

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 RENOWN⁹¹ (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.