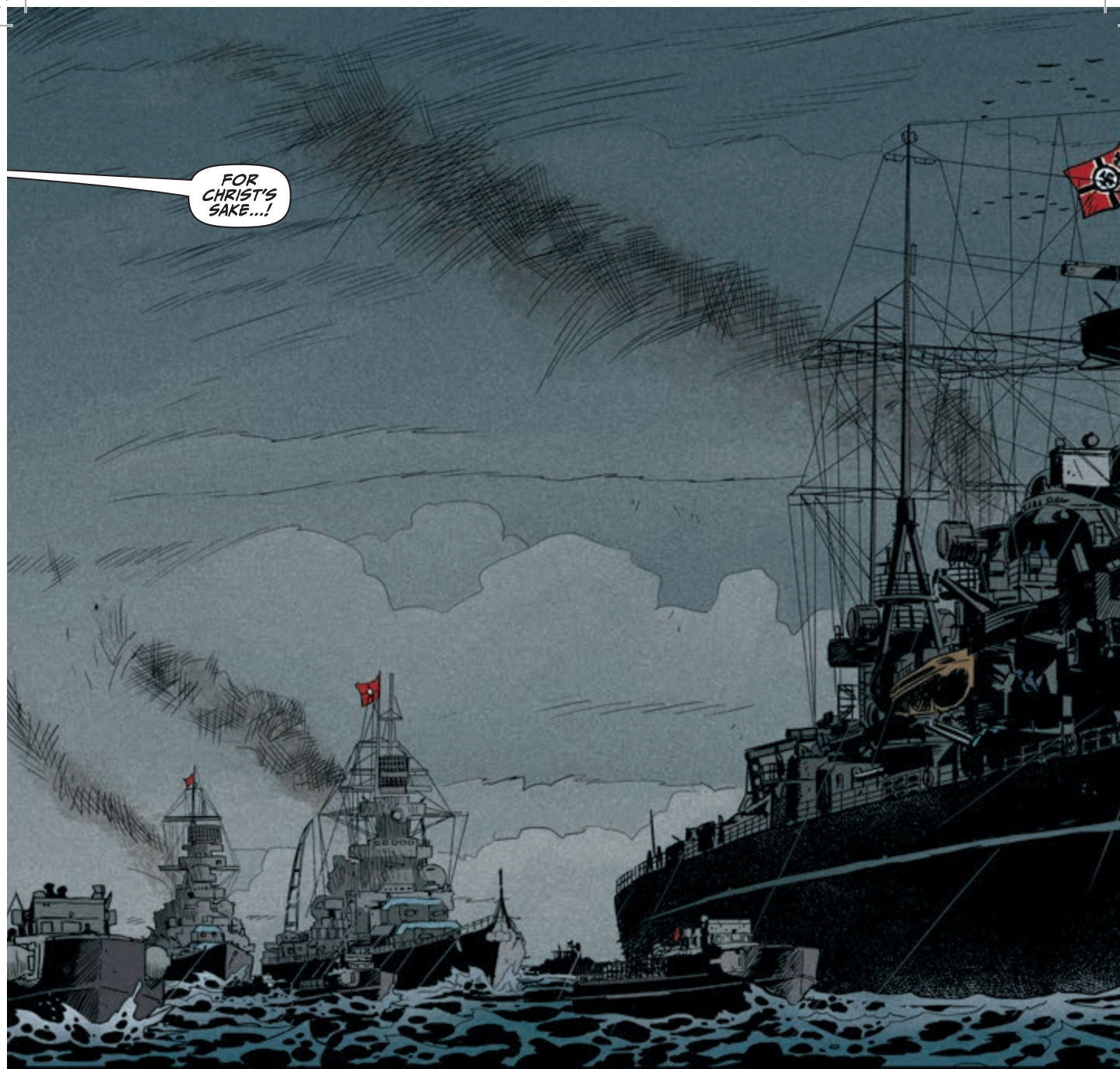




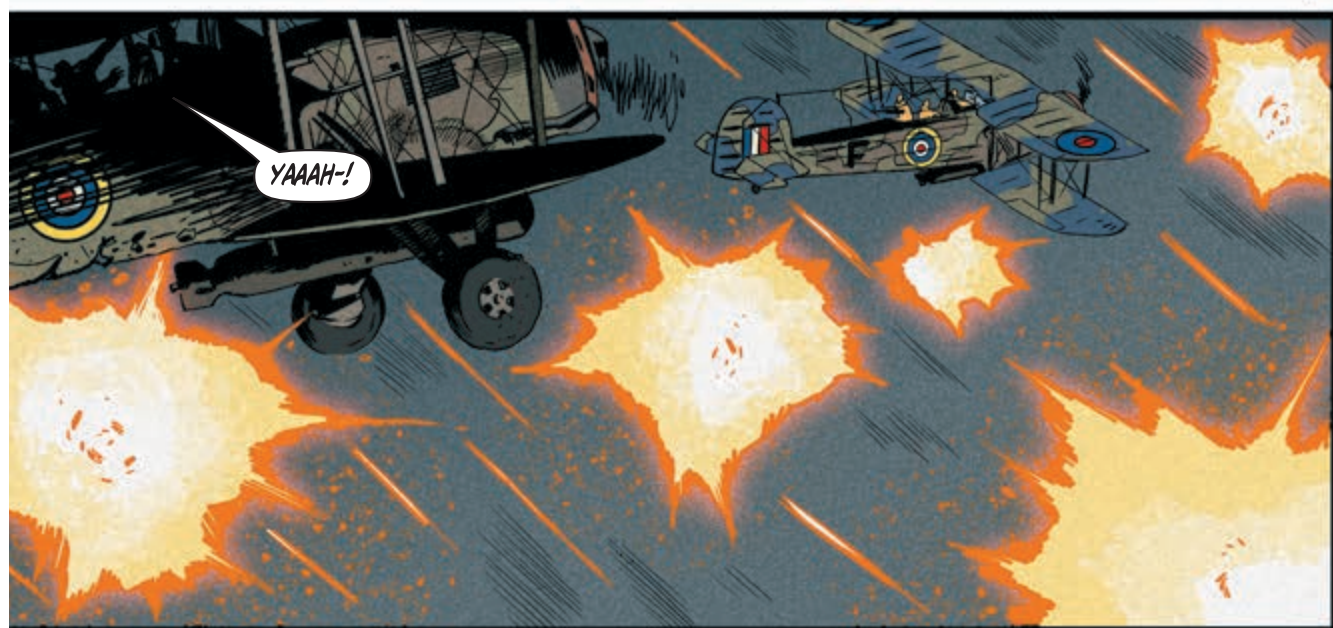




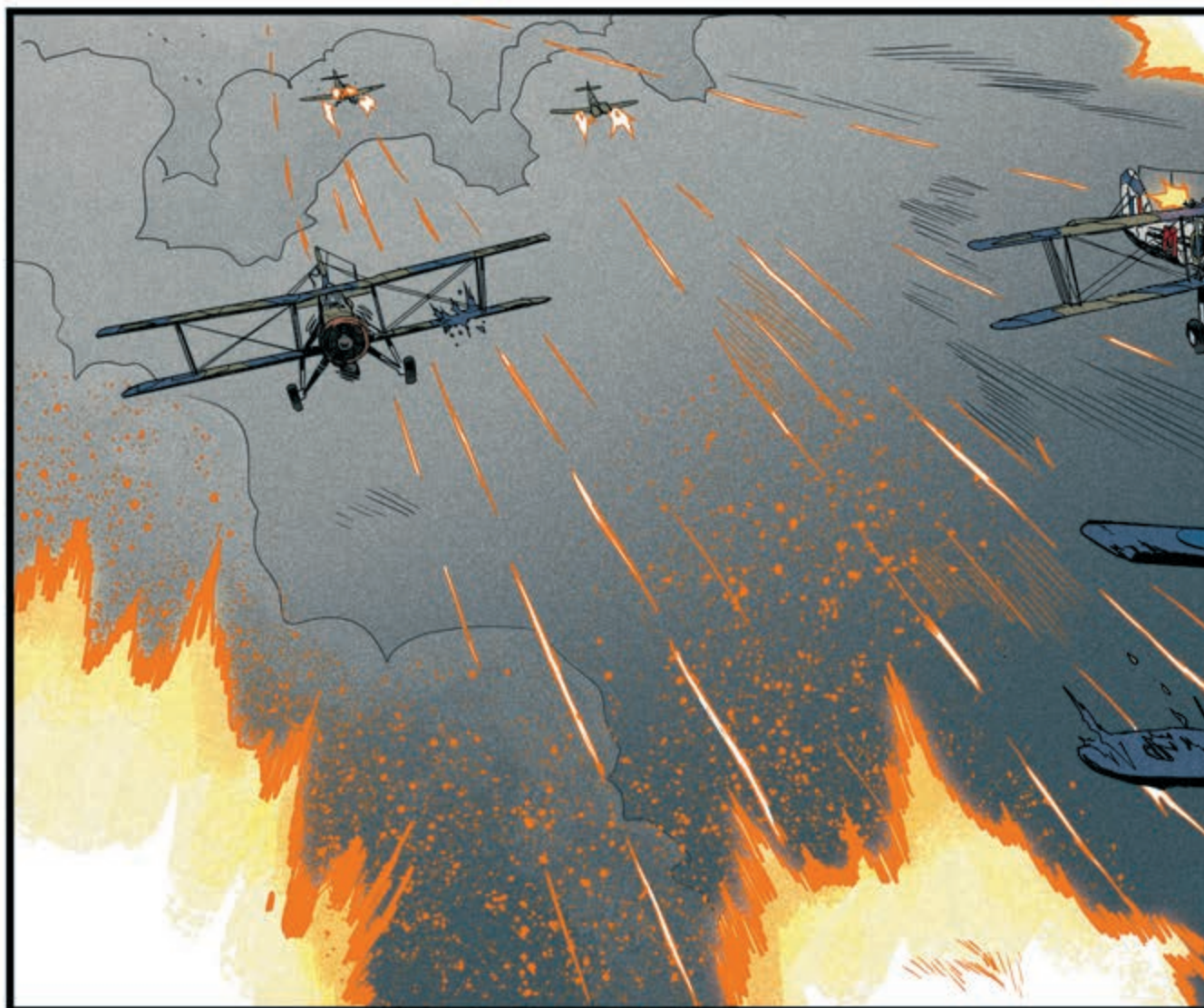




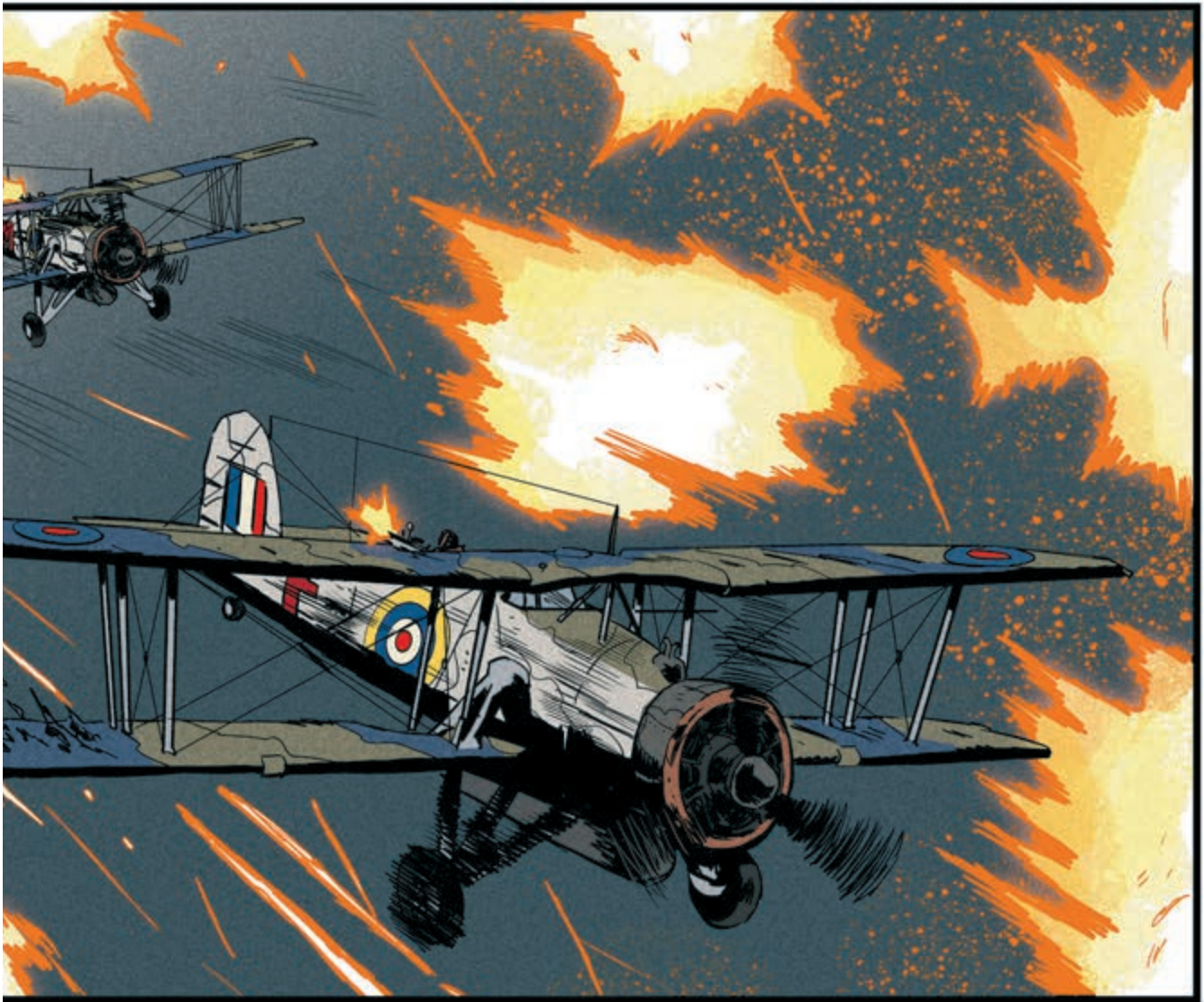








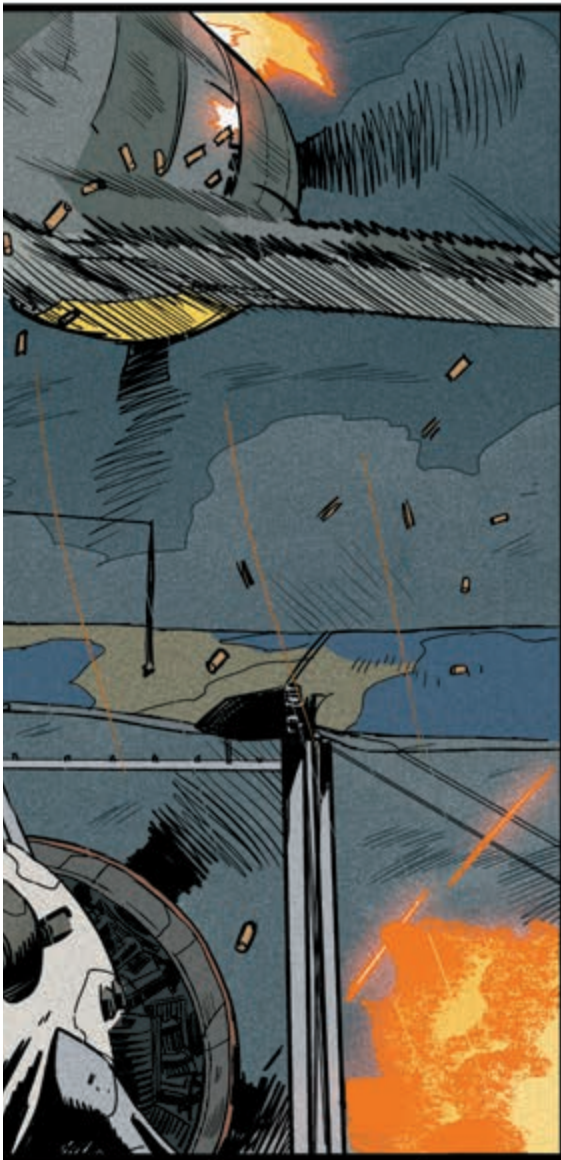
















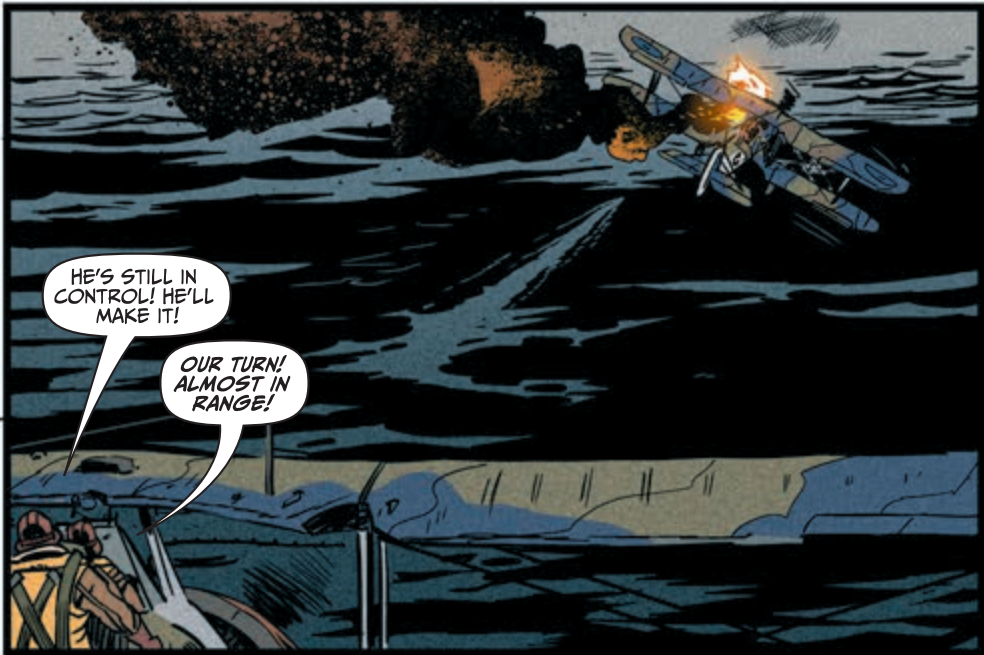
