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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. FOVEY, 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

Squadron, in the Denmark Strait, was ordered to rejoin the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, after completing with fuel. In order to conserve fuel, this movement was deferred, SUFFOLK being sailed to arrive on patrol just before the earliest possible time of arrival of the enemy.

(d) ARETHUSA (Captain Alex C. Chapman), who was due at Reykjavik with the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Orkneys and Shetlands, on a visit of inspection to Iceland, was ordered to remain at Hvalfiord at the disposal of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron.

(e) KING GEORGE V (Captain Wilfrid R. Patterson, C.V.O.), flying the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, GALATEA (Captain Edward W. B. Sim), flying the flag of Rear-Admiral Alban T. B. Curteis, C.B., Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, AURORA (Captain William G. Agnew), KENYA (Captain Michael M. Denny, C.B.), NEPTUNE (Captain Rory C. O'Connor), and the remaining three Home Fleet destroyers ACTIVE (Lieutenant-Commander Michael W. Tomkinson), PUNJABI (Commander Stuart A. Buss, M.V.O.), and NESTOR (Commander Conrad B. Alers-Hankey, D.S.C.), were brought to short notice at Scapa. INGLEFIELD (Captain Percy Todd, D.S.O.; Captain (D), Third Destroyer Flotilla) and INTREPID (Commander Roderick C. Gordon, D.S.O.) arrived on 22nd May and joined this force, as did AERMIONE (Captain Geoffrey N. Oliver) on completing the repair of her fourth turret.

(f) The sailing of VICTORIOUS (Captain Henry C. Bovell) and REPULSE (Captain William G. Tennant, C.B., M.V.O.) in Convoy W.S. 8B was cancelled by the Admiralty and they were placed at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet. VICTORIOUS was already at Scapa and REPULSE was ordered to sail from the Clyde to join.

(g) The submarine MINERVE (Lieutenant de Vaisseau P. M. Sommeville) on patrol off South West Norway was moved to the vicinity of position 61° 53' N. 3° 15' E., and the P.31 (Lieutenant John B. de B. Kershaw) was sailed from Scapa to patrol west of Stadtlandet.

(h) A bombing attack by Royal Air Force aircraft was arranged for the dark hours and a reconnaissance of the coast from Trondheim to Kristiansand South for first light on 22nd May. Neither of these was able to establish definitely whether the enemy was still at Bergen, owing to the fog and low cloud over the Norwegian coast, but some of the bombers attacked ships in harbour.

(i) The Admiralty transferred 828 Squadron of Albacores to Sumburgh, to attack the enemy at Bergen. I had hoped to embark them in VICTORIOUS in place of her Fulmars, but when it became known that the enemy had sailed, it was too late to do so.

5. The lack of further news about the enemy's movements was disturbing; and the need was felt of an air patrol similar to "Sentinel" (since established) across the route between Norwegian waters and the Northern Straits to

report if the enemy left. Here, too, weather conditions were bad, with large stretches of fog, but it would have been possible with the aid of A.S.V.\* to maintain some sort of watch.†

6. This state of uncertainty continued until the evening of 22nd May, when the Commanding Officer, R.N. Air Station, Hatston (Captain Henry L. St. J. Fancourt), on his own initiative, despatched an aircraft to try to break through the fog belt to the Norwegian coast. This aircraft carried Commander Geoffrey A. Rotherham, O.B.E., the executive officer of the station and a Naval observer with much experience, and was piloted by Lieutenant (A) Noel E. Goddard, R.N.V.R. Flying almost at surface level, they succeeded in penetrating to the fiords and carried out a search of the position where the enemy ships had been photographed. Finding nothing there, they examined Bergen harbour, under heavy fire, and reported that the ships had sailed. This skilful and determined reconnaissance is deserving of the highest praise, as is the initiative of Captain Fancourt in ordering it.

7. The report of the departure of the warships and convoy reached me at 2000 on 22nd May and, in view of the qualifications of the aircraft crew, I had no hesitation in accepting it. There seemed to be four possible explanations of the enemy's intentions:—

(a) The convoy might contain important military stores for Northern Norway and have gone on up the Leads. Movements of troops to Kirkenes had been reported for some weeks.

(b) The convoy might contain a raiding force bound for Iceland, possibly with a view to capturing an aerodrome for operations against Reykjavik and Hvalfiord.

(c) The battleship and cruiser might be trying to break out on to the trade routes. This theory had the support of Admiralty intelligence. If it were correct, the further question arose of which passage the enemy would select. Such information as was available suggested that on all previous occasions the Denmark Strait route had been taken, and this was therefore considered the most likely; but the passages between Iceland and Scotland could not be ruled out, especially in view of the enemy's stop at Bergen.

(d) The battleship and cruiser might have covered an important convoy over the dangerous sea passage as far as the Inner Leads, and might now be returning to the Baltic.

8. The third possible move carried the greater menace to our interests and dispositions were therefore made to meet it. These dispositions also gave a reasonable possibility of interfering, before it was too late, with any attempted landing in Iceland.

(a) SUFFOLK was sailed to join the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, in the Denmark Strait.

#### Admiralty footnotes:—

\* A.S.V.—radar equipment in aircraft.

† At the request of the Admiralty, Coastal Command carried out the more southerly air patrols at this time and there were insufficient A.S.V. aircraft left to fly any further patrols.

(b) ARETHUSA was sailed to join MANCHESTER and BIRMINGHAM in the Iceland-Faeroes passage. These ships were disposed by MANCHESTER in equal areas between 61° N. 10° 30' W., and 64° N. 15° W. Five trawlers were on their normal patrol west of these areas.

(c) The Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron, with his force then on passage to Hvalfjord, was instructed to cover the patrols in the Denmark Strait and the Iceland-Faeroes passage, operating north of 62° N.

(d) KING GEORGE V, VICTORIOUS, GALATEA, AURORA, KENYA, HERMIONE and seven destroyers sailed from Scapa at 2245 to cover the passages, operating south of 62° N. LANCE (Lieutenant-Commander Ralph W. F. Northcott) was compelled to return to Scapa with boiler trouble, but REPULSE and three destroyers of the Western Approaches Command joined north-west of the Butt of Lewis on the forenoon of 23rd May. I had intended to detach two cruisers to patrol the Faeroes-Shetlands passage, but I finally decided to keep all four in company with me.

(e) Air reconnaissance of all the passages between Greenland and the Orkneys and of the Norwegian coast was asked for, as well as reconnaissance of forces approaching Iceland. An additional air patrol line about 260 miles west of the Iceland-Faeroes passage was also established by the Admiral Commanding Western Approaches.

9. It was desirable that the cruiser patrols in the passages, and the heavy ships as well, should be as nearly complete with fuel as possible when the BISMARCK was located. The problem involved in ensuring this, during the long period between her location at Bergen and the report of her departure, was not an easy one. If the BISMARCK had chosen the Iceland-Faeroes passage, the cruisers which were sent to refuel at Skaalefjord would only just have been in time to intercept her when they resumed their patrol. The force in company with me was likewise sailed at the latest possible moment, for it was obvious that fuel would become a vital factor before the operation was completed.

10. The battlefleet proceeded to the north-westward until reaching latitude 60° N., far enough north to be in a position to deal with an attack on Iceland or a possible break back, and then steered west. There had been an interval of 29 hours between the time the enemy was last seen at Bergen and the time they were found to have left, so no accurate estimation of their "furthest on" position could be made; but the time of their first sighting by SUFFOLK showed later that they must have sailed on the evening of 21st May, soon after they had been photographed at Bergen and long before their departure was discovered.

#### *First Sighting.*

11. The air patrols arranged for 23rd May were seriously depleted by weather conditions. Two sorties were carried out in the Iceland-Faeroes gap, the more westerly one backing it up was maintained only from 1300 to 1700, while the Denmark Strait patrol did not fly at all, though I did not learn of this until later.

12. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, had issued the following signalled instructions to NORFOLK and SUFFOLK:—

"SUFFOLK is to patrol within R.D.F.\* distance of the ice-edge on line running north-east and south-west. Southern end of 3 hour beat to be on line 310° from Staalbiorg Huk. The time at southern end to be at 2200 and every 6 hours thereafter. When clear inshore NORFOLK will patrol about 15 miles abeam of you. When thick inshore NORFOLK will patrol to cover inshore passage. NORFOLK will make contact with you at 1300B/24th May in position 66° 45' N. 26° W. to check position. Investigate ice up to minefield on parting company to-day Friday."

13. On the afternoon of 23rd May the atmospheric conditions in the Denmark Strait were unusual, being clear over and close to the ice, and misty between the ice and the land. SUFFOLK took advantage of this to move further to the eastward across the top of the minefield than would otherwise have been prudent and kept close to the edge of the mist so as to have cover handy if the BISMARCK were sighted at close range. NORFOLK patrolled 15 miles on the beam of SUFFOLK's patrol.

14. Shortly after turning back to the south-westward on completing her investigation of the ice-edge, SUFFOLK at 1922 sighted the BISMARCK, followed by the PRINZ EUGEN, 7 miles on the starboard quarter, steaming the same course as herself. SUFFOLK made an enemy report, increased to full speed and altered to 150° to take cover in the mist and to make for the gap in the minefield if unable to round its northern edge. She was able, however, to keep under cover and to follow the BISMARCK round the minefield, maintaining touch by R.D.F. Her alert look-out and the intelligent use made of the peculiar weather conditions enabled SUFFOLK, after this short range sighting, to avoid being engaged. At 2028 she sighted the enemy again, reported them and once more retired into the mist. At the same time, NORFOLK, who had meanwhile been closing, also made contact, this time at a range of 6 miles. The BISMARCK opened fire, but NORFOLK retired safely under a smoke screen, though some salvos fell close enough to throw splinters on board.

15. This report from NORFOLK (2032/23rd May) was the first intimation that I received of the enemy being sighted, as none of SUFFOLK's reports up to date had been received in the battlefleet. The two cruisers proceeded to shadow with great skill in very difficult conditions. There were rain storms, snow storms, ice floes and mirage effects, which occasionally deceived SUFFOLK into thinking that the enemy had closed to very short range. SUFFOLK took up a position on the starboard quarter of the enemy within R.D.F. range of the edge of the ice, to ensure that the enemy could not turn back unseen between her and the ice; NORFOLK on the port quarter covered any possible turn to the southward. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, reports that a third, smaller, ship was thought

*Admiralty footnote:—*

\* R.D.F.—radar.

to be present; but SUFFOLK never saw this ship and in view of her position it is considered that its presence is not established. It is curious, however, that PRINCE OF WALES also obtained 3 echoes soon after meeting the enemy. It is possible that two separate R.D.F. echoes were being received from the BISMARCK. Aircraft from Iceland were also sent to shadow, and one made a report of enemy's course and speed to NORFOLK.

#### *Battle Cruiser Force.*

16. HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES and their screen were meanwhile closing at high speed. They arrived in the vicinity of the enemy sooner than I had expected. At 0205 the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron turned to a course nearly parallel to that of the enemy to wait for the relative positions to become clear and for daylight. The opposing forces were in close proximity at this time, and it is possible that the ship sighted by NORFOLK at 0229 was the PRINCE OF WALES. During the rest of the night PRINCE OF WALES obtained frequent D/F\* bearings of NORFOLK and SUFFOLK and passed them in to the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron. At 0340 HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES increased to 28 knots and altered in to make contact.

17. It was the intention of the Vice-Admiral Commanding, Battle Cruiser Squadron, that HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES should engage the BISMARCK, leaving the PRINZ EUGEN to the cruisers, but the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, was not aware that the battle-cruiser force was so near; NORFOLK and SUFFOLK, therefore, shadowing from the eastward and northward respectively at a range of about 15 miles, were not in a position to engage the PRINZ EUGEN who was now stationed ahead of the BISMARCK on a course of 240°.

18. HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES sighted the enemy at 0535 from a direction just before his beam and came into action at 0553 steering to close the range as fast as possible. All three ships opened fire practically simultaneously at a range of about 25,000 yards. The shooting of both the HOOD and the BISMARCK was excellent from the start and both scored hits almost at once. The BISMARCK's second or third salvo started a fire in HOOD in the vicinity of the port after 4-inch mounting. This fire spread rapidly and, at 0600, just after the ships had turned together to open 'A' arcs,† HOOD was straddled again: there was a huge explosion between the after funnel and the mainmast and the ship sank in 3 or 4 minutes. She had fired only 5 or 6 salvos. The loss by one unlucky hit of this famous ship with Vice-Admiral Lancelot Ernest Holland, C.B., Captain Ralph Kerr, C.B.E., and her fine company, was a grievous blow.

19. PRINCE OF WALES had started off well for so new and unpractised a ship and had straddled with her sixth salvo. She had been engaging the BISMARCK, while herself being engaged by the PRINZ EUGEN. After

emptying her aircraft in preparation for a night encounter, she had been unable to refuel it in time to fly off before contact was made. It was just about to be catapulted when it was hit by splinters, and had to be jettisoned. As soon as HOOD had been disposed of, the BISMARCK shifted her main and secondary armament fire quickly and accurately on to the PRINCE OF WALES. The range was now about 18,000 yards and PRINCE OF WALES' starboard 5.25-inch battery had also come into action. Within a very few minutes she was hit by four 15-inch and three smaller, probably 8-inch shells; her compass platform was damaged and most of the people on it killed or wounded; both forward H.A. Directors and the starboard after one were out of action; one four-gunned turret had jammed and the ship was holed underwater aft. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, reports that PRINCE OF WALES' salvos were now falling short and had a very large spread. The Commanding Officer considered it expedient temporarily to break off the action and, at 0613, turned away under smoke. The range on ceasing fire was 14,600 yards.

20. SUFFOLK reported that the BISMARCK had suffered three hits, but neither the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, nor PRINCE OF WALES had been able to observe any hits for certain, though black smoke had been seen at times. Her fire at any rate was still very accurate. (It is now known that she did probably suffer three hits, one of which caused her to leave an oil track and may have had a considerable effect on her endurance.)

21. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, ordered the destroyers in the area to search for survivors of the HOOD and told PRINCE OF WALES to remain in company with him and maintain her best speed. By 0720 she had cleared away most of the debris on the bridge, and resumed conning from the compass platform; two guns of 'Y' turret were again in action and her best speed had been reported as 27 knots.

#### *Decision to Break Off the Action.*

22. The Commanding Officer of the PRINCE OF WALES in his report says:—

"Some explanation remains to be made as to my decision to break off the engagement after the sinking of H.M.S. HOOD—a decision which clearly invites most critical examination. Prior to the disaster to HOOD I felt confident that together we could deal adequately with the BISMARCK and her consort. The sinking of the HOOD obviously changed the immediate situation, and there were three further considerations requiring to be weighed up, of which the first two had been in my mind before action was joined, namely:—

(a) The practical certainty that owing to mechanical 'teething troubles' a full output from the main armament was not to be expected.

(b) The working up of the ship after commissioning had only just reached a stage where I had felt able to report to the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, that I considered her reasonably fit to take part in service operations. This was the first

#### *Admiralty footnotes:—*

\* D/F—direction finding.

† 'A' arcs are the arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, thus allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.

occasion on which she had done so. From the gunnery point of view the personnel was immensely keen and well drilled, but inexperienced.

(c) The likelihood of a decisive concentration being effected at a later stage.

In all the circumstances I did not consider it sound tactics to continue single-handed the engagement with two German ships, both of whom might be expected to be at the peak of their efficiency. Accordingly I turned away and broke off the action pending a more favourable opportunity."

23. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, in his report says:—

"At 1545 Admiralty signal 1445\* had been received. At that time I had no evidence that the enemy's speed was in any way reduced by damage and I did not consider it likely that he would fight or that we could catch him, as his policy was obviously evasion.

The question whether I should re-engage with PRINCE OF WALES had been exercising my mind for some time before the receipt of this signal. The factors to be considered were as follows:—In the first place, the state of efficiency of PRINCE OF WALES. I had seen her forced out of action after 10 minutes' engagement, at the end of which her salvos were falling short and had a very large spread indeed. As a result of the action she was short of one gun and her bridge was wrecked. She was a brand new ship, with new turrets in which mechanical breakdowns had occurred and were to be expected, apart from damage, and she had had a bare minimum period for working up. I had been unable to observe for certain any hits on the BISMARCK and her shooting had given striking proof of its efficiency. To put it in a nutshell, I did not and do not consider that in her then state of efficiency the PRINCE OF WALES was a match for the BISMARCK.

This, however, was in no way a deciding factor. My object was the destruction of the BISMARCK and I knew that other forces were on the way to intercept her. I had therefore two broad alternatives, one to ensure that she was intercepted by the Commander-in-Chief, the other to attempt her destruction with my own force.

This second alternative involved my being able to bring her to action and this required an excess of speed. I had no evidence that, with PRINCE OF WALES reduced to 27 knots, I possessed it. If, however, the attempt had shown that we could overtake her I would have had to engage with the whole force and press the action to a range at which the 8-inch cruisers' fire would be effective—and could be spotted—namely 20,000 yards or less.

In view of the relative efficiency of the two heavy ships I was of the opinion that such an

action would almost certainly result as follows. A gradual reduction of PRINCE OF WALES' gunfire due to material failures and damage, in return for which the BISMARCK would receive some damage. That such damage, though it would affect her fighting efficiency, would also have any large effect on her speed I considered improbable, as in a modern well-protected ship the most that could be expected would be some loss of draught due to damaged funnels or fans, or waterline damage forward or aft.

At the range to which the action must be pressed the cruisers might well be left to bear the brunt of the BISMARCK's and PRINZ EUGEN's fire and suffer a reduction of speed due to hits in their large and unprotected machinery spaces or waterline. I should then have a damaged PRINCE OF WALES, and possibly damaged cruisers, with which to try and maintain touch with a BISMARCK damaged but still capable of a high speed.

The alternative was to ensure her interception by the Commander-in-Chief. This I felt I had good reason for thinking I could achieve. At this time I was expecting the Commander-in-Chief to be able to make contact about 0100† on the 25th—before dark—and I saw no reason why our success so far in keeping touch should not continue. Even if we had to wait till next day for the Commander-in-Chief, the conditions of darkness were no more difficult than those of low visibility with which we had been able to deal by the use of R.D.F. and it would only be dark from 0200 to 0500."

(†This was due to a miscalculation. The earliest the Commander-in-Chief could arrive, even if he forecast exactly the enemy's movements, was between 0600 and 0700/25th May.)

"The decision was not an easy one. I appreciated that my force was superior in number and the weight of the moral factors involved. I could not feel, however, that PRINCE OF WALES in her then state of efficiency was worth her face value or that my extra cruiser would counterbalance her weakness. But for the probability of a T/B\* attack from VICTORIOUS and interception by the Commander-in-Chief the situation would have been fundamentally different, and any other course but to re-engage could not have been considered.

As it was, however, the alternatives could be summed up as follows:—

(i) To engage with my whole force; this had possibilities varying from the highly problematical result of the destruction of the enemy, through the gamut of a long stern chase at high speed which would make interception by the Commander-in-Chief impossible, to that of being driven off with loss of speed and inability to keep touch.

(ii) Against this was the alternative of continuing to keep touch, with the possibility that we might fail to do so, though with PRINCE OF WALES in support I had no fear of being driven off.

Weighing these alternatives, I chose the latter. This did not preclude the possibility of attacking the enemy, but in so doing my object must be to ensure interception rather

#### *Admiralty footnote—*

\* Admiralty signal 1445/24 asked the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, to state—

(i) the remaining percentage of the BISMARCK's fighting efficiency;

(ii) what ammunition she had expended;

(iii) the reasons for her frequent alterations of course;

(iv) his intention as regards the PRINCE OF WALES re-engaging.

#### *Admiralty footnote:—*

\* T/B—Torpedo/Bomber aircraft.

than attempt his destruction, and on this policy I acted.

Their Lordships' signal had enquired my "intentions" as regards re-engaging with PRINCE OF WALES. I was careful in my reply to state my "opinions" and not my intentions, and I was grateful that They left the matter to my judgment."

24. After full consideration of the facts, I am of the opinion that this decision was justified and correct. Some of the factors affecting it require emphasis. The PRINCE OF WALES, with many of the contractor's workmen still on board, had joined the Fleet on 25th March. It was not till 27th April that the last of her turrets could be accepted from the contractors and that practice drills with the whole main armament could be started. Captain Leach had been able to report on 17th May, shortly before the Fleet sailed for this operation, that he considered his ship fit to operate; but neither he nor I interpreted that report as implying that she was fully worked up. Her turrets, of a new and untried model, were known to be liable to teething troubles and could already be seen to be suffering them. The effects of all this on her gunnery had been witnessed by the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, and he knew, in addition, that her bridge was seriously damaged, that she had taken in 400 tons of water aft and could not exceed 27 knots. The BISMARCK and PRINZ EUGEN, on the other hand, after working up for many months under ideal conditions in the Baltic, had given evidence of a very high degree of efficiency: the BISMARCK had been hit, but the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, could see no sign of damage.

25. In these circumstances, the senior officer on the spot was clearly justified in his conclusion that he was more likely to achieve his object of ensuring the enemy's destruction by keeping touch until the approaching reinforcements should arrive. If these powerful reinforcements had not been in the vicinity, the problem would, of course, have been a different one.

