

THE ENGAGEMENT OFF THE DENMARK STRAIT.

DATE

lay
4th

Action Stations were not exercised on Saturday morning. "Romans" (beastly things that they are) were flaring freely at 0730. No one knew 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 0900. He told us that the "Hood" and "Prince of Wales" in support of the "Norfolk" first sighting report had made contact at 0543 and opened fire. "Lucky Salvoes" at long range succeeded in sinking "Hood" at 0637 but that the "Prince of Wales" was still engaged. Telling us that we ought to establish contact during the dog-watches, 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 was just counting the minutes till Action Stations would be sounded off and a lot of amusing scenes took place. 'Stanislaw', one of the Polish Midshipman appeared in the Bathroom, clasping an enormous sheath knife with murder written all over his face. When asked what it was for he replied "Survivors from the Bismarck! That is just an example of what all our Polish friends think about it."

M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

The "Norfolk" and "Suffolk" shadowed the two German units all day long and sent 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 on 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 had been inflicted on '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 A.D.P. had been killed.

It appears that the Hood was sunk at a range of 25,000 yards. Whether this was due to R/D/F or not is a debatable question. Personally, I feel that her success was due to that enormous stereoscopic rangefinder mounted at the top of the control mast, which was so noticeable when she was later brought to action. Incidentally, it was not observed to be firing during the action. Now it is obvious that R/D/F & not rangefinders will play the most important part in the future; I have made particular enquiries amongst those who were fortunate enough to see the "Bismarck"

THE AFTERNOON ATTACK

DATE

as to whether they could make out any R D F airials. They were all a little vague and quite rightly refused to give any definite decision one way or the other. It therefore appears that although Germany has got some sort of R D F gear, she has not 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 & 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 on fire aft.

At four o'clock the Prince of Wales supported by the two cruisers went in to attack. How far this engagement went or how long it lasted is as yet unknown, but an announcement from the Commande 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 overestimated.

Undoubtedly, without their half-hourly reports on the enemy course and speed, we should never have had a 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 than to any discrepancy on our part.

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

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 silence in the C-in-C's name.

At 1600 we altered course to the southward and "Victorims" endeavoured to get in position for a torpedo-bombing attack carried on the course *. By 2000 that night she was within a hundred and fifty miles of the enemy and flew off six Swordfish to attack. The result which was all round the ship by four o'clock next morning was announced by the Commander at nine. — It claimed one hit.

Sunday
May 25th

As I have already stated contact by the shadowing forces was lost at 0300. There is not the slightest doubt about it all; Bismarck keeping two or three knots in reserve had slowed down to an unnecessary low speed after the T.B. attack and as soon as it was dark (about 0200) increased 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 "Victorims" and ourselves that night and although the defence watch closed up at 0215 and Action Stations were sounded off

* Two Fulmars which machine-gunned the bridge did not return from this attack.

— BISMARCK GIVES US THE SLIP —

DATE

at 0600 no sign of the enemy was seen. We had soon altered course through 180° 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.* In the meantime, the "Rodney" who had been underway bound with a convoy en route for the U.S.A. left her "protégé" and steering north also closed the enemy. The Ramilles & Revenge engaged in the same task did likewise. Force 'H' out from 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 1000 on Sunday May 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 "Victorians", 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) Turned to the north, back through the Denmark Strait
- (b) Altered to the west and was hugging the coast of Greenland
- (c) Steered at full speed to the South-West in an attempt, to gain the French coast.

It was a great relief when we saw the log increase to 25 knots and our course alter to 060° . Everyone was desperate, we wanted to know if she had been contacted again. It

* Conception Bay, Newfoundland.

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

was only through a "buzz" that we heard that she had been or perhaps I should say a strange transmission had been D/F'd to the East of us, several hundred miles away.

We had gone to the third degree at about ten o'clock and together with the Gunner + 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 the destruction 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 am 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 Gunroom, which was looked after by the Midshipman 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 of 060°, but altered to the south-east in the afternoon.

Can't be
done,
movement must
be secret until
log after

— CONTACT BY COASTAL COMMAND —

DATE

lay
26th

My watch kept the first 4 morning and we went to Action Stations at 0530.

The Commander broadcast at nine o'clock. He told us that the "Bismarck" had been sighted 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 sea-water admitted in its stead. We then had the task of collecting all the small drops of oil out of the bottom tanks and pumping them into one central tank from where it could be bled to the boilers. This could not be done at high speed.

At 1130 The Commander broadcast again. He confirmed that the Coastal Command were 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's aircraft did not spot her in the afternoon, she must have parted company between those two times. [This was the last heard of her.]

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

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

We hoped to meet the "Ark Royal"^{*} at 1500, but instead we came up with "Rodney" going "hell for leather" on the same course as ourselves. — She was terrific! In the T.S. we carried out a run on her and the clock suggested her speed to be 22 knots! Unfortunately this 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 four 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 could not
be caught by
at 2000 22 knots

Somali
destroyer &
destroyer

We had now got three destroyers Cossack, Zulu & 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 1535 we opened fire on a F.W.

* "Renown" was all company with "Ark Royal", but was ordered to keep clear of the action after the lesson learnt by the loss of the "Hood".

