

occasion on which she had done so. From the gunnery point of view the personnel was immensely keen and well drilled, but inexperienced.

(c) The likelihood of a decisive concentration being effected at a later stage.

In all the circumstances I did not consider it sound tactics to continue single-handed the engagement with two German ships, both of whom might be expected to be at the peak of their efficiency. Accordingly I turned away and broke off the action pending a more favourable opportunity."

23. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, in his report says:—

"At 1545 Admiralty signal 1445* had been received. At that time I had no evidence that the enemy's speed was in any way reduced by damage and I did not consider it likely that he would fight or that we could catch him, as his policy was obviously evasion.

The question whether I should re-engage with PRINCE OF WALES had been exercising my mind for some time before the receipt of this signal. The factors to be considered were as follows:—In the first place, the state of efficiency of PRINCE OF WALES. I had seen her forced out of action after 10 minutes' engagement, at the end of which her salvos were falling short and had a very large spread indeed. As a result of the action she was short of one gun and her bridge was wrecked. She was a brand new ship, with new turrets in which mechanical breakdowns had occurred and were to be expected, apart from damage, and she had had a bare minimum period for working up. I had been unable to observe for certain any hits on the BISMARCK and her shooting had given striking proof of its efficiency. To put it in a nutshell, I did not and do not consider that in her then state of efficiency the PRINCE OF WALES was a match for the BISMARCK.

This, however, was in no way a deciding factor. My object was the destruction of the BISMARCK and I knew that other forces were on the way to intercept her. I had therefore two broad alternatives, one to ensure that she was intercepted by the Commander-in-Chief, the other to attempt her destruction with my own force.

This second alternative involved my being able to bring her to action and this required an excess of speed. I had no evidence that, with PRINCE OF WALES reduced to 27 knots, I possessed it. If, however, the attempt had shown that we could overtake her I would have had to engage with the whole force and press the action to a range at which the 8-inch cruisers' fire would be effective—and could be spotted—namely 20,000 yards or less.

In view of the relative efficiency of the two heavy ships I was of the opinion that such an

action would almost certainly result as follows. A gradual reduction of PRINCE OF WALES' gunfire due to material failures and damage, in return for which the BISMARCK would receive some damage. That such damage, though it would affect her fighting efficiency, would also have any large effect on her speed I considered improbable, as in a modern well-protected ship the most that could be expected would be some loss of draught due to damaged funnels or fans, or waterline damage forward or aft.

At the range to which the action must be pressed the cruisers might well be left to bear the brunt of the BISMARCK's and PRINZ EUGEN's fire and suffer a reduction of speed due to hits in their large and unprotected machinery spaces or waterline. I should then have a damaged PRINCE OF WALES, and possibly damaged cruisers, with which to try and maintain touch with a BISMARCK damaged but still capable of a high speed.

The alternative was to ensure her interception by the Commander-in-Chief. This I felt I had good reason for thinking I could achieve. At this time I was expecting the Commander-in-Chief to be able to make contact about 0100† on the 25th—before dark—and I saw no reason why our success so far in keeping touch should not continue. Even if we had to wait till next day for the Commander-in-Chief, the conditions of darkness were no more difficult than those of low visibility with which we had been able to deal by the use of R.D.F. and it would only be dark from 0200 to 0500."

(†This was due to a miscalculation. The earliest the Commander-in-Chief could arrive, even if he forecast exactly the enemy's movements, was between 0600 and 0700/25th May.)

"The decision was not an easy one. I appreciated that my force was superior in number and the weight of the moral factors involved. I could not feel, however, that PRINCE OF WALES in her then state of efficiency was worth her face value or that my extra cruiser would counterbalance her weakness. But for the probability of a T/B* attack from VICTORIOUS and interception by the Commander-in-Chief the situation would have been fundamentally different, and any other course but to re-engage could not have been considered.

As it was, however, the alternatives could be summed up as follows:—

(i) To engage with my whole force; this had possibilities varying from the highly problematical result of the destruction of the enemy, through the gamut of a long stern chase at high speed which would make interception by the Commander-in-Chief impossible, to that of being driven off with loss of speed and inability to keep touch.

(ii) Against this was the alternative of continuing to keep touch, with the possibility that we might fail to do so, though with PRINCE OF WALES in support I had no fear of being driven off.

Weighing these alternatives, I chose the latter. This did not preclude the possibility of attacking the enemy, but in so doing my object must be to ensure interception rather

Admiralty footnote:—

* Admiralty signal 1445/24 asked the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, to state:—

(i) the remaining percentage of the BISMARCK's fighting efficiency;

(ii) what ammunition she had expended;

(iii) the reasons for her frequent alterations of course;

(iv) his intention as regards the PRINCE OF WALES re-engaging.

Admiralty footnote:—

* T/B—Torpedo/Bomber aircraft.