26. At 1445 the Admiralty asked the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, to report on the percentage fighting efficiency of the BISMARCK and requested his intentions as regards PRINCE OF WALES re-engaging. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, replied that the BISMARCK's efficiency was uncertain but high, and that he considered that PRINCE OF WALES "should not re-engage until other heavy ships are in contact unless interception fails. Doubtful if she has speed to force action." From his reply I assumed that the Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron, would not force action unless the situation changed materially, or instructions were received either from the Admiralty or myself. I had complete confidence in Rear-Admiral Wake-Walker's judgment, nor did I wish the enemy to be forced away to the westward.

#### *Shadowing during Daylight on 24th May.*

27. After the action had been broken off, the three ships continued to shadow. The enemy proceeded on a south-westerly course, with minor alterations, until 1240. They tried hard, by frequent alterations of course and

speed, to throw off the shadowers; and the rapid variations of visibility, between two and seventeen miles, were of great assistance to them; but their efforts were without success. SUFFOLK, using her R.D.F. in a masterly manner to overcome the difficulties of varying visibility, shadowed from the starboard quarter to cover any attempt to break back along the ice; NORFOLK, with PRINCE OF WALES in company, kept out on the port quarter to ensure the detection of any alteration to the southward. About 1240 the enemy seem to have abandoned hope of evasion by daylight, for they turned south, presumably to gain sea-room for another attempt by night, and reduced to 24 knots.

#### *Movements of the Battlefleet.*

28. At the time the first report of the sighting of the enemy was received by me, KING GEORGE V, with REPULSE, VICTORIOUS, GALATEA, AURORA, KENYA, HERMIONE and nine destroyers in company, was in approximate position 60° 20' N. 13° W. I had always thought the enemy, when breaking out, might have long distance aircraft reconnoitring ahead of them, to give warning of any of our forces in a position to intercept; if either or both of our capital ship forces were reported, the enemy might turn back through the Denmark Strait or shape course and speed to avoid contact. I therefore altered course to 280° and increased to 27 knots with the idea of reaching a position from which I could intercept the enemy to the eastward of the Denmark Strait, and at the same time be able to reinforce HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES if they were able to bring him to action and reduce his speed, or force him in my direction. As more information was received, it became clear that the enemy intended to continue his attempt to break out; though there was still the chance that he would turn back when he encountered HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES or, if HOOD and PRINCE OF WALES were to the westward of him when contact was made, he might endeavour to break to the south or south-eastward.

29. The sinking of the HOOD and the damage to PRINCE OF WALES made it unlikely that the enemy would be forced to turn back, and the best hope lay in interception by my force, though this would not become possible unless he reduced his speed. Course was altered accordingly to 260°, and later to 240°. Reports suggested that the enemy was keeping a few miles off the edge of the ice, possibly in the hope of finding thick weather. From my point of view the greatest danger lay in his hugging the coast of Greenland, and then making his way to the westward, where I suspected he might have an oiler: for, if he could refuel, he would be able to use higher speeds than KING GEORGE V could maintain and so get away.

30. The enemy's alteration to the southward and his reduction of speed were a great relief, although there seemed a good chance that he was leading our forces into a concentration of U-boats. It suggested that he did not know of my force and it made interception possible.

31. There was still a grave risk of his getting away by sheer speed, and though I knew the lack of experience of the crews of the aircraft in VICTORIOUS and of VICTORIOUS's own



officers and ship's company, I decided I must call upon their aid in an endeavour to reduce the BISMARCK's speed and to ensure my being able to bring her to action with KING GEORGE V and REPULSE—a call they responded to with such splendid gallantry and success.

32. I therefore detached the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, at 1509 with VICTORIOUS and the four cruisers with instructions to steer the best course to get within 100 miles of the enemy and deliver a T/B attack. Though VICTORIOUS would be of great value in company with me the next morning to locate the enemy if they escaped during the night, a reduction of speed was the more important object and could only be achieved by detaching her at this stage.

33. KING GEORGE V and REPULSE steered an intercepting course with the object of bringing the enemy to action soon after sunrise with the sun low behind us. The situation at this time was as follows:—

(a) The enemy appeared to have settled down to a course of 180° at about 22-24 knots. They were, for no apparent reason, zig-zagging. They were shadowed by SUFFOLK from astern and by PRINCE OF WALES and NORFOLK from the port quarter. The BISMARCK had suffered some damage but retained her fighting efficiency, though an aircraft had reported that she was leaving an oil wake. Their reduced speed was probably dictated by the need for economy of fuel and to afford an opportunity of breaking contact by an increase of speed after dark. PRINCE OF WALES had two guns out of action and considerable damage to her bridge.

(b) KING GEORGE V and REPULSE were closing from the eastward and would, if the enemy held their course, make contact about 0830, half an hour after sunrise. REPULSE was short of fuel, but had just enough to fight a short action and then reach Newfoundland. By midnight all destroyers had left for Reykjavik to fuel.

(c) RODNEY (Captain Frederick H. G. Dalrymple-Hamilton), with three destroyers, was approaching from the south-eastward and would join about 1000.

(d) RAMILLIES (Captain Arthur D. Read) was approaching from the south, steering to get to the westward of the enemy, and would make contact about 1100.

#### *Attack by Aircraft of VICTORIOUS.*

34. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, with his force proceeded at 28 knots on the course which would bring him soonest within 100 miles. He hoped to get near enough to launch the attack by 2100, but a short engagement with PRINCE OF WALES caused the enemy to make ground to the westward; and, it became apparent that VICTORIOUS could not be within 100 miles of them before 2300. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, therefore ordered the striking force to be flown off at 2200, some 120 miles from the objective.

35. VICTORIOUS had only just commissioned. She was about to carry a large consignment of crated Hurricanes to Gibraltar, there

to be assembled and flown to Malta, when she was put under my command for this operation. The only operational aircraft she had on board were, nine Swordfish of 825 and six Fulmars of 802 Squadron. She had only had a week to work up and the Fulmar crews were far from fully trained. The Commanding Officer had decided that nothing less than the whole of 825 Squadron could be expected to produce any result in a torpedo attack. He realised that the Fulmars were far from ideal for shadowing, but decided to use them to maintain touch, in the hope of being able to launch another torpedo attack in the morning.

36. The nine Swordfish were flown off at 2210, followed at 2300 by three Fulmars and at 0100 by two more as reliefs. The weather was showery with squalls; wind north-westerly fresh; visibility good except during showers. Sunset was at 0052.

37. 825 Squadron, by very good navigation and with the assistance of the A.S.V. located the BISMARCK at 2330 and altered to the southward with the object of making their attack from ahead. The cloud was increasing and they lost touch, but after circling round for some time located NORFOLK and PRINCE OF WALES and were re-directed by the former. A few minutes later the A.S.V. gear again indicated a ship and the squadron broke cloud to deliver their attack, only to find themselves over a United States coastguard cutter. The BISMARCK was six miles away and, observing this incident, opened H.A. barrage fire, keeping it up throughout the attack. Eight aircraft got in their attacks, the ninth losing touch in a cloud layer and failing to find the target. At least one hit was obtained.

38. This attack, by a squadron so lately embarked in a new carrier in unfavourable weather conditions, was magnificently carried out and reflects the greatest credit on all concerned. There can be little doubt that the hit was largely responsible for the BISMARCK being finally brought to action and sunk.\* The value of A.S.V. was once more demonstrated; without it, it is doubtful whether any attack would have been possible.

39. The Fulmars, whose object was to shadow and to distract the enemy, were less successful. Only one of each group made contact and these did not succeed in holding the enemy for long. The crews were inexperienced, some of the observers finding themselves in a two-seater aircraft for the first time, with a wireless set tuned only on deck and no homing beacon. Night shadowing is a task which tries the most experienced of crews and it is not surprising in these difficult conditions that they failed to achieve it. The utmost gallantry was shown by the crews of these aircraft in their attempt. Two of the Fulmars failed to return, but the crew of one was rescued later by a merchant vessel.

#### *Admiralty footnote:—*

\* It is now known that the hit received in the action with the HOOD about 0600 on May 24th and the resulting loss of oil fuel caused Admiral Lutjens to decide at 0800/24 to make for the French coast. The torpedo hit by the VICTORIOUS at 0015/25 no doubt confirmed him in this decision. The immediate and principal cause however of the BISMARCK being brought to action was the hit at 2105/26th May by the aircraft of the ARK ROYAL, which demolished her rudder and left her out of control.

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 regrettably 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.



48. The enemy's courses west of south were being covered by SUFFOLK and, to a lesser extent, by NORFOLK and PRINCE OF WALES. KING GEORGE V worked across to the south-westward to cover a southerly course, allowing for an increase of speed by the enemy. Consideration was given to flying off the Walrus from KING GEORGE V to search the perimeter astern of the ship and so cover a south-easterly course of the enemy; but the swell was such that the sacrifice of the aircraft would almost certainly result, and I did not wish to expose KING GEORGE V to U-boat attack whilst picking up the crew. Subsequent analysis shows that such a search might possibly have located the BISMARCK.

49. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, was ordered by signal to organise an air and surface search, with VICTORIOUS and his four cruisers, north-west of the last known position of the enemy. When I issued these instructions, I estimated that the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, and VICTORIOUS were well to the northward of this position; but in point of fact he had been steaming south at high speed and was now close to it. It is probable therefore that the air search carried out did not extend as far as the circle on which the enemy now was and would not have found them even if the aircraft had searched to the eastward, as the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron, and the Commanding Officer of VICTORIOUS had originally intended.

50. This completed the immediate search, leaving a sector between north and south-east unwatched. The search was backed up to a certain extent by the ships which had been detached by the Admiralty from various other duties and which were approaching the scene. RODNEY recovered her screen, which had earlier been forced by bad weather to drop astern, and took up an extremely well-chosen position on the route for the Bay of Biscay. RAMILLIES patrolled to the southward of KING GEORGE V and PRINCE OF WALES. EDINBURGH (flying the flag of Commodore Charles M. Blackman, D.S.O., Commodore Commanding, Eighteenth Cruiser Squadron), who had been patrolling off the Bay of Biscay and had been sent by the Admiralty to act as relief shadower, was near the track for Gibraltar. In addition, some degree of search was provided by REPULSE, whom I had been compelled to detach to Newfoundland for fuel, and by LONDON (Captain Reginald M. Servaes, C.B.E.), who had been instructed by the Admiralty to search for an enemy tanker believed to be in the area round 25° 30' N. 42° W. Force "H," some 1,300 miles to the south-eastward, had been instructed by the Admiralty to steer to intercept the BISMARCK from the southward.

51. The track of the BISMARCK as drawn on the attached strategical plot (see Plan 1) is probably reasonably accurate. It shows how narrowly she avoided contact with the various British forces during her run east. She started by crossing about 100 miles astern of KING GEORGE V at 0800 on 25th May and then passed about 50 miles from RODNEY and 45 miles from EDINBURGH. On the next day

she passed 85 miles under the stern of convoy W.S. 8B and 25-30 miles ahead of the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, who had parted company with this convoy. It is understood that the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, had disposed the convoy escort to the westward of the convoy in the hope that the BISMARCK would be deflected if she appeared steaming towards it.

