France would also be ordered to sea. The Admiralty had also warned me to expect heavy air attack. It was therefore essential to allow a sufficient reserve of fuel to enable the battleships to return to United Kingdom ports at a reasonably high speed. The loss of HOOD and the damage to PRINCE OF WALES had left KING GEORGE V as the only effective capital ship remaining in Home Waters. I was not prepared to expose her unscreened at low speed to almost certain attack by U-boats unless there was very good prospect of achieving a result commensurate with the risk. I therefore decided that unless the enemy's speed had been reduced, KING GEORGE V should return at 2400 on 26th May to refuel.

First T/B Attack.

65. The speed of KING GEORGE V was reduced to 22 knots at 1705 on 26th May to economise fuel and RODNEY, who had by then been overhauled, was formed astern. I had recommended the Flag Officer Commanding, Force " H," to remain with ARK ROYAL; he was maintaining his position on the beam of the BISMARCK and had detached SHEFFIELD to shadow. The visual signal ordering this latter movement was not repeated to ARK ROYAL, an omission which, as will be seen later, had serious consequences.

66. A striking force of 15 Swordfish, one of which had to return, was flown off at 1450; they were armed with Duplex pistols set to 30 feet instead of 34 feet, in consequence of the doubt which then existed in ARK ROYAL whether the enemy ship was the BISMARCK or the PRINZ EUGEN. The weather was particularly bad in the vicinity of the target and reliance was placed on the A.S.V. set carried in one of the aircraft; this aircraft located a ship at 1550, about 20 miles from the expected position of the enemy, and an attack through the cloud was ordered. The ship detected was SHEFFIELD, of whose presence near the BISMARCK the striking force was not aware, and eleven torpedoes were dropped at her. Two of the torpedoes exploded on hitting the water, and three more on crossing the wake, the remainder being successfully avoided by SHEFFIELD, who, with great forbearance, did not fire a single round in reply.

67. The flying boat was still shadowing, though her reports now differed widely in position from those of the aircraft of ARK ROYAL. Her signals were made on H/F* and her position could not therefore be checked by D/F. She reported twice during the afternoon that she was being attacked by enemy aircraft, but these were probably shadowing Swordfish from ARK ROYAL.

Second T/B Attack.

68. A second striking force of 15 aircraft was launched at 1915. Owing to the limited number of serviceable aircraft, it had been necessary to re-arm and refuel most of those which had taken part in the first attack. In view of the apparent failures with Duplex pistols in the first attack, contact pistols were employed on this occasion. The striking force was ordered to make contact with SHEFFIELD before launching the attack and the latter was instructed to home the striking force by D/F.

69. The aircraft approached SHEFFIELD below the clouds and then climbed to 6,000 feet to make their final approach. The weather in the vicinity of SHEFFIELD appeared to be ideal for a synchonised torpedo attack, but when the aircraft came near the BISMARCK, they found that she was under a cold front. A thick bank of cloud with base about 700 feet and top between 6,000 and 10,000 feet was encountered and the force became split up. The torpedo attacks had therefore to be made by sub-flights or pairs of aircraft over a long period in the face of intense and accurate fire; they were pressed home with a gallantry and determination which cannot be praised too highly. One aircraft, having lost touch with his subflight, returned to SHEFFIELD for a fresh range and bearing of the enemy and went in again by himself in the face of very heavy fire to score a hit on the port side of the BISMARCK. At least two hits were scored, one of which so damaged the BISMARCK's rudders that she was unable to keep off the wind, which providentially was from the northwest, for any length of time; a result which ARK ROYAL and her aircraft crews had well earned and which ensured my being able to bring the BISMARCK to action next morning.

70. When I received the first report that the BISMARCK had altered course to 340° I dared not hope that it was more than a temporary alteration to avoid a T/B attack; a further report four minutes later that she was steering 000° suggested, however, that her rudders had been damaged and that she had been forced up into the wind towards KING GEORGE V and RODNEY. I immediately turned towards our estimated position of the BISMARCK in an endeavour to make contact in time to engage her from the eastward in the failing light. But with frequent rain squalls and gathering darkness the light conditions became too unreliable, and with no certainty of the enemy's position or of that of our own forces, but with confirmation of the damage to the enemy and the knowledge that the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla was shadowing, I decided to haul off to the north-north-eastward and work round to engage from the westward at dawn.

71. The Flag Officer Commanding, Force " H," had informed me that no further T/B attacks were possible that evening and that he was preparing all remaining Swordfish for a strong attack at dawn. He was instructed to keep not less than 20 miles to the southward of the BISMARCK so as to be clear of my approach.

Night Shadowing and Attack by Destroyers.

72. SHEFFIELD made her last enemy report at 2140 on 26th May. At this time the BISMARCK turned and fired six accurate 15-inch salvos at her, at a range of nine miles. SHEFFIELD turned away at full speed and made smoke, but suffered a few casualties from splinters. The turn caused her to lose touch, but shortly afterwards she made contact with the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla (Captain Philip L. Vian, D.S.O.), in COSSACK, who with MAORI, ZULU, SIKH and the Polish destroyer PIORUN, was approaching the BISMARCK. The Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, as I knew he would, had decided to shadow and attack the BISMARCK,

Admiralty footnote:—
* H/F—high frequency.