

DATE

tolling in the short sea astern of us. As soon as the fleet was clear of the entrance to Scapa it set a course due west at 18 knots.

Friday
23rd May

At about 0810 Cape Wrath light was sighted, and the fleet continued on its westerly course. Paravanes were recovered in the forenoon at 0830.

Repube was expected to join the fleet during the forenoon, and a sharp look out was maintained until 1114 when she was sighted with the three destroyers Assiniboine, Saguenay and Legion. After providing the target for a range and inclination exercise Repulse took station astern of Victorious, and the three destroyers joined up with the screen. The fleet which before had looked so grand now looked magnificent, and we hoped that this time we might get our long awaited chance. Certainly they were taking no chances by sending two few ships to sea.

This great formation thrust on westwards throughout the day, with the three cruisers leading and with Aurora still ~~at the~~ ^{near} Victorious. We took the opportunity to try out our type 284 on some of the cruisers attempting to get bearing, range inclination and speed without actually seeing the target. The plots in the T.S. were well up to the occasion, and the answers which were produced were extremely encouraging. The tremendous

DATE

possibilities of this when applied to night action especially are unbounded. At 2100 came the tremendous news, Bismarck had been sighted by Norfolk and Suffolk some 600 miles from us; there was no delay in increasing to full power which gave us 27 knots, and we set a course of 280° to head her off. Norfolk and Suffolk meantime continued to shadow the Bismarck and Prince Eugen while we burned with impatience and excitement, and did not sleep.

Saturday
24th May

I went into the gunroom early this morning to find a small piece of paper up on the notice board on which was written, "Hood and Prince of Wales in action against Bismarck". This was marvellous news, though ~~and~~ I had a moment's qualm that we might arrive too late to join the action. I was still considering the news when Oran came in and took down the notice, and as he turned to go out again he said "Hood has just been sunk". This seemed quite unbelievable but he was certain as he had just come from the bridge. It is hard to describe the feelings which were produced by this frightful news. It appeared that she had been in action for only half an hour when she had received a direct hit at long range which piercing her unarmoured deck exploded in one of her magazines and caused the ship to blow up. It seemed amazing to think

Operation Bismarck

DATE

That the gunnery of the Bismarck was so very accurate and I wondered how Prince of Wales would be faring if it had taken so short a time to destroy 'Hood'. It was altogether unreal and difficult to understand that this great ship who only three days ago had been lying at her buoy close to us was no more, lost with almost her entire company. But the ~~loss~~ loss did more to strengthen our determination than cause ~~the~~ any anxiety, it was now quite obviously up to us to avenge the Hood.

The Captain spoke to the ships company in the forenoon, he told us of the sinking of the Hood by a lucky salvo which had exploded in her magazine, and said that Prince of Wales had already damaged the Bismarck, he hoped that we should be able to make contact that evening if the Bismarck continued on the same course and at the same speed.

At 1000 action was exercised. We carried out running runs and exercised break-downs, while the main armament exercised concentration with Repulse.

The fleet was steaming at 27 knots and was the most inspiring sight, both victorious and Repulse were a mass of plunging white spray, and the destroyers battled manfully along through a hanging sheet of water, some of them finding the pace rather too great.

The convoy we passed at about 0740 were given a great thrill as this powerful ~~fleet~~ fleet swept close by them on opposite course.

DATE

At 1507 Victorious and The 2nd Cruiser Squadron was detached from the fleet to proceed at full speed with the object of carrying out a torpedo bomber attack as soon as Bismarck was within range of her aircraft. The object being to reduce Bismarck's speed to allow us to catch her up and engage her.

We now continued, a depleted force, but confident and anxiously awaiting the news of the torpedo bomber attack which was to be carried out. Norfolk meanwhile was sending regular bulletins of Bismarck's position course and speed. She lost touch on one or two occasions through bad visibility, and our hearts sank but always she regained contact and hopes rose and faces brightened.

During the afternoon the Commander announced that we should be going into action ~~on~~ with Prince of Wales early next morning. The chance for which we had hoped and longed since the day we commissioned was now ours, as the captain had put it in his broadcast in the forenoon.

After this all conversation was on one topic, preparations for the action were made, action ^{was} arranged and fire hoses connected up. The moment was at last coming, we had been expecting and awaiting it through the night, ~~it~~ but it did not come in the forenoon, we had hoped it might have been in the day, but now we had been

DATE

told what was to happen and all were busy with the problem. The ships company each and severally made up his mind what strategy should be employed, when was the best time to engage, the best range and a number of other equally important points.