52. At 1030 on 25th May, a series of D/F bearings was received from the Admiralty which indicated that the enemy was breaking back across the Atlantic. The signals appeared to come from the same ship which had transmitted several signals soon after the T/B attack of the night before; they could therefore reasonably be attributed to the BISMARCK. These bearings, as plotted in KING GEORGE V, showed a position too far to the northward, which gave the misleading impression that the enemy was making for the North Sea. I broadcast this position of the enemy and instructed all Home Fleet forces to search accordingly. PRINCE OF WALES had not yet joined, but the course of KING GEORGE V was altered to 055°, 27 knots, to make for the Iceland-Faeroes gap.

53. A position of the enemy transmitted by the Admiralty made it clear that the enemy was making for a French port and had a lead of about 100 miles. The accuracy of the information which was issued by the Admiralty throughout this stage of the operation and the speed with which it was passed out were beyond praise. The situation could be clearly envisaged by all the forces concerned and I was able to preserve wireless silence.

54. KING GEORGE V, RODNEY, NORFOLK, EDINBURGH and Force "H" all proceeded at their best speed towards the Bay of Biscay; and a sweep was flown in the evening by Coastal Command flying boats as far as longitude 30° W. When this failed to locate the enemy, two cross-over patrols by flying boats were arranged to start at 1000 on 26th May, across his probable track. In addition to these forces, COSSACK (Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla), with SIKH (Commander Graham H. Stokes), ZULU (Commander Harry R. Graham, D.S.O.), MAORI (Commander Harold T. Armstrong, D.S.C.), and the Polish Ship PIORUN (Commander E. Plawski) were detached by the Admiralty from convoy W.S. 8B early on 26th May and instructed to join and screen KING GEORGE V and RODNEY, to be joined by JUPITER (Lieutenant-Commander Norman V. J. T. Thew) from Londonderry; and DORSETSHIRE (Captain Benjamin C. S. Martin), on receipt of the first enemy report, reported that she intended to leave convoy S.L. 74, which she was escorting, and came up from the south-west to intercept and shadow.

#### *Other Dispositions.*

55. Meanwhile, those forces which could not reach the most probable track of the enemy were moving to cover alternative possible movements. MANCHESTER and BIRMINGHAM took up the Iceland-Faeroes patrol and ARETHUSA that of the Denmark Strait, with air patrols of all the northern passages to assist. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second

Cruiser Squadron, in GALATEA, with VICTORIOUS, KENYA, AURORA and HERMIONE in company, proceeded towards the Iceland-Faeroes passage, carrying out air searches on the way. The cruisers had not enough fuel left to escort VICTORIOUS to the Bay and she could not be allowed to proceed unescorted.

56. Two Swordfish aircraft were lost during air searches on 25th and 26th May; but the crew of one of them had a remarkable escape. The aircraft landed alongside a ship's lifeboat, unoccupied but complete with provisions and water, and the crew spent nine days in the boat before being picked up by a merchant vessel. One of the Fulmar crews was also rescued by a merchant vessel.

57. PRINCE OF WALES also proceeded towards Iceland; and destroyers were sent out to screen her and VICTORIOUS. SUFFOLK, after her search, was too short of fuel to steam at the high speed necessary to come up with the BISMARCK; considerable forces were better placed than she was for intercepting an enemy movement to the south-eastward and the Commanding Officer considered he would be better employed covering VICTORIOUS in the northern area, where there was nothing more powerful than a 6-inch cruiser. He therefore set course to the north-eastward until he was instructed, on 26th May, to proceed to an area in the Davis Strait south-west of Cape Farewell and search for enemy supply ships.

58. Two other precautions were taken by the Admiralty: the Flag Officer Commanding, North Atlantic, was instructed to arrange air and submarine patrols to prevent passage of the Straits of Gibraltar, NELSON being sailed from Freetown to reinforce; and LONDON was recalled from her search for a tanker and instructed to escort convoy S.L. 75, which was approaching the area west of the Bay of Biscay.

59. At 1100 on 25th May, when in position 41° 30' N. 17° 10' W., the Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H" (Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O.) in RENOWN (Captain Rhoderick R. McGrigor), with ARK ROYAL (Captain Loben E. H. Maund) and SHEFFIELD (Captain Charles A. A. Larcom) in company, was instructed by the Admiralty to act on the assumption that the enemy was proceeding to Brest. Course was set for a favourable initial position and a comprehensive scheme of air search, to cover all enemy speeds between 25 and 15 knots, was prepared for the following day.

60. No information had been received since 23rd May of the two German battlecruisers at Brest, so a security patrol was flown off in the morning to search to the west and northward in case one or both of these ships should be at sea in support of the BISMARCK. Ten Swordfish were flown off at 0835 on 26th May for the first search, whose western edge was next to the flying boat patrols arranged by the Admiralty. It had been hoped to thicken the search with Fulmars, but the weather conditions rendered this impracticable. The wind was from 320°, force 7,\* sea rough, sky overcast, visibility 10-12 miles; the round down of ARK ROYAL was

rising and falling 56 feet and the handling of aircraft on deck was extremely difficult. While the search was in progress Force "H" proceeded to reach a position to windward, so that the operation of aircraft would not be impeded by subsequent movements of the BISMARCK, if the latter were located.

#### *The BISMARCK Located.*

61. At 1030 on 26th May one of the Coastal Command flying boats on cross-over patrol sighted and reported the BISMARCK. The Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H", on receipt of this report, ordered ARK ROYAL to fly off two shadowing aircraft fitted with long range tanks to gain touch, as he feared that the flying boat's position might be inaccurate in view of the weather conditions and the distance from her base. (It was, in fact, about 35 miles in error.) Three-quarters of an hour after the first sighting, one of ARK ROYAL's searching aircraft also located the enemy, followed shortly by another. The flying boat reported at this time that her hull had been holed by shrapnel and soon after she lost touch. The reports of the aircraft from ARK ROYAL placed the enemy about 20 miles north of her correct position, but this error was due to the reference position passed out by the Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H", and was corrected later in the day.

62. The BISMARCK was shadowed continuously by aircraft from ARK ROYAL for the rest of the day and excellent reports were made. Particular credit is due to the crews of these aircraft whose part, though unspectacular and often forgotten, is as important and frequently as dangerous as that of the aircraft which attack with torpedoes. The Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H", manoeuvred his force throughout the day to maintain the weather gage for flying operations, to avoid loss of bearing on the BISMARCK and to keep within 50 miles of her to facilitate the launching of T/B attacks. He was instructed by the Admiralty that RENOWN was not to become engaged with the BISMARCK unless the latter was already heavily engaged by either KING GEORGE V or RODNEY.

63. The first report of the BISMARCK placed her about 130 miles south of me, steering a south-easterly course at 22 knots. It was evident that she had too great a lead for KING GEORGE V to come up with her unless her speed could be further reduced or she could be deflected from her course; our only hope lay in torpedo attacks by the aircraft of ARK ROYAL.

#### *Fuel.*

64. The shortage of fuel in the Home Fleet battleships was a matter of grave anxiety; KING GEORGE V had only 32 per cent. remaining, and RODNEY reported that she would have to part company at 0800 the next morning. When these ships joined company later in the day, they had to share an A/S screen of three destroyers (SOMALI (Captain Clifford Caslon), TARTAR (Commander Lionel P. Skipwith) and MASHONA (Commander William H. Selby)) and even these were due to leave that night for lack of fuel. There were known to be several U-boats in the area and it was safe to assume that every available destroyer and U-boat in the ports of Western

*Admiralty footnote:—*

\* Wind force 7—moderate gale, 27-33 m.p.h.

France would also be ordered to sea. The Admiralty had also warned me to expect heavy air attack. It was therefore essential to allow a sufficient reserve of fuel to enable the battle-ships to return to United Kingdom ports at a reasonably high speed. The loss of HOOD and the damage to PRINCE OF WALES had left KING GEORGE V as the only effective capital ship remaining in Home Waters. I was not prepared to expose her unscreened at low speed to almost certain attack by U-boats unless there was very good prospect of achieving a result commensurate with the risk. I therefore decided that unless the enemy's speed had been reduced, KING GEORGE V should return at 2400 on 26th May to refuel.

#### *First T/B Attack.*

65. The speed of KING GEORGE V was reduced to 22 knots at 1705 on 26th May to economise fuel and RODNEY, who had by then been overhauled, was formed astern. I had recommended the Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H," to remain with ARK ROYAL; he was maintaining his position on the beam of the BISMARCK and had detached SHEFFIELD to shadow. The visual signal ordering this latter movement was not repeated to ARK ROYAL, an omission which, as will be seen later, had serious consequences.

66. A striking force of 15 Swordfish, one of which had to return, was flown off at 1450; they were armed with Duplex pistols set to 30 feet instead of 34 feet, in consequence of the doubt which then existed in ARK ROYAL whether the enemy ship was the BISMARCK or the PRINZ EUGEN. The weather was particularly bad in the vicinity of the target and reliance was placed on the A.S.V. set carried in one of the aircraft; this aircraft located a ship at 1550, about 20 miles from the expected position of the enemy, and an attack through the cloud was ordered. The ship detected was SHEFFIELD, of whose presence near the BISMARCK the striking force was not aware, and eleven torpedoes were dropped at her. Two of the torpedoes exploded on hitting the water, and three more on crossing the wake, the remainder being successfully avoided by SHEFFIELD, who, with great forbearance, did not fire a single round in reply.

67. The flying boat was still shadowing, though her reports now differed widely in position from those of the aircraft of ARK ROYAL. Her signals were made on H/F\* and her position could not therefore be checked by D/F. She reported twice during the afternoon that she was being attacked by enemy aircraft, but these were probably shadowing Swordfish from ARK ROYAL.

#### *Second T/B Attack.*

68. A second striking force of 15 aircraft was launched at 1915. Owing to the limited number of serviceable aircraft, it had been necessary to re-arm and refuel most of those which had taken part in the first attack. In view of the apparent failures with Duplex pistols in the first attack, contact pistols were employed on this occasion. The striking force was ordered to make contact with SHEFFIELD before launching the attack and the latter was instructed to home the striking force by D/F.

*Admiralty footnote:—*

\* H/F—high frequency.

69. The aircraft approached SHEFFIELD below the clouds and then climbed to 6,000 feet to make their final approach. The weather in the vicinity of SHEFFIELD appeared to be ideal for a synchronised torpedo attack, but when the aircraft came near the BISMARCK, they found that she was under a cold front. A thick bank of cloud with base about 700 feet and top between 6,000 and 10,000 feet was encountered and the force became split up. The torpedo attacks had therefore to be made by sub-flights or pairs of aircraft over a long period in the face of intense and accurate fire; they were pressed home with a gallantry and determination which cannot be praised too highly. One aircraft, having lost touch with his sub-flight, returned to SHEFFIELD for a fresh range and bearing of the enemy and went in again by himself in the face of very heavy fire to score a hit on the port side of the BISMARCK. At least two hits were scored, one of which so damaged the BISMARCK's rudders that she was unable to keep off the wind, which providentially was from the north-west, for any length of time; a result which ARK ROYAL and her aircraft crews had well earned and which ensured my being able to bring the BISMARCK to action next morning.

