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CONVOYS TO NORTH RUSSIA, 1942.

Admiralty foreword:—

The safe passage of convoys carrying vital war supplies to North Russia was one of the chief commitments of the British Home Fleet from August, 1941, until the end of the European War in May, 1945.

Like the passage of the Malta convoys, it involved a series of major fleet operations. The Russian convoy routes, in contrast to the complete freedom of movement of the Atlantic routes, were restricted to the east and south by an enemy-occupied coastline and to the west and north by ice. The convoys themselves were subject to attack by surface forces over a large part of their 2,000-mile passage, to air attack for 1,400 miles, and to U-boat attack throughout their entire run. The severe Arctic weather added to their navigational difficulties during winter months, but they ran a greater risk of attack between March and September owing to the continuous daylight of the Far Northern summer. Nevertheless, in spite of these very adverse conditions, under British command, and almost entirely under British naval and air escort, forty outward and thirty-five homeward bound Russian convoys made the passage during a period of nearly four years.

The first, which sailed from the United Kingdom in August, 1941, only two months after the German invasion of Russia, arrived safely, and by the spring of 1942 twelve more had made the passage with the loss of only one out of 103 ships. From the spring of 1942, however, the threat of attacks on the convoys increased, for the Germans were already preparing to stop the flow of supplies to Russia with every means at their disposal, including the basing of heavy ships in Norway, among them the new battleship TIRPITZ.

This new and evergrowing threat could be met only by giving greater protection to the

convoys, but the general war situation still very severely limited the numbers of allied escorts available in northern waters.

In July, 1942, the Russian convoys suffered their first and greatest disaster when Convoy P.Q.17 lost twenty-one of its thirty-four ships during a series of heavy enemy daylight attacks lasting a week. The next convoy, P.Q.18, which sailed in September—the August convoy to Russia was abandoned in favour of a convoy to Malta—was also heavily attacked and lost thirteen of its forty ships. Then followed a break of two months, during which all available escorts were taking part in the Allied invasion of North Africa. After the invasion the Russian convoys were resumed, and on 31st December strong German forces, endeavouring to attack the convoy, were engaged in the Barents Sea. A German heavy cruiser, the ADMIRAL HIPPER, was crippled, an enemy destroyer was sunk and the whole convoy reached Archangel without loss.

During the next two years the Russian convoys ran only during the long dark months of winter and lost only three ships, all in January, 1944. No further losses were sustained until March, 1945, when one ship was sunk. This proved to be the final casualty and brought the total losses in outward bound Russian convoys to sixty-two, or 7.8 per cent. of the 792 ships sailed in them during the war. In the homeward bound convoys, twenty-eight, or 3.8 per cent., of the 739 ships sailed were lost. The total casualties in merchant ships on the Russian route were 829 officers and men. The Royal Navy, too, paid a heavy price, for two cruisers, six destroyers, three sloops, two frigates, three corvettes and three minesweepers were sunk with the loss of 1,840 officers and men.

The forty outward bound convoys carried to Russia the huge total of £428,000,000 worth of

material, including 5,000 tanks and over 7,000 aircraft from Britain. The tonnage figures are:

Year	Approximate amount of cargo despatched from U.K. or U.S.A.	Approximate amount of cargo lost en route.
	(tons)	(tons)
1941	300,000	10,000
1942	1,350,000	270,000
1943	450,000	—
1944	1,250,000	10,000
1945	650,000	10,000
Total	4,000,000	300,000

The U.S.S.R. in 1943 expressed their appreciation when M. Maisky, Soviet Ambassador in London, paid this glowing tribute to the men whose courage had made possible the carriage of these vital war supplies to Russia:

"The Russian convoys are a Northern Saga of heroism, bravery, and endurance. This Saga will live for ever, not only in the hearts of your people, but also in the hearts of the Soviet people, who rightly see in it one of the most striking expressions of collaboration between the Allied Governments, without which our common victory would have been impossible."

The following are extracts from Despatches covering the period 1st January, 1942, to 31st December, 1942, submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty by Admiral Sir John C. Tovey, K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet.

EXTRACT FROM DESPATCH COVERING THE PERIOD 1ST JANUARY TO 31ST MARCH, 1942

*Home Fleet,
20th May, 1942.*

Loss of s.s. WAZIRISTAN

1. The year started with the first loss from these convoys; it was brought about by a most unfortunate combination of circumstances. Convoy P.Q.7 was so delayed by defects while assembling at Hvalfiord* that the Admiral Commanding, Iceland, decided to sail it in two parts. The first, which sailed late in December, consisted of only two ships: the cruiser and destroyers of the ocean escort were therefore held back for the second, and larger, part; and the two ships were given two minesweepers as ocean escort.

2. These were sailed as usual to join the convoy near Jan Mayen Island but failed to make contact before the local escort of trawlers parted company, or in fact at all. The merchant ships thus arrived south of Bear Island without escort: U-boats, working in this area for the first time, succeeded in sinking the WAZIRISTAN. The COLD HARBOUR, her companion, arrived off the White Sea a week late.

3. That the first appearance of U-boats should coincide with the first unescorted convoy was most unfortunate. In order that escorting cruisers should not be exposed to

U-boat attack at convoy speeds, they were ordered after this attack to part company with their convoys between 14° East and 26° East and pass through this area at high speed, re-joining the convoys when the latter had come through. It was considered unlikely that enemy surface forces would operate in the same area as U-boats.

Loss of H.M.S. MATABELE

4. Convoy P.Q.7B arrived safely, but P.Q.8 was attacked by U-boats north-eastward of the Kola Inlet*. The s.s. HARMATRID was torpedoed on 17th January, but reached harbour in tow: the MATABELE, one of the two escorting destroyers, was torpedoed the next day and lost with only two survivors.

5. The increased enemy effort against the convoys, of which these unfortunate losses were evidence, though expected, was disturbing. The early spring was approaching, with a period of two or three months during which the ice would still compel the convoys to pass through two narrow focal areas close to the enemy coast, without the compensation of foul weather and long darkness to restrict his air activity. It seemed therefore that air attacks, and surface or U-boat attacks made possible by air reconnaissance, might reach a scale beyond the escorting resources of the Home Fleet.

6. I pointed this out to Their Lordships and pressed for strong and continuous Russian patrol activity off the Kola Inlet, to make that area untenable by U-boats, and for short-range and long-range fighter protection. The cruiser could not remain in company with the convoy, in U-boat infested waters, solely to provide the A.A. defence which could come more effectively from fighters. The Rear Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron†, in the NIGERIA, was stationed at Murmansk throughout February to represent these requirements to the Russians, the NIGERIA providing escort for east and westbound convoys between Bear Island and the Kola Inlet.

Surface Threat from Trondheim

7. The presence of the TIRPITZ at Trondheim, where she arrived on 17th January and, still more, her reinforcement on 23rd February by the SCHEER and PRINZ EUGEN, constituted another and more serious threat to these convoys. It seemed probable that the heavy ships, if they attacked, would do so between Jan Mayen and Bear Islands, leaving the eastern section of the route to their U-boats and aircraft. It was therefore necessary to provide heavy cover on this part of the route, even though this could not be done without uncovering to some extent the Northern Passages.

8. To economise the use of this heavy cover, I asked the Admiralty on 26th February that the convoys should be sailed simultaneously from each end, so that their passage through the danger area should be synchronised. This would entail a 14-day cycle. I also asked for four more destroyers, to enable the covering force to have a proper screen and the convoy a close escort of two destroyers.

Admiralty footnotes:—

* The entrance to Murmansk.

† Rear Admiral H. M. Burrough, C.B.

Admiralty footnote:—

* On the west coast of Iceland.

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 oversea 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.

The former was escorted by five destroyers, four corvettes, two minesweepers and four A/S trawlers, with the EDINBURGH, NORFOLK and two destroyers providing close cover: the westbound convoy had the LIVERPOOL, five destroyers, one minesweeper and two trawlers. The KING GEORGE V, DUKE OF YORK, VICTORIOUS, KENT, NIGERIA and eight destroyers provided heavy cover.

4. P.Q.14 ran into ice south-west of Jan Mayen Island and was delayed and scattered: two-thirds of the convoy lost touch and returned to Iceland, with several of the escort who had been damaged by ice. The remaining nine ships, with most of the escort, continued their passage. The delay had probably disorganised to some extent the German arrangements for attack, but the convoy was sighted by enemy aircraft on 13th April and attacked by U-boats east of Bear Island on 16th April, one ship being sunk.

5. Q.P.10 was subjected to air and U-boat attacks for three days, while on passage between the Kola Inlet and Bear Island, and four ships were sunk. One other returned to Kola, the remaining eleven arriving safely in Iceland.

P.Q.15 and Q.P.11

6. Before the next pair of convoys was due to sail, I suggested once more that these convoys, if they could not be postponed until the ice moved north, should be limited in size. This proposal was not accepted: convoys P.Q.15 and Q.P.11, which sailed on 26th and 28th April respectively, contained 25 and 17 ships.

7. The eastbound convoy was escorted by four destroyers, one A.A. ship and three minesweepers, and included a C.A.M. ship*; the NIGERIA and two destroyers provided close cover. The westbound convoy was escorted by five destroyers, five corvettes and two trawlers, with the EDINBURGH as close cover. Distant cover for both convoys was given by the KING GEORGE V, U.S. battleship WASHINGTON, VICTORIOUS, U.S. cruisers WICHITA and TUSCALOOSA, KENYA and ten destroyers (of which four were American). This was the first occasion on which United States ships operated as part of the Home Fleet.

8. Four submarines were disposed off the the Norwegian coast, moving north-eastwards with the convoy, to provide cover against the surface forces at Trondheim; being joined later by the TRIDENT, which accompanied P.Q.15 as far as longitude 5° East.

H.M.S. EDINBURGH Torpedoed

9. Q.P.11 left the Kola Inlet on 28th April and was sighted and reported by aircraft and U-boats the next day. On 30th April the EDINBURGH, about fifteen miles ahead of the convoy, was struck by two torpedoes from a U-boat. Her stern was blown off and she was unable to steer, but she proceeded at very slow speed towards Murmansk, escorted and towed by the FORESIGHT and FORESTER, who were detached from the convoy escort. Minesweepers, tugs and Russian destroyers were sent from Murmansk to assist.

Admiralty footnote:—

* C.A.M. ship—a merchant ship fitted with a catapult for flying off an aircraft.

10. The protection of these Russian convoys against surface attack must always involve grave risk of ships of the covering force being torpedoed by U-boats. The convoys come under early air reconnaissance and for a great part of the voyage have up to eight U-boats within striking distance. The number of escorts and the necessity for strict economy of fuel do not permit of prolonged A/S hunts; the speed of the convoys is 8 knots or less; so U-boats put down by the escorts have little difficulty in regaining contact. The risk from U-boats has always been appreciated by the Flag and Commanding Officers of the covering cruisers; but it is obvious that effective protection against surface forces in the varying visibility usually experienced can only be provided if the covering cruiser is in the vicinity of the convoy.

Q.P.11

11. The convoy drove off an attack by four torpedo aircraft and, on 1st May, was five times attacked east of Bear Island by three large German destroyers. The escorting destroyers, though greatly inferior in gunpower, met these attacks with gallantry and skill and by their aggressive tactics succeeded in driving off their powerful opponents. One merchant ship was sunk and the AMAZON was damaged, though able to proceed. No further losses were suffered by this convoy.

12. The three German destroyers then transferred their attentions to the EDINBURGH, who was now in tow of a Russian tug and escorted by the FORESIGHT and FORESTER, one small Russian destroyer and the minesweepers HARRIER, HUSSAR, GOS-SAMER and NIGER. The German destroyers located her on the morning of 2nd May, in low visibility and extreme cold. The tow was immediately slipped and the EDINBURGH, who was unable to steer, circled slowly at about eight knots.

13. A series of most gallant actions followed, the enemy being engaged in turn by the FORESIGHT and FORESTER, the remaining guns of the EDINBURGH, and the minesweepers. One enemy destroyer was sunk and the other two damaged; but the EDINBURGH was struck by another torpedo and had to be abandoned, being sunk later by a torpedo from the FORESIGHT; two officers and 56 ratings were lost. The FORESIGHT and FORESTER were seriously damaged, both being brought to a standstill during the course of the action, but each in turn covered the other while she effected the repairs necessary to enable her to proceed. The minesweepers were not damaged, though more than once they had engaged enemy destroyers single-handed and driven them off.

14. P.Q.15, which had sailed from Hvalfjord on 26th April, was reported by enemy aircraft two days later, in spite of a spirited attack on the sighting aircraft by the Norwegian seaplane providing A/S escort. A U-boat made contact the following day. On 1st May the convoy was bombed without success by six Ju.88s, one of which was shot down. As all the enemy destroyers in the Far North had been sunk or damaged in the final action of the EDINBURGH, I instructed the NIGERIA and LONDON to leave convoy P.Q.15 west of Bear Island and not to proceed into the U-boat waters further east unless the convoy was threatened by enemy cruisers or larger vessels.

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 Seidisfiord, 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 Hvalfiord, 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 Seidisfiord 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.

25. Owing to the evident inability of the Russians to provide air co-operation in the Barents Sea, I had asked for R.A.F. reconnaissance and long-range fighter aircraft to be stationed in North Russia. These would provide the convoys, during the worst part of their passage, with A/S patrols, fighter protection and reconnaissance against surface attack. But the number of aircraft in Coastal Command was insufficient to meet any of these requirements and the convoys had to continue this most hazardous passage virtually without air co-operation (see also paragraph 32).

P.Q.16 and Q.P.12

26. P.Q.16, which sailed on 20th May, contained 35 ships and, despite the fact that this was the most unfavourable time of the year, was the largest convoy which had so far been run. It was escorted by five destroyers, four corvettes, four trawlers, one minesweeper and one A.A. ship. It was located by enemy aircraft on 24th May and, though one shadower was shot down on 25th May by the Hurricane from the C.A.M. ship, was shadowed continuously for the next six days.

27. The first attack, 380 miles from the enemy aerodromes, was made on 25th May by eight torpedo aircraft and about twenty Ju.88s: one ship, the American s.s. CARLTON, had a steam pipe fractured and turned back for Iceland, in tow of the trawler NORTHERN SPRAY: one Ju.88 was shot down and four more were probably destroyed.

28. The main weight of air attack started on the afternoon of 26th May and continued almost without respite until 30th May. During this period no less than 34 torpedo aircraft and 210 bombers attacked the convoy, sinking five ships and damaging three others, as well as the Polish destroyer GARLAND: three aircraft were shot down and twelve more were probably destroyed. Numerous attempts were

made by U-boats to attack the convoy, but with one exception they were driven off, several U-boats being damaged: in the one successful attack, one ship was sunk, making a total loss of six ships out of 35. The smallness of the losses in comparison with the enemy effort was due to the skill and endurance of the escort, under the command of the Commanding Officer of the ASHANTI, and to the steadiness, good gunfire and excellent station keeping of the convoy. The German bombers pressed their attacks home on one day only, while their torpedo aircraft were cautious in the extreme and generally ineffective. Some Russian fighters were present on the last two days and claimed to have destroyed some of the enemy after their attacks.

29. Q.P.12, escorted by six destroyers, one A.A. ship, one minesweeper and four trawlers, left Kola Inlet on 31st May. They were sighted shortly after sailing; but the enemy concentrated all his force on the more important eastbound convoy and Q.P.12 reached Iceland without being attacked.

30. The cruiser covering force was in company with P.Q.16 for the first air attack, but their operations were otherwise without incident, as were those of the heavy covering force. The threat of surface attack by the two pocket battleships at Narvik did not materialise.

P.Q.17 and Q.P.13

31. The operation for the supply of Malta, early in June, left insufficient destroyers in the Home Fleet for the simultaneous running of Russian convoys. The next pair were therefore postponed until 27th June.

Summary of Results

32. The approximate scale of attack and the losses for the convoys run during the quarter were:—

Convoy	Ships sailed	Ships turned back	Ships lost	Attacked by	Reached destination
P.Q. 14	24	16	1	U-boats	7
Q.P. 10	16	1	2 2	U-boats 34 bombers	11
P.Q. 15	25	—	0 0 3	U-boats 6 bombers 6 torpedo aircraft	22
Q.P. 11	13	—	1 0 0	3 destroyers U-boats 4 torpedo aircraft	12
P.Q. 16	35	1	1 5 1	U-boats 208 bombers 34 torpedo aircraft	27
Q.P. 12	15	1	0	Nil	14

Note.—About 15 U-boats operated against each pair of convoys.

EXTRACT FROM DESPATCH COVERING THE PERIOD 1ST JULY TO 30TH SEPTEMBER, 1942

*Home Fleet,
3rd January, 1943.*

Threat of Heavy Surface Attack

Information received in June indicated that the enemy intended, at last to bring out his main units to attack the next eastbound convoy east of Bear Island. The strategical situation thus produced was wholly favourable to the

enemy. His heavy ships would be operating close to their own coast, with the support of powerful shore-based air reconnaissance and striking forces, and protected, if he so desired, by a screen of U-boats in the channels between Spitzbergen and Norway. Our covering forces, on the other hand, if they entered these waters, would be without shore-based air support, one thousand miles from their base, with their destroyers too short of fuel to escort a damaged ship to harbour.

2. Apart from submarine attack off the enemy coast, a more favourable disposition could be brought about only by inducing the enemy heavy ships to come further to the westward to deliver their attacks.

3. With this object, I proposed to the Admiralty that the convoy, on reaching the approximate longitude of 10° East, should turn back for twelve or eighteen hours, unless information showed that the enemy had not after all put to sea, or the weather was such as to prevent air shadowing. I hoped that this temporary turn back would either tempt the German heavy ships to pursue, or cause them to return to harbour, or compel them to cruise for an extended period among our submarines, nine of which were concentrated between Bear Island and the Norwegian coast. Three Russian submarines were also in this area.

4. The Admiralty did not approve of this plan but, after further discussion, issued instructions on 27th June which envisaged the possibility, under certain circumstances, of the convoy being temporarily turned back by the Admiralty, but not of this turn being timed to achieve the object I had in view. In the event, this question did not arise, as the enemy surface movements took place later than had been expected. The Admiralty instruction also stated, *inter alia*, that the safety of the convoy against surface attack to the westward of Bear Island must be met by our surface forces, and to the eastward of that meridian must depend on our submarines; and that the cruiser covering force was not intended to go east of Bear Island unless the convoy was threatened by the presence of a surface force which the cruiser force could fight, or in any case to go beyond 25° East.

Diversionsary Operations

5. In an attempt to divert the enemy surface and air forces, a dummy convoy, consisting of the 1st Minelaying Squadron and four colliers, and escorted by the SIRIUS, CURACOA, five destroyers and some trawlers, was assembled in Scapa Flow for a week and sailed two days after the convoy. It sailed westabout the Shetlands and then eastward to 1° East, hoping to attract the attention of the German air reconnaissance and simulate a raiding force bound for Southern Norway (Operation ES). The battlefleet sailed later the same day and adjusted its course to give the impression of covering the raiding force.

6. The only German reconnaissance of Scapa during the period of assembly apparently failed to notice this convoy, nor was it sighted on passage. The operation was therefore repeated on 1st July, but again without success.

Q.P.13

7. The westbound convoy sailed from Archangel on 26th June, some ships leaving Murmansk the next day to join. It consisted of 35 ships and was escorted by five destroyers, three corvettes, one anti-aircraft ship, three minesweepers, two trawlers and, as far as the Bear Island area, one submarine. It was sighted by enemy aircraft on 30th June and 2nd July; but once more the enemy's policy was to concentrate on the eastbound laden convoy, and Q.P.13 was not attacked.

8. The convoy was divided east of Iceland, one section proceeding direct to the

United Kingdom and the other to Hvalfjord, en route for America. This change of plan was ordered by the Admiralty when the convoy was already at sea. The officer who became Commodore of the Hvalfjord section was not therefore aware of the position of the minefield in the Denmark Strait nor of the danger of navigating in that area without accurate knowledge of his position. This section ran foul of the minefield and on 5th July the NIGER (Commander A. J. Cubison, R.N.) and five merchant ships were sunk; one other merchant ship was damaged. These were the only casualties suffered by the convoy.

P.Q.17

9. The eastbound convoy sailed from Hvalfjord on 27th June. In addition to 34 merchant ships, an oiler for the use of the escort and three rescue ships sailed in this convoy. The escort comprised six destroyers, four corvettes, three minesweepers, four trawlers, two anti-aircraft ships and two submarines.

10. The route was considerably longer than that for earlier convoys this year, for the ice allowed passage north of Bear Island and a considerable evasive detour in the Barents Sea; and all the convoy was bound for Archangel, recent heavy air raids having destroyed most of Murmansk.

11. Part of the convoy ran into drifting ice in thick weather in the Denmark Strait. Two merchant ships were damaged and had to return and the escort's oiler, the GREY RANGER, was also damaged: her speed reduced to eight knots and it was doubtful whether she could face heavy weather; it was therefore decided to transfer her to the fuelling position north-east of Jan Mayen (Force Q) in exchange for the ALDERSDALE.

12. The convoy was located by enemy aircraft and U-boats on 1st July, a little later than usual, and thereafter was shadowed continuously except for a few short intervals in fog. Though this fog was not permanent enough to prevent shadowing, it did decrease the number of air attacks. The first, by nine torpedo aircraft, took place late on 2nd July: it was unsuccessful and one aircraft was shot down. A solitary aircraft scored a torpedo hit on the morning of 4th July, the merchant ship later being sunk by our own forces; and there was an unsuccessful attack by six bombers in the evening. Later the same evening another attack, by twenty-five torpedo bombers, took place: two ships were sunk and one damaged, and at least four aircraft were shot down.

Covering Forces

13. Meanwhile the two covering forces were moving into position. The cruiser force, under the command of Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron*, left Seidisfjord during the night of 30th June/1st July and arrived in a covering position north of the convoy on 2nd July. It consisted of the LONDON, NORFOLK, WICHITA, TUSCALOOSA and three destroyers, of which two were American. They were not sighted by the enemy until late on 3rd July.

14. The heavy covering force, comprising the DUKE OF YORK (Commander-in-Chief),

Admiralty footnote:—

* Rear Admiral L. H. K. Hamilton, D.S.O.

WASHINGTON, VICTORIOUS, CUMBERLAND, NIGERIA and nine destroyers, was shadowed for a short period north-east of Iceland on the 1st July, while the screen was refuelling in succession at Seidisfiord; and again for a short period early on 3rd July, while in a covering position south of the convoy. Later on that day, course was altered to the northward, to cross the convoy track and reach a position north-west of Bear Island, within air striking range of the convoy on the morning of 4th July: this time was calculated from the information available to be the earliest at which surface attack was likely to materialise. While on passage to the new covering area, which was occupied for about 24 hours, the battlefleet was joined by the MANCHESTER and ECLIPSE from Spitzbergen.

15. Air reconnaissance of the Norwegian harbours had been hindered by the weather, but the available information showed that the heavy units were probably moving northwards, and an air photograph of Trondheim late on 3rd July confirmed that the TIRPITZ and HIPPER had left. The flying-boat patrol and the two lines of submarines between North Cape and Bear Island were being adjusted to cover the line of approach to the convoy as it moved eastwards. In view of the uncertainty of the enemy's position, Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron decided to continue to provide close cover and to pass to the eastward of Bear Island.

Route

16. A fresh ice reconnaissance on 3rd July found that the passage north of Bear Island had widened. The Admiralty suggested to the KEPPEL (Senior Officer of Escort) that the convoy should pass at least fifty miles north of it, but he preferred to stay in the low visibility on his original route and to make ground to the eastward: Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron, however, on closing the convoy, decided that a more northerly route was necessary and ordered the KEPPEL to alter course to pass 70 miles north of Bear Island and, later, to open to 400 miles from Banak.

Scattering of Convoy

17. At 1230/4th July, the Admiralty gave Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron permission to proceed east of longitude 25° East, should the situation so demand, unless contrary orders were received from me. This was a reversal of the policy agreed between the Admiralty and myself (see paragraph 4): as no information in my possession justified this change, I instructed Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron to withdraw when the convoy was east of 25° East, or earlier at his discretion, unless the Admiralty assured him that the TIRPITZ could not be met. The Admiralty at 1858, however, informed him that further information was expected shortly and instructed him to remain with the convoy pending further instructions.

18. At 2111/4th July, the Admiralty made a signal, prefixed "Most Immediate", ordering Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron to withdraw to the westward at high speed (this is understood to have been due to U-boat information, but that fact was not known to the addressees): at 2123, the

Admiralty, in a signal prefixed "Immediate", ordered the convoy to disperse and proceed to Russian ports owing to threat from surface ships; and at 2136 followed this up with another "Most Immediate" signal ordering the convoy to scatter (this latter signal was intended merely as a correction of technical wording from "disperse" to "scatter", but this too was not known at the time). Both Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron and the Commanding Officer of the KEPPEL took these signals to indicate that an attack by the TIRPITZ was imminent: the convoy was immediately ordered to scatter, the escorting destroyers to join the cruiser force, and the rest of the escort to proceed independently.

Enemy Surface Forces

19. The enemy heavy forces, however, had not yet left North Norway: it was not until 1700 on 5th July that they were sighted and reported by the Soviet submarine K.21, north of North Cape outward bound: and three and a half hours later the submarine P.54 reported the TIRPITZ, HIPPER and six destroyers, still steering to the north-eastwards. Soon after, for some reason at present not established, the enemy fleet abandoned their enterprise and returned to harbour: possibly their information of the position and composition of our two covering forces was at fault, or they were unwilling to face the threat of our submarines.

20. During the night of 5th/6th July, I received three signals from the Admiralty suggesting that if the battlefleet was sighted steering to the eastward it might make the TIRPITZ reluctant to go as far as the convoy; and that the TIRPITZ might be damaged and, if I could refuel my destroyers, might present an opportunity for the VICTORIOUS. The latter seemed to me unlikely, for it was almost certain that the TIRPITZ, especially if damaged, would not be sailed down the Norwegian coast until adequate fighter cover and seaward reconnaissance were available: moreover the DUKE OF YORK was short of fuel. Arrangements were made for the fleet to reverse its course if the approach of enemy aircraft was detected; and at 0645/6th July when the destroyers had completed with fuel, course was altered back to the north-eastward. An hour later an enemy aircraft passed over the fleet, above the clouds: endeavour was made to attract his attention by gunfire and fighters, but without success. The weather continued unfavourable for air reconnaissance, so that at 1545/6th July the course of the fleet was again reversed and the units returned to harbour.

21. The submarines STURGEON and MINERVE, returning from patrol lines off North Cape, had meanwhile been diverted by the Flag Officer Submarines to establish a patrol off the entrance to Vestfiord. The German ships were sighted by a Mosquito aircraft on the morning of 7th July, leaving Arno, in North Norway, on their way back to Narvik. It is possible that they passed inside the Leads and thus evaded the submarines.

Further Attacks on Convoy

22. When the order to scatter the convoy was received, it had covered more than half its route with the loss of only three ships.

Now its ships, spread over a wide area, were exposed to the powerful enemy U-boat and air forces. The enemy took prompt advantage of this situation, operating both weapons to their full capacity. In spite of widespread searches by a few Coastal Command aircraft which had proceeded to North Russia after their patrols and by minesweepers and corvettes in these waters, a fortnight elapsed before the results of these attacks and the fate of the various ships of the convoy were fully known. Of the thirty-four ships remaining when the convoy was scattered, twenty-one, including the fleet oiler ALDERSDALE and one rescue ship, were sunk, and thirteen, including one which was refloated after running aground in Nova Zemlya, eventually reached Archangel.

Postponement of P.Q.18

23. There was not time for another convoy operation before the withdrawal of many Home Fleet cruisers and destroyers for Operation "Pedestal"*. P.Q.18 had therefore to be postponed until early in September. The possibility of running the westbound convoy alone during this interval was examined, but adequate submarine cover could not be provided.

24. Much of the ammunition reserves intended for North Russia had been lost in ships of P.Q.17: there was also a shortage of food. Four destroyers, the MARNE, MARTIN, MIDDLETON and BLANKNEY, were therefore sailed on 20th July to Archangel with ammunition to replenish the escorts and ships of Q.P.14 and with provisions: they were sighted by aircraft on 21st July near Jan Mayen Island, but their voyage was otherwise without incident.

Independent Sailing of Russian Ships

25. Two Russian merchant ships, at the request of the Soviet Government, were sailed from Iceland on 11th and 12th August respectively to attempt the passage unescorted. This they eventually achieved after a long voyage extending well into the Kara Sea.

Air Co-operation

26. Further attempts were made during August to arrange air co-operation in the Far North. Two officers on the Staff of Air Officer Commanding, Bomber Command came to Scapa at my request to discuss the possibility of an attack by heavy bombers on the enemy ships at Narvik; this operation was dependent on there being a suitable aerodrome in North Russia for the bombers to land and refuel after their attack. I promised to arrange the transport by sea of the necessary ground staff and stores to such an aerodrome if it could be found.

27. Two squadrons of Hampden torpedo aircraft were flown to North Russia, ready to support P.Q.18. Their ground staff, stores and torpedoes were carried to Kola in the TUSCALOOSA, escorted by the RODMAN, EMMONS and ONSLAUGHT. I had recently received a disquieting report about conditions in Russian hospitals in which the seamen from the escorts and merchant ships of these convoys were treated: the personnel and stores of

the British medical unit, which resulted from my representations, also took passage in the TUSCALOOSA, and as much ammunition and food as possible was sent.

28. On instructions from Moscow, the medical unit was later refused permission to land at Archangel; while that portion which had been landed by the TUSCALOOSA at Vaenga was ordered to leave. The stores were left in North Russia but the personnel had to return to the United Kingdom in Q.P.14. I renewed my representations for the strongest pressure to be brought to bear to induce them once more to change their minds.

Sinking of ULM

29. While the TUSCALOOSA was on passage indications of German activity east of the Barents Sea were accumulating. A Russian ice-breaker was attacked by an unidentified surface ship east of Nova Zemlya and several places were bombarded. I considered the retention of the TUSCALOOSA's force in North Russia, pending further intelligence, but Senior British Naval Officer, North Russia represented that the Murman anchorages were under constant air attack and that a longer stay than necessary was most undesirable.

30. The TUSCALOOSA, with her escort reinforced by the MARTIN and MARNE, sailed again for Iceland on 24th August. A sweep by the three British destroyers was ordered, to the southward of the TUSCALOOSA, to intercept any enemy vessels leaving Northern Norway for the Kara Sea. The German minelayer ULM was met at 2230, south-east of Bear Island, and sunk by these destroyers. The British and American ships were located by aircraft and shadowed intermittently on the following day, but no attack developed.

Operation EV—Passage of P.Q.18 and Q.P.14

31. *Plan.* The experience of P.Q.17 had shown that the enemy was now ready to bring his heavy surface forces against the convoys, well to the eastward in the Barents Sea. Nor could it be assumed that he would continue to leave the westbound convoys alone. The cover provided by the battlefleet, while the convoys were east of Bear Island, had always been more threatening than real; for I had strong objections to taking heavy ships into the Barents Sea, far from their bases and exposed to heavy concentrations of U-boats and shore-based aircraft, with little hope of bringing the enemy to action. The battlefleet screen absorbed a number of destroyers which could otherwise be used to provide real cover, close to the convoy. In the variable visibility which prevails in those latitudes, the presence of a strong force of destroyers would constitute a threat which the enemy, in spite of the longer range of his guns, would probably be reluctant to face.

32. I therefore decided to rely for surface cover on a strong force of destroyers, under the command of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers (Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., O.B.E.), flying his flag in the SCYLLA, and to accept the consequent restriction on the movements of the battleships, for which small screens of low endurance only were retained. The destroyer force was to transfer off Nova Zemlya from P.Q.18 to Q.P.14, leaving the former to complete its voyage with the normal anti-submarine escort, reinforced by any forces which the Russians might

Admiralty footnote:—

* Operation "Pedestal" was the sailing of a large convoy for Malta in August, 1942.

be persuaded to provide. The fuel requirements of the escort and covering force were to be met by two oilers sailed under separate escort to Spitzbergen, and two more with P.Q.18, transferring with the covering force to Q.P.14.

33. Frequent German air reconnaissance of Icelandic ports had been reported, so it was decided to sail the eastbound convoy direct from Loch Ewe, with a local escort from the Western Approaches Command until arrival off Iceland.

34. A considerable increase was possible in the scale of shore-based air co-operation. The Royal Air Force in Iceland undertook, as far as the weather would permit, to provide anti-submarine escort to the convoys as far as 73° North, ice reconnaissance daily when they were west of Jan Mayen and fighter protection for forces in Icelandic ports. Eleven Catalinas and thirty-two torpedo carrying Hampdens, of which five were lost on passage, were flown to North Russia to provide anti-submarine escort in the eastern end of the Barents Sea and reconnaissance and a striking force in case the German heavy ships put to sea. Arrangements were also made for P.R.U.* aircraft in increased numbers to reconnoitre the Norwegian fiords, working from the United Kingdom and North Russia. Russian promises of anti-submarine escort, fighter cover and bombing attacks on German aerodromes were also made. An important addition to the air defence was the new auxiliary aircraft carrier AVENGER, equipped with twelve Sea Hurricanes and three Swordfish, who formed part of the escort of both convoys.

35. The ANSON (Vice Admiral Second in Command, Home Fleet†), DUKE OF YORK, JAMAICA and five short endurance destroyers were moved to Akureyri‡. Their radius of action was very limited, unless the destroyer screen was slipped, but they might be of value if the enemy surface forces unexpectedly attacked at the western part of the route: it was hoped too that their absence from Scapa would deceive the enemy and make him imagine that a heavy covering force was at sea as usual. I remained at Scapa in the KING GEORGE V to be in touch with the latest intelligence and in general control of the operations.

36. Additional cover was provided for Q.P.14 after passing Bear Island by a force of five cruisers and four destroyers, under Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron§, after they had carried stores to the Norwegian force in Spitzbergen. Endurance would not permit this force to cover P.Q.18 as well.

Preliminary Movements

37. In order to reduce as far as possible the duration of the operation for the destroyer covering force and the escort of P.Q.18, the convoy was brought from Loch Ewe to the Denmark Strait by a separate escort from the Western Approaches Command, the permanent escort starting from Icelandic ports. It was necessary to hold three conferences, one at

Loch Ewe for the convoy and others at Hvalfjord and Seidisfjord for the escort and covering forces. These were conducted in succession by Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers.

38. The convoy sailed from Loch Ewe on 2nd September and immediately met foul weather. It arrived off Skagi on 7th September, thirty-six hours astern of station, and was there joined by the ocean escort of three destroyers, four corvettes, two anti-aircraft ships and four trawlers. Apart from the weather, and two U-boat contacts, the passage so far had been uneventful.

39. The weather improved on 8th September and the convoy was joined the next morning by Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers, in the SCYLLA, eight destroyers, the AVENGER, two Hunt class destroyers to escort her, three minesweepers and two submarines, all from Seidisfjord. The other eight destroyers of the covering force were sailed direct from Akureyri to refuel at Lowe Sound, Spitzbergen. The oilers OLIGARCH and BLUE RANGER, escorted by four destroyers, had sailed from Scapa for Lowe Sound on 3rd September.

