

WASHINGTON, VICTORIOUS, CUMBERLAND, NIGERIA and nine destroyers, was shadowed for a short period north-east of Iceland on the 1st July, while the screen was refuelling in succession at Seidisfiord; and again for a short period early on 3rd July, while in a covering position south of the convoy. Later on that day, course was altered to the northward, to cross the convoy track and reach a position north-west of Bear Island, within air striking range of the convoy on the morning of 4th July: this time was calculated from the information available to be the earliest at which surface attack was likely to materialise. While on passage to the new covering area, which was occupied for about 24 hours, the battlefleet was joined by the MANCHESTER and ECLIPSE from Spitzbergen.

15. Air reconnaissance of the Norwegian harbours had been hindered by the weather, but the available information showed that the heavy units were probably moving northwards, and an air photograph of Trondheim late on 3rd July confirmed that the TIRPITZ and HIPPER had left. The flying-boat patrol and the two lines of submarines between North Cape and Bear Island were being adjusted to cover the line of approach to the convoy as it moved eastwards. In view of the uncertainty of the enemy's position, Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron decided to continue to provide close cover and to pass to the eastward of Bear Island.

Route

16. A fresh ice reconnaissance on 3rd July found that the passage north of Bear Island had widened. The Admiralty suggested to the KEPPEL (Senior Officer of Escort) that the convoy should pass at least fifty miles north of it, but he preferred to stay in the low visibility on his original route and to make ground to the eastward: Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, however, on closing the convoy, decided that a more northerly route was necessary and ordered the KEPPEL to alter course to pass 70 miles north of Bear Island and, later, to open to 400 miles from Banak.

Scattering of Convoy

17. At 1230/4th July, the Admiralty gave Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron permission to proceed east of longitude 25° East, should the situation so demand, unless contrary orders were received from me. This was a reversal of the policy agreed between the Admiralty and myself (see paragraph 4): as no information in my possession justified this change, I instructed Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron to withdraw when the convoy was east of 25° East, or earlier at his discretion, unless the Admiralty assured him that the TIRPITZ could not be met. The Admiralty at 1858, however, informed him that further information was expected shortly and instructed him to remain with the convoy pending further instructions.

18. At 2111/4th July, the Admiralty made a signal, prefixed "Most Immediate", ordering Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron to withdraw to the westward at high speed (this is understood to have been due to U-boat information, but that fact was not known to the addressees): at 2123, the

Admiralty, in a signal prefixed "Immediate", ordered the convoy to disperse and proceed to Russian ports owing to threat from surface ships; and at 2136 followed this up with another "Most Immediate" signal ordering the convoy to scatter (this latter signal was intended merely as a correction of technical wording from "disperse" to "scatter", but this too was not known at the time). Both Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron and the Commanding Officer of the KEPPEL took these signals to indicate that an attack by the TIRPITZ was imminent: the convoy was immediately ordered to scatter, the escorting destroyers to join the cruiser force, and the rest of the escort to proceed independently.

Enemy Surface Forces

19. The enemy heavy forces, however, had not yet left North Norway: it was not until 1700 on 5th July that they were sighted and reported by the Soviet submarine K.21, north of North Cape outward bound: and three and a half hours later the submarine P.54 reported the TIRPITZ, HIPPER and six destroyers, still steering to the north-eastwards. Soon after, for some reason at present not established, the enemy fleet abandoned their enterprise and returned to harbour: possibly their information of the position and composition of our two covering forces was at fault, or they were unwilling to face the threat of our submarines.

20. During the night of 5th/6th July, I received three signals from the Admiralty suggesting that if the battlefleet was sighted steering to the eastward it might make the TIRPITZ reluctant to go as far as the convoy; and that the TIRPITZ might be damaged and, if I could refuel my destroyers, might present an opportunity for the VICTORIOUS. The latter seemed to me unlikely, for it was almost certain that the TIRPITZ, especially if damaged, would not be sailed down the Norwegian coast until adequate fighter cover and seaward reconnaissance were available: moreover the DUKE OF YORK was short of fuel. Arrangements were made for the fleet to reverse its course if the approach of enemy aircraft was detected; and at 0645/6th July when the destroyers had completed with fuel, course was altered back to the north-eastward. An hour later an enemy aircraft passed over the fleet, above the clouds: endeavour was made to attract his attention by gunfire and fighters, but without success. The weather continued unfavourable for air reconnaissance, so that at 1545/6th July the course of the fleet was again reversed and the units returned to harbour.

21. The submarines STURGEON and MINERVE, returning from patrol lines off North Cape, had meanwhile been diverted by the Flag Officer Submarines to establish a patrol off the entrance to Vestfiord. The German ships were sighted by a Mosquito aircraft on the morning of 7th July, leaving Arno, in North Norway, on their way back to Narvik. It is possible that they passed inside the Leads and thus evaded the submarines.

Further Attacks on Convoy

22. When the order to scatter the convoy was received, it had covered more than half its route with the loss of only three ships.