

The engagement off the Denmark Strait

Saturday May 24th

Action stations were not exercised on Saturday morning

“Rumorous” beastly things that they are were flowing free at 7:30. No one knows whether to believe them or not and it was always the same thing so and so said that he had heard from etc. The reason for this was that all signals received from the engaged ships came in self-evident code or else in fleet code and were not handled in the same channels as other signals of that importance. Consequently, a great weight was removed from everyone's mind when the captain broadcast at 09:00. He told us that the Hood and Prince of Wales in support of the Norfolk first sighting report had made contact at 05:43 and opened fire. Lucky salvos at long range succeeded in sinking Hood at 06:37 but that the Prince of Wales was still engaged. Telling us that we ought to establish contact during the dog watch the captain finished by reminding us that the great day which we had all longed for ever since this ship commissioned was at hand and it was for us to distinguish ourselves.

Naturally everyone just was counting the minutes till action stations would be sounded off and a lot of amusing scenes took place Stanislaw, one of the Polish midshipmen appeared in the bathroom claspings an enormous sheath knife with murder written all over his face. When asked what it was for, he replied survivors of the Bismarck. That is just an example of what all our Polish friends think about it.

King George V at Sea

The Norfolk and Suffolk shadow the two German units all day long and send in half hourly reports on their course and speed Once or twice she lost touch owing to the poor visibility, but the splendid work carried out by these two ships played a prominent part in leading us up to them during the day.

News was also received about the Prince of Wales. The bridge had apparently been put out of action and temporary damage have been inflicted on the “Y” turret. She had therefore been forced to retire from the action and await our arrival and further support. How severe her casualties are we have not yet fully heard apart from a signal saying that the Navigator was extremely badly wounded and the two midshipmen in the ADP (the Air Defence Position) had been killed.

The Afternoon Attack

It appears that the Hood was sunk at a range of 25,000 yards. Whether this was due to RD/F (the Radio Direction Finder) or not is a debatable question.

Personally, I feel that her success is due to the that enormous stereoscopic range finder at the top of the control mast which was so noticeable when she was later brought to action. Incidentally it was not observed to train during the action. Now it is obvious that the RD/F and not range finders will play the most important part in the future. I later made particular inquiries amongst those who were more fortunate enough to see the Bismarck, as to whether they could make out any RD/F aerials. They were all a little vague and quite rightly refused to give any definite decision one way or another. It therefore appeared that although Germany has got some sort of RD/F gear she has not yet reached the same standard as we have with ours, although what we have is far from perfection as yet.

The Prince of Wales after her action in the morning fell back with the 8 inch cruisers Norfolk and Suffolk and joined in the shadowing. Whether she had actually inflicted any damage on the Bismarck is doubtful although there was a report of her being far on fire aft. At 4 o'clock the Prince of Wales supported by the two cruisers went into action. How far this engagement went or how long it lasted is as yet unknown but an announcement from the commander told us that the Bismarck had turned tail and run. The fine performance carried out by this shadowing force under the command of Admiral Wake-Walker in the Norfolk cannot be overstated. Undoubtedly without their half-hourly reports on the enemy course and speed we should never have had the chance of locating them so easily and that they were able to slip away during the darkness at night was due largely to their good fortune rather than any discrepancy on our part.

Meanwhile we were steaming along at a good 27 knots on a south-westerly course. The weather was slightly rougher and the destroyers one by one began to fall by the way. I am told that several were used to proceed to a safe distance and break W/T (Wireless Traffic) silence in the C-in-C's name.

At 1600 we altered course to a southward to the southward and Victorious endeavouring to get in position for a torpedo bomb attack carried on her course. Two Fulmars which machine gunned the bridge did not return from the

from this attack. By 20:00 that night she was within 150 miles of the enemy and flew off 6 swordfish to attack. The result which was all round the ship by 4 o'clock next morning was announced by the commander at 09:00. It claimed one hit.

Sunday, May 25th.

As I have already stated, contact by the shadowing force was lost at 03:00. There is not the slightest doubt about it all, Bismarck keeping two or three knots in reserve had slowed down to an unnecessarily low speed after the T.B. (Torpedo Boat) attack and as soon as it was dark about 02:00 increase to 25 knots to shake off our forces astern. In this she was most successful and at the first opportunity turned to the east. She must have passed fairly close to Victorious and ourselves that night and although the defence watch closed up at 02:15, the action stations were sounded off.

Bismarck Gives us the Slip

At 06:00 no sign of the enemy was seen. We had soon altered course through 180 degrees and in company with the Repulse, steered to the East. The latter however soon left and set course for where she was going to oil, at Conception Bay, Newfoundland. In the meantime, the Rodney who had been outward bound with a convoy en route for the USA, left her protegee and steered north also closed the enemy. The Ramilles and Revenge engaged in the same task, did likewise. Force H out of Gibraltar barred the way to the south, but although it looked as if she was in the bag the mesh was too wide.

The situation at 10:00 on Sunday may the 25th was as follows:-

All ships engaged in the search were steering at high speed to the east in accordance with a signal from the C-in-C. The Victorious, the only aircraft carrier as yet operating in the area was preparing to carry out a reconnaissance and reinforced patrols were put into force by the coastal command.

She might have done three things:-

- a) turn to the North, back through the Denmark Strait
- b) altered to the West and was hugging the coast of Greenland
- or c) steering at full speed to the south-east in an attempt to gain the French coast.

It was a great relief when we saw the log increase to 28 knots and our course altered to 060 degrees. Everyone was desperate, we wanted to know if she had been contacted again. It was only through a buzz that we heard that she had been or perhaps I should say a strange transmission had been DF'd (*Distance Finder'd*) to the east of us several 100 miles away.

We had gone to the third degree at about 10:00 and together with the gunners and the band, I kept my watches in the T.S. The ship's company as a whole were decidedly ignorant of what was going on and most of them had very little idea where we were. Naturally enough they were all set on a destination of the Bismarck and had a chart been provided in their quarters with flags representing the two forces, and any other items of interest marked in, I'm sure it would have been very much appreciated. Apparently this was always done in the last war and was kept up to date by the Chief Quartermaster. We kept a plot of the operation in the gun room which was looked after by the midshipmen of the watch and apart from being highly fascinating it kept the members of the mess who worked "underground" informed of the position from hour to hour.

Two green flares were sighted in the forenoon but although nothing was seen it is thought that it was most probably a U-boat. Unfortunately, we had no destroyers with us to detach and sink him.

The visibility was fair throughout the day. We continued on course 060 degrees but altered to the South East in the afternoon.

Monday May 26th

My watch kept the first and morning and we went to action stations at 05:30.

The commander broadcast at 09:00. He told us that the Bismarck had been cited 100 miles to the south of us, and that we were gaining on her at the rate of five miles an hour. Naturally enough we would have increased speed if our oil fuel had allowed it but already we had been travelling at this speed for three days and our tanks were beginning to run low. Already the wing tanks had been emptied and seawater admitted in its stead. We then had the task of collecting all the small dregs of oil at the bottom of the tanks and pumping them into the central tank from where it could be fed to the boilers this could not be done at high speed.

At 11:30 the commander broadcast again. He confirmed that the coastal command was still in contact and said the enemy were now some 70 miles ahead. At first the Prince Eugene was reported to be with the Bismarck but since the Ark Royal Aircraft did not spot her in the afternoon she must have parted company between those two times. {This was the last we heard of her.}

Naturally enough we were all simply thrilled and it seemed at last that the hour for which we had been praying would arrive that evening.

