

Officer of DE WITT, but she did not join and no information was received as to whether or not she ever left Sourabaya.

30. By 1500/28 from examination it appeared probable that two boilers in B boiler room could be got ready for steaming by about 2300/28, but that satisfactory performance of these boilers would be dependent on power trial at sea. Rear Admiral Palliser* was informed accordingly by telephone from Dutch Naval Headquarters. With two boilers EXETER's maximum speed was 15 to 16 knots; with four boilers it was hoped to obtain 24 knots, but 23 knots was the maximum that could be maintained subsequently.

31. The first part of the night 28th February/1st March* passed without incident. Weather conditions were as follows:—wind E.N.E., force 2, sea 20, cloud two tenths, full moon. After clearing Sourabaya minefields the destroyers were ordered to take up screening diagram Number 2A and shortly before midnight steam was available in the two additional boilers. Speed was increased by steps to 23 knots, the maximum capacity of the four boilers. It may be well to remark here that all four serviceable boilers were on the starboard side, two in each boiler room. No unit system was possible and all four boilers had therefore to be cross connected. Course was altered to 000 degrees at midnight to pass some 25 miles East of Bawean Island and at 0200 to 345 degrees.

32. It had been intended to alter course to 290 degrees at 0400, but shortly before this, three ships, two large and one smaller, were sighted to the Westward in the light of the setting moon, distant about 10 miles, steering to the S.S.W., to pass Westward of Bawean Island. These appeared to be two merchant ships escorted by a cruiser or destroyer. From my orders and routeing I had no doubt in my mind that my object was evasion in this attempt to clear the Java Sea, and accordingly I turned away stern on to avoid being sighted, then worked round to the Northward and resumed course 345 degrees at about 0430. Subsequently course was altered to 290 degrees at 0600 and 280 degrees at 0700. No enemy air or surface forces were sighted at daylight and visibility was extreme.

33. At about 0750 the crow's nest lookout reported the masts of two ships nearly right ahead. These were identified as the topmasts of warships, cruisers or larger, steering to the N.N.E. Course was immediately reversed and it was thought possible that, with the advantage of light, EXETER had not been sighted. This hope was short lived as the enemy ships were seen to turn towards though still well hull down. An enemy report was therefore made and repeated but no acknowledgment was received. This turn towards by the enemy cruisers was brief and may possibly have been for the purpose of flying off aircraft, as they resumed their Northerly course and were soon out of sight. EXETER worked gradually to the Southward and Westward through East finally steering 260 degrees. In spite of failure to receive acknowledgment of the enemy report

I decided against further repetition, since avoidance of disclosure of movements by D/F* seemed of greater importance than any possible advantage to be gained by continuing to make this report. For some time it appeared that evasion had been achieved since no enemy forces were sighted, although it was subsequently stated by the Japanese that their cruisers, as these ships proved to be, had flown off reconnaissance aircraft. There was however no indication of this on the radar screen nor was any aircraft sighted until action was subsequently joined.

34. It was not until about 0935 that the topmasts of two large cruisers were sighted bearing about 170 degrees steering to the Westward. Course was immediately altered to 320 degrees with a view to possible evasion, but these cruisers also were seen to turn towards. Very shortly after this an enemy ship, at first thought to be a 6-inch gun cruiser, was sighted ahead steering directly towards. This ship proved to be a large destroyer. It was engaged by EXETER and destroyers at ranges between 20,000 and 14,000 yards, but on being engaged turned away to the Westward under smoke. Almost simultaneously two more large cruisers were sighted bearing approximately 330 degrees and these at once turned towards. All four cruisers proved to be ten-gun 8-inch cruisers of the Ashigara or Atago classes and one is believed to have been the flagship ASHIGARA. Course was immediately altered to the Eastward (090 degrees), destroyers conforming.

35. EXETER's speed at this time was 23 knots on four out of the eight boilers, but shortly afterwards the Engineer Officer reported that he believed that steam could be raised in one more boiler in B boiler room, and this boiler could be connected in about an hour. Orders were given for this to be done and the extra boiler was connected in less than that time. From then (about 1055) a speed of 25 knots was maintained and before the end the ship was steaming at 26 knots. This and the repair work after the action on 27th February reflects much credit on the Engine Room Department.

36. The enemy cruisers to the Northwest were the first to open fire at long range, their fire being immediately returned by EXETER. It was most unfortunate that at the start of this action the fire control table was damaged and put out of action by a failure in the enemy travel drive. Until this damage was realised salvos fell appreciably out for line and during the remainder of the action a clock and Dumaresq had to be used while repairs were attempted.

37. An enemy report was made when it was seen that evasion was no longer possible and two other reports were made subsequently during the action.

38. The ensuing action is difficult to describe in detail with no records available. The general trend of the action was Easterly with course varying between about 070 degrees and 110 degrees as alterations were made to avoid straddling or to open "A" arcs. The enemy

Admiralty footnote :—

* Rear Admiral A. F. E. Palliser was Chief of Staff to Vice Admiral Helfrich

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* D/F—direction finding.