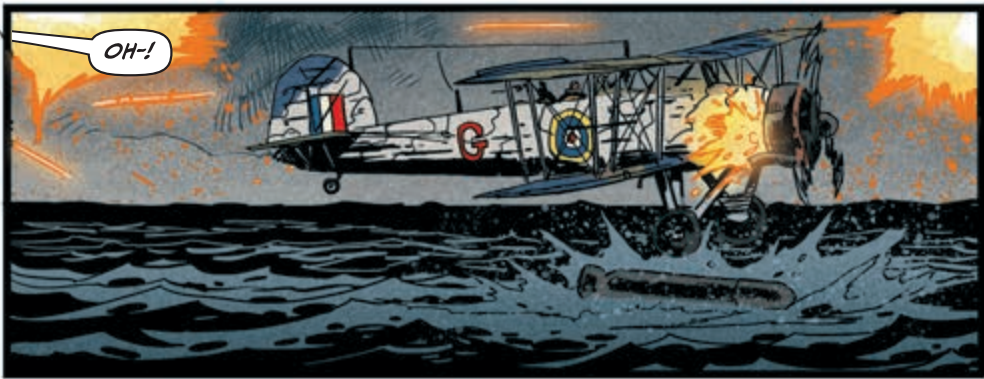
















BY GOD,  
IF WE SURVIVE *THIS*  
WE'LL HAVE A STORY  
TO TELL...!

ONE-NINETIES!



TRY AND  
HOLD THEM  
OFF, POPS,  
WE'RE  
ALMOST  
THERE!

OH,  
CHRIST-!



*Poor fellows, said Kurt Hoffmann,  
captain of the Scharnhorst.*

