

40. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, meanwhile, had been steaming towards the position of the BISMARCK, to shorten the return journey of the aircraft. The homing beacon of VICTORIOUS had broken down and the return of the striking force unfortunately coincided with a rain squall round the ship. They missed her in the darkness and it was necessary to home them by D/F on medium frequency and to carry out an all-round sweep with a signal projector. It was with considerable relief that the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, sighted them at 0155, one hour after they were due and uncomfortably close to the end of their endurance. The homing procedure was continued for the benefit of the missing Fulmars until 0250 when the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, was regretfully compelled to order VICTORIOUS to stop it. It was by then quite dark and searchlight sweeps in waters close to the enemy, and where attack by submarines had to be expected, were too hazardous. Course was set to close the last reported position of the enemy, in preparation for a search at dawn; this course was also considered to be the best calculated to avoid an encounter before daylight.

First Cruiser Squadron and PRINCE OF WALES.

41. Throughout the afternoon NORFOLK, SUFFOLK and PRINCE OF WALES continued to shadow. The enemy's alterations of course to the southward and south-eastward and their reduction of speed were all in our favour. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, endeavoured further to delay them, and so to assist me to intercept, by engaging the enemy from astern: but the enemy must have made an alteration of course to the south-westward while the shadowing force was temporarily out of touch, for when he did come within gun range at 1840, the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, found himself still on the port quarter instead of astern. A few salvos were exchanged at long range, and the brief action had the undesirable result of forcing the enemy further to the westward, away from my force. The unreliability of PRINCE OF WALES' armament was demonstrated once more, as two guns again went out of action.

42. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, considered the possibility of working to the westward of the enemy to force them towards me; but the risk of losing touch altogether was too great and he continued shadowing as before, instructing PRINCE OF WALES not to open fire except in response to enemy fire.

43. Just when the torpedo attack by the aircraft of VICTORIOUS was developing, the shadowing ships were confused by an American coastguard cutter, which appeared on the bearing of the enemy, and touch was again temporarily lost. It was regained at 0115, but the light was very bad and only two salvos were fired.

44. By 0140 it was getting dark and SUFFOLK was ordered to act independently and keep touch by R.D.F., the Commanding Officer having previously been instructed to concentrate on the BISMARCK if the enemy

should separate. Experience had suggested that the R.D.F. of PRINCE OF WALES was not reliable; the R.D.F. fitted in NORFOLK had the disadvantage of working on limited bow bearings only, so that she would lose touch at once if forced to turn away. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, therefore, with NORFOLK and PRINCE OF WALES, maintained a position in close support of SUFFOLK.

Loss of Touch.

45. The loss of touch, when it came, was caused primarily by over-confidence. The R.D.F. had been giving such consistently good results and had been used so skilfully that it had engendered a false sense of security. The attention of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, had been drawn, both by the Admiralty and by me, to the evident danger of U-boat attack, and he had ordered the ships in company to zig-zag. SUFFOLK was shadowing from the extreme range of her instrument, losing touch on those parts of her zig-zag which took her furthest from the enemy. The enemy altered sharply to starboard while SUFFOLK was moving to port, and, by the time she got back, had gone. It is of interest that on both her last two contacts at 0229 and at 0306, SUFFOLK detected two ships; it would appear that the PRINZ EUGEN was still in company with the BISMARCK.*

Search—Morning of 25th May.

46. SUFFOLK searched towards the enemy's last bearing until it became certain that they had succeeded in evading and then reported the fact (at 0401). The Commanding Officer decided that it was essential first to allow for an increase of speed, coupled with a small alteration to starboard, since failure to do so now could not subsequently be retrieved. He acted accordingly. By 1100 his curve of search had covered enemy courses up to 220°. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, informed me that the enemy had probably made a 90° turn to the west, or had turned back and cut away to the eastward under the stern of the shadowers. At 0620 he detached PRINCE OF WALES to join me and himself searched to the westward, north of SUFFOLK.

47. When I heard that the enemy had succeeded in breaking away from the shadowing force, it seemed probable that they would either make for an oiler or they would make for a dockyard. If the former, they would probably steer north-west towards the Davis Strait, which offered an excellent hiding place for an oiler, or southwards towards where an oiler was suspected to be operating in about 25° 30' N. 42° W. If they were making for a dockyard port, they could steer north-east for the North Sea or south-east for Brest, the Straits of Gibraltar or Dakar. In view of the limited capabilities of VICTORIOUS, I had insufficient forces to search all the possible courses of the enemy. I therefore decided to cover the possibility that they were joining a tanker, for these two ships, refuelled, at large in the Atlantic, would constitute a much more serious and immediate menace to our interests than they would, damaged, in a French or German port.

Admiralty footnote—

* It is now known that the PRINZ EUGEN parted company from the BISMARCK at about 1814 on 24th May.