

cruisers to allow of cruiser cover in the Barents Sea.

13. The large number of U-boats which usually surround and accompany these seven-knot convoys are a serious menace to covering cruisers so far from their base. The experience of the past year, and especially the loss of the EDINBURGH, had underlined this risk. After balancing it against the risk of surface attack, my intention had been that the 6-inch cruisers, if they became available, should provide cover as far as 25° East and then return to Iceland. The Admiralty, however, were insistent that the cruisers should cover the convoys right through to Kola; this insistence was fully justified in the event, for otherwise the cruiser force would probably not have been present at the action on New Year's Eve.

J.W.51A

14. For security reasons, the titles of the convoys were changed from P.Q. and Q.P. to J.W. and R.A., both starting with the number 51. The first sixteen ships were assembled at Loch Ewe on 15th December. So that no more time should be wasted, it was decided to sail them direct from there, followed a week later by the next sixteen, all routed east of the Faroes.

15. The first group, J.W.51A, was escorted from Loch Ewe by three Hunt class destroyers, one minesweeper, two corvettes and two trawlers, the Hunts being relieved north-east of Iceland by seven destroyers under Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla from Seidisfiord. The Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet* in the SHEFFIELD, with the JAMAICA, OPPORTUNE and MATCHLESS, was to provide cover to the vicinity of Iceland, enter Seidisfiord to refuel and again provide cover from 15° East: but low visibility prevented the cruisers from getting into Seidisfiord, so the two destroyers were detached to fuel and join the close escort, while the Rear Admiral (D) proceeded with the cruisers.

16. I sailed from Scapa on 19th December in the KING GEORGE V, with the BERWICK and three destroyers, to provide cover to the westwards of 15° East, subsequently returning to Scapa. Four submarines were disposed off the exits from Altenfiord.

17. No enemy forces of any sort were encountered, and the convoy arrived intact at Kola Inlet on Christmas Day, the only incident having been a report by a Russian aircraft of two ships which proved to be the OPPORTUNE and MATCHLESS. Five ships of the convoy were detached off Kildin Island and arrived at Molotovsk, in the White Sea, on 27th December.

J.W.51B and R.A.51

18. Only fourteen ships were ready for the next convoy, J.W.51B, which left Loch Ewe on 22nd December with an escort similar to its predecessor. The BULLDOG, on passage to Seidisfiord, suffered severe weather damage; so Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla had only six destroyers in company when he sailed from there to join the convoy. Cover as far as 15° East was provided by the ANSON, wearing the flag of the Vice Admiral Second in

Command, Home Fleet*, with the CUMBERLAND and three destroyers, sailing from Akureyri on 26th December.

19. A westbound convoy, R.A.51, of thirteen ships, with the escort from J.W.51A, left Kola Inlet on 30th December. The Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet, with his cruiser force, was to cover both these convoys in the Barents Sea and subsequently, if fuel permitted, to return to Seidisfiord.

20. The first part of the passage of J.W.51B was without incident, though it is possible that the convoy was sighted by enemy aircraft on 24th December. The ORIBI had a gyro compass failure and lost touch on 28th: after searching for twenty-four hours she failed to regain contact, and proceeded independently to Kola. During that night a gale arose and the port wing column of the convoy lost touch: the BRAMBLE was detached to search for these ships and the VIZALMA, stationed astern of the column, also lost touch with the main body. Neither of these rejoined the convoy, but three of the merchant ships later succeeded in doing so.

Surface Action

21. At 0830 on New Year's Eve, the situation was therefore as follows. The convoy, now reduced to twelve ships, was on an easterly course, about 220 miles north-north-west of the Kola Inlet and 13 miles south of its ordered route. The escort still in company consisted of H.M. destroyers ONSLOW (Captain R. St. V. Sherbrooke, D.S.O., R.N., Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla), OBEDIENT (Lieutenant Commander D. C. Kinloch, R.N.), ORWELL (Lieutenant Commander N. H. G. Austen, D.S.O., R.N.), OBDURATE (Lieutenant Commander C. E. L. Sclater, D.S.O., R.N.) and ACHATES (Lieutenant Commander A. H. T. Johns, R.N.), H.M. corvettes RHODODENDRON (Lieutenant Commander L. A. Sayers, R.N.R.) and HYDERABAD (Lieutenant S. C. B. Hickman, D.S.C., R.N.R.), and H.M. trawler NORTHERN GEM (Skipper Lieutenant W. J. Mullender, R.D., R.N.R.). Some 35 miles to the northward was H.M. trawler VIZALMA (Temporary Lieutenant J. R. Anglebeck, R.N.V.R.) with one merchant ship in company, and about 15 miles to the north-eastward was H.M.S. BRAMBLE (Commander H. T. Rust, D.S.O., R.N.). Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., O.B.E. (Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet) flying his flag in H.M.S. SHEFFIELD (Captain A. W. Clarke, R.N.), with H.M.S. JAMAICA (Captain J. L. Storey, R.N.) in company, was about 25 miles north of the convoy and 10 miles south of the VIZALMA. None of these four groups knew each other's relative position, and there was one other straggler in the vicinity.

22. Reports had been received of D/F bearings on one U-boat well ahead of the convoy, one U-boat well to the southward and an enemy destroyer off North Cape; and a suspected U-boat had been reported and attacked without success the evening before. But there was otherwise no indication that the enemy was at sea, or even aware of the passage of the convoy.

23. The visibility in the twilight was about 7 miles to the northward and 10 miles to the

Admiralty footnote:—

*Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., O.B.E.

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* Vice Admiral Sir Bruce A. Fraser, K.B.E., C.B.