

southward. The sky was mostly covered with low cloud; wind W.N.W. force 3; sea slight with no swell. There were 16 degrees of frost, and ice on all ships.

24. The HYDERABAD, on the starboard quarter of the convoy, sighted two destroyers (later seen to be three) bearing 180° at 0820: she thought they were Russian destroyers coming to reinforce the escort and did not report them: but they were sighted and reported soon afterwards by the OBDURATE, stationed on the starboard beam of the convoy. She closed them at best speed and they retired to the north-westward, across the stern of the convoy, opening fire at 0930 on the OBDURATE, who retired on the convoy. Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla, from ahead, altered down the port side of the convoy and ordered the destroyers to concentrate. While the ORWELL, OBEDIENT and OBDURATE were moving to comply, the ACHATES, whose station was on the port quarter, started to lay a smoke screen to cover the convoy, which made an emergency turn to 135°.

25. Before the other destroyers had joined, the ONSLOW sighted a large ship to the north-westward, coming towards her at high speed. This was probably the HIPPER. She turned east and opened fire on the ACHATES, who was very conspicuous because of her smoke screen. The ONSLOW immediately opened fire, at 9,000 yards, and turned to a course parallel to the enemy to keep between her and the convoy. The other three "O" class destroyers were now joining and the enemy retired to the northward under smoke, firing a few salvos at the convoy as she did so.

26. Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla concluded that the enemy was unwilling to face the risk of torpedo attack by our destroyers and for the next 25 minutes he made use of this fact. He detached the OBEDIENT and OBDURATE to close the convoy and increase its protection against any attempt by the enemy destroyers to attack; and himself in the ONSLOW, with the ORWELL in company, conducted an intermittent action with the HIPPER, scoring several hits and preventing her from coming any closer to the convoy. At 1020, however, the ONSLOW was hit four times in rapid succession and suffered considerable damage. A and B guns were put out of action and fire broke out in the fore superstructure and messdeck, the main aerials and both radar sets were destroyed, the engine room holed, and Captain (D) was severely wounded in the face, disabling the left eye so that he could not see. In spite of this severe handicap he continued to direct the flotilla and his ship until compelled to disengage the ONSLOW as a result of a further hit. Only after receiving reports that the hole in his engine room was plugged, that the main engines and steering gear were still efficient and that OBEDIENT had taken charge of the destroyers in accordance with his signalled instructions did he consent to leave his bridge to receive medical attention. From his sea cabin he continued to receive reports of the action and to advise Lieutenant Commander T. J. G. Marchant, R.N., who assumed command of the ONSLOW.*

Admiralty footnote:—

* Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla, Captain R. St. V. Sherbrooke, D.S.O., R.N., was subsequently awarded the V.C. for his conduct on this occasion.

27. Rear Admiral (D) meanwhile, away to the northward, had at 0858 obtained radar contact on a ship to the north-westward of his force. While closing to identify this echo he sighted at 0932 gun flashes over the horizon to the southward, but considered that they were H.A. fire. The echo was the VIZALMA and her merchant vessel; but before they could be identified as such, the gunfire to the southward increased and an enemy report was received from Captain (D) 17. Course was altered to close and speed worked up to 31 knots.

28. About 1030, soon after the ONSLOW had suffered her damage, two ships were detected by SHEFFIELD's radar, one bearing 180° and the other 140°, both on an easterly course. From subsequent examination of the reports it appears probable (but by no means certain) that the former was the HIPPER and the latter the LUTZOW, some miles ahead of her. Although both ships came in sight soon after and were seen to be larger than destroyers, and therefore enemy; it was impossible to identify them precisely: Rear Admiral (D) therefore altered to the eastward to allow the radar action plot to become clearer*.

29. After the cruisers had been on this course for about 20 minutes, the leading enemy ship (probably LUTZOW) altered to starboard towards the convoy and Rear Admiral (D) turned towards the other, who soon followed her consort to the southward. The SHEFFIELD and JAMAICA opened fire on this second ship (probably HIPPER) and appeared to take her completely by surprise, as she failed to reply till after the SHEFFIELD's fourth salvo. Hits were seen almost at once and the enemy appeared to alter towards under cover of smoke. While the SHEFFIELD was starting to conform, a destroyer was suddenly sighted fine on the bow and fire was shifted to this new target. She was hit at once and repeatedly, and left in a sinking condition. The Germans later admitted the loss of this destroyer. The JAMAICA meanwhile was engaging another destroyer, which turned away and was lost to view.

30. During this action the radar had continued to track the original target (probably HIPPER), and as soon as it was over the chase was resumed. She was sighted again at 1215 and soon after two destroyers and the second large ship (probably LUTZOW) came in sight, all steering to the westward. The last named ship had probably made a wider sweep to the east and south than her consort and sank the BRAMBLE in the course of it; for a report was received from the BRAMBLE of an enemy cruiser, and an engagement was seen in her probable direction between a heavy ship and a much smaller one which fired a single gun and pom-pom tracer. At 1045 an enemy ship from the north-eastward came in sight of the OBEDIENT, and the destroyers protecting the convoy once more went into action. It is not possible definitely to establish which ship this was: there is some evidence to suggest that it was a third heavy ship, possibly a 6-inch cruiser, or it may have been the LUTZOW.

31. Since the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. OBEDIENT had taken command and the

Admiralty footnote:—

* The enemy force was in fact LUTZOW, HIPPER and six large destroyers, one of which was sunk.