

G U R P S

# THE SECRET OF THE *GNEISENAU*

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AN e23 ADVENTURE  
FOR GURPS® WWII FROM  
STEVE JACKSON GAMES  
FOR 3-6 PLAYERS

## INTRODUCTION

*The Secret of the Gneisenau* does not pit the players against a conventional enemy. Instead, it is a *Weird War II* adventure, meaning the opponent is a much more sinister one – the unknown world of magic and the paranormal.

The players take the role of engineering hands onboard the doomed German battlecruiser *Gneisenau*, just a day after it has successfully sped through the British-controlled waters of the English Channel in a nearly impossible feat. Along with the battleship *Prince Eugen* and its sister battlecruiser *Scharnhorst*, the *Gneisenau* left the Channel behind, pushing toward Holland, dodging pursuing Allied forces. This risky move represents the last desperate gamble to give the German navy, or Kriegsmarine, a bargaining chip in the North Sea.



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What most onboard the doomed convoy don't know is this: Their safety in the Channel was bought at a hefty price. Reality itself was *bent* to create a pocket of probability through which the German vessels could sail unmolested. Like all other aspects of nature, however, there is a natural inertia to probability. Now that the feat is done, nature struggles to complete events that *should* have come to pass the day before in the Channel.

The three ships – by nature destined to perish in a doomed run through British home waters – are now being pushed toward destruction by the laws of probability. Some will give in sooner, some later, but nothing on Earth can stop it from eventually coming to pass. Unless the players discover the secret and take steps to survive, they too will meet their fate within the *Gneisenau*.

## RUNNING THE ADVENTURE

Unlike many other adventures, *The Secret of the Gneisenau* is structured to be free-form. There is no set path, no fixed beginning or end. Instead, there are a number of independent story elements that the PCs can interact with, discover, puzzle out, or prevent from occurring.

The main goal of the PCs in this adventure is simply survival. Better yet, they could somehow prevent the destruction of the battlecruiser. To do this, they must first discover the secret of the ship. How, when, and where the PCs resolve this adventure is up to you, as the GM, to determine. If you feed them leads, clues, and hints, don't worry, they will follow. From there, it's just a matter of pacing.

### Dealing With Know-It-Alls

Those well versed in WWII history will no doubt know the specifics of the Channel dash, and may even know the actual fate of the *Gneisenau*, itself. This knowledge could interfere with the adventure if you, as GM, allow it to. Cries by players of "but this never happened!" or other factual demands can very quickly lead to trouble, if they go unanswered.

The answer to such problems is simple – the players are supposed to be taking on the roles of sailors onboard the battlecruiser *Gneisenau*. To them, future events and the outcome of the Channel dash are far from certain. Feel free, as GM, to allow anything to come to pass – the *Gneisenau* could sink, be boarded by the Allies, bombed to the point of absolute disintegration, or even successfully steered to port at Kiel. (The last outcome is, indeed, what historically happened, but here it would represent an outstanding success on the part of the PCs. Your troublesome know-it-alls might be surprised to find out that their sailors' most heroic efforts were required just to make events follow their historical course . . .)

In short, it is your game, and neither history nor the players dictate what occurs. That remains entirely up to you.

## A Note on Style

This adventure avoids several themes commonly found in WWII games – the black-and-white portrait of good vs. bad guys, an obsessive concentration on factual material, and an attempt to thrust the players into a crash course on language.

The black-and-white characterization is avoided because of the time and location of the adventure. While the German navy did not exactly care for the British, many sailors were far from Nazis. Many German mariners, both officers and ratings, held deep misgivings about Hitler and his party, and felt the course of the war practically guaranteed Germany's destruction. Under these circumstances, naval loyalty often was paid to an individual ship first, Germany second, and Hitler only when necessary. The enemy in this adventure (the Allies, which are pretty much represented by the British in this scenario) is referred to mostly in the background. More unearthly dangers will soon crowd these conventional foes from the players' concerns.

A concentration on factual material is avoided because there is a limited amount of time to learn such material. In a short adventure, two hours of game time cannot be consumed by exposition on the type of craft the players are in, where it is, its exact tactical situation, and other details. Such facts might be learned in game, and it remains up to the GM to keep things in perspective, but there is nothing but a general "what you know" section outlining the facts as the players understand them (found on p. 6). Everything else, the players must learn by themselves in the course of the adventure.

A crash course on language is avoided for similar reasons. There is little time in the game for the players to learn all the nuances of the German language (unless they are German, of course) and the difference between a *leutnant* and *gefreiter* is usually lost on everyone except the war buff or military collector. Instead, when possible, all ranks, names, and other German words or phrases are translated into English. Players should be encouraged to attempt to simply play the German sailors, not imitate them (hopefully avoiding the temptation to speak English with a bad German accent . . .)

## What Is Needed to Play

This adventure can be played with as little as the *GURPS World War II Lite* free PDF – the essentials to play a game are in there. The GM might be able to flesh out and expand the experience, however, by having any of the following *GURPS* books on hand:

- *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*
- *GURPS World War II*
- *GURPS WWII: Iron Cross*
- *GURPS WWII: Weird War II*