

Attack by TIRPITZ

9. The first convoys to receive heavy ship cover were P.Q.12 and Q.P.8, unusually large convoys of between 15 and 20 ships each, which sailed from Hvalfjord and the Kola Inlet on 1st March. Cover was provided by the whole Home Fleet as far as longitude 14° East; but the real danger, in my opinion, was that arising from U-boat and air attack further east, and I was unable to obtain any increase in the meagre A/S escorts of these convoys or in the scale of A.A. defence, except for a promise of Russian long-range fighters, at some future unspecified date, in the approaches to the Kola Inlet.

10. The eastbound convoy, P.Q.12, was fortuitously sighted by aircraft off Iceland. Probably, in my opinion, suspecting that the convoy was transporting troops to effect a landing in North Norway, the TIRPITZ was tempted out to attack it. She failed to locate it, but succeeded in sinking a straggler, the I-JORA, from the westbound convoy (Q.P.8) on the 7th March.

11. The same low visibility which hampered the TIRPITZ, and severe icing conditions which precluded the use of our aircraft for reconnaissance, prevented me from bringing her to action; but she was attacked by the aircraft of the VICTORIOUS off the Lofoten Islands, on her way back to Trondheim, apparently without success. She immediately took refuge at Narvik and completed her passage on 13th March.

12. I had despatched eight destroyers under Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, with the TRINIDAD in support, to sweep up the coast from 66° North on the night of 12th/13th March, in the hope that the TIRPITZ would make an earlier move. Five submarines were maintained on patrol off the northern entrance to Trondheim, but did not succeed in attacking.

P.Q.13 and Q.P.9

13. The next two convoys, P.Q.13 and Q.P.9, each of 19 ships, sailed on 20th and 21st March respectively, after a 48-hour delay caused by the presence of U-boats off the Kola Inlet. It was not possible materially to increase the A/S escort, which consisted of two destroyers, a minesweeper and two trawlers for the eastbound convoy, and one destroyer and two minesweepers for the westbound one, but one cruiser accompanied each as close cover, with another west of Bear Island in support: the main fleet, under the command of the Vice Admiral Second in Command* gave cover over the western half of the route against the heavy surface forces at Trondheim, while five minesweepers and a Russian destroyer reinforced the escorts off the Murmansk coast; no air support was available outside the immediate vicinity of the Kola Inlet.

14. The enemy made another determined attempt to interfere with the convoys. P.Q.13 was located by aircraft, east of Bear Island, on 28th March and repeatedly attacked by dive bombers, three ships being sunk. On the following day, the TRINIDAD and ECLIPSE came in contact with three enemy destroyers attempting to attack the same convoy: in brief engagements in very low visibility one enemy

destroyer was sunk and others damaged, the TRINIDAD being hit by a torpedo and her speed reduced, and the ECLIPSE having two guns put out of action. A Russian destroyer was also in action, but without result. The convoy had experienced heavy weather and was widely scattered, but 14 ships reached their destinations, the remaining two probably having been sunk by U-boats, of which at least nine were operating in the area. One U-boat was seriously damaged by the GOSSAMER, of the local escort.

15. Q.P.9 was fortunate to escape detection and arrived complete in Iceland. One U-boat was sighted on 24th March in low visibility, rammed and sunk by the SHARPSHOOTER.*

Increased Protection

16. These attacks, and the continued movement northward of enemy surface, U-boat and air reinforcements, showed clearly the importance attached by the enemy to the stoppage of this traffic. Further representations to the Admiralty were therefore made and some destroyers and corvettes from the Western Approaches were promised for the next convoys. The Russians also agreed to receive a mission from Coastal Command to help in organising their overseas reconnaissance and fighter protection. I recommended that the number of convoys should be reduced during the next few months, when the German aerodrome conditions and air reconnaissance would improve, whilst the convoy routes would still be restricted by ice: but the U.S.A. was now giving first priority to deliveries to Russia, of which her quota was far behind schedule, and it seemed probable that the convoys would increase rather than decrease.

EXTRACT FROM DESPATCH COVERING THE PERIOD 1ST APRIL TO 30TH JUNE, 1942

*Home Fleet,**2nd August, 1942.*

1. Throughout the quarter the Russian convoys remained the chief commitment of the Home Fleet. The last pair to be run in March had been heavily attacked, and the enemy was obviously determined to do everything in his power to stop this traffic. The U-boat and air forces in Northern Norway had been heavily reinforced, the three remaining destroyers were disposed offensively at Kirkenes, and the heavy forces at Trondheim remained a constant, if reluctant, threat.

2. Early in April destroyers, corvettes and trawlers were transferred from the Western Approaches to bring the A/S escort of each convoy up to ten. Requests were made to the Russian naval authorities to co-operate by reinforcing the escort at the eastern end of the route, by providing long-range fighter or A/S air escort and bombing the enemy aerodromes, and by disposing their submarines south of the convoy route to discourage surface raiders east of Bear Island. The response was disappointing.

P.Q.14 and Q.P.10

3. Convoys P.Q.14 (23 ships) and Q.P.10 (16 ships) sailed on 8th and 10th April respectively.

Admiralty footnote:—

* The sinking of this submarine, U.655, by H.M.S. SHARPSHOOTER, and also that of U.585 by H.M.S. FURY in this area, has since been confirmed.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Vice Admiral A. T. B. Curteis, C.B.