We hoped to meet the Ark Royal at 15:00, but instead we came up with Rodney going "hell for leather" on the same course as ourselves. She was terrific! Renowned was all company with Arch Royal but was ordered to keep clear of the action after the lesson learnt by the loss of the hood. In the T.S. we carried out a run on her and the clock suggested her speed to be 22 knots. Unfortunately our fuel did not last and with a feeling of infinite regret we came down to the Rodney's speed. It was a terrible blow; it meant that everything now depended on the fleet air arm and if they did not succeed in curtailing her speed, the Bismarck would get away. Accordingly the first attack was planned for 4 o'clock. I should have said before that Sheffield had been detailed to shadow the enemy. When the attacking squadron arrived in sight they mistook the Sheffield for the Prince Eugene and some of them carried out their attack on her. This was a dreadful mistake but luck was with us, for happy to relate, no hits were scored.

We had now got three destroyers Cossack, Zulu and Maori in company. They were originally Rodney's screen. More are on their way from Devonport.

A report was also received that large formations of aircraft were flying west from Brest.

At 15:35 we opened fire on a F.W. Condor (Focke-Wulf Condor), who flew between the Rodney and ourselves. Violent alterations of course and altitude saved her from our fire, which was accurate.

The First Phase

The commander spoke at 21:30. He said attacks on the Bismarck would be carried out in continuous sequence until midnight and then if her speed had not been reduced we should have to turn for home to oil. I for one turned in very disappointed, but I did not sleep for long. At 22:40 action stations were sounded off!! It was incredible, had the miracle come about?

Once again the commander's voice echoed around the ship. The Bismarck had been hit by two torpedoes and most probably her screws or steering had been put out of action, as she was now steering a course of 300 degrees, speed 8 knots. We were closing at a rate of 45 miles an hour. He forecast that we had an hour to wait.

As it turned out, we decided not to take part in a night engagement and in company with Rodney lay off till the darkness lifted. Reports were sent in all this time by Sheffield who continued to do excellent work.

Bismarck had apparently ordered all U-boats to close and at the same time had asked for aircraft assistance.

Tuesday May 27th

We remained in the first degree of readiness throughout the night and partook at midnight of action cake and action cocoa.

At 01:30 the three destroyers went into attack. This was entirely successful and hits were claimed by all. The Bismarck was now reported to be stopped and on fire for'd. A low glow could be seen on the horizon.

All through the night RD/F carried out sweeps on all bearings. Cossack was shadowing the enemy now and every half hour she fired Starshell to indicate her position. At 05:30, breakfast took place this was a meal of singular enjoyment, an enormous corn beef sandwich and a cup of tea. At the time it was incredibly good but half an hour afterwards we all had the most terrible stomach aches!!

By this time Bismarck was reported to be underway at a speed of 8 knots course 300 degrees. The captain gave a few words of final advice at 07:20, when we began to close in.

At 08:20 we altered course to 080 degrees, at 08:35 cited the enemy right ahead in the haze. This was the moment that we had all been waiting for and breathlessly we awaited a first range. The tapes began to move 210 – 220 – 230 - ... and then the unexpected happened. 284 got a range – 251. The table was quickly tuned and at 08:45 we opened fire about ten minutes after sighting her.

The Action

Unfortunately this range was 2000 yds to high, for our salvos went a long way over. At the same time, R,D/F came down to 23,000 although she estimated the first salvo as 1000 short. This was therefore most probably one of Rodney's salvos as she had opened fire a few minutes before us. Anyhow the good shoot went on and down in the T.S. it was hard to realise that Germans not 20000 yds away were receiving a little of what they had hoped to give our merchant seaman in the North Atlantic.

We continued to close and at 9 o'clock the 5.25-inch opened fire. Various breakdowns were experienced. The shell-ring jammed in 'A' turret which prevented her from firing for twelve minutes and an expandable lead was broken in 'Y' turret. At one time we had to cease fire completely except for the No 3 gun of 'A', but the 5.25 kept the old school tie flying.

Neither ourselves or Rodney were hit but the blast from the for'd guns unfortunately put 284 out of action. They had given us a large number of fall of shot reports up to date and since our spotting had been inaccurate, they had therefore been of inestimable value. 279 came in to play when the range had decreased to 14,000 yds but they however gave us no reports on the fall of shot. When air attack was expected in the latter part of the action they were reverted to aircraft.

Apparently the Bismark was a beautiful ship. I was told that her lines were simply perfect and even more pronounced than the Hood's had been. 16" and 14" projectiles had a terrible effect on her. Great sheets of armour were shot off her hull, the anchor was hit and together with the cable ran away. The back of 'B' turret was blown out by one of Rodney's salvos and the bridge and super structure received a deadly hammering from our secondary armament. Through large glasses in the D.C.T. (Director Control Tower) men could be seen running about the upper deck playing hoses on fires which had already taken a grip, and even in the later stage of the action others could be seen abandoning ship.

One by one the enemies guns were put out of action and we finally closed in to about 2000 yards. These last few salvos had a terrible effect not only on the Bismarck but also on our own quarter deck where the guardrails and "punkah-louvers" suffered badly. Rodney fired a few of her 24-inch torpedoes at this stage of the action, but finally Dorsetshire was ordered to close and finish her

off with tin-fish. This task was greatly facilitated by the list which she carried and an explosion on her comparatively thin armoured bottom finally sealed her fate. Her bows lifted high in the air and she passed beneath the waves after one of the most gallant defences that the British Navy has ever known.

Final Destruction

After we had ceased fire down in the T.S. we were all most eager to go up on deck and see our handiwork. Although of the repair parties and other groups of men who work between deck during action were sent up to before she finally sank, we were not allowed to. Although there must have been a very good reason for this, I shall always regret it since it is one thing to go into action and see the enemy and a very different story not to see what you are firing at at all. It was a bit of disappointment to everybody.

We now left the scene of destruction although Dorsetshire and Maori were sent in to pick up survivors. In all they rescued about 100 officers and men including a Lieutenant Commander. Admiral Lutjens, C-in-C of the German Navy wore his flag in the Bismarck and his inspiring message to the high command is a perfect example of his bravery and also that of his flag-captain Captain Lindeman and all the brave company who sailed in her.

“Ship incapable of manoeuvres will fight to the last shell. Long live the Fuehre (signed) chief of the fleet”.

As I have said before the German C-in-C ordered all U boats to close the area and since the Dorsetshire cited a periscope while she was rescuing survivors she had to get under way and leave about 200 in the water. Whether the U boat picked any up or not I do not know. No German communiques have yet announced it.

It was a tremendous thrill to hear our success announced on the one o'clock news and considering everything it had happened most providentially, since it was ripe for Mr Churchill's statement in the House of Commons that afternoon and also for President Roosevelt's "Fireside talk" the following morning.

Since our fuel was so low, Port A was our destination and in that direction our course was set. The A.A. armament remaining in the 1st degree throughout the day and various aircraft were opened fire on. A HeinKel shadowed us most of the afternoon and an "Alarm to Arms" was sounded off at one o'clock.

"Nevissa" now the Polish "Piorun" was torpedo-bombed about 40 miles away. Without success.

We were all a little staggered to hear of our losses in the Mediterranean. Fiji, Gloucester, Kelly, Kashmir and Greyhound, not to speak of two battleships and other cruisers which had been hit. The Battle for Crete is a serious one and of the same importance as that of Tobruk. Its loss would constitute a severe danger to Egypt and the Suez Canal.

We remained in 3rd Degree throughout the night and went to the 4th at 07:00 next morning.

Nashona Abandoned and Sunk

Wednesday May 28th

"Alarm to Arms" echoed round the ship at 09:15 and at 10:15 we went to Action Stations. 14" were closed up to fire a few projectiles which were left over from action. All guns were elevated to 040 degrees and we had every intention of blowing this mass of metal at any elusive member of the "Luftwaffe" should they come within sight. It is a pity that our ambition was not fulfilled as it would have been a most interesting experiment.

A Whitley and a Blenheim circled round the fleet most of the day and a Ju88 dropped several bombs in our vicinity. Fire F.W. condors attacked "Mashona" who was about 40 miles astern of us and she had to be abandoned after being badly damaged. I believe Tartan (which incidentally shot down the Ju88) tried to take her in tow but with continual attacks from the air, salvage proved impossible. There was also a report that 20 long distance bombers which had been picked up flying over the Scilly Islands in our direction, had been intercepted by fighters and that two or three aircraft had been destroyed.

Dorsetshire who had reached the action after leaving her convoy was returning home after a two years commission abroad. Although the papers later made a tremendous fuss about the torpedoes which she fired saying "Hood hit her, Fleet Air Arm crippled her and Dorsetshire sunk her" one I can't help thinking that she was extremely lucky to be there at all. I feel even stronger about this

since my brother is in her and has seen far more of the war in six months than I have in eighteen!!

Thursday May 29th

The visibility decreased considerably during the morning and we had to make two attempts before we could pass through the head of the Little Minch. The weather however cleared and when we passed through the gate and the sun was shining brightly.

Loch Ewe is a beautiful sea-loch situated in one of the remotest parts of Scotland. It is a No 2 to Scapa and was used frequently in the early days of the war, when air attack on the Orkneys was more persistent. It was then evacuated after Nelson had struck a mine in the entrance and the fleet retired to Greenock. The expeditionary force to Finland was also gathered in this anchorage in the spring of 19:40, and now it is one of the principal distribution and collecting stations for convoys sailing to the East coast by way of the Pentland Firth.

We anchored at about 12:45 and the oiler came alongside half an hour later.

Return to Scapa

Several of us were able to get ashore in the afternoon. We walked to the top of the nearest hill that we could see and had a magnificent view of the surrounding country-side. It was lovely up at those heights and everything was made perfect when the note of the cuckoo rang clearly across the Moors. We returned to the quay at 19:00 and caught the drift back to the ship.

Friday May 30th

We weighed at 05:30 and left port A.

The damage done to our boats has been most severe the starboard cutter although she has only been in the water two or three times had suffered worse. What remains of her will be sent ashore as firewood, but those planks which still remain undamaged will most probably be returned to the builders. The second cutter has come a nasty crack on the right-bolt and may have

broken her back. Most of the boats on the deck on the boat deck have suffered pathetically. The C-in-C's beautiful barge has been completely decapitated and so has our motor boat of Vincent Pier fame. In fact apart from the whalers and launch the only one which can boast of a small hull is the "Jolleyboat".

We passed through the gate at 12:30 and received an enthusiastic reception from the boom defence vessel. The Devonshire and Edinburgh cleared lower deck and also welcomed us home a cutter provided by Tyne picked up our buoy for us.

We had returned to Scapa after a 3,500 mile trip with the ambition of the entire ships company, which had been inspired by the Prime Minister six months before at Rosyth-fulfilled. Our chase from the time that we increased to 27 knots till the time that the Bismarck passed beneath the water was 2184 miles long at an average speed of 26 knots.

Various signals of congratulations were exchanged and in a stirring message to the fleet the C-in-C expressed his approbation to all commands. The operation had worked smoothly, and apart from the loss of the hood which was one which no one can minimise as a great blow it was the first great success of the home fleet.

The ammunition lighters which came alongside as soon as we arrived, contained ammunition of every sort and description. Ammunition parties got under way as soon as possible and projectiles earmarked for the Tirpitz were soon coming aboard. The hands secured at 22:00.

Some of the Abbreviations:

C-in-C **commander in chief**

W/T **wireless transmitter**

R/D/F **Radio Direction Finding**

D.F. **Direction Finding**

T.B. **Torpedo Boat**

F.W. **Condor Focke-Wulf Fw200 Condor**