70. When I received the first report that the BISMARCK had altered course to 340° I dared not hope that it was more than a temporary alteration to avoid a T/B attack; a further report four minutes later that she was steering 000° suggested, however, that her rudders had been damaged and that she had been forced up into the wind towards KING GEORGE V and RODNEY. I immediately turned towards our estimated position of the BISMARCK in an endeavour to make contact in time to engage her from the eastward in the failing light. But with frequent rain squalls and gathering darkness the light conditions became too unreliable, and with no certainty of the enemy's position or of that of our own forces, but with confirmation of the damage to the enemy and the knowledge that the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla was shadowing, I decided to haul off to the north-north-eastward and work round to engage from the westward at dawn.

71. The Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H," had informed me that no further T/B attacks were possible that evening and that he was preparing all remaining Swordfish for a strong attack at dawn. He was instructed to keep not less than 20 miles to the southward of the BISMARCK so as to be clear of my approach.

#### *Night Shadowing and Attack by Destroyers.*

72. SHEFFIELD made her last enemy report at 2140 on 26th May. At this time the BISMARCK turned and fired six accurate 15-inch salvos at her, at a range of nine miles. SHEFFIELD turned away at full speed and made smoke, but suffered a few casualties from splinters. The turn caused her to lose touch, but shortly afterwards she made contact with the Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla (Captain Philip L. Vian, D.S.O.), in COS-SACK, who with MAORI, ZULU, SIKH and the Polish destroyer PIORUN, was approaching the BISMARCK. The Captain (D), Fourth Destroyer Flotilla, as I knew he would, had decided to shadow and attack the BISMARCK,

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.

the sight of two battleships steering straight for them would shake the nerves of the range-takers and control officers, who had already had four anxious days and nights.

#### *The Approach.*

81. Between 0600 and 0700, D/F bearings of a series of reports by MAORI enabled the relative position of the enemy to be deduced with reasonable accuracy. The BISMARCK had settled down to a course of about 330°, at 10 knots. The horizon to the north-eastward was clear and the light good, but south of east were rain squalls and a poor background. The strong wind and heavy sea made it most undesirable to fight to windward. I decided to approach on a bearing of west-north-west and, if the enemy held his course, to deploy to the southward, engaging him on opposite course at a range of about 15,000 yards and subsequently as events might dictate. At 0737, when the enemy bore 120°, 21 miles, course was altered to 080° to close: RODNEY was stationed on a bearing of 010° and instructed not to close within six cables of me and to adjust her own bearing. NORFOLK was shadowing from the north-westward, ready to carry out flank marking for the battleships, and at 0820 she came in sight and provided me with a visual link. It had been necessary to alter course on the way in to avoid rain squalls and to allow for the reported alterations of course of the BISMARCK, but at 0843 she came in sight, bearing 118°, 25,000 yards, steering directly towards us, our course at this time being 110°.

#### *The Action.*

82. RODNEY opened fire at 0847, followed one minute later by KING GEORGE V and then by the BISMARCK. The BISMARCK had turned to starboard to open 'A' arcs, and directed her fire at RODNEY. This turn of the enemy made it look as if it would be better for us to deploy to the north-eastward, and I hoisted the signal to turn to 085°; the BISMARCK, however, almost immediately altered back to port, so the negative was hoisted and I indicated my intention to turn to 170°. RODNEY, who wished to open her 'A' arcs, had anticipated the hauling down of the first signal and started to alter course to port; KING GEORGE V also had altered 20° to starboard to open her distance from RODNEY; so that the ships were well separated, which was entirely in accordance with my wishes. The BISMARCK's fire was accurate at the start, though it soon began to fall off; she made continual alterations of course, but it is doubtful whether these were deliberate.

83. The range was now 20,000 yards and decreasing rapidly, the general trend of the enemy's course being directly towards us. Shortly after our turn to the southward, the BISMARCK shifted her fire to KING GEORGE V. By 0905 both KING GEORGE V and RODNEY had their secondary armaments in action. At this stage the effect of our gunfire was difficult to assess, as hits by armour piercing shell are not easily seen; but after half an hour of action the BISMARCK was on fire in several places and virtually out of control. Only one of her turrets remained in action and the fire of this and of her secondary armament was wild and erratic. But she was still steaming.

84. Some interference from our own funnel and cordite smoke had been experienced, and at 0917 the course of the battlefleet was altered towards the enemy and right round to north, RODNEY again anticipating the signal. When the turn had been completed, the lines of fire of KING GEORGE V and RODNEY were approximately at right angles; a heavy volume of fire could be produced without interference in spotting between the two ships. DORSETSHIRE had been firing intermittently since 0902 from the other side of the enemy, as had NORFOLK from her flank marking position.

85. In order to increase the rate of hitting, the battleships continued to close, the range eventually coming down to 3,300 yards. By 1015 the BISMARCK was a wreck, without a gun firing, on fire fore and aft and wallowing more heavily every moment. Men could be seen jumping overboard, preferring death by drowning in the stormy sea to the appalling effects of our fire. I was confident that the BISMARCK could never get back to harbour and that it was only a matter of hours before she would sink.

86. The shortage of oil fuel in KING GEORGE V and RODNEY had become acute. It was not merely a matter of having sufficient oil to reach one of our harbours: I had to consider the possibility of damage to fuel tanks by a near miss from a bomb or a hit by a torpedo; this might easily result in the ship being stopped in an area where U-boats were known to be concentrating, and where I had been warned to expect heavy air attack. Further gunfire would do little to hasten the BISMARCK's end. I therefore decided to break off the action with KING GEORGE V and RODNEY, and I instructed any ships still with torpedoes to use them on the BISMARCK. DORSETSHIRE anticipated my order and torpedoed the BISMARCK at close range on both sides: she sank at 1037 in position 48° 09' N. 16° 07' W. Although her sinking had been seen from the after Director Control Tower in KING GEORGE V, the fact did not become known to me until 1100 and I informed the Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H", that I could not sink the BISMARCK with gunfire: this signal (1045/27th May), which was perhaps unfortunately phrased, was addressed only to him and was intended to ensure that he should take any steps which might help to hasten her sinking: when intercepted by others, it may have caused some misunderstanding.

87. The BISMARCK had put up a most gallant fight against impossible odds, worthy of the old days of the Imperial German Navy, and she went down with her colours still flying. DORSETSHIRE picked up four officers, including the Third Gunnery Officer, and 75 ratings; MAORI picked up 24 ratings; but at 1140 DORSETSHIRE sighted a suspicious object, which might have been a U-boat, and ships were compelled to abandon the work of rescue. Some of the remaining survivors may have been rescued by the Spanish cruiser CANARIAS.

88. From the information available, it appears that the BISMARCK suffered three hits by gunfire on 24th May, one hit by aircraft torpedo on 25th May and two on 26th May, two hits by destroyer torpedoes early on

27th May, one by RODNEY's torpedo, and the subsequent heavy pounding by gunfire. At the end of this she was in a sinking condition, and the final torpedoes from DORSETSHIRE only hastened her end. A few casualties and slight damage from splinters were incurred in SHEFFIELD and the destroyers of the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla during the night of 26th/27th May; there were no casualties or damage to any of our ships during the subsequent day action.

89. In KING GEORGE V W/T transmission on power on certain wavelengths interfered with reception on R.D.F. For this reason I was unable during the action to keep the Admiralty fully informed of its progress, especially in view of the fact that I had been warned to expect heavy attack by enemy aircraft, and I did not wish to risk being fixed by D/F. The BISMARCK's sinking was reported as soon as it was known and a description of the engagement was deferred until it was practicable to transmit a long signal by wireless. This limitation applies in some degree to all ships and will have to be borne in mind in the future.

#### *Return of the Fleet.*

90. KING GEORGE V and RODNEY with COSSACK, SIKH and ZULU, proceeded to the northward, DORSETSHIRE and MAORI rejoined at 1230, and the screen was augmented by JUPITER during the afternoon. Nine further destroyers had joined by 1600 the following day. Several signals were received on 28th May, indicating that air attacks on the fleet were impending, but only four enemy aircraft appeared. One of these bombed the screen without effect, while another jettisoned its solitary bomb on being attacked by a Blenheim fighter. MASHONA and TARTAR, 100 miles to the southward, were heavily attacked, MASHONA being sunk at noon, with the loss of one officer and 45 ratings; TARTAR shot down one of the attacking aircraft. PIORUN underwent six attacks by aircraft on her way back to Plymouth; all were driven off by gunfire.

91. RODNEY, screened by MAORI, SIKH and COLUMBIA (Lieutenant-Commander Somerville W. Davis), was detached to the Clyde at 1700; DORSETSHIRE was detached to the Tyne at 2316; KING GEORGE V was delayed by fog, but eventually anchored in Loch Ewe at 1230 on 29th May. GALATEA (Rear-Admiral Commanding, Second Cruiser Squadron), AURORA and PRINCE OF WALES arrived at Hvalfjord on 27th May; EDINBURGH (Commodore Commanding, Eighteenth Cruiser Squadron) arrived at Londonderry on 28th May and NORFOLK (Rear-Admiral Commanding, First Cruiser Squadron) at the Clyde on 29th May; Force "H" returned to Gibraltar.

#### *Conduct of Officers and Men.*

92. Although it was no more than I expected, the co-operation, skill and understanding displayed by all forces during this prolonged chase gave me the utmost satisfaction. Flag and Commanding Officers of detached units invariably took the action I would have wished, before or without receiving instructions from me. The conduct of all officers and men of

the Fleet which I have the honour to command was in accordance with the traditions of the Service. Force "H" was handled with conspicuous skill throughout the operation by Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O., and contributed a vital share in its successful conclusion.

#### *Supply of Information and Disposition of Forces.*

93. The accuracy of the enemy information supplied by the Admiralty and the speed with which it was passed were remarkable, and the balance struck between information and instructions passed to the forces out of visual touch with me was ideal. The disposition of Force "H," RODNEY and the other forces placed at my disposal, completed my own dispositions and enabled me to avoid breaking W/T silence at a time when this was particularly important.

(Signed) JACK C. TOVEY,

*Admiral.*

*Commander-in-Chief,  
Home Fleet.*

H.M.S. RENOWN,

4th June, 1941.

#### *To: The Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet.*

The following report of the operations culminating in the destruction of the German battleship BISMARCK is forwarded in accordance with Admiralty message 0032 of 28th May, 1941.