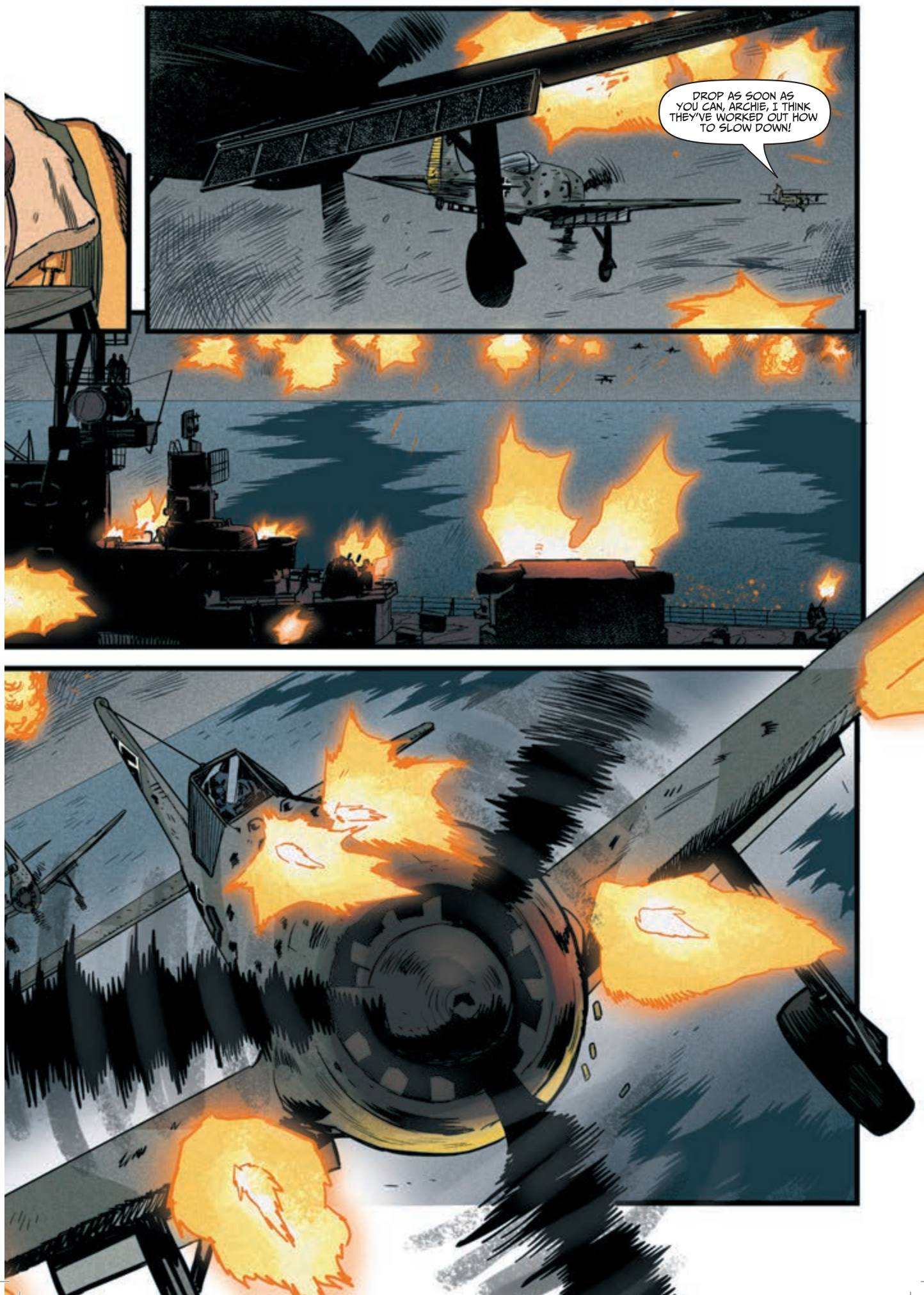


*They are so very slow.*



*It is nothing but  
suicide for them to fly  
against these big ships.*








Operation *Cerberus* was a complete success.  
The *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prinz  
Eugen* all returned intact to Germany.








