

## A MEMBER REMEMBERS

Rolfe Matthews, an Honorary Member of LAHS, joined the Society on his retirement in 1997 and now lives in Bathurst. He is probably a descendant of William Matthews, the 1820 Settler who settled at Salem and was its schoolmaster, but Rolfe feels this lineage has not been properly confirmed. However, behind the church in Salem is a graveyard where a lady called 'Min' is buried. "Aunt Min was my Dad's aunt and I think I still remember her," says Rolfe. It seems too coincidental that the famous teacher Matthews and his wife are buried there, too.

"The family farm was at Coega<sup>1</sup> and was named Motherwell<sup>2</sup>, which is now a township of Port Elizabeth. Unfortunately that township covered and destroyed the old cemetery. I remember some stones dated back to 1790 that were inscribed in high Dutch, but those now buried would have been the antecedents of the farm's previous owners. There was also a mixture of names like 'Nathys' which my Dad told me were names to dodge the tax man. The salt pan crossing on the road to PE was part of the farm.

"I have written a very short article for the Journal because I felt those dark days of war, as experienced by a small boy, might be of some interest.. . This is not a naval history,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Coega Industrial Development Zone (IDZ), established in 1999 and 11,500 ha in extent, is situated near Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha in the Eastern Cape. The initiative is a multibillion-dollar industrial development complex customised for heavy, medium and light industries, adjacent to the deepwater port, the Port of Ngqura...The name "Coega" comes from a Nguni word, Khoekhoen, which means "ground water". The Xhosa language name for Coega, Ngqura, is used for the adjacent Port of Ngqura. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coega>

<sup>2</sup> Motherwell, 25 km north of Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha's city centre, is situated on the northern outskirts of the city. It was planned to accommodate the black squatters who were relocated from Zwide and Veeplaas. Construction began in 1984 and today it is the largest settlement in terms of population and land area in Port Elizabeth. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motherwell,\\_Eastern\\_Cape](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motherwell,_Eastern_Cape)

just my memory of that event, as a boy.... My school at the time was in Durban North, an area then more English than the English.” Rolfe was deeply affected “by the grief of a woman who lost her only son in a terrible way.”

Rolfe continues: “The date was the 24 May 1941 and I was in standard 4. It was a normal school day. Our teacher was a Mrs. Gibbs who came to school looking pale. Everyone had heard the radio news that the *Hood*<sup>3</sup> had engaged the *Bismarck*. We as kids were in no doubt that *Bismarck* would be sunk. “

“We were busy with our first lesson of the day, arithmetic. Suddenly the classroom door opened and in came the headmaster who said in a low voice, ‘Mrs Gibbs, please come with me’. We heard a gasp from outside then the kids sitting by the windows said that they saw Mrs. Gibbs and the senior teacher getting into a car. The Headmaster returned and told us the sad news that *Hood* had been sunk by *Bismarck* and that our teacher's son had been on *Hood*. Only three men were saved out of the ship's company of nearly 2000. The school was assembled outside and prayers were offered. My Dad came home and told us that a man by the name of Knightscales from his office had also been on the *Hood*. There were in total five South Africans on board. Mrs Gibbs took only one day off, then was back teaching again.

Our whole class, indeed the whole school, felt sorry for Mrs Gibbs. It was shown by an unusual quietness: no laughter, no scraping of feet or shouting. Even the maintenance Zulu man was not in his normal cheerful way. Outside in the city it was the same - that strange quietness and a polite atmosphere was everywhere but the reason was not because of our teacher's great loss. It was for that broken thing - *Hood* - now on the bottom of the sea and the lives and loves of all those young men who had meant protection [for us]. The sorrow of it! The British navy was the guardian of all the many colonies. [This was] a disturbance that could spread and there was even a warship [in port], just visiting. It was a fact that people were scared and looked to one other for protection. Hardly was there a man in the street not in uniform. We kids picked up the mood from adults the way kids do. Slowly, after the Germans had suffered the same, little by little the city returned to its normal state - and the price of just about everything went up.”

Mr. Churchill, the prime minister of England, gave an order. ‘That ship (the *Bismarck*) must go’. It did - a few days later. *HMS Hood*, the heavy battle cruiser, was an old ship, but armed with very heavy guns. She began searching for the German battleship *Bismarck*, then the world's most powerful warship, which was on its way to destroy convoys carrying food and other supplies to England.”

The battlecruiser *HMS Hood* initially engaged Prinz Eugen, probably by mistake, while *HMS Prince of Wales* engaged *Bismarck*. On 24 May 1941, in the ensuing Battle of the

---

<sup>3</sup> *HMS Hood* was the lead ship of her class of four battlecruisers built for the Royal Navy during World War I. Already under construction when the Battle of Jutland occurred in mid-1916, that battle revealed serious flaws in her design, despite drastic revisions before she was completed four years later. For this reason, she was the only ship of her class to be completed, as the Admiralty decided it would be better to start with a clean design on succeeding battlecruisers... Despite this, *Hood* remained the largest warship in the world for 20 years after her commissioning, and her prestige was reflected in her nickname, “*The Mighty Hood*”... She was scheduled to undergo a major rebuild in 1941 to correct a few design issues, but the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 forced the ship back into service without the upgrades. In May 1941, in The Denmark Strait, *Hood* and the battleship *Prince of Wales* were ordered to intercept the German battleship *Bismarck* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*, which were en route to the Atlantic, where they were to attack convoys.

Denmark Strait, Hood was struck by several German shells, the combined fire of Bismarck and Prinz Eugen. She exploded, and sank within 3 minutes, with the loss of all but three of her crew. The German ships then damaged Prince of Wales and forced her to retreat. Bismarck, too, suffered sufficient damage from three hits to force an end to the raiding mission. Due to her publicly perceived invincibility, the loss of *Hood* affected British morale. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_battleship\\_Bismarck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_battleship_Bismarck)

The destruction of *Hood* spurred a relentless pursuit by the Royal Navy, involving dozens of warships. Two days later, heading for occupied France to effect repairs, *Bismarck* was attacked by 16 Fairey Swordfish biplane torpedo bombers from the aircraft carrier *HMS Ark Royal*; one scored a hit that rendered the battleship's steering gear inoperable. In her final battle the following morning, the already-crippled *Bismarck* was engaged by two British battleships and two heavy cruisers, and sustained incapacitating damage and heavy loss of life. The ship was scuttled to prevent her being boarded by the British, and to ... limit further casualties. Most experts agree that the battle damage would have caused her to sink eventually. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_battleship\\_Bismarck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_battleship_Bismarck)

The Royal Navy conducted two inquiries into the reasons for the *Hood's* quick demise. The first, held soon after the ship's loss, concluded that *Hood's* aft magazine had exploded after one of *Bismarck's* shells penetrated the ship's armour. A second more thorough inquiry was held and concurred with the first conclusion. The discovery of the ship's wreck in 2001 confirmed the conclusion of both boards, although the exact reason the magazines detonated is likely to remain unknown since that area of the ship was destroyed in the explosion. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS\\_Hood#Wreck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Hood#Wreck)



Last photo of *Hood* from *Prince of Wales*, 1924.  
(Wikipedia)

#### REFERENCES:

Warner, Oliver. *Great Sea Battles* Hamlyn, 1963 George Weidenfield Nicholson Ltd. ISBN 0600 01650 1  
Wikipedia

**Editor's note: we invite our LAHS members to contribute their anecdotes concerning local historical people or places**