The destroyers left us at 2130 to proceed to Iceland to refuel. The fuel problem was acute as Repulse had not had time to fuel before leaving and was running very short, there was much debate as to whether she would have to be sent to refuel before we engaged the enemy leaving Prince of Wales and ourselves to sink Bismarck. It was finally decided that she could just make conception bay Newfoundland if she remained with us until next day. Actually one or two of the destroyers I am told had already dropped back before they were detached, not being able to stand the pace.

At about midnight I went onto the quarterdeck as I came off watch, the light was failing, but there was the spray swamped light grey and black form of Repulse making very heavy weather on our port quarter. The time was fixed, the rendez-vous arranged and the men were ready, now it was just for us to wait -

Sunday
25th May

I was awoken at 0500 when Reville was sounded off, having had five very good hours of sleep since keeping the first watch.

DATE

I was in the middle of lashing up my hammock when it was piped that bands would go to action stations at 0530. In some hurry I completed the evolution, went up to the gunroom and attempted to gulp down some breakfast, but for some reason I found I was not hungry. Even when at 0525 it was piped that we would not be going to action stations until 0600 I still found I had no appetite.

We closed up at our action stations at 0600, and for our part we checked over everything in the cabs both in L.A. and H.A. in case we should be called upon to shoot down her spotting plane if she used one. Everyone was fairly quiet though very cheerful and very keen about this great chance we were getting of achieving the one aim we placed before all others. Lifebelts were donned, and identity discs were fastened on and there was an air of expectation and eagerness backed by a set determination that we had no intention of leaving the sinking of the Hood unavenged. We waited for the announcement over the broadcaster which would tell us just when we should be joining Prince of Wales and going into action against the enemy.

Then we heard the click and whirr followed by the double tap which told us that the commander was just about to speak, we all crowded in about the speaker although we could all have heard just as well from here

DATE

we were, and held the mouthpieces of the Director phones close up to it so that they who were waiting up top should also hear. The commander spoke and told us how victorious had made her attack and that at least one hit had been scored with aerial torpedos late the evening before, but he went on to say that contact had temporarily been lost by the shadowing cruisers and that that was the reason why we had gone to action stations earlier than had been expected, he said he hoped that the aerial reconnaissance which was to be carried out as soon as it was light would quickly locate the enemy. Everyone had been keyed up to crest pitch just a moment before, and while there was obviously still a very good chance of hitting her the moment was delayed and from the "Bestimmte" had passed to "Vielleicht".

We continued to hope and wait. We heard that reconnaissance aircraft had set out, that they had searched the area but had been unable to find any trace of the enemy. Contact had been lost at 0300 due to very bad visibility, and during the three or four hours of darkness which followed Bismarck must have turned off and gone sufficiently far to outrun aerial reconnaissance from a carrier. We continued on our course of 215° as there was no definite indication of which way the enemy had turned, and while it was considered possible that

DATE

he had doubled right back to the north east his last known course had been to the southward, and he might equally well have turned in any other direction.

At 0900 we were piped to revert to the third degree of readiness. Faces lengthened at this and spirits fell, we had been told that Prince of Wales had re-engaged the enemy at about 1800 the evening before and that as the enemy had turned away and run before her, she had avoided continuing the chase which was moving ^{the enemy} rapidly away from us hoping that we should still come up with her and engage the enemy in the morning.

We had heard on the previous day that in the first engagement Prince of Wales had received hits on the bridge, and stern, and that the bridge was therefore out of action, it was also said that her Y turret was temporarily out of action. Our first reaction was one of tremendous disappointment. We had been closed up that morning with every assurance that we should be going into action alongside Prince of Wales early that day, and everyone was set up and ready for that, and now at the eleventh hour she had given us the slip, and we were returning to the third degree. It was a hard blow and I at least found myself in a pronounced state of depression as I believe many others ~~were~~ ^{were} also, the sheer pity of it - everything had been so perfect, a dawn rendezvous with the enemy, Prince of Wales, King

DATE

George V and Repulse were to have been in a position to engage and sink the Bismarck, and now all these preparations and dispositions were in vain.

Repulse was running very short of fuel, and had to be sent to the nearest place to refuel, so she was accordingly despatched to Conception Bay Newfoundland. Meanwhile we still had not sighted Prince of Wales. We expected to do so at ¹²⁰⁰~~1130~~ I believe.