Further British attacks by ships and aircraft proved ineffectual. Both the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* struck mines, but repairs were soon effected and the battlecruisers continued on their way. By the morning of February 13th, all three vessels were safe in the ports of Wilhelmshaven and Brunsbüttel.

Their crews were welcomed home as heroes. Vice Admiral Ciliax had become the first man in three centuries to lead a hostile fleet through the English Channel.

Adolf Hitler, quite naturally, was delighted.

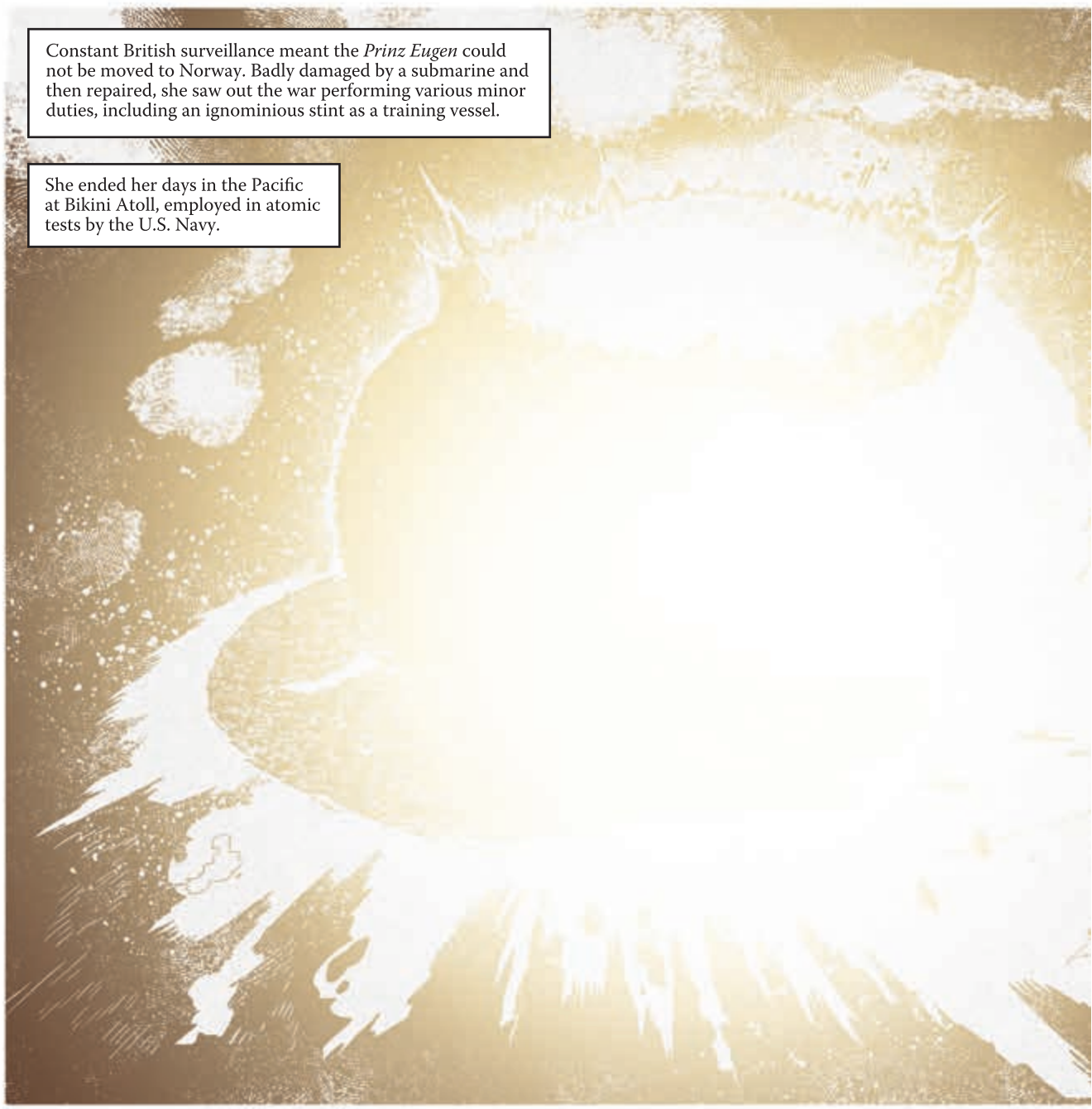


An illustration of the German battleship Gneisenau engulfed in intense orange and yellow flames. The ship is shown from a side-on perspective, with its superstructure and gun turrets visible amidst the fire. The background is dark with stylized, jagged shapes representing smoke or other ships in the distance.

Yet tactical victory soon proved strategic folly. The warships were no safer in Germany than they had been in France, and all too soon the RAF came calling.

Two weeks after the Channel Dash, as the daring endeavor had become known, the *Gneisenau* was damaged beyond repair.

Her guns removed and sent to shore batteries, she was sunk as a blockship in Gotenhafen harbor at the war's end.

A large, stylized illustration of a massive atomic explosion. A bright, glowing white and yellow fireball rises from the water, surrounded by a thick, billowing cloud of white steam and smoke. The background is a dark, textured brown, suggesting the sea and sky.

Constant British surveillance meant the *Prinz Eugen* could not be moved to Norway. Badly damaged by a submarine and then repaired, she saw out the war performing various minor duties, including an ignominious stint as a training vessel.

She ended her days in the Pacific at Bikini Atoll, employed in atomic tests by the U.S. Navy.





Damaged and repaired, damaged and repaired,  
the *Scharnhorst* finally met her fate at the Battle  
of North Cape, the day after Christmas, 1943.

