

## **LIEUTENANT ROBERT HAROLD PERCY BROWNE (31-35)**

He was born on 20 February 1917 and after leaving the College joined the Royal Navy.

During WW2 he was mentioned in dispatches and sadly served on HMS Hood at the time she was sunk by the Bismarck. He was one of 1418 to die on 24 May 1941. He is remembered on the War Memorial in the College Chapel, the Earl Soham War Memorial (along with Marmaduke Abney (1899-1902)) and at the Portsmouth Naval Memorial.

I am indebted to Chris Pratt for recent research he has carried out for Earl Soham to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of WW1. This is his detailed write up on Robert Browne :-

**Lieutenant (S) ROBERT HAROLD PERCY BROWNE**  
**ROYAL NAVY, HMS HOOD**  
**Who was Killed in Action, aged 23, on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1941**  
**Mentioned in Despatches**

The memorial site for HMS Hood shows that Lt. Browne joined the ship on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1939. The Navy Lists for October and December 1940 show him as Paymaster Sub-Lt. Admirals Office and the Navy List for April 1941 shows him as Paymaster Lt. Admirals Personal Staff - Secretary

HMS Hood, the 'Mighty Hood' as she was popularly known in the Royal Navy, was the largest warship in the world on commissioning in 1920. Although classified as a battlecruiser she was a fast battleship. Her armaments were 8 x 15 inch guns, 14 x 4 inch guns and 6 x 21 inch torpedo tubes.

After nearly 20 years service HMS Hood was due for a major refit in 1939, including the removal of the 600-ton conning tower and improvements to her deck armour but with too few capital ships available she could not be spared. Lt. Browne would have joined Hood at Scapa Flow where she was based with the Home Fleet. In June 1940 she was allocated to Force H, the squadron established under Admiral James Somerville to take over French duties in the western Mediterranean. Force H's first task was its most distasteful, to neutralise the French squadron at Oran in Algeria. At 1755 on 3 July 1940 Hood and her compatriots opened fire; the battleship Bretagne was blown up and the Provence and Dunkerque badly damaged.

Hood then returned to the Home Fleet and on 19 May 1941 she sailed with the brand new battleship HMS Prince of Wales to intercept the German battleships Bismarck and Prinz Eugen which were attempting to break out into the North Atlantic. Bismarck and the Prinz Eugen were shadowed, on radar, by HMS Norfolk and HMS Suffolk which reported their position to Admiral Holland in Hood. In the Denmark Strait on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> May Holland ordered his ships to close the range and at 0552 Hood opened fire followed shortly afterwards by the Prince of Wales. Two minutes later both the Bismarck and Prinz Eugen opened fire primarily at the Hood. At 0600 the Bismarck's fifth salvo hit the Hood amidships penetrating the secondary armament magazine. The detonation spread to the main magazine resulting in a catastrophic explosion which tore the ship in half. Lt. Browne was one of the 1,418 who died. Only 3 crew members survived. The loss of the navy's flagship in such dramatic circumstances and the appalling loss of life were greeted with profound shock in Britain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously signalled to the fleet '*The Bismarck must be sunk at all costs.*' Crippled by Fleet Air Arm aircraft, Bismarck was engaged by the battleships HMS King George V and HMS Rodney on the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> May before being sunk with torpedoes.