We were still steaming along at 27 knots, course 215° when wonder of wonders at about 1130 we received a W.T. D/F fix of the enemy, or actually I believe we received two. ~~She~~^{He} was some 150 miles to the North Eastward of us, and had clearly doubled back round Norfolk's stern as soon as he realised that contact had been lost. It was a simple yet very effective manoeuvre, for firstly it would shake off her shadows, and secondly since through the ~~the~~ torpedo bomber attack she knew there was an aircraft carrier in the vicinity and where there is an aircraft carrier it is very reasonable to suppose there is a force as well, and after all ~~the~~ units of the British Fleet must have been expected to be approaching. Though probably she had not realised they were so close, since she knew then that a force was approaching, and that that force must be steaming from the Eastward to attempt to intercept her on her southerly course.

DATE

able only to go on information received from the shadowing force, it was easy once she had shaken off the shadowers to avoid the approaching force by altering course right round so as to pass to the northwest of the British fleet on opposite course probably during the dark hours. Actually she must have passed quite close to us during the night.

When she had successfully given us the slip she immediately made use of her wireless and gave us a very fair knowledge of her position. I can not imagine but I gather that whatever the message was it was twice repeated in identical form; perhaps it was a signal making a rendezvous with her oiler, or merely to say ^{what} ~~that~~ she was doing, or even to give our approximate position in the hope that there might be some well placed U. boat nearby.

As soon as we received these D/F reports we altered course to 030, and then later to 050, all the while steaming at full power. There was no news throughout the day, except an announcement that we were now searching for the enemy. Everyone seemed rather glum and downcast, if we felt disappointed I wondered what the captain and the C-in-C. felt. By the end of the day we were still steaming at full power on a course of 115° without news of Bismarck, Prince of Wales or Victorious and our ~~task~~ mood

DATE

~~was~~ heavy.

Monday.
26^A May.

I kept the morning watch in the cack, which was convenient as the bands went to action stations at 0530. The Commander announced that during the day strong aircraft reconnaissance would be carried out in the hopes of finding Bismarck. We hoped against hope that this would come about, but we were naturally not over optimistic since we had gone for so long without news. Still there remained a definite chance, and we clung to that hope desperately as we could not face the thought of our not catching her after all that had happened.

Then all of a sudden we heard, she had been located by a Catalina aircraft and proved with great good fortune not to be hopelessly out of reach, she was some 120 miles to the SW. of us. We assumed that she was either making for a French port or for Spanish territorial waters so we altered course to 120 hoping to cut her off. The Commander announced this, and from a dull feeling of annoyed disappointment there was an instantaneous change to eager impatience and there was hope again.

At 1150 we altered course to 130° and continued on this course at a speed of 27 knots. By this time our fuel situation was becoming very serious and it was becoming disturbingly obvious that we could not maintain this speed very much longer.

DATE

in fact it was becoming doubtful if we could continue at any speed for very much longer if we were to regain port without running completely out of fuel. We managed to help a little by using no hot water and having ~~no~~ baths.

We then heard that aircraft from H.M.S. Ark Royal had sighted Bismarck and our hopes rose as we realised that it might now be possible to reduce Bismarck's speed sufficiently to catch up with her. We learned that Ark Royal was to make an attack at 1500, and we waited anxiously for the report on it. ~~At 1430~~

At 1430 a battleship was sighted in the mist, at a range of about fifteen miles, as we closed she was identified as H.M.S. Rodney together with a screen of three destroyers. Signals were exchanged as we overhauled her in the middle of which a Focke-Wulf reconnaissance aircraft appeared, and approached us a little too close. She was fired on at once at a range of about 15,000 and it made off after making its sighting report. We finally overtook Rodney at about 1550.

By 1700 we still had not heard of any success by Ark Royal's aircraft, and assumed that they had not managed to score any hits. At 1705 we reduced speed to 22 knots, and we down below had a horrible feeling that it had

lost much
glider

DATE

been decided that the situation so far as we were concerned was hopeless. The reasons for the decrease however were soon made apparent by a signal from the Cinc. which said that we were reducing speed to economize fuel and that our only hope was that Ark Royal would be able to reduce the enemy's speed. Apparently we were not making enough on the enemy to warrant consuming the tremendous amount of fuel which we do at 27 knots, and therefore the reduction of speed would have no effect on the final issue except that we should have some fuel in hand, the question of whether we should be able to catch her up or not now remained to be decided for us by the fleet air arm.