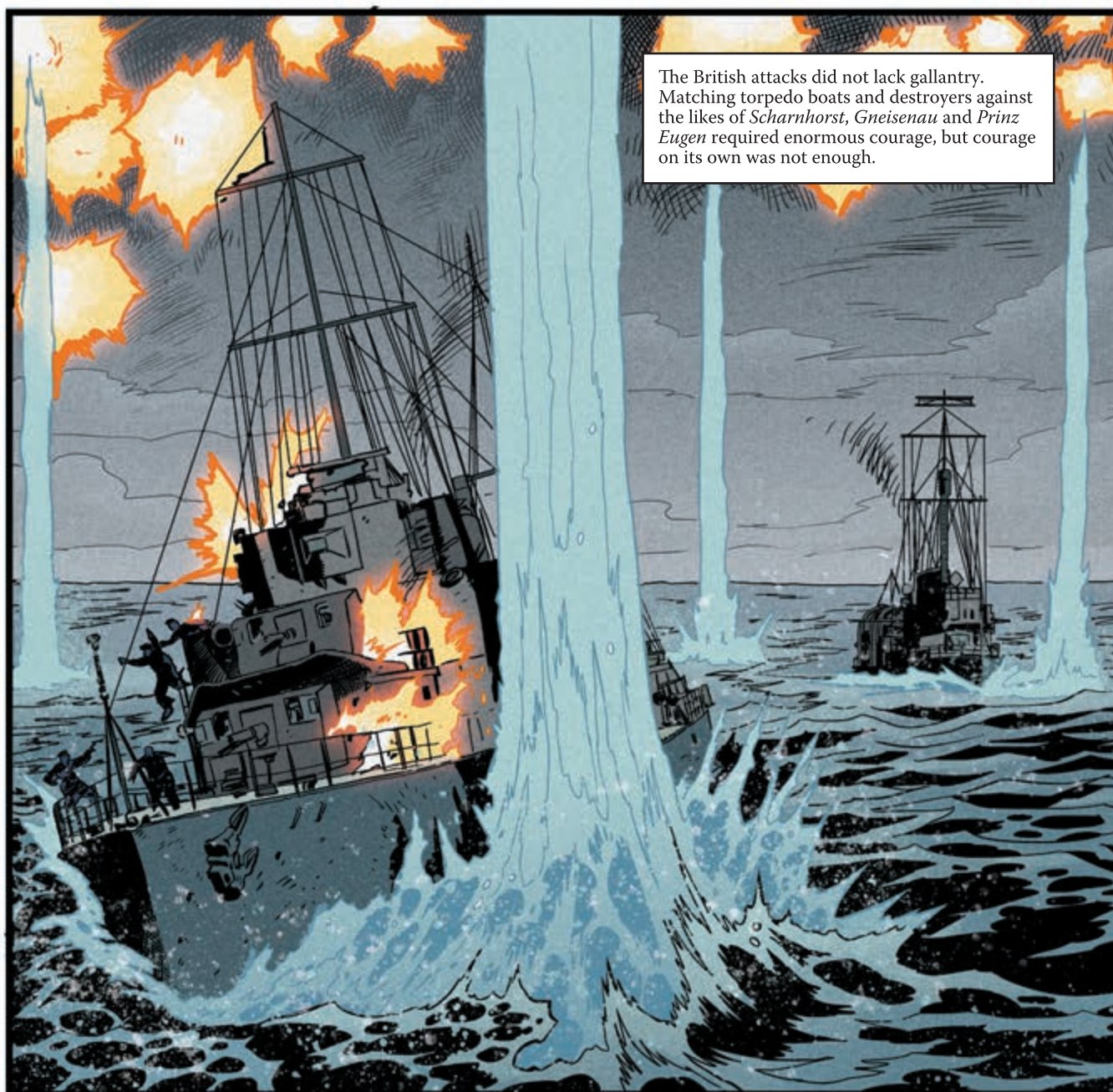


The Royal Navy sent her to the bottom  
of the Barents Sea, along with all but  
36 of her 1,970-man crew.

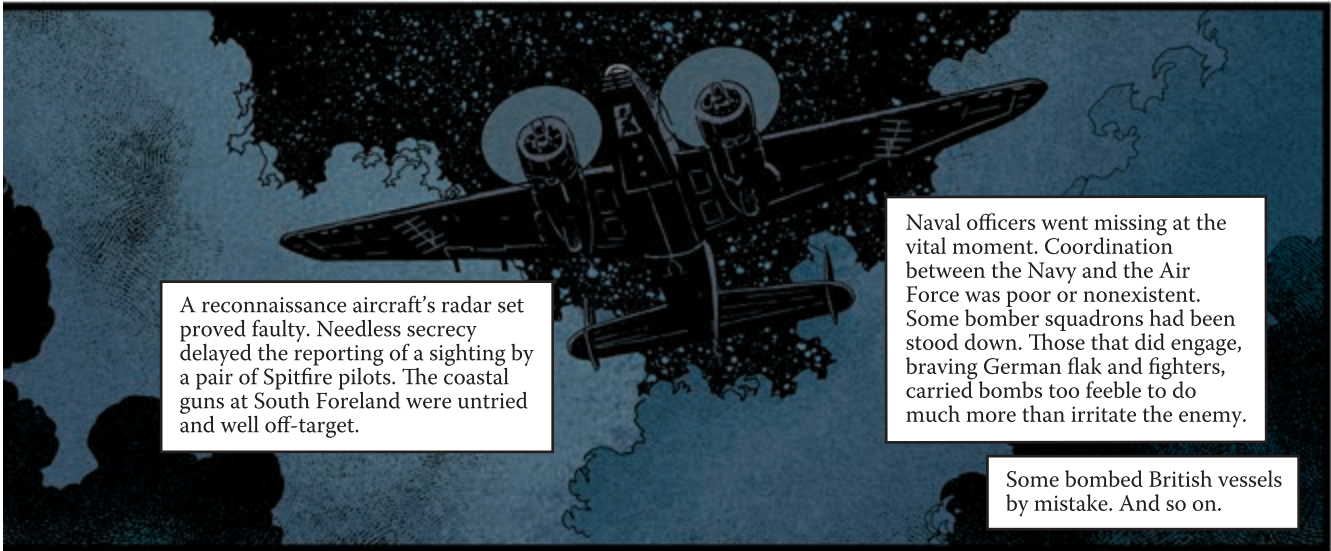




The German operation had been planned, timed and executed to perfection. The British response proved the exact opposite.



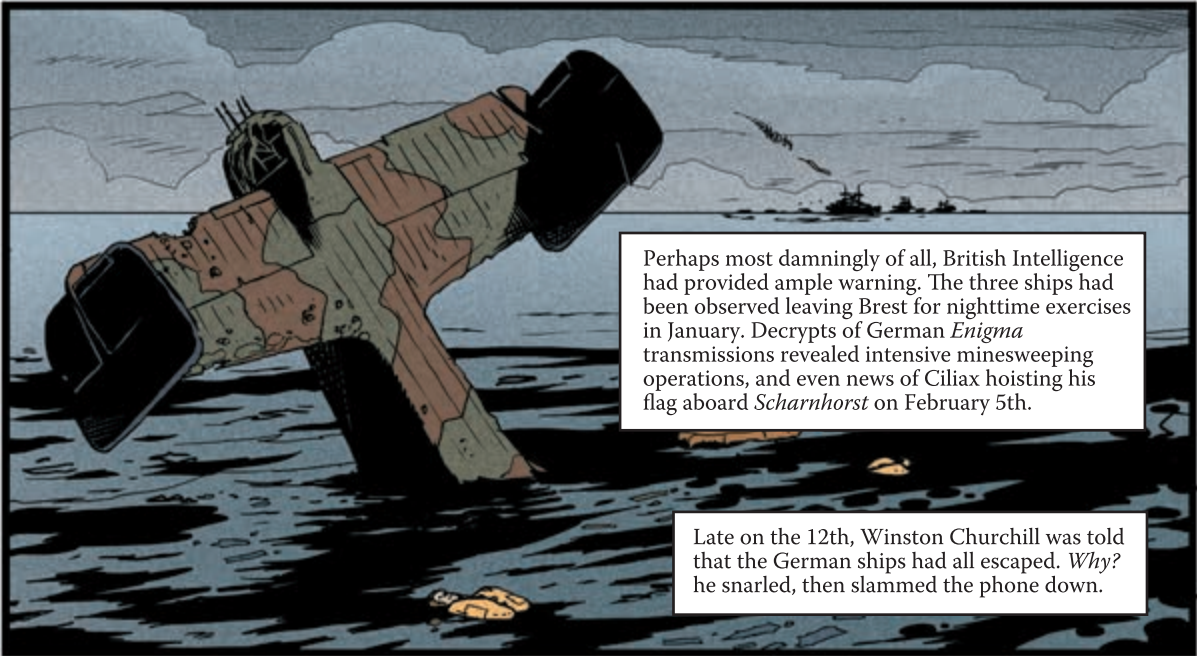




A reconnaissance aircraft's radar set proved faulty. Needless secrecy delayed the reporting of a sighting by a pair of Spitfire pilots. The coastal guns at South Foreland were untried and well off-target.

Naval officers went missing at the vital moment. Coordination between the Navy and the Air Force was poor or nonexistent. Some bomber squadrons had been stood down. Those that did engage, braving German flak and fighters, carried bombs too feeble to do much more than irritate the enemy.