#### *25th May.*

2. At 0330 on Sunday, 25th May, Force "H" was in position 39° 35' N. 14° 10' W., steering 310° at 24 knots. At this time instructions were received to steer to intercept BISMARCK from the southward. The enemy had last been located in position 56° 30' N. 36° 00' W. at 0306 when SUFFOLK lost touch. The existing course and speed was therefore maintained.

3. At 0400 instructions were received that destroyers should be sent back to Gibraltar before it became necessary to fuel them, as Force "H" might be required for extended operations. The three screening destroyers were therefore detached at 0900 with instructions to transmit two signals when 150 miles clear, one informing the Admiralty of the position, course and speed of Force "H" at 0730, and the other requesting Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, to keep me fully informed of the results of Brest reconnaissance.

4. At 1100, when in position 41° 30' N. 17° 10' W., orders were received for Force "H" to act on the assumption that the enemy had turned towards Brest at 0300/25. Course was therefore altered to 360°.

5. At 1215 Force "H" altered course to 345° to reach the initial position for an air search a.m./26 based on the assumption that the enemy's maximum speed of advance was not more than 25 knots. It was my intention to carry out, if necessary, three searches of the area across the Bay of Biscay allowing for the enemy making a substantial detour to the southward. The first search was designed to cover enemy speeds of 25 to 21 knots, the second 21



to 18 knots and the third 18 to 15 knots, Force "H" maintaining an intercepting position to the eastward throughout.

26th May.

6. During the night the north-westerly wind and sea increased, and speed had to be reduced to 23 knots at 2115, to 21 knots at 2340, to 19 knots at 0020 and finally to 17 knots at 0112.

7. In consequence of this reduction of speed, which the BISMARCK with a following sea would not have suffered, course was altered to 000° at 0300/26 to reach the best position for flying off the search.

8. The latest intelligence regarding the German battle-cruisers was contained in a reconnaissance report that they were still at Brest at 1515/23. This lack of information caused me some anxiety as I could not entirely discount the possibility that one or both battle-cruisers might have put to sea to support BISMARCK. With this possibility in view a security patrol was flown off at 0716 to search to the west and northward before assuming A/S duties.

9. It had been intended that the first search should cover the area bounded by 47° 30' N. 21° 30' W., 49° 00' N. 23° 40' W., 52° 25' N. 20° 00' W., 51° 40' N. 17° 00' W., but owing to the head seas experienced during the night the area for the search, measuring some 280 miles by 120 miles was transferred 35 miles to the south-east.

10. Ten Swordfish were flown off at 0835 from position 48° 26' N. 19° 13' W. Two cross-over patrols by Catalinas, arranged by the Admiralty, lay along the western edge of ARK ROYAL's reconnaissance. Weather conditions at this time were wind from 320° force 7, sea rough, sky overcast, visibility 10-12 miles. It had been hoped to increase the density of the search by the use of Fulmars, but weather conditions rendered this impracticable. ARK ROYAL's round down was rising and falling 56 feet at times, as measured by sextant. The handling of the aircraft on the flight deck was always difficult and several slid bodily across the deck which was wet with spray.

11. At 0930 the A/S patrol was landed on; no relief was flown off in order that every available aircraft should be available for a torpedo striking force. Whilst the search was in progress Force "H" proceeded at 15 knots on a course of 015° to reach a position to windward so that the operation of aircraft would not be impeded by subsequent alterations of course of the BISMARCK should the latter be located.

12. At 1030 a Catalina (Duty Z) made a report of "1 BS 240° 5 miles steering 150 from position KRG 3313". This report, received at 1050, placed the enemy 285° 112 miles from RENOWN. An amplifying report five minutes later gave the enemy's speed as 20 knots. I instructed ARK ROYAL to fly off two shadowers fitted with long range tanks to gain touch, as I feared the Catalina's position might be somewhat inaccurate in view of the weather conditions and the distance from her base. As the reconnaissance aircraft had already

reached the limit of their search I decided not to recall them by wireless, but informed ARK ROYAL that I would continue the present course and speed until they had returned when a full scale striking force was to be prepared.

13. At 1114 the Catalina reported that her hull had been holed by shrapnel and requested instructions. I asked ARK ROYAL how many aircraft would be required to ensure gaining contact; she replied 6 but proposed to fly off the two aircraft fitted with long range tanks at once to carry out a square search.

14. At this time (1125) the Catalina lost touch and I instructed ARK ROYAL to send at least 4 aircraft. Before these could be flown off one of ARK ROYAL's aircraft reported in touch (at 1114) but also reported the enemy as a cruiser and gave the position of the enemy as 77 miles to the west of Force "H". This was some 25 miles further to the eastward than the Catalina's report but was considered to be a more accurate position in view of the shorter time interval between departure and sighting. Seven minutes later a second aircraft of the reconnaissance gained touch and reported that the enemy was a battleship. The aircraft on track 305° was the first to sight followed by the aircraft on track 285°. There were five more aircraft to the northward of these two and three more to the southward. These aircraft were on their way back to the ARK ROYAL when touch was first gained. The long range shadowers were flown off at noon and the majority of the reconnaissance landed on. Force "H" was then manoeuvred to the south-east on a course 140° at 24 knots, my intention being to maintain the weather gage for flying operations, to avoid loss of bearing on BISMARCK, and to keep within about 50 miles of the enemy to facilitate the launching of T/B attacks. Should it be desirable for RENOWN to attack unsupported it was my intention to do so from up wind and astern with the object of causing him to turn and thus slow up his retreat, and also to enable full use to be made of smoke.

15. The two shadowers were relieved as necessary throughout the day. Touch was maintained continuously and excellent reports transmitted until the shadowers were finally recalled at 2230.

16. Orders were received from Admiralty at 1145 that RENOWN was not to become engaged with BISMARCK unless the latter was already heavily engaged by either KING GEORGE V or RODNEY.

17. The Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, reported his position at 1050 as 51° 37' N. 20° 42' W., closing the ship reported by the Catalina, and requested Admiralty confirmation that the report did not refer to RODNEY. This was confirmed by Admiralty.

18. At 1208 the Catalina reported 4 UN\* 050° 10 miles steering 140° from position KRG 4731. It was assumed that these were four of the five destroyers which had just parted from Convoy W.S.8B, and who were now some 50 miles W.N.W. of the BISMARCK.

Admiralty footnote—

\* UN—unknown vessel.

19. At 1201 the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, reported that his position at 1100 was 51° 33' N. 20° 43' W., course 150°, altering to 130° at 1155, speed 26 knots.

20. It was evident at this stage that unless aircraft from ARK ROYAL could reduce the enemy's speed he could not be overhauled by our battleships till well within range of bombing aircraft from the French coast the following day. It was also doubtful whether the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, would have sufficient fuel to enable him to continue the chase until the following day.

21. At 1315 I detached SHEFFIELD with orders to close and shadow the enemy, who was then some 40 miles south-west of RENOWN who was in position 49° 39' N. 18° 58' W. at 1330. The V/S\* signal ordering this movement was not repeated to ARK ROYAL, and as will be seen later this omission had serious consequences.

22. ARK ROYAL informed me that after the interrogation of observers who had sighted the enemy ship, considerable doubt arose, whether the ship was in fact BISMARCK or PRINZ EUGEN. In consequence the torpedoes of the striking force, which was then being ranged, were set to 30 feet instead of 34 as originally intended. The torpedoes were fitted with Duplex pistols. The striking force of 15 Swordfish took off at 1450 in position 49° 35' N. 18° 30' W. One aircraft had to return and made a successful emergency landing with the torpedo in place just after the last of the striking force had left the deck. It had been intended to carry out a synchronised diversion by Fulmars, but this had to be abandoned owing to sea and cloud conditions.

23. Weather and cloud conditions were particularly bad over the target area when the striking force took off. Reliance was therefore placed on the A.S.V. set carried in one of the aircraft of the striking force. This aircraft located a ship 20 miles from the position given to the leader on taking off. This ship was SHEFFIELD, of whose presence near BISMARCK the striking force were not aware. A situation report made to Admiralty at 1345 containing the information that SHEFFIELD had been detached to shadow had been received by ARK ROYAL, but had not been decoded before the striking force left.

24. At 1550 on reaching a position over the supposed target an attack through the cloud was ordered, and eleven torpedoes were dropped at SHEFFIELD. The latter increased to full speed and took successful avoiding action. Of the eleven torpedoes dropped, two were observed by SHEFFIELD to explode on hitting the water and three more exploded when crossing her wake. During this unfortunate incident it is satisfactory to record that not a single round was fired at the attacking aircraft by any gun in SHEFFIELD, where the mistake had been immediately appreciated.

25. At 1525 the Catalina reported having lost touch with the enemy in position 47° 30' N. 19° 00' W. Both this report and the preceding one at 1330 placed the enemy 60 miles south of the position reported by aircraft from ARK

ROYAL. It was assumed that the discrepancy was probably caused by navigational errors in the Catalina. The latter made infrequent reports and, as H/F was employed, could not be D/Fd. The need for frequent reports on a D/F-able wave was strongly felt throughout the operation.

26. At 1551, the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, reported his position, course and speed as 50° 18' N. 18° 45' W., 128°, 26 knots, and that RODNEY bore 100° eleven miles from him. This was the first definite information that had been received of RODNEY since her signal timed 0900/25. Course was altered to 140° at 1650 to maintain position on BISMARCK, who had been reported steering that course at 1340.

27. At 1632 the Catalina signalled that she was being attacked by enemy aircraft, type unknown. She had previously made this signal at 1345 but on each occasion the alarm was caused by the ARK ROYAL's shadowing Swordfish.

28. The striking force returned to ARK ROYAL at 1720. Owing to the motion on the ship the three aircraft who had realised that the target was friendly and who had not fired their torpedoes, were ordered to drop them before landing on. Meanwhile the relief shadowers had reported that the enemy ship was definitely BISMARCK.

29. On completion of landing on speed was increased to 29 knots to regain lost ground, and by reducing the distance from the enemy to assist the next striking force in gaining contact.

30. At 1747 SHEFFIELD gained touch with BISMARCK and made her first enemy report. Being in some doubt regarding the Commander-in-Chief's intentions, I requested his position, course and speed and asked whether he wished me to leave the carrier and join him. I added that should no reply be received I would remain with the carrier. A second striking force of 15 aircraft was prepared with all possible speed. Owing to the limited number of serviceable aircraft to provide this number, it was necessary to refuel and rearm most of the aircraft that had just returned.

31. At 1900 the Polish destroyer PIORUN was sighted 9 miles to the southward and the bearing and distance of the enemy passed to her. The latter portion of the signal, instructing destroyers to shadow and attack as opportunity offered, was not passed owing to visibility closing down. Having sighted PIORUN, it appeared evident that the four destroyers which had been reported by the Catalina at 1208 as 4 UN and had also been sighted by first striking force, were Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla in COSSACK, with ZULU, MAORI and SIKH in company. To assist these destroyers and the striking force in making contact, SHEFFIELD was ordered to make her call sign for D/F-ing purposes.