At 2015 Rodney took station four cables astern of us, using Taster and Washburn as a screen. Ark Royal seemed to be delaying her attack interminably and by 1900 there was no news for us who so anxiously awaited it. I turned in at about 2100 feeling that there was still a hope, knowing that Ark Royal would be doing her very best to secure hits on the Bismarck with aerial torpedoes, but knowing that now we were getting our last chance as fuel was alarmingly low and if nothing happened that night we should have to return to port with our job undone, allowing the Germans to get away with what had up till then been a most successful operation.

Suddenly at 2235 it was ~~undoubtedly~~ ^{piped}

DATE

that hands would go to action stations in five minutes time. I was fully clothed and closed up in the cabin before I was properly awake, gleaming on the way that Bismarck was steering towards us, and was apparently chasing Sheffield, who had been shadowing her, in our direction. The news was almost unbelievable almost a miracle, of all the truly amazing things ~~to think~~ which could have happened this seemed the most extraordinary.

When we had closed up the commander told us that the aircraft had obtained one or two hits with torpedoes, and that the Bismarck had turned towards us, and we were now closing at the rate of some forty five knots. At that rate we could expect to be within range of her in an hour. By this time it was dark, and we stood by for a night action. Starshell was prepared in the two upper deck turrets of each battery and as time passed we found ourselves in a mood of ~~and~~ exhilaration, the long awaited moment was rapidly approaching, the moment for which ~~we~~ we had ~~longed~~ trained and longed since our commissioning, the moment which in the past few days had seemed at first so close ^{and} then so remote, the moment which would mean such a tremendous amount to us and to Germany.

Then the commander spoke, telling us that it had been decided to avoid a night action, but that we should

DATE

be engaging Bismarck at dawn. He said that the fourth Destroyer flotilla would probably attempt a night torpedo attack. We were to remain closed up in the second degree or rather first degree modified in case we should suddenly come upon her in the night.

During the long night we were told that the Destroyers had attacked successfully, and that they had all claimed hits, Bismarck was reported to be stopped, and to be on fire forward. We heard that the Destroyers were shadowing the enemy and were intending to fire the starshell every half hour to give us an idea of the position of the enemy.

Actually although starshell was reported from every direction none was definitely observed and the conflicting reports were merely confusing.

Tuesday
27th May.

In the morning we closed up at 0530 and having cleared away the pressed beef sandwiches from the fire control clock we gave everything a final check over and waited. I started to read "Pickwick Papers" but found it difficult reading, and changed to "In Search of England", which suited better. Time was heavy, and it passed without news, we altered course a number of times, sometimes quite large alterations and as it grew light we wondered what was happening, not that we could see the light, but the Director was very kindly keeping us informed of all that was happening.

At 0700 the Destroyers which had been screening us parted company and Rodney

DATE

and ourselves went on alone. Just when we were wondering what was happening the captain broadcast that the torpedo attack had been effective and had apparently damaged her steering. ~~The~~ Bismarck was reported to be making about eight knots. He said we were now turning in to attack, he said that he wanted us to treat it just as if it were a battle practice shoot and take it quietly. He hoped we had been able to get some sleep during the night and wished us good luck.

At long last the hopes and despair were over we had surely now reached ~~the~~ the last act and were just about to make contact with our elusive enemy.

We were standing to at the fire control table when we suddenly had "Bismarck in sight" passed down the phones. I made a note of the time which was 0810 and wrote down range 240 together with her inclination and speed. We waited tensely as we watched the range decrease, it had reached about 190 when the Director informed us that this vessel was not the Bismarck after all, but the Norfolk, which explained the long delay in opening fire. After this King George and Rodney received definite indication from Norfolk of the position of Bismarck and altered course slightly to close in on the enemy, remaining in line abreast.

At 0842 Bismarck was actually

DATE

sighted bearing $117\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ at a range of twenty four thousand yards. There was nothing for the 5.25s to do until the range closed, so we just stood by and listened to the running commentary from the Director. At 0847 Rodney opened fire, followed by ourselves about a minute later. Rodney's first salvo was close on Bismarck's stern or at least was reported so. At 0852 Bismarck was seen to open fire. There was a somewhat tense silence as the salvo neared its invisible way through the air towards us, it was a matter of some moment whether she was firing at us or Rodney, and I admit I felt much relieved when the fall of shot was marked as being short of Rodney.

Things now moved fast, our 14" guns were firing all the time as were Rodney's 16", and we listened to a commentary until the range closed to about ~~14,000~~ 14,000 yards when the port battery opened fire. It is difficult to describe the action after this, as we were firing for quite a large part of the time. We did not feel frightened but for myself I felt a sort of grim keenness and some regret at not being able to see what was happening, having to rely on an interrupted description by the control officer, feeling a little ashamed at being down below in comparative immunity while they were in the thick of it up top.