Some bombed British vessels by mistake. And so on.



Perhaps most damningly of all, British Intelligence had provided ample warning. The three ships had been observed leaving Brest for nighttime exercises in January. Decrypts of German *Enigma* transmissions revealed intensive minesweeping operations, and even news of Ciliax hoisting his flag aboard *Scharnhorst* on February 5th.

Late on the 12th, Winston Churchill was told that the German ships had all escaped. *Why?* he snarled, then slammed the phone down.



All six of 825 Squadron's machines were shot down. Of their eighteen crewmen, five survived.

For his leadership against such appalling odds, Lieutenant Commander Eugene Esmonde was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

*A handful of ancient planes, Otto Ciliax said later.*



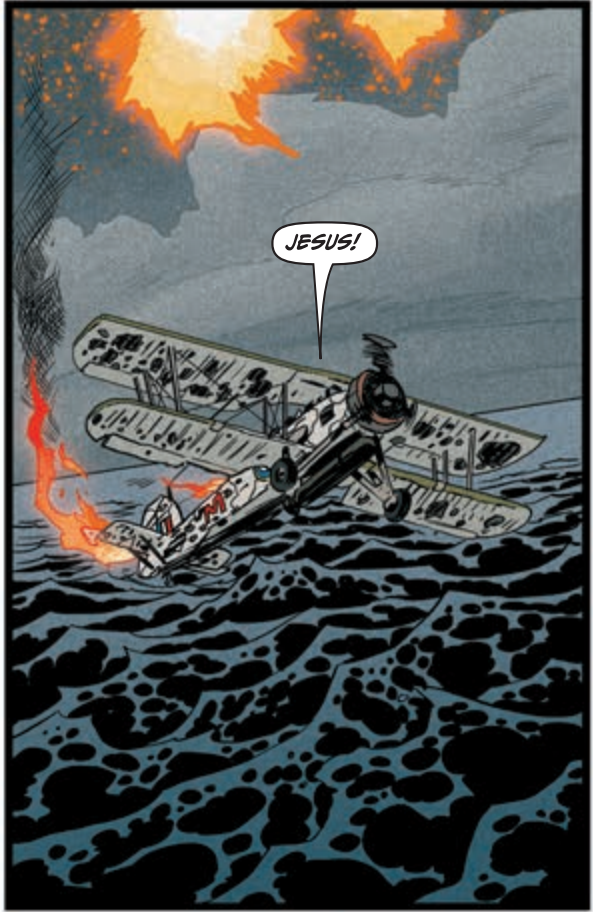


*Piloted by men whose bravery surpasses any other action by either side that day.*



OLLIE- POPS-  
I THINK THAT'S THE GNEISENAU UP AHEAD, I'M GOING TO MAKE A RUN AT THE BASTARD-!









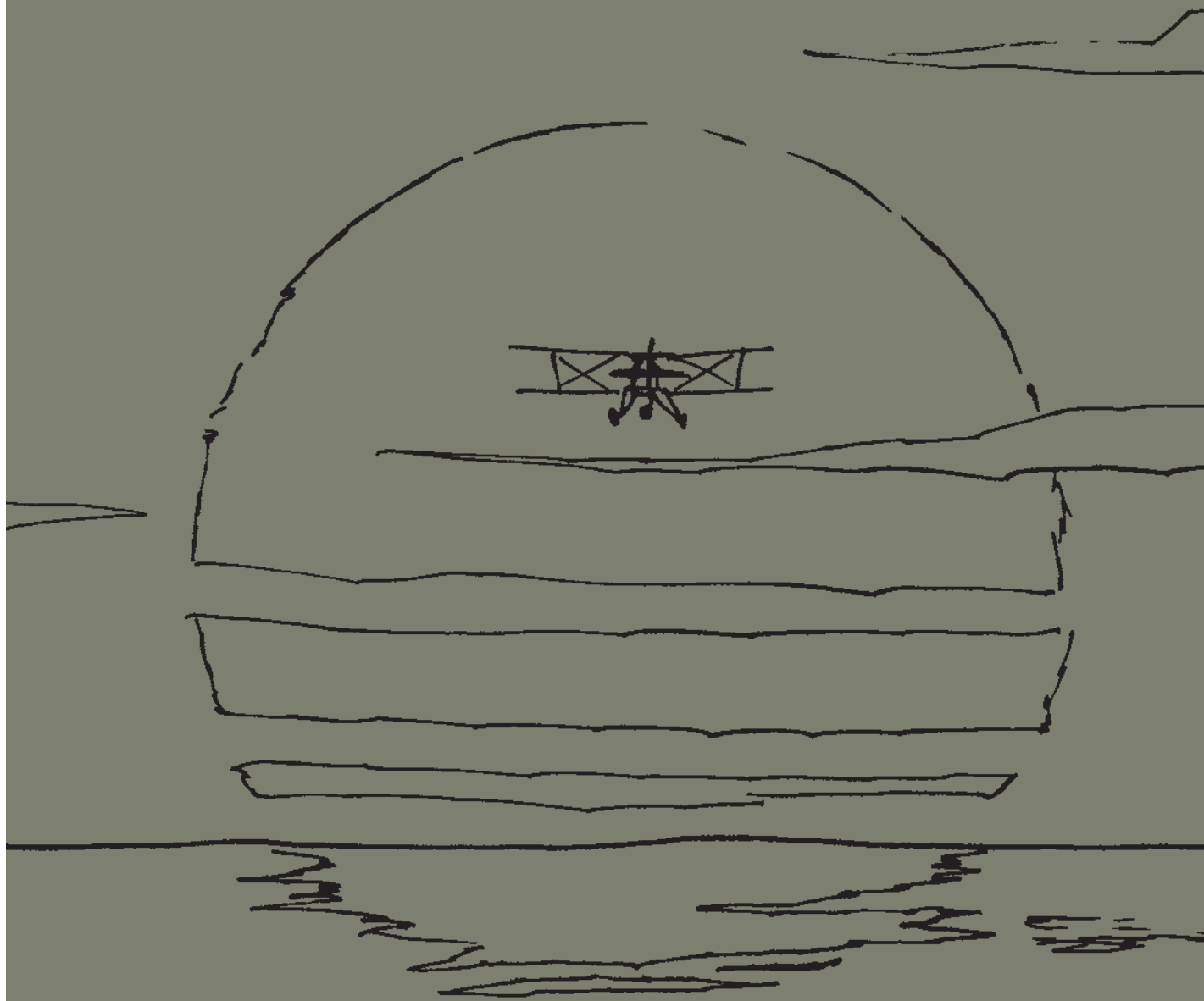
CHAPS,  
WE'RE ALMOST  
THERE.

The End











## Afterword

# FACT & FICTION



**M**ore than most of the war stories I've written, *The Stringbags* makes direct use of historical events and personalities, and it seems only proper to distinguish those elements from material invented for the narrative. So whereas the attack on Taranto, the sinking of the *Bismarck* and the Channel Dash all actually occurred, the three main characters are fictional creations. They are not thinly disguised versions of real individuals, nor even amalgamations of the same. Archie, Ollie and Pops are simply stand-ins for the men who crewed the Fairey Swordfish, and flew the aircraft on the operations our story depicts. The reasons for this creative choice were twofold.

First, and most practically, no single Swordfish crew took part in all three actions. The epic scope of the story—involving as it does the crippling of a fleet, the hunt for a Nazi battleship, and the death ride of heroes—seemed to me to be in danger of dwarfing all other elements, and without strong and consistent characters to inspire the reader's sympathy could easily reduce the narrative to dry documentary. The answer was obviously to follow one crew of three men throughout, which would mean creating a completely fictional trio. It would also require a little bit of historical tinkering.

