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SINKING OF THE GERMAN BATTLESHIP BISMARCK ON 27TH MAY, 1941.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 5th July, 1941, by Admiral Sir JOHN C. TOVEY, K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet.

Home Fleet,

5th July, 1941.

Be pleased to lay before the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty the following despatch covering the operations leading to the sinking of the German battleship BISMARCK on Tuesday, 27th May, 1941. All times are zone minus 2.

First Reports of Enemy.

2. In the second week of May an unusual amount of German air reconnaissance between Jan Mayen Island and Greenland was noticed. It seemed possible that the object of this reconnaissance was to locate the ice-limits either with a view to an attack on Jan Mayen Island, or to assist some ship to break in or out of the North Sea, through the Denmark Strait. On 14th May, accordingly, I asked the Flag Officer-in-Charge, Iceland, for a report of the ice conditions round Jan Mayen Island. The report showed that the approach was possible only from between south and south-west, with ice blocking all other directions. Reports of troop movements in Norway, a false alarm of an air invasion of Iceland and an air reconnaissance of Scapa Flow all continued to direct my attention towards the Denmark Strait; and on 18th May I instructed SUFFOLK, who was on patrol, to keep a special watch on the passage in both directions close to the ice. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, in H.M.S. NORFOLK, sailed from Hvalfiord the next day and relieved SUFFOLK, who returned to Hvalfiord to refuel.

3. Early on 21st May a report was received of 11 merchant vessels and 2 heavily-screened large warships northbound in the Kattegat the day before. Later in the day the warships were located at Bergen and identified from air photographs as one Bismarck class battleship and one Hipper class cruiser. There were indications that these two were contemplating a raid on the ocean trade routes (Admiralty message 1828/21st May) though, if this were so, it seemed unlikely that they would stop at a place so convenient for air reconnaissance as Bergen. Two other pointers were a report (unreliable) of a U-boat, north of Iceland, and an attack by a German aircraft on Thorshaven W/T station.

4. The following dispositions were made:—

(a) HOOD (Captain Ralph Kerr, C.B.E.), flying the flag of Vice-Admiral Lancelot E. Holland, C.B., Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron, and PRINCE OF WALES (Captain John C. Leach, M.V.O.), screened by ELECTRA (Commander Cecil W. May), ANTHONY (Lieutenant-Commander John M. Hodges), ECHO (Lieutenant-Commander Cecil H. de B. Newby), ICARUS (Lieutenant-Commander Colin D. Maud, D.S.C.), ACHATES (Lieutenant-Commander Viscount Jocelyn), and ANTELOPE (Lieutenant-Commander Roger B. N. Hicks, D.S.O.), were sailed from Scapa to Hvalfiord.

(b) BIRMINGHAM (Captain Alexander C. G. Madden) and MANCHESTER (Captain Herbert A. Packer), on patrol in the Iceland-Faeroes passage, were ordered to fuel at Skaalefjord and resume patrol.

(c) SUFFOLK (Captain Robert M. Ellis), who had just arrived at Hvalfiord after being relieved by NORFOLK (Captain Alfred J. L. Phillips), flying the flag of Rear-Admiral William F. Wake-Walker, C.B., O.B.E., Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser