

6. At 0837 DEVONSHIRE fired two salvos spread to the right and left. My object was—

(a) to provoke a return fire and so establish her identity beyond doubt, or

(b) to induce her to abandon ship in order to avoid bloodshed, particularly as she might have a number of British prisoners on board.

The enemy stopped and turned round and at 0840 transmitted a raider report on 500 kc/s in the form "RRR RRR RRR de POLYPHEMUS 04 degs. 20 mins. South, 18 degs. 35 mins. West 0940 GMT."

It was noted that—

(a) no signal letters were included, and

(b) that three "R"s were transmitted in a group and not four.

7. The possibility of the ship being in fact the POLYPHEMUS had now to be considered. Talbot Booth showed a ship of similar appearance but with a counter stern. Admiralty's signal timed 1134A/22nd October indicated that she was at Balboa on 21st September, and therefore within reach of my position. To remove what little doubt remained I signalled at 0905 "Is POLYPHEMUS genuine?" and at 0934 received your reply "No repetition no". In the meantime a signal was passed to the aircraft—"What type of stern has she got?" and the reply "Cruiser stern—hull similar to ATLANTIS" was received at 0931.

8. At 0935 DEVONSHIRE opened fire to destroy the enemy raider. The range was 17,500 yards. The fourth salvo scored a hit in number two hold setting it on fire and subsequently blowing up the magazine. Thirty salvos were fired in all. The enemy turned away and started a very efficient chlorosulphonic smoke screen from her stern and from both sides abreast the bridge. She also abandoned ship. No attempt was made to return my fire. Owing to the smoke I checked fire at 0939 and altered course to the eastwards to regain bearing and get clear of the smoke. Indirect fire using R.D.F.* ranging was attempted but failed owing to the breakdown of the R.D.F. transmitter through gun blast and of the aircraft's W/T generator owing to a short circuit. At 0943 the target was again visible and fire was re-opened and maintained until 0956 when the ship was seen to be badly on fire forward and down by the stern. The necessity for this latter burst of fire was a report by the aircraft that she was still proceeding at 15 knots.

9. DEVONSHIRE turned away on ceasing fire. The raider had consistently attempted to draw me in a south easterly direction and I was determined to make no more ground in that direction than I could help. At 1002 her magazine blew up and it was clear that no further offensive action was necessary. At 1005 the situation was reported to you. There was another heavy explosion at 1014 and the raider sank at 1016.

10. My next action was to recover the aircraft. She had been in the air for two hours with a damaged propeller, temporarily repaired on board, which I knew was causing excessive vibration and which might precipitate a forced landing at any moment. The wind and sea

were on the increase. The ship proceeded to the north west and made a successful recovery at 1040.

11. After receiving verbal reports from the pilot and observer I had no further doubt regarding the identity of the raider and was almost certain that a U-Boat had been present. Unquestionably it was impossible to rescue the survivors without grave risk of being torpedoed.* The reasons for abandoning the boats were as follows:—

(a) the identity of the raider and Admiralty's signal timed 1218A/21st November reporting that U-Boats had been used as escorts for returning raiders;

(b) two large patches of oil on the water,

(c) a lifeboat filled with oil drums cast adrift shortly after my arrival,

(d) the movements of the raider. She was head to wind when sighted and subsequently made good no more than 2½ miles to the south east although she was reported to have steamed as fast as 15 knots;

(e) the character of the Captain described in the supplement to Weekly Intelligence Report No. 64, page 8, paragraph 13, and the fact that he did not return my fire;

(f) the unreliability of my aircraft and lack of any other A/S protection.

(Signed) R. D. OLIVER,

*Captain, R.N.,
Commanding Officer.*

REPORT OF THE SINKING OF THE GERMAN SUPPLY SHIP PYTHON.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 29th December, 1941, by Vice-Admiral A. U. Willis, C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, South Atlantic Station.

South Atlantic.

29th December, 1941.

Forwarded for the information of Their Lordships.

2. The strategical effect of this sinking combined with that by H.M.S. DEVONSHIRE on 23rd November has been considerable, for the submarine threat to shipping in the Cape area has—at any rate temporarily—been removed.

3. After DORSETSHIRE had, quite rightly, left them, efforts were made to regain touch with the survivors' boats by means of the corvettes ASTER and MARGUERITE who were ordered to pass through the area of the sinking on 8th December, on passage to the Cape. This came to nothing and no positive information has been obtained as to the fate of the survivors.

4. The U-Boats, known to have been in the vicinity by the attacks on S.S. CLAN MACBEAN on the 3rd December and on the U.S. ship SAGADAHOC on 3rd December, were tracked on their northward passage by Admiralty estimated dispositions and by D/F

Admiralty footnote —

* After the raider had sunk, the survivors in her laden boats were met by submarines and later by the supply ship PYTHON so that, in the event, they were rescued, though not as prisoners.

Admiralty footnote —

* R D F—radar