Taranto was the stumbling block. As Ollie notes just after take-off, the other Swordfish on the raid each had only two men aboard, thus allowing for a large auxiliary fuel tank that would grant each aircraft the required range. (To be absolutely precise, the torpedo-carrying Stringbags had the tank placed in the cockpit in what was normally the observer's position, while the flare-droppers flew with it slung beneath the fuselage.) With our heroes assigned the latter task, it seemed to me not completely unreasonable that Archie's enthusiasm—combined with the confusion after Captain Shanks' collapse and the preoccupation of other personnel with the job at hand—might just be enough to get them airborne, before Ollie realized they'd bitten off more than they could chew. The loss of the tank itself made the whole thing a *fait accompli*, ensuring that the improbable would not become the impossible; they could go on the raid, but not make it back. To my mind, that was fair enough.

(The reader may be interested to note the experience of Lieutenants Clifford and Going, whose Swordfish was damaged on the flight deck of HMS *Illustrious*, and who subsequently took off almost half an hour after the rest of the first wave had departed. Having pleaded with their superiors to be allowed to join the raid, the two made their way to Taranto alone—well aware that the Italian defenses would be fully alert after the initial British attack. Guided to their target by the storm of antiaircraft fire over the distant harbor—"the biggest firework display we had ever seen," said Going—they survived the undivided attention of the Italian gunners during their attack, then escaped into the darkness. So individual acts of courage and initiative were not unheard of.)





This minor sleight of hand allowed me a couple of other indulgences, most obviously the night fighter attack and our heroes' subsequent ditching. Apart from the two Swordfish lost over Taranto itself, the British suffered no other losses, nor did they encounter any Italian aircraft during the operation. Yet fighters would certainly have been up that night, and a chance encounter wherein the trio picked up a few bullet holes in their already doomed aircraft (as opposed to some epic dogfight from which they emerged victorious) felt reasonably credible.

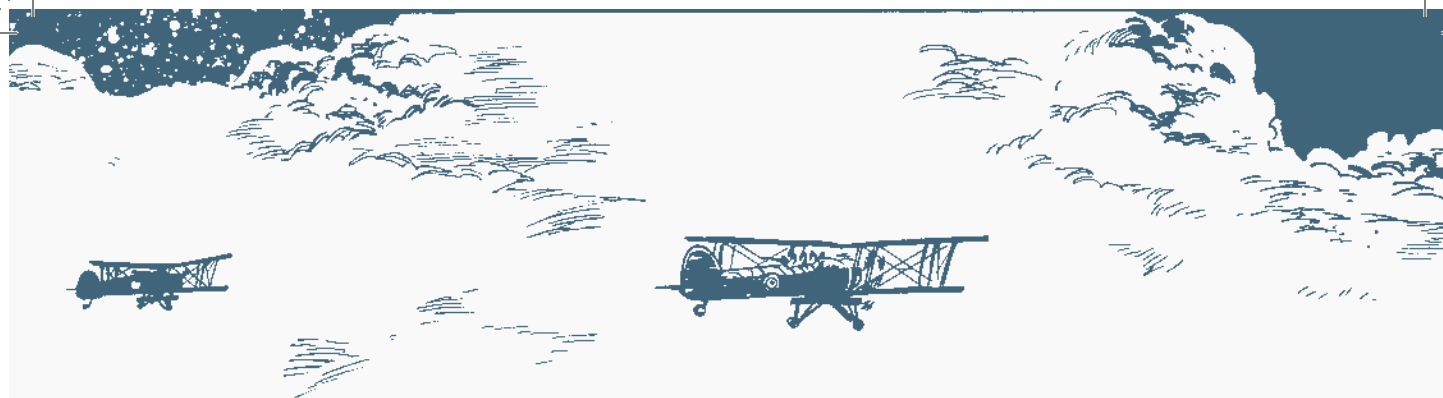
The second reason for creating three fictional heroes is a simple matter of respect for the men who did these things. I have usually shied away from using historical figures in stories like *The Stringbags*, just because it seems unfair to ascribe invented opinions and behaviors to people who in all likelihood never said or felt any such thing. Sometimes involving the genuine players is unavoidable, of course, or even desirable—having Rear Admiral Lyster express mild amusement at Admiral Cunningham's signal, for instance, or reproducing some of Lieutenant Commander Esmonde's actual dialogue in an otherwise invented conversation with the fictional Captain Shanks. But to go further and make, say, Launcelot Kiggell and Johnny Neale the heroes of the entire three-part story, to involve them in the *Bismarck* strike or the Channel Dash, to put words in their mouths that they never spoke but which suited my own purposes—that would betray a lack of respect. And respect, at the end of the day, is what this is all about.

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Having created Archie, Ollie and Pops—and kept them moving between squadrons and aircraft carriers in unlikely but not impossible fashion—P. J. and I worked hard to depict the three operations concerned as accurately as possible. This includes the background pieces that introduce and conclude each of the episodes, as well as dialogue attributed to the likes of Günther Lütjens, Otto Ciliax, Adolf Hitler, and Winston Churchill. (With its mention at the end of part one, it is worth noting that the question of Taranto's influence on Pearl Harbor has always been slightly controversial; certainly the latter raid was already well into its planning stages when Japanese observers visited the site of the British strike. So while one certainly did not inspire the other, it seems reasonable to assume that some degree of influence was exerted.)

I was very careful to avoid the portrayal of any of our heroes' actions as having been decisive. For them to have launched the torpedo that disabled the *Bismarck's* steering gear, or to have gained a direct hit on one of the Italian battleships, would once again have been unfair to the men who performed these feats in real life. Of course, determining who exactly accomplished what in such circumstances is not always easy; an attack made at night or in mid-Atlantic twilight is not exactly conducive to calm recollection





by eyewitnesses, particularly with heavy anti-aircraft fire thrown into the mix. Yet what seems clear is that at Taranto, Kenneth Williamson and Norman Scarlett not only survived the disabling and ditching of their Swordfish after making the initial attack, but also scored a critical hit on the *Conti di Cavour*. Swordfish L4K crewed by Lieutenants Kemp and Bailey appears to have done the same to the *Littorio*, while Lea and Jones (of the second attack wave) put a torpedo into the *Caio Duillo*. As for the *Bismarck*, exactly who deserves credit for the crucial strike remains a matter of some conjecture, but the most likely candidates are the aircraft flown by Lieutenant Godfrey-Faussett and Sub-Lieutenant Moffat. Add to this roll of honor the names of those who caused further damage to vessels and installations at Taranto, or split the German defensive fire six months later, or flung themselves at Otto Ciliax's warships during the Channel Dash, and the folly of attributing their actions solely to fictional replacements should become clear.

Yet Archie, Ollie and Pops are involved in several more minor but specific incidents that did actually take place. Here my rationale was that a leavening of such details could enliven, humanize and even where necessary distract from the ongoing narrative, whose epic nature has, as I say, certain all-eclipsing qualities. A brief rundown on these—and their real-life origins—seems appropriate at this point, beginning with the dire Royal Naval Air Service station Twatt. There is an actual Twatt in the Orkney Isles, just to the north of Scotland—the Navy ended its presence at the airfield there in 1949. Deciding that the name was too good not to employ, I moved the location much closer to London, really to grant our heroes convenient access to the fleshpots of the big city. There is another Twatt even farther north in the Shetlands, this time sans airfield. In the original Norse it translates as “small parcel of land”.

After their dunking in the Strait of Otranto the trio are rescued by the very real HMS *Nubian*, whose task force destroyed four Italian merchant ships and damaged two of their escorts. Later, Captain Shanks' account of the *Illustrious*' ghastly ordeal is based on accounts of survivors; the carrier was bombed again while undergoing temporary repairs at Malta, crossed the Mediterranean and transited to South Africa via the Suez Canal, then made her way to Norfolk, Virginia, for permanent repair work. It is a measure of the dreadful damage she sustained that—several months after the initial attack—American dock workers were still finding human remains trapped deep inside the great ship's superstructure.

The pursuit and destruction of the *Bismarck* is probably the most well-known aspect of *The Stringbags*; again, the saga of the *Hood*, the *Prince of Wales*, the Nazi battleship and the Home Fleet is portrayed as accurately as could be achieved. Ollie's magnificent moment of insanity was actually that of Sub-Lieutenant J. D. “Dusty” Miller, whose pilot, John Moffat, remembered:





*Then I heard Dusty Miller shouting in my ear, "Not yet, not yet!" and I thought, "Has he gone mad? What is he doing?" I turned and realized that he was leaning out of the cockpit, looking down at the sea, trying to prevent me from dropping the torpedo on to the crest of the wave . . . the ship was getting bigger and bigger, and I thought, "Bloody hell, what are you waiting for?" Then he said, "Let her go, Jock," and I pressed the button on the throttle. Dusty yelled, "I think we have got a runner."*

Most of *Ark Royal*'s Stringbags were damaged to some extent during the attack, but none were actually shot down. Yet considering the weight of lead being flung around the sky, it seemed not impossible for our heroes to end up in the drink. Likewise, despite the earlier (and real) blunder involving HMS *Sheffield*, I decided that Captain Larcom would have a big enough heart to fish them out.

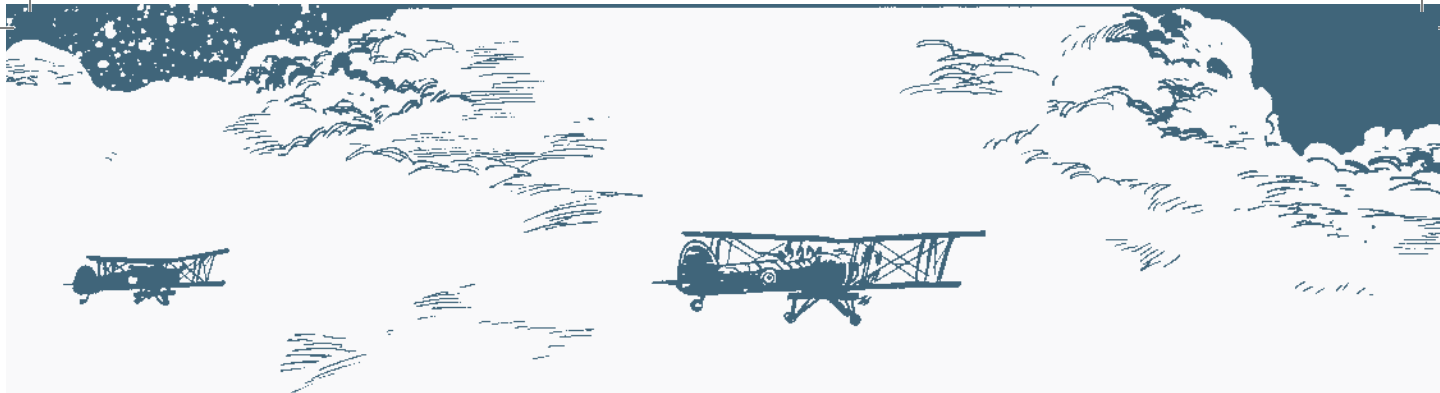
Which brings me to the story's melancholy ending. No one in 825 Squadron or at RAF Manston was under any illusion about what a daylight attack would mean for the Swordfish crews, particularly in the face of German fighter opposition. The station commander, Tom Gleave, did indeed salute the aircraft as they took off—and Gleave was a man who knew something of sacrifice, having been shot down and horribly burned during the Battle of Britain. Squadron Leader Brian Kingcome led the ten Spitfires that did initially show up, and his recollection of the Stringbags' encounter with the mighty *Kriegsmarine* warships makes for grim reading:

*The contrast between our lumbering patrol of Swordfish, wallowing sluggishly over the waves, and this magnificent floating fortress cruelly showed up the contrast between struggling museum relics and a sleek, deadly product of the latest technology . . . then the battleship raised her sights and let fly directly at the Swordfish with a fiery inferno. The brave "Stringbags" never faltered, but just kept driving steadily on at wave-top height, straight and level as though on a practice run. They made perfect targets as they held back from firing their missiles before closing to torpedo range. They were flying to unswerving destruction, and all we as their escort could do was sit helplessly in the air above them and watch them die.*

Kingcome's squadron was soon fighting for its life in the face of terrible odds, and even when more Spitfires arrived there were not enough to protect the Swordfish from the swarms of Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs.

The man that Archie, Ollie and Pops watch trying to beat out the flames on his aircraft's fuselage is Petty Officer Clinton, Eugene Esmonde's gunner; both they and observer Lieutenant Williams died in the attack. So did all nine men in the second wave of three





Swordfish; they were last seen flying straight into the enemy guns, and to this day are listed as missing in action. One of the survivors of the first wave was Sub-Lieutenant R. M. Samples, whose fluent Anglo-Saxon and accompanying two-fingered gestures inspired Ollie's own defiance of the enemy. Samples was fortunate enough to have been rescued from the waters of the Channel, along with the rest of his crew.

The German pilot who figured out how to match his FW 190's speed to that of the Swordfish was Leutnant Egon Mayer of *Jagdgeschwader* 2. His boss, Adolf Galland, *General der Jagdflieger* and responsible for the aerial component of Operation *Cerberus*, regarded the Channel Dash as his finest hour. In this light, it may seem odd that the story should end with praise for the Swordfish crews from a man they were trying to kill, and who was, in turn, ultimately responsible for their deaths. All I can say is that, to my mind, Otto Ciliax was in a position to know.

The actual origin of the term "Stringbag" had less to do with the Swordfish itself and more with what it could carry. Torpedoes, bombs, mines, depth-charges, rockets, flares—there seemed no limit to what could be loaded aboard the aircraft, and its nickname was thus derived from the all-purpose string shopping bags in common use at the time. If that seems a mundane comparison for a machine that accomplished so much, what should perhaps be borne in mind is the illimitable British talent for understatement. Besides, when it entered service, the Swordfish did not seem like a world-beater. Its crews had yet to get down to work.

The incident with the barrage balloon happened; and if the tale of the American observer learning the aircraft's provenance is indeed apocryphal, that is perhaps a matter for some regret. Taranto, the *Bismarck* and the Channel Dash are the most famous moments by far in the Stringbag's history, but considering its service throughout the war they are perhaps only the tip of the iceberg. *The Stringbags*, then, is offered in tribute to the men who flew the Fairey Swordfish into battle. I hope it would not have displeased them.

—Garth Ennis

*New York City, June 2019*





# About the Creators

**Garth ENNIS** has been writing comics since 1989. Credits include *Preacher*, *The Boys* (both adapted for TV), *Hitman*, and successful runs on *The Punisher* and *Fury* for Marvel Comics. He is particularly known for his war comics, including *War Stories*, *Battlefields*, *Out of the Blue*, *Sara*, and a recent revival of the classic British series *Johnny Red*. Originally from Northern Ireland, Ennis now lives in New York City with his wife, Ruth.

**PJ HOLDEN** is a Belfast-based comic artist. Best known for his work for *2000AD* on *Judge Dredd*, over the last twenty years he has also drawn *Rogue Trooper*, *Robocop/Terminator*, *James Bond: M*, *World of Tanks*, and *Battlefields*. He is the co-creator of *Dept. of Monsterology* and *Numbercruncher*. He is married to Annette and has two kids, Thomas and Nathan.

**Kelly FITZPATRICK** is a Hugo-nominated comic book colorist and illustrator. She has worked on everything from Kickstarter and indie publications to DC graphic novels. Kelly spends all of her free time doting on her dog, Archie, as well as training dogs, doing yoga and aerial acrobatics, and self-publishing her own books.

**Rob STEEN** has lettered comics for all major comic book companies. He is also the illustrator of the children's book series *Flanimals*, written by Ricky Gervais, and *Erf*, written by Garth Ennis.

