

instead of screening KING GEORGE V and RODNEY; and was wisely proceeding at high speed, in spite of fuel shortage, to get in touch before dark. Ships were spread 2.5 miles apart at right angles to the estimated bearing of the enemy. The approximate bearing and distance of the enemy was obtained from SHEFFIELD and, in view of the heavy sea running, speed was reduced and the flotilla manoeuvred to avoid a high speed end-on contact.

73. The BISMARCK was sighted by PIORUN, on the port wing, at 2238, just after the last shadowing aircraft left to return to ARK ROYAL: destroyers were ordered to take up stations for shadowing: at 2242 the enemy opened a heavy fire on PIORUN, who made a spirited reply before turning away under smoke. It was evident to the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, that the enemy's speed had been so seriously reduced by the torpedo bomber attack that interception by the battlefleet was a certainty, provided that the enemy could be held. He therefore decided that his main object was to keep touch and his secondary object to attack with torpedoes if he thought this would not involve the destroyers in serious losses. He ordered the destroyers to attack independently as opportunity offered.

74. Throughout the night and until 0845 on 27th May, when the battlefleet came into action, these destroyers maintained touch in spite of heavy seas, rain squalls and low visibility. They were frequently and accurately engaged by the main and secondary armaments of the BISMARCK, who was apparently firing by R.D.F.; but by skilful handling they avoided serious damage and suffered a very small number of casualties. The four ships of the 7th Division all delivered torpedo attacks during the night, COSSACK and MAORI making two each; hits were scored by COSSACK and by MAORI, the latter's torpedo causing a fire on the forecastle of the BISMARCK; SIKH may also have scored a hit.

75. The Commanding Officer of the PIORUN had not worked with the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla before and he therefore decided to wait until last to deliver his attack as he did not wish to interfere with the flotilla and was not fully conversant with their methods. He had drawn the BISMARCK's fire for an hour during the period of dusk, hoping that this would assist the other destroyers to get in their attacks, but after dark he retired to a distance of some 6 to 8 miles to wait for them to finish. He had not succeeded in regaining touch when, at 0500, he was ordered by the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, to proceed to Plymouth to fuel if not in contact with the enemy. The Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, knew that Commander Plawski would certainly attack the enemy as soon as he could find him: conditions as light came would not be easy and the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, was concerned lest a valuable ship and a fine crew should be lost without need. PIORUN continued to search until 0600 and left an hour later.

76. The conduct of the night operations by these five destroyers under the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, was a model of its kind. In heavy weather, frequently under fire, they hung on to their prey with the utmost determination, hit her with torpedoes and

delivered her to me the next morning, without suffering damage, other than by splinters, to any of their ships.

77. During the night NORFOLK arrived in the area and made her way round to the north-eastward of the enemy, ready to flank mark for the battleships in the morning: EDINBURGH was compelled to leave for Londonderry owing to lack of fuel (she arrived there with 5½ per cent. remaining): and the DORSETSHIRE was also approaching, to arrive soon after the battlefleet joined action. KING GEORGE V and RODNEY worked round to the westward ready to engage at dawn.

78. The BISMARCK was making frequent alterations of course, possibly involuntary, and it was difficult to gauge her progress from the frequent course reports which were received. As was only to be expected with forces which had been widely separated in weather unsuitable for taking sights, considerable differences in reckoning were now apparent. I instructed destroyers to fire starshell to indicate the position of the enemy, but frequent rain squalls prevented these from being seen in KING GEORGE V, while the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, reported that the reactions of the BISMARCK to this practice were unpleasant. Destroyers in touch were then instructed to transmit on medium frequency so that bearings might be obtained by D/F, but some had their aerials shot away and ZULU had a smashed deck insulator, which caused enough sparking when transmitting to illuminate the whole ship. It became evident that the relative positions were not known with sufficient accuracy for a dawn approach to be practicable. The visibility, too, was uncertain; and I decided to wait for full light.

ACTION OF 27TH MAY.

Weather: Wind—north-west, force 8.*

Weather—overcast; rain squalls.

Visibility—12-13 miles.

Sea and swell—45.

Sunrise—0722.

Choice of Tactics.

79. It was clear from the reports of the ships which had come under her fire that, in spite of the damage she had already received from guns and torpedoes, the gun armament and control of the BISMARCK were not seriously affected. Everything suggested, however, that her rudders had been so seriously damaged that she could not steer; in the strong wind prevailing, she could, by working her engines, haul off the wind only for short periods. So it was possible for me to select the direction and time of my approach and to close to whatever range I chose. The experience of the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla made it clear that the BISMARCK had R.D.F. which ranged accurately up to 8,000 yards; by day, she could range very accurately up to about 24,000 yards, either by means of the excellent stereoscopic rangefinders the Germans have always had or possibly by R.D.F.

80. I decided to approach with the advantages of wind, sea and light and as nearly end-on as possible, so as to provide a difficult target and to close quickly to a range at which rapid hitting could be ensured. I hoped that

Admiralty footnote—

* Wind force 8—fresh gale, 34-40 m.p.h.