

be persuaded to provide. The fuel requirements of the escort and covering force were to be met by two oilers sailed under separate escort to Spitzbergen, and two more with P.Q.18, transferring with the covering force to Q.P.14.

33. Frequent German air reconnaissance of Icelandic ports had been reported, so it was decided to sail the eastbound convoy direct from Loch Ewe, with a local escort from the Western Approaches Command until arrival off Iceland.

34. A considerable increase was possible in the scale of shore-based air co-operation. The Royal Air Force in Iceland undertook, as far as the weather would permit, to provide anti-submarine escort to the convoys as far as 73° North, ice reconnaissance daily when they were west of Jan Mayen and fighter protection for forces in Icelandic ports. Eleven Catalinas and thirty-two torpedo carrying Hampdens, of which five were lost on passage, were flown to North Russia to provide anti-submarine escort in the eastern end of the Barents Sea and reconnaissance and a striking force in case the German heavy ships put to sea. Arrangements were also made for P.R.U.* aircraft in increased numbers to reconnoitre the Norwegian fiords, working from the United Kingdom and North Russia. Russian promises of anti-submarine escort, fighter cover and bombing attacks on German aerodromes were also made. An important addition to the air defence was the new auxiliary aircraft carrier AVENGER, equipped with twelve Sea Hurricanes and three Swordfish, who formed part of the escort of both convoys.

35. The ANSON (Vice Admiral Second in Command, Home Fleet†), DUKE OF YORK, JAMAICA and five short endurance destroyers were moved to Akureyri‡. Their radius of action was very limited, unless the destroyer screen was slipped, but they might be of value if the enemy surface forces unexpectedly attacked at the western part of the route: it was hoped too that their absence from Scapa would deceive the enemy and make him imagine that a heavy covering force was at sea as usual. I remained at Scapa in the KING GEORGE V to be in touch with the latest intelligence and in general control of the operations.

36. Additional cover was provided for Q.P.14 after passing Bear Island by a force of five cruisers and four destroyers, under Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron§, after they had carried stores to the Norwegian force in Spitzbergen. Endurance would not permit this force to cover P.Q.18 as well.

Preliminary Movements

37. In order to reduce as far as possible the duration of the operation for the destroyer covering force and the escort of P.Q.18, the convoy was brought from Loch Ewe to the Denmark Strait by a separate escort from the Western Approaches Command, the permanent escort starting from Icelandic ports. It was necessary to hold three conferences, one at

Loch Ewe for the convoy and others at Hvalfjord and Seidisfjord for the escort and covering forces. These were conducted in succession by Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers.

38. The convoy sailed from Loch Ewe on 2nd September and immediately met foul weather. It arrived off Skagi on 7th September, thirty-six hours astern of station, and was there joined by the ocean escort of three destroyers, four corvettes, two anti-aircraft ships and four trawlers. Apart from the weather, and two U-boat contacts, the passage so far had been uneventful.

39. The weather improved on 8th September and the convoy was joined the next morning by Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers, in the SCYLLA, eight destroyers, the AVENGER, two Hunt class destroyers to escort her, three minesweepers and two submarines, all from Seidisfjord. The other eight destroyers of the covering force were sailed direct from Akureyri to refuel at Lowe Sound, Spitzbergen. The oilers OLIGARCH and BLUE RANGER, escorted by four destroyers, had sailed from Scapa for Lowe Sound on 3rd September.

Submarines

40. Besides the two submarines which formed part of the close escort, four were disposed off the Northern Lofoten Islands in an attempt to intercept the German surface ships if they moved north, and three off the north coast in the usual covering positions. The SCHEER, HIPPER and KOLN moved up from Narvik to Altenfjord on 10th September. They were sighted by all four submarines on the coastal patrols, TIGRIS, TRIBUNE, UREDD and P.54; but the TIGRIS alone was close enough to fire torpedoes: her attack was spoilt by one of the screening destroyers, which almost rammed her just before she fired, and the torpedoes missed astern. After this, the four inshore submarines were moved up to join the covering patrol off the north coast.

First Contact

41. The convoy was first sighted by an enemy aircraft late on 8th September, but was not shadowed until 12th September. This immunity was due to clouds and low visibility; but it did not unduly disturb the enemy, for his U-boats were in contact and shadowing from 10th September onwards. It did, however, prevent the early and comparatively small scale air attacks which had been directed against previous convoys; and thus had the unexpected and unfortunate result of depriving the guns and fighters of the practice and experience which would have helped them to deal with the first massed attack.

Fuelling

42. The SCYLLA and five of the destroyers with the convoy parted company north-east of Jan Mayen Island on 11th September and proceeded to Lowe Sound to fuel. The eight destroyers which had been fuelling joined the convoy early on 13th September, and the force with Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers rejoined at noon the same day. The two oilers and their screen left Lowe Sound and cruised to the north-westwards to fuel the

Admiralty footnotes:—

* P.R.U.—Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

† Vice Admiral Sir Bruce A. Fraser, K.B.E., C.B.

‡ On the north coast of Iceland.

§ Vice Admiral S. S. Bonham-Carter, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O.