

15. On 2nd May, the Polish submarine P.551, who was about 100 miles out of her covering position, was sighted by the convoy escort and unfortunately sunk. Later in the day the convoy was attacked by six torpedo aircraft and three ships were sunk, one or two aircraft being shot down. No warning was received of this attack, the only determined one which these aircraft had so far delivered, and they were first sighted only 6,000 yards away. Another aircraft was destroyed the next day, during an unsuccessful bombing attack; and, although shadowed by aircraft and U-boats as far as longitude 36° East, the convoy arrived at Kola Inlet without further loss. The local escort of ships of the 1st Minesweeping Flotilla gave valuable assistance in the Barents Sea, escorting ships of the convoy and rescuing survivors of those sunk.

16. The heavy covering force was sighted by aircraft the day after leaving Scapa and shadowed up to the latitude of Seidisfjord, where visibility began to decrease. On 1st May the PUNJABI came into collision in a fog with the KING GEORGE V and was sunk, the KING GEORGE V being damaged both by the collision and by the subsequent explosion of the PUNJABI's depth charges. The DUKE OF YORK, flying the flag of the Vice Admiral Second in Command, Home Fleet, from Hvalfjord, was instructed to relieve the KING GEORGE V, the Vice Admiral Second in Command assuming command of the covering force, after which the KING GEORGE V proceeded to Seidisfjord to fuel her screen and thence returned to Scapa.

Loss of H.M.S. TRINIDAD

17. The TRINIDAD had been damaged during the course of an action with German destroyers attacking a convoy in March. She had received temporary repairs at Murmansk, enabling her to steam at 18 knots, and was now ready to leave for permanent repair in the United States. She was due to sail on 9th May, but at that time there were indications of a northward movement by the German ships at Trondheim and her departure was delayed until 13th May while the situation was being cleared up by air reconnaissance. The SCHEER was found to have moved to Narvik, the remainder being still at Trondheim.

18. Cover for the TRINIDAD, who was flying the flag of the Rear Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron*, was provided by four cruisers and four destroyers, under the command of the Rear Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron, operating west of Bear Island; and she was escorted by the SOMALI (Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla), MATCHLESS, FORESIGHT and FORESTER. The battlefleet left Scapa on 15th May to rendezvous with Task Force 99 east of Iceland and provide more distant cover. The Russians' long-range fighter escort, expected up to a distance of 200 miles from the Murman coast, did not materialise.

19. The TRINIDAD was sighted by enemy aircraft on the morning of 14th May, 100 miles out, and was attacked by bombers and torpedo aircraft that evening, south-west of Bear Island.

One bomb hit and one near miss were obtained, starting several fires and causing a list. The fires got out of control and spread rapidly, and the ship had to be abandoned after three hours. She was sunk by torpedoes from the MATCHLESS. One officer, 60 naval ratings and 20 merchant seamen taking passage were lost.

20. The escorting destroyers joined the Rear Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron, and this force set course for Iceland. They were shadowed by enemy aircraft until 2000 on 15th May, when about 25 Ju.88s attacked with bombs: no hits were scored on either side. This attack took place over 350 miles from the nearest aerodrome, which meant that the convoys must now expect to be attacked from the air at any time during five days of their passage.

Amended Arrangements for Cover

21. On 16th May, the pocket battleship LUTZOW left the Baltic to join the force in Norway; and ten days later, during the passage of the next two convoys, she moved up to Narvik to join the SCHEER. Though this reinforcement must increase the chances of the enemy nerving himself to undertake a surface attack on the convoys, the U-boat and air threats were such that it was most undesirable to risk our heavy ships or cruisers east of Bear Island. This fact had been emphasised by the loss of the EDINBURGH and TRINIDAD.

22. With all the German destroyers in the Far North either sunk or damaged, the threat of destroyer attack had temporarily disappeared; and it was no longer necessary to risk cruisers to guard against it. The dispositions for the next convoys were therefore changed: four cruisers, accompanied by three destroyers, provided close cover west of Bear Island against the pocket battleships; while the main fleet cruised north-east of Iceland, ready to deal with the TIRPITZ if she should come out in support.

23. Two submarines accompanied the east-bound convoy, to discourage surface attack, and the British and Russian submarine cover off the north-west and north of Norway was maintained as before, five British and three Russian submarines being employed. After the move of the LUTZOW to Narvik, the Russians were asked to instruct their submarines to simulate by wireless traffic a larger number; and an air patrol from the United Kingdom was established as far as 71° North 23° East.

24. In addition to the changes already mentioned, all the merchant ships of P.Q.16 carried balloons; some degree of A/S protection as far as longitude 10° East was given by four flying-boats from Iceland; and the Senior British Naval Officer, North Russia, was permitted to adjust the sailing time of Q.P.12 up to 24 hours either way, to take advantage of weather unsuitable for air reconnaissance. The Russians promised to cover the passage of these convoys with a big scale offensive by 200 Army bombers on the aerodromes of North Norway: but unfortunately were only able to deliver one small attack which took place after the enemy's main attacks on the convoy had been completed.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Rear Admiral S. S. Bonham-Carter, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O.