At 0923 the control officer said he thought that Bismarck had a list to port. The enemy inclination was 138

DATE

left at the beginning of the action, and we were using an enemy speed of 8 knots. I will note down the reports as we heard them in the cable.

0925 Bismarck reported to be on fire.

0938 Range 093.

0941 Bismarck reported to be heeling considerably

0943. A hit reported on Bismarck from our Y turret.

0951. Range 077.

0955. Port battery switched to H.A.

1009. Bismarck had not fired for some minutes. She was a mass of smoke obscuring her superstructure.

1012. Range 048. Direct hit on Bismarck. Bismarck well on fire, flames all over her, listing heavily to port. Sheffield and Norfolk firing.

1017. Range 026

1018. Commander broadcast, "Bismarck is sinking we are finishing her off".

1031 Ship turned and left the scene of the battle.

1040. Bismarck right over on her side.

Our main armament fired until we were in at close range when the starboard battery continued firing for a time. Men were seen jumping overboard from Bismarck and she was seen to be a mass of flames and smoke from stern to stern. We left her in sinking condition though Dorsetshire was ordered to administer the coup de grace. The port battery fired twenty nine

DATE

broadside and we claim some hits, the starboard battery had more luck, and were on the engaged side at the end of the action, they fired seventy five broadsides, and claim to have done considerable damage to Bismarck's control tower and superstructure. I can only say what I have overheard of the 14", but they claim to have scored a fair number of very effective hits, one salvo at close range crashing into the base of the bridge superstructure seemed to cause the ship to crumple inwards as they hit.

No hits were observed on Rodney, and we had received nothing, ~~although~~ although after the opening salvo Bismarck had directed her main and secondary armaments at us. We claim to have had a large shell pass between the fore D.C.T. and the H.A. Director support, also it is said one passed between the funnels. Some shells were seen to fall fairly close at moments but never dangerously close. Rodney was straddled with Bismarck's second and third salvos, as far as we can tell. After that we began to hit Bismarck's turrets, and her effective fire became drastically reduced. Also hits with our secondary armament on her bridge and control tower would not have encouraged them.

When we left the scene of the action we remained in the first degree of HA readiness, as attack by air was a distinct probability. We had in fact had a warning from the admiralty to that effect. It was learned from survivors from

DATE

The Bismarck that they had been expecting aerial and submarine support, so we were careful to maintain a good look out for aircraft and submarines.

We did in fact sight one or two hostile aircraft, and opened fire on them when we had the opportunity.

We secured from 1st degree at shortly before 0000.

Wednesday
28th May.

to

Thursday
29th May.

On Wednesday apart from a few aircraft alarms and warnings we continued on our way Northward. As we went further North we were joined by more destroyers as we had to pass through a belt known to contain a large number of enemy submarines. Columbus and Vanquisher joined at 0600, and Lance, Legion, Hughfield, Punjabi, Nestor and Somali joined at about 1400.

We closed up in the 1st degree of H.A. position at about 0900 as we had been warned by the Admiralty to expect air attack on a large scale. The main armament was closed up since some of the guns were still loaded and therefore they trained Y turret on the after bearing with the guns at maximum elevation intending to fire them at the first dive bomber which might choose to attack from astern.

Actually we did sight some hostile aircraft, and opened fire on them, unfortunately without damaging them. One of them, a Heinkel dropped a bomb

Arrival at Loch Ewe.

DATE

close to Zulu. At 1725 Rodney was detached with 4 Destroyers to proceed to Greenock, we ourselves making for Loch Ewe.

We ran into thick fog during the night, and found ourselves badly handicapped by it when daylight came. Edinburgh was sighted at 0545.

The Destroyers took station astern with the exception of Jupiter and Eskimo which stationed themselves on our port and starboard bow. After making a series of 360° turns and going out of our way to obtain a fix, we approached the entrance to Loch Ewe, the fog having most conveniently lifted leaving a hot bright summer day to welcome us as we made our way into this beautiful loch.

Matthew

The peace was rudely shattered at 1420 by the sounding off of the Alarm to Arms. The oiler alongside and the Destroyer consort alongside it prepared to cast off and the shore sirens having wailed their mournful warning everything seemed ready for the coming of the bombers, but nothing came. Soon we secured and our fueling continued.

At first I believe ~~we~~ we had only been going to take in just enough fuel to get us back to Scapa, but weather reports showed that there was persistent thick fog in the Scapa area, and