32. The second striking force took off at 1915 in position 48° 35' N. 16° 54' W., when the enemy bore 167°, 38 miles. In view of the failures with Duplex pistols in the preceding attack, contact pistols were employed on this occasion, torpedoes being set to run at 22 feet. The striking force had orders to make contact with SHEFFIELD before launching the attack,

Admiralty footnote —

\* V/S—visual signal.

both to ensure gaining contact with the enemy and to avoid any possibility of SHEFFIELD being mistaken for the target. SHEFFIELD was instructed to home the striking force by D/F.

33. The aircraft approached SHEFFIELD at 1955 below the clouds and then climbed to a height of 6,000 feet. The weather conditions at this time appeared to be ideal for a synchronised torpedo attack, cloud 7/10ths from 2,000 to 5,000 feet. During the climb contact was lost with SHEFFIELD but regained at 2035 when a bearing and distance (110° 12 miles) of BISMARCK was passed by SHEFFIELD by V/S. The force took departure for the target in sub flights in line astern at 2040. On nearing the enemy a thick bank of cloud with base about 700 feet and top between 6,000 and 10,000 feet was encountered and the force became split up. At 2047, when it was calculated that the enemy would be in a suitable position for an attack down wind from astern, No. 1 sub flight dived through the cloud, but on reaching the base the enemy was seen four miles down wind to the eastward. Position for an attack on the port beam was gained by approaching just in the clouds, and the final dive to attack was made at 2055. One aircraft from No. 3 sub flight followed closely and also attacked from the port beam. This aircraft observed a hit on BISMARCK about two-thirds of her length from forward. All four aircraft came under intense and accurate fire from the first moment of sighting until out of range.

34. No. 2 sub flight, having climbed to 9,000 feet in cloud, dived down on a bearing obtained by A.S.V. and two aircraft attacked from the starboard beam under intense fire. The third aircraft having lost touch with his sub flight in the clouds returned to SHEFFIELD for a range and bearing on the target. Having obtained this he pressed home a lone and determined attack from the port bow in face of very heavy opposition, and his crew saw the torpedo strike BISMARCK amidships port side.

35. No. 4 sub flight followed No. 3 sub flight into the cloud and became iced up at 6,600 feet. After seven minutes the aircraft dived and found a clear patch at 2,000 feet. BISMARCK was sighted almost at once engaging No. 2 sub flight to starboard. All four aircraft circled astern of the target and attacked simultaneously from port coming under heavy fire. One aircraft was hit many times and both pilot and air gunner were wounded, the observer being uninjured. 175 holes were counted in this aircraft which had to be written off as one of the longerons had been cut.

36. No. 5 sub flight of two aircraft lost contact with the remainder and with each other in the cloud. Having started to ice up at 7,000 feet they came down and when still in cloud at 3,500 feet one was engaged by A.A. fire. On coming out of the cloud this pilot saw the enemy ahead of him and down wind so retired into the cloud, being engaged continuously while gaining a more favourable position. He eventually came in low on the BISMARCK's starboard bow and dropped just outside 1,000 yards. The other aircraft of this sub flight made three attempts to come in but was so heavily engaged

on each appearance that he finally jettisoned his torpedo and returned to ARK ROYAL.

37. No. 6 sub flight followed into the cloud and when at 6,300 feet turned 40 degrees to port and climbed clear at 7,450 feet, waited for about 15 minutes and returned to SHEFFIELD for another range and bearing of the enemy. These two aircraft then searched at sea level and attacked on the starboard beam. Intense fire prevented close approach and one dropped at about 4,000 yards while the other returned to the carrier and jettisoned before landing on.

38. The striking force attack took much longer than had been anticipated (2055 to 2125) owing to bad weather conditions around BISMARCK who appeared to be under a cold front.

39. At 2040 a signal was received from Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, giving his position, course and speed at 1800 as 49° 48' N. 17° 33' W., 100°, 22 knots, with RODNEY in company. He also stated that unless the enemy's speed was reduced he would have to return in KING GEORGE V at midnight to refuel, leaving RODNEY to continue the chase. He recommended that RENOWN should remain with ARK ROYAL.

40. During and after the torpedo attack on BISMARCK shadowing aircraft reported frequent alterations of course and that she was making smoke. On receipt of these reports RENOWN and ARK ROYAL altered course as requisite to maintain a position some 40 miles distant from the enemy in order that flying operations could not be unexpectedly hampered. It appeared possible that BISMARCK was endeavouring to shake off shadows before dark; on the other hand she might have suffered damage to shafts or steering gear as a result of the torpedo attacks.

41. Owing to the time taken to deliver the T/B attack insufficient light remained to carry out another attack before dark. Aircraft could have flown off but in the failing light location of the target would have been difficult, friend might have been mistaken for foe and certainly many of the aircraft would have failed to regain the carrier. It was therefore decided to maintain shadowing aircraft as long as possible and concentrate on preparing all remaining Swordfish for a strong striking force at dawn.

42. Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, requested that aircraft might give the destroyers a visual link with the enemy and ARK ROYAL was instructed to comply. The two shadowing aircraft were ordered to remain in touch as long as possible and establish this link before returning. They left the BISMARCK at 2230 and, after making a detour in heavy rain, located the destroyers. By this time, however, they were not certain of their own position and were unable to assist the destroyers. These two aircraft were D/Fd back to ARK ROYAL, landing on at 2320 when it was practically dark.

43. At 2220 ARK ROYAL reported that one torpedo had definitely hit BISMARCK amidships, and Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, was informed accordingly at 2225. Later, information was received from ARK ROYAL that a second hit had most probably been obtained aft, and Commander-in-Chief was again informed at 2240.

44. SHEFFIELD made her last enemy report at 2140. At this time BISMARCK turned and fired six accurate 15-in. salvos at SHEFFIELD at a range of 9 miles. The latter turned away at full speed and made smoke but suffered a few casualties and superficial damage from splinters. These casualties consisted of 1 killed, 2 dangerously wounded who have since died, two seriously and six slightly wounded. All were ratings. After this SHEFFIELD lost touch but at 2142 sighted Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla, in COSSACK with 3 other destroyers closing the enemy and signalled the last observed bearing and distance of BISMARCK.

45. At 2251 ZULU made a contact and reported the enemy steering 110°. From this time onwards Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla and his destroyers maintained contact, reporting the enemy's course as 110°, 060°, 340° and finally by midnight 310° into the sea. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron in EDINBURGH was sighted to the westward at 2315.

46. Just before midnight a signal was received from Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, giving his position, course and speed at 2215 as 49° 10' N. 15° 29' W., 170°, 21 knots, with RODNEY in company. Shortly afterwards Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, reported his position, course and speed as 48° 32' N. 15° 22' W., 025°, 13 knots, that he had no fuel left for shadowing and was proceeding to Londonderry.

47. At 2345 I informed Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, of my position (48° 42' N. 15° 17' W.), that no further T/B attack was possible that evening and that I intended turning west for a short distance to keep clear of him. Shortly afterwards I received his intentions to engage from the westward at dawn and directions that RENOWN and ARK ROYAL were to keep not less than 20 miles to the southward of BISMARCK. Course and speed was adjusted during the night to comply.

27th May.

48. At 0036 ARK ROYAL reported that after being torpedoed, BISMARCK made two complete circles and reduced speed. I informed Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, accordingly at 0046.

49. It was evident the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, was in some doubt regarding the position of BISMARCK. I therefore reported to him at 0112 that the estimated bearing and distance of the enemy from me at 2345 was 165° 41 miles.

50. The situation at this time was as follows. RENOWN and ARK ROYAL some 40 miles to the northward of BISMARCK, working round to the west to reach a position to the southward; Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, proceeding southward to engage at dawn; and Rear-Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, working round to the north-east. DORSETSHIRE who had left S.L. 74 at 0930/26 in position 44° 08' N. 24° 50' W. was closing from the south-west. SHEFFIELD's position was not known exactly but assumed to be in vicinity of BISMARCK and to the westward of the latter.

51. At 0115 a flash was seen bearing 152°, followed four minutes later by heavy gun flashes. Course was altered to 210° to keep clear to the westward. During the middle watch the destroyers carried out attacks, and signals were received between 0202 and 0210 stating that ZULU, MAORI and COSSACK had attacked, the last two claiming one hit each. MAORI added that there was an extensive fire on the forecastle.

52. At 0210, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, reported his intention to keep to the northward and flank mark for KING GEORGE V and RODNEY. At 0301 DORSETSHIRE reported her position, course and speed which indicated she would cross some 10 to 15 miles ahead of RENOWN.

53. The destroyers were instructed by Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, that after all attacks were completed they were to fire starshell every half hour to indicate the position of the enemy, whose course and speed was now reported as 310°, 8 knots.

54. During the night Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, experienced difficulty in making destroyers transmit their call signs on M/F\* in order that D/F bearings could be obtained. Many D/F bearings obtained proved to be inaccurate and caused considerable doubt as to the exact position of the enemy.

55. At 0335 I informed Commander-in-Chief of my position and reported starshell had been seen bearing 100°, and that an aircraft would be flown off ARK ROYAL at 0500 to spot for KING GEORGE V.

56. At 0610 I ordered SHEFFIELD who had signalled her position at 0500 to obtain and pass a D/F bearing of MAORI who was in touch with the enemy. The third class bearing of 118° which she gave put BISMARCK further south than her previously estimated position.

57. At dawn visibility was low, and after consultation with ARK ROYAL I decided to delay flying off the striking force as there was a serious risk of mistaking friend for foe and I was in considerable doubt as to the position of KING GEORGE V and RODNEY. Having informed the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, that the striking force would arrive at 0715, I later informed him that the attack was postponed on account of low visibility, and later still that I had cancelled the attack on account of the difficulty of identifying our own ships in the existing visibility. I was satisfied that until the situation clarified it was undesirable to fly off the striking force.

58. While these signals were being passed the destroyers' reports of the position of the BISMARCK suggested she might be as much as 60 miles to the northward of RENOWN. Course was therefore altered to the northward, and at 0810 after ARK ROYAL had struck down her aircraft as it was impossible in existing weather conditions to keep them ranged, MAORI was sighted to the northward. MAORI reported the enemy as being 009° distant 11 miles from her and thereby only 17 miles from RENOWN. The latest estimate previous to this report placed BISMARCK 40 miles from

Admiralty footnote:—

\* M/F—medium frequency.

RENOWN. As contact was now definitely established course was altered to 180° to range the striking force and aircraft were flown off at 0926 in position 47° 16' N. 15° 51' W.

59. In the meantime the spotting aircraft which had been flown off at 0509 had become lost in rain, failed to establish contact by W/T with KING GEORGE V and eventually had to be D/Fd back.

