

anything was in the wind was an attack by the NORTHERN SPRAY, one of the rescue trawlers, on a U-boat near Jan Mayen Island. It is probable that the news of this encounter led the enemy to increase his air reconnaissance and U-boat patrols. Of the thirteen east-bound ships, five reached Archangel, four were sunk, one ran aground near South Cape, Spitzbergen, and three returned to Iceland. Only four westbound ships were sailed, of which three arrived safely at Akureyri: the fourth was recalled when it became apparent that there was considerable enemy activity in the Barents Sea, but failed to get the signal and was sunk. A fifth westbound Russian ship was sailed on 14th November, just ahead of Q.P.15, and arrived safely. The Russians thereafter continued to sail ships independently in the intervals between convoys: four more were sailed late in November and fifteen in December: all arrived without loss.

Q.P.15

5. The operations for the occupation of French North Africa left too few ships in the Home Fleet to provide escorts on the earlier scale; but the light and ice conditions, more favourable than at any other time of the year, and the withdrawal of much of the German Air Force in Northern Norway offered opportunities for more lightly escorted convoys. It was therefore decided to resume this traffic in mid-November with a westbound convoy from the White Sea.

6. As the passage would be made in almost continuous darkness, and foul weather could also be expected, I requested that the convoy should be limited to twenty ships, but the Admiralty directed that thirty ships should be included. It sailed on 17th November, escorted by five minesweepers, four corvettes, one trawler and one A.A. ship; and was to be reinforced in the Barents Sea by five destroyers under the command of Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, relieved by five others from a position west of Bear Island. The Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron*, in the LONDON, with the SUFFOLK and three destroyers, provided surface cover west of Bear Island. One Russian and three British submarines operated off the exits from Altenfiord, to deter the HIPPER and KOLN from sailing.

7. The convoy met a succession of gales throughout its passage. These, with the almost complete lack of daylight, caused it to become very scattered. Neither destroyer force succeeded in making contact with the main body; and by the time the convoy had passed Bear Island, it and its escort had broken up into a number of small groups, spread over a large area and without knowledge of each other's whereabouts. The route was adjusted to pass south of Bear Island and avoid the normal U-boat concentration between there and Spitzbergen, but many ships did not receive the amending signal.

8. In the absence of air reconnaissance, for which the weather was quite unsuitable, the enemy was presumably even more lacking in knowledge of the situation than ourselves. Of the thirty ships which sailed, twenty-seven

arrived safely in Icelandic waters, one returned to Kola Inlet and two were sunk, both probably by U-boats. The safe arrivals were rounded up and taken straight on in two convoys to Loch Ewe.

Mid-winter Policy

9. From late November to mid-January the lack of daylight is such that air reconnaissance in the Arctic is virtually impossible. Provided that a convoy is of such a size that it can be handled and kept together, it therefore stands an excellent chance of evading both U-boat and surface attack, and even of completing the passage without the enemy knowing of its existence. A large convoy, on the other hand, is likely to fail to keep in company and to split, as did Q.P.15, into a large number of small groups, covering a vast area and unaware of each other's position or composition. Such small groups would be more liable to detection by U-boats than a single concentrated convoy, and would present the enemy surface forces with an ideal opportunity for an offensive sweep. Our own covering forces are always handicapped by having to identify a radar contact before they are free to attack: the enemy need not do so. The splitting of the convoy into a large number of scattered units would greatly add to this handicap.

10. It was obviously advantageous to run through as many ships as possible during this short dark period, rather than to defer our commitments until air reconnaissance could start again. Though it would be impossible to provide strong surface escort for a large number of small convoys, the chances of evasion were, in my opinion, so good that the risk of interception by superior surface forces should be accepted.

11. I had asked that about six merchant ships, escorted by three trawlers, should be held ready in Iceland to sail shortly before the arrival of Q.P.15 if the U-boats were drawn out of position by that convoy; but the Admiralty did not approve this suggestion. They proposed instead to wait until 22nd December and then to sail a convoy of thirty-one ships, with an escort of summer dimensions. The experience of Q.P.15 confirmed my opinion that a convoy of this size could not be handled: the Admiralty proposal, moreover, would waste the first half of the dark period.

12. I therefore signalled my intention on 25th November to limit the convoy in size and asked that the assembly of the first ten ships might be hastened. This small convoy was to be escorted by four destroyers from the Home Fleet and any minesweepers and trawlers which could be made available. The Admiralty, however, insisted in their reply of 26th November that it was essential to provide a covering force strong enough to deal with the scale of attack which they expected, and considered that the only alternatives were either to sail thirty ships in company, or in three groups so close together that one force could cover all three. After further discussion, including a visit to London by my Chief of Staff, I was directed to sail the convoy in two parts of sixteen ships each, escorted by seven destroyers and some smaller craft; and the Home Fleet was reinforced by two 6-inch

Admiralty footnote:—

* Rear Admiral L. H. K. Hamilton, D.S.O.