

to be present; but SUFFOLK never saw this ship and in view of her position it is considered that its presence is not established. It is curious, however, that PRINCE OF WALES also obtained 3 echoes soon after meeting the enemy. It is possible that two separate R.D.F. echoes were being received from the BISMARCK. Aircraft from Iceland were also sent to shadow, and one made a report of enemy's course and speed to NORFOLK.

Battle Cruiser Force.

16. HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES and their screen were meanwhile closing at high speed. They arrived in the vicinity of the enemy sooner than I had expected. At 0205 the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron turned to a course nearly parallel to that of the enemy to wait for the relative positions to become clear and for daylight. The opposing forces were in close proximity at this time, and it is possible that the ship sighted by NORFOLK at 0229 was the PRINCE OF WALES. During the rest of the night PRINCE OF WALES obtained frequent D/F* bearings of NORFOLK and SUFFOLK and passed them in to the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron. At 0340 HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES increased to 28 knots and altered in to make contact.

17. It was the intention of the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron, that HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES should engage the BISMARCK, leaving the PRINZ EUGEN to the cruisers, but the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, was not aware that the battle-cruiser force was so near; NORFOLK and SUFFOLK, therefore, shadowing from the eastward and northward respectively at a range of about 15 miles, were not in a position to engage the PRINZ EUGEN who was now stationed ahead of the BISMARCK on a course of 240°.

18. HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES sighted the enemy at 0535 from a direction just before his beam and came into action at 0553 steering to close the range as fast as possible. All three ships opened fire practically simultaneously at a range of about 25,000 yards. The shooting of both the HOOD and the BISMARCK was excellent from the start and both scored hits almost at once. The BISMARCK's second or third salvo started a fire in HOOD in the vicinity of the port after 4-inch mounting. This fire spread rapidly and, at 0600, just after the ships had turned together to open 'A' arcs,† HOOD was straddled again: there was a huge explosion between the after funnel and the mainmast and the ship sank in 3 or 4 minutes. She had fired only 5 or 6 salvos. The loss by one unlucky hit of this famous ship with Vice-Admiral Lancelot Ernest Holland, C.B., Captain Ralph Kerr, C.B.E., and her fine company, was a grievous blow.

19. PRINCE OF WALES had started off well for so new and unpractised a ship and had straddled with her sixth salvo. She had been engaging the BISMARCK, while herself being engaged by the PRINZ EUGEN. After

emptying her aircraft in preparation for a night encounter, she had been unable to refuel it in time to fly off before contact was made. It was just about to be catapulted when it was hit by splinters and had to be jettisoned. As soon as HOOD had been disposed of, the BISMARCK shifted her main and secondary armament fire quickly and accurately on to the PRINCE OF WALES. The range was now about 18,000 yards and PRINCE OF WALES' starboard 5.25-inch battery had also come into action. Within a very few minutes she was hit by four 15-inch and three smaller, probably 8-inch shells; her compass platform was damaged and most of the people on it killed or wounded; both forward H.A. Directors and the starboard after one were out of action; one four-gunned turret had jammed and the ship was holed underwater aft. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, reports that PRINCE OF WALES' salvos were now falling short and had a very large spread. The Commanding Officer considered it expedient temporarily to break off the action and, at 0613, turned away under smoke. The range on ceasing fire was 14,600 yards.

20. SUFFOLK reported that the BISMARCK had suffered three hits, but neither the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, nor PRINCE OF WALES had been able to observe any hits for certain, though black smoke had been seen at times. Her fire at any rate was still very accurate. (It is now known that she did probably suffer three hits, one of which caused her to leave an oil track and may have had a considerable effect on her endurance.)

21. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, ordered the destroyers in the area to search for survivors of the HOOD and told PRINCE OF WALES to remain in company with him and maintain her best speed. By 0720 she had cleared away most of the debris on the bridge, and resumed conning from the compass platform; two guns of 'Y' turret were again in action and her best speed had been reported as 27 knots.

Decision to Break Off the Action.

22. The Commanding Officer of the PRINCE OF WALES in his report says:—

"Some explanation remains to be made as to my decision to break off the engagement after the sinking of H.M.S. HOOD—a decision which clearly invites most critical examination. Prior to the disaster to HOOD I felt confident that together we could deal adequately with the BISMARCK and her consort. The sinking of the HOOD obviously changed the immediate situation, and there were three further considerations requiring to be weighed up, of which the first two had been in my mind before action was joined, namely:—

(a) The practical certainty that owing to mechanical 'teething troubles' a full output from the main armament was not to be expected.

(b) The working up of the ship after commissioning had only just reached a stage where I had felt able to report to the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, that I considered her reasonably fit to take part in service operations. This was the first

Admiralty footnotes:—

* D/F—direction finding.

† 'A' arcs are the arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, thus allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.