60. After sighting MAORI I considered detaching ARK ROYAL to the southward to range the striking force, keeping RENOWN in the vicinity of MAORI ready to support KING GEORGE V and RODNEY as required. I decided however that the appearance of RENOWN on the scene before KING GEORGE V established contact was undesirable in view of the low visibility and furthermore it was imperative to afford ARK ROYAL the maximum degree of protection should KING GEORGE V fail to establish contact and thus leave the third striking force as the only means of dealing with BISMARCK.

61. Heavy gunfire was heard to the northward at 0855 but no report was received indicating what ship or ships were in action.

62. At 0940 SHEFFIELD appeared from the westward, and I ordered her to join ARK ROYAL on a course of 290° while RENOWN turned towards the scene of action to investigate. ARK ROYAL was instructed to fly off a spotting aircraft for RENOWN.

63. At 0952 a signal was intercepted from Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, ordering destroyers to close. Five minutes before this I had informed Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, that SHEFFIELD and ARK ROYAL had been detached, and that RENOWN was closing him from the southward; I also requested his position, course and speed.

64. The Commander-in-Chief's signal ordering the destroyers to close coupled with NORFOLK's signal that she had ceased flank marking and Rear-Admiral, Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron's signal ordering DORSETSHIRE to torpedo BISMARCK at close range, led me to suppose that the action was successfully concluded so in view of the Admiralty signal which had just been received indicating that a heavy scale of air attack was to be expected I decided to rejoin ARK ROYAL to afford A.A. protection. I informed Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, accordingly at 0953.

65. At 1025 as I still had no definite information I asked Commander-in-Chief if he had disposed of the enemy; he replied that she was still afloat, adding three minutes later that he could not get her to sink by gunfire. Shortly afterwards Commander-in-Chief also informed me that he had been forced to discontinue the action on account of fuel. I was about to order the T/B striking force to finish off the BISMARCK when DORSETSHIRE, who had been ordered by Rear-Admiral, Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron to torpedo the enemy at close range, reported at 1034 that the BISMARCK was sinking and at 1039 that she had been sunk.

66. The torpedo striking force from ARK ROYAL located the BISMARCK just in time to see the finish of the action. The enemy was

down in the water, on fire and silenced. DORSETSHIRE was seen to be in close proximity to BISMARCK and would have been endangered by a torpedo attack on the latter. The striking force therefore closed KING GEORGE V for instructions but could obtain no answer either by V/S or W/T. The striking force then returned to the vicinity of the BISMARCK and were in time to see DORSETSHIRE sink her with torpedoes from close range.

67. Meanwhile at 0955 an enemy aircraft had been sighted by RENOWN and engaged. About this time COSSACK and NORFOLK both reported that they were being bombed. SHEFFIELD'S R.D.F. was not efficient owing to damage from splinters when she had been engaged by BISMARCK. Enemy aircraft were sighted from time to time and engaged whenever they came out of the clouds. Weather conditions prevented the use of fighters. There appeared to be both Focke-Wolfes and Heinkels present.

68. The striking force returned about 1115 and were ordered to jettison their torpedoes before landing on as the motion of the ship was even greater than the previous day and to land on with torpedoes would have jeopardised the aircraft. Whilst landing on was in progress a Heinkel came out of the clouds and dropped a stick of two large and about five smaller bombs 600 yards astern and to port of ARK ROYAL. This was the last interference experienced by Force "H". Landing on was completed by 1152, and from then on the air appeared clear of enemy aircraft and course was shaped to the southward at 24 knots.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE,  
Vice Admiral.

Flag Officer Commanding.  
Force "H".

## APPENDIX.

### COASTAL COMMAND OPERATIONS IN CONNECTION WITH THE BISMARCK AND PRINZ EUGEN 21ST-27TH MAY, 1941.

#### May 21st.

At 1300 hours an aircraft of P.R.U. located and photographed one Bismarck class battleship and one Hipper class cruiser at anchor in small fiords near Bergen.

The weather deteriorated during the afternoon and evening but a strike of 6 Whitleys of No. 612 Squadron and 12 Hudsons of Nos. 220 and 269 Squadrons took off between 2150 and 2330 hours to attack. Owing to bad weather conditions only 2 Hudsons dropped bombs, and poor visibility prevented any results being observed.

#### May 22nd.

Aircraft patrolled off the Norwegian coast from first light but weather conditions by 1000 hours had forced all of them to return. Blenheims of No. 248 Squadron maintained meteorological sorties off the coast all day reporting the weather conditions, which became worse with 10/10 cloud down to sea level.

Sunderlands of No. 201 Squadron maintained a patrol up the meridian of 5° West between latitudes 6220 N and 6500 N from 0930, but had to return at 1100 on account of fog with nil visibility.

At 1930 a Fleet Air Arm Maryland succeeded in penetrating to the anchorages and found the billets empty and no sign of the vessels in Bergen roadstead.

#### *May 23rd.*

The Norwegian coast patrols could not take off owing to weather conditions. Sunderlands of No. 201 Squadron carried out a patrol between the Faeroes and Iceland from 0650-2000 and Hudsons of No. 220 Squadron patrolled between the Shetlands and Faeroes from 0400-1250, when they had to be recalled as the base was closing down. Catalinas of No. 210 Squadron, after a delayed start due to weather, patrolled to the south of Iceland from 1300-1650 when they also had to be recalled as the bases in United Kingdom were closing down. Iceland based aircraft should have patrolled the Denmark Strait but here again weather conditions of continuous rain, cloud 10/10 at 300 feet and visibility of 1,000 yards forced the abandonment of all flying. These conditions improved slightly towards the end of the day and, after the sighting of the enemy force by H.M. Ships SUFFOLK and NORFOLK at 1922 and 2028 respectively, it was found possible to get aircraft off at 2225 and 2320 to locate and shadow the enemy.

#### *May 24th.*

The Sunderland of No. 201 Squadron which had taken off from Reykjavik sent a first sighting report of the enemy at 0620 and followed this up with four subsequent amplifying signals, the last being at 0900. The action between the BISMARCK and H.M. Ships PRINCE OF WALES and HOOD was witnessed and bearing and distance of enemy signals given to H.M.S. NORFOLK. The Sunderland also signalled the position of survivors of H.M.S. HOOD at 1000 and the fact that BISMARCK was leaving a large trail of oil fuel.

The Hudson of No. 269 Squadron which had taken off at 2320 on the 23rd May did not locate the enemy, but another Hudson of the same Squadron did so and reported at 0554. This aircraft also witnessed the action in which H.M.S. HOOD was sunk, and continued shadowing until 0808. A third Hudson located and shadowed the enemy from 0905 till 1340.

A Catalina of No. 240 Squadron from Reykjavik contacted the enemy at 1432, shadowing until 1640. During this time frequent bearings and distances of the enemy were given to the two cruisers and the PRINCE OF WALES. Fire was opened on this aircraft by both enemy ships from time to time. Finally, a Catalina of No. 210 Squadron took off at 1612, but did not sight the enemy in worsening weather visibility although all three H.M. Ships were sighted at 2127 and a formation of F.A.A. aircraft at 0035 on the 25th. During the day 6 aircraft of No. 22 Squadron armed with torpedoes flew from Wick to Kaldadarnes in Iceland as a strike force, together with Catalina and Sunderland reinforcements.

#### *May 25th*

At 0306 hours contact with the enemy force was lost by the two shadowing cruisers and in order to assist re-location a long range sweep by Catalinas was organised. This sweep was designed to cover either a break back to Norway

or a course shaped by the enemy for French Biscay ports. The Catalinas took off at 1345 and did not land back until 1030 on 26th May. Some of our own surface forces were sighted but no positive enemy sighting was made, although one Catalina at 0120 on 26th May passed over the wake of a heavy ship which gave no answer to challenge or signals. The aircraft circled for an hour but in the darkness and low cloud at 500 feet it was impossible to establish any identity. The position, course and estimated speed of this unknown ship was signalled to base but fuel supply would not permit shadowing until dawn. As it was, this aircraft did not land back until 1203 on 26th May.

#### *May 26th*

As additional precautions to prevent a break back to Norway, Hudsons of No. 269 Squadron patrolled the Denmark Strait throughout the day in very bad weather conditions, a further sweep was carried out south of Iceland by two Sunderlands, one Catalina and one Hudson, and a continuous patrol was maintained between the Faeroes and Iceland by two Sunderlands.

To endeavour to prevent an unseen escape into a French Biscay port two patrols were placed athwart the estimated line of advance from the last sighted position of the enemy towards the Bay of Biscay. On the initiative of the A.O.C.-in-C., Coastal Command, the southern of these two patrols was somewhat to the south of the general appreciation as to the likely course steered by these two ships. A Catalina of No. 240 Squadron flew the northern patrol and a Catalina of No. 209 Squadron the southern patrol. Both were on patrol by 0930 hours.

At 1030 hours aircraft "Z" of No. 209 Squadron sighted the BISMARCK and sent a first-sighting report. An amplifying report was sent five minutes later while the aircraft was taking cover in cloud. At 1039 cloud cover was inadvertently broken almost over the BISMARCK, which immediately opened fire, and before cloud could be regained the aircraft was hit by shrapnel and holed in several places. The other Catalina was diverted to assist in the shadowing and made a sighting report at 1328. Meanwhile "Z" of No. 209 Squadron had lost touch in worsening visibility at 1045. Efforts to re-locate failed, though at 1510 this aircraft sighted and communicated with the other Catalina—"M" of No. 240 Squadron—which by this time had also lost touch. "Z" then left the scene for base, plugging the holes in the hull, and landed safely at Loch Erne. Meanwhile "M" regained contact with an enemy ship at 1600 and continued to report positions and courses until 1800, when contact was lost and the aircraft had to return to base having reached prudent limit of endurance.

A relief Catalina—"O" of No. 210 Squadron—had been flown off at 1215 to continue the shadowing. At 2340 this aircraft sighted and reported an enemy ship and continued to signal positions at intervals until 0240 hours on 27th May.

#### *May 27th*

At 0404 this aircraft reported having lost touch with the enemy ship, though at 0712 it signalled the presence of a Blohm and Voss float



plane, after which limit of endurance forced a return to base after a flight of 26 hours 12 minutes.

As the Hipper class cruiser—PRINZ EUGEN—last seen in company with the BISMARCK early on 25th May was unaccounted for, Coastal Command maintained two patrols by Sunderlands of No. 10 Squadron across the mouth of the Bay of Biscay from dawn during the day, and Hudsons of No.

206 Squadron carried out searches in this area from 0900 till 1830, while Wellingtons of No. 221 Squadron completed the patrols across the mouth of the Bay up till 1900 hours.

Over the whole period from the locating of the two enemy ships near Bergen on 21st May until dusk on 27th May, aircraft of Coastal Command flew 69 sorties, totalling 580 hours flying, while searching for or shadowing these two ships.

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