

officers and ship's company, I decided I must call upon their aid in an endeavour to reduce the BISMARCK's speed and to ensure my being able to bring her to action with KING GEORGE V and REPULSE—a call they responded to with such splendid gallantry and success.

32. I therefore detached the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, at 1509 with VICTORIOUS and the four cruisers with instructions to steer the best course to get within 100 miles of the enemy and deliver a T/B attack. Though VICTORIOUS would be of great value in company with me the next morning to locate the enemy if they escaped during the night, a reduction of speed was the more important object and could only be achieved by detaching her at this stage.

33. KING GEORGE V and REPULSE steered an intercepting course with the object of bringing the enemy to action soon after sunrise with the sun low behind us. The situation at this time was as follows:—

(a) The enemy appeared to have settled down to a course of 180° at about 22-24 knots. They were, for no apparent reason, zig-zagging. They were shadowed by SUFFOLK from astern and by PRINCE OF WALES and NORFOLK from the port quarter. The BISMARCK had suffered some damage but retained her fighting efficiency, though an aircraft had reported that she was leaving an oil wake. Their reduced speed was probably dictated by the need for economy of fuel and to afford an opportunity of breaking contact by an increase of speed after dark. PRINCE OF WALES had two guns out of action and considerable damage to her bridge.

(b) KING GEORGE V and REPULSE were closing from the eastward and would, if the enemy held their course, make contact about 0830, half an hour after sunrise. REPULSE was short of fuel, but had just enough to fight a short action and then reach Newfoundland. By midnight all destroyers had left for Reykjavik to fuel.

(c) RODNEY (Captain Frederick H. G. Dalrymple-Hamilton), with three destroyers, was approaching from the south-eastward and would join about 1000.

(d) RAMILLIES (Captain Arthur D. Read) was approaching from the south, steering to get to the westward of the enemy, and would make contact about 1100.

Attack by Aircraft of VICTORIOUS.

34. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, with his force proceeded at 28 knots on the course which would bring him soonest within 100 miles. He hoped to get near enough to launch the attack by 2100, but a short engagement with PRINCE OF WALES caused the enemy to make ground to the westward; and, it became apparent that VICTORIOUS could not be within 100 miles of them before 2300. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, therefore ordered the striking force to be flown off at 2200, some 120 miles from the objective.

35. VICTORIOUS had only just commissioned. She was about to carry a large consignment of crated Hurricanes to Gibraltar, there

to be assembled and flown to Malta, when she was put under my command for this operation. The only operational aircraft she had on board were nine Swordfish of 825 and six Fulmars of 802 Squadron. She had only had a week to work up and the Fulmar crews were far from fully trained. The Commanding Officer had decided that nothing less than the whole of 825 Squadron could be expected to produce any result in a torpedo attack. He realised that the Fulmars were far from ideal for shadowing, but decided to use them to maintain touch, in the hope of being able to launch another torpedo attack in the morning.

36. The nine Swordfish were flown off at 2210, followed at 2300 by three Fulmars and at 0100 by two more as reliefs. The weather was showery with squalls; wind north-westerly fresh; visibility good except during showers. Sunset was at 0052.

37. 825 Squadron, by very good navigation and with the assistance of the A.S.V. located the BISMARCK at 2330 and altered to the southward with the object of making their attack from ahead. The cloud was increasing and they lost touch, but after circling round for some time located NORFOLK and PRINCE OF WALES and were re-directed by the former. A few minutes later the A.S.V. gear again indicated a ship and the squadron broke cloud to deliver their attack, only to find themselves over a United States coastguard cutter. The BISMARCK was six miles away and, observing this incident, opened H.A. barrage fire, keeping it up throughout the attack. Eight aircraft got in their attacks, the ninth losing touch in a cloud layer and failing to find the target. At least one hit was obtained.

38. This attack, by a squadron so lately embarked in a new carrier in unfavourable weather conditions, was magnificently carried out and reflects the greatest credit on all concerned. There can be little doubt that the hit was largely responsible for the BISMARCK being finally brought to action and sunk.* The value of A.S.V. was once more demonstrated; without it, it is doubtful whether any attack would have been possible.

39. The Fulmars, whose object was to shadow and to distract the enemy, were less successful. Only one of each group made contact and these did not succeed in holding the enemy for long. The crews were inexperienced, some of the observers finding themselves in a two-seater aircraft for the first time, with a wireless set tuned only on deck and no homing beacon. Night shadowing is a task which tries the most experienced of crews and it is not surprising in these difficult conditions that they failed to achieve it. The utmost gallantry was shown by the crews of these aircraft in their attempt. Two of the Fulmars failed to return, but the crew of one was rescued later by a merchant vessel.

Admiralty footnote:—

* It is now known that the hit received in the action with the HOOD about 0600 on May 24th and the resulting loss of oil fuel caused Admiral Lutjens to decide at 0800/24 to make for the French coast. The torpedo hit by the VICTORIOUS at 0015/25 no doubt confirmed him in this decision. The immediate and principal cause however of the BISMARCK being brought to action was the hit at 2105/26th May by the aircraft of the ARK ROYAL, which demolished her rudder and left her out of control.