Submarines

40. Besides the two submarines which formed part of the close escort, four were disposed off the Northern Lofoten Islands in an attempt to intercept the German surface ships if they moved north, and three off the north coast in the usual covering positions. The SCHEER, HIPPER and KOLN moved up from Narvik to Altenfjord on 10th September. They were sighted by all four submarines on the coastal patrols, TIGRIS, TRIBUNE, UREDD and P.54; but the TIGRIS alone was close enough to fire torpedoes: her attack was spoilt by one of the screening destroyers, which almost rammed her just before she fired, and the torpedoes missed astern. After this, the four inshore submarines were moved up to join the covering patrol off the north coast.

First Contact

41. The convoy was first sighted by an enemy aircraft late on 8th September, but was not shadowed until 12th September. This immunity was due to clouds and low visibility; but it did not unduly disturb the enemy, for his U-boats were in contact and shadowing from 10th September onwards. It did, however, prevent the early and comparatively small scale air attacks which had been directed against previous convoys; and thus had the unexpected and unfortunate result of depriving the guns and fighters of the practice and experience which would have helped them to deal with the first massed attack.

Fuelling

42. The SCYLLA and five of the destroyers with the convoy parted company north-east of Jan Mayen Island on 11th September and proceeded to Lowe Sound to fuel. The eight destroyers which had been fuelling joined the convoy early on 13th September, and the force with Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers rejoined at noon the same day. The two oilers and their screen left Lowe Sound and cruised to the north-westwards to fuel the

Admiralty footnotes:—

* P.R.U.—Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

† Vice Admiral Sir Bruce A. Fraser, K.B.E., C.B.

‡ On the north coast of Iceland.

§ Vice Admiral S. S. Bonham-Carter, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O.

destroyers of the cruiser force and await the return of the destroyer covering force. All the destroyers with the convoy were topped up in succession throughout the passage by the two oilers in company.

U-Boat and Air Attacks

43. Though several promising attacks on U-boats had already been made by the escorts, the first losses to the convoy from U-boat attack did not occur until just before Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers rejoined: two ships were sunk.

44. The air attacks started in the afternoon with a diversion by six bombers, followed immediately by a massed attack by forty to fifty torpedo aircraft, each carrying two torpedoes. This attack came in low, and little more than visual warning was obtained, with the result that the fighters were caught out of position, chasing bombers and shadowers. The attack was pressed right home and eight ships were sunk. Two smaller torpedo attacks were made that day, but no more ships were hit. One more serious loss occurred during the night, the large freighting tanker *ATHEL TEMPLAR* being sunk by U-boat.

45. As a result of his experience on the first day, the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. *AVENGER*, decided to change his tactics and reserve his fighters for the heavy attacks. Fighter patrols were relieved at short intervals, so that they should not be short of fuel or ammunition if an attack developed without warning, and the main force of fighters was not normally flown off until the striking force was actually in sight. This system, though it did not give the fighters time to prevent an attack from developing, did ensure that they should harass its final stages, disturbing the enemy and spoiling his aim.

46. Combined with the greater accuracy of anti-aircraft gunfire, which came with experience, the new tactics proved successful. Two heavy torpedo attacks, by twenty-two and twenty-five aircraft respectively, and two bombing attacks, all on 14th September, succeeded only in sinking one merchant ship; and a prolonged attack by about seventy bombers on the next day was entirely without success. During the whole period, just over two days, of concentrated air attack, the enemy lost at least forty aircraft: there can be little doubt that these heavy casualties, especially among his limited supply of really skilled torpedo pilots, was largely responsible for the steady decline in the size and vigour of his attacks.

47. The *AVENGER*, whose flying deck is too small for landing on when the ship is pitching, was fortunate in having calm weather throughout the operation. The precaution of attaching two Hunt class destroyers to the *AVENGER*, for her close protection, proved its value. Several attacks were directed especially at her, but she suffered no damage.

48. No more air attacks were made on P.Q.18 while the destroyer covering force was in company, but off Cape Kanin, near the entrance to the White Sea, three further attacks succeeded in sinking one more ship. Three more ran aground in a heavy gale off the Dvina Bar, but were later refloated, so that twenty-seven of the original forty, and all the escort, arrived safely at Archangel.

Q.P.14

49. The westbound convoy of sixteen merchant ships, escorted by two Hunt class destroyers, two anti-aircraft ships, four corvettes, three minesweepers and four trawlers, sailed from Archangel on 13th September. They were routed east of P.Q.18 to pass that convoy in approximate latitude 73° 30' North, off Nova Zemlya. Here, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers with his sixteen destroyers, the *AVENGER* and her two Hunt class destroyers, and the two convoy oilers, transferred in three groups from P.Q.18 to Q.P.14 during the night of 16th/17th September.

50. The latter convoy had been sighted earlier by German aircraft, but the weather was now thick and no shadowers were present to witness the transfer. Nor had any U-boats apparently succeeded in following the covering force across. The