— THE FIRST PHASE —

DATE

condor, who flew between the "Rodney" and ourselves. Violent alterations of course and altitude saved her from our fire, which was accurate.

The Commander spoke at 2130. 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 2240 Action Stations were sounded off!! It was incredible, had the miracle come about?

Once again, the Commander's voice echoed round 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°. Speed 8 knots. We were closing at the rate of 4.5 miles an hour. He forecasted 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.

We remained in the 1st Degree

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE
Tuesday
May 27th

of readiness throughout the night and partook at midnight of "Action cake" and "Action cocoa".

At 0130 the three destroyers went in to 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.

Some
Zulu
have
left

All through the night RDI/F carried out periodical sweeps on ~~the~~ all bearings. "Cossack" was shadowing the enemy now and every half hour she fired starshell to indicate her position. At 0530, Breakfast took place. This was a meal of singular enjoyment an enormous 'corned 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 under way at a speed of 8 knots course 300°. The Captain gave a few words of final advice at 0720, when we began to close in.

At 0820 we altered course to 080°. at 0835 sighted the enemy right ahead in the haze. This was the moment that we had all been waiting for - and breathlessly we awaited a the 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 0845 we opened fire about ten minutes after sighting her.

- THE ACTION -

DATE

Unfortunately this range was 2,000 yards too high, for our salvoes went a long way over. At the same time R.D/F came down to 23,000 although she estimated the first salvo as 1,000 short. - This was therefore, most probably one of Rodney's salvoes 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 20,000 yards away were receiving a little of what they ^{had} hoped to give our merchant seamen in the North Atlantic.

We continued to close and at nine o'clock the 5.25-inch opened fire. Various breakdowns were experienced. The shell-rig jammed in 'A' turret which prevented her from firing for twelve minutes and an expendable 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 *He 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 ~~that~~ spotting had been inaccurate, they had therefore been of inestimable value. 279 came in to play when the range had decreased to 14,000 yards 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 "Bismarck" was a

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

beautiful ship. I was told that her lines were simply perfect and even more pronounced than the Hood had been. 16" & 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 salvoes and the bridge and superstructure received a deadly hammering from our secondary armament. Through large glasses in the D.C.T. men could be seen running about the upper deck playing hoses on fires which had already taken a grip, and even in the latter stage of the action others could be seen abandoning ship.

One by one the enemy's guns were put out of action and we finally closed in to about 2,000 yards. These last few salvoes had a terrible effect not only on the "Bismarck" but also on our own quarter-deck where the guard-rails and "punkah-louvres" suffered badly. Rodney fired a few of her 24" Torpedoes at this stage of the action, but finally "Dorsetshire" was ordered to close and finish her off with a "Pin-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 —

DATE

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 all 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 bitter disappointment to everybody.

We now left the scene of destruction, although "Dorsetshire" & "Maori" were sent in to pick up survivors. In all they rescued about a hundred 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 which sailed in her.

"Ship incapable of manoeuvres. Will fight to the last shell. Long live the Fuehrer (signed) Chief of Fleet."

As I have said before the German C-in-C ordered all U-boats to close the area and since the "Dorsetshire" sighted a periscope while she was rescuing survivors she had to get underway and leave about two hundred

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

in the water. Whether the U-boat picked any up or not I do not know. No German communique's 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 remained 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. "Nerissa" 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", & "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 next morning.

— "MASHONA" ABANDONED & SUNK —

DATE

Wednesday
May 28th

"Alarm to Arms" echoed round the ship at 0915 and at 1015 we went to Action Stations. 14" were closed up to fire a few projectiles which were left over from the action. All guns were elevated to 40° 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' & a 'Blenheim' circled round the Fleet most of the day and a Ju 88 dropped several bombs in our vicinity. Five F.W. condors attacked "Mashona" who was about about 40 miles astern of us, and she had to be abandoned after being badly damaged. I believe "Tartar" * tried to take her in tow but with continual attack from the air, salvage proved impossible. There was also a report that 20 long distance bombs which had been picked up flying over the Scilly Islands in our direction, had been intercepted by lighters 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

* Incidentally shot down Ju. 88.

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE

"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 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 1940, and now it is one of
the principal distribution & collecting stations
for convoys sailing to the East coast by way
of the Pentland Firth.

We anchored at about 1245 and the
other came alongside half an hour later.

Several of us were able to get
ashore in the afternoon. We walked to the

— RETURN TO SCAPA. —

DATE

top of the highest and 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 1900 and caught the drifter back to the ship.

Friday
30th

We weighed at 0530 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 has suffered the 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 2nd Cutter has come a nasty crack on a ring-bolt and may have broken her back. Most of the boats 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 & launch the only one which can boast of a sound hull is the "Tollyboat".

We passed through the Gate at 1230 and received an enthusiastic reception from the boom defence vessel. The "Devonshire" & "Edinburgh" cleared lower deck ~~at~~ and also welcomed us home. A cutter provided by "Tyne" picked up

H.M.S. KING GEORGE V

At SEA.

DATE _____

on buoy for us.

We had returned to Scapa after a 3,500 mile trip with the ambition of the entire ship's 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 no one can minimise as a great blow, it was the first great success of the Home Fleet, and one which we are all most grateful to have taken part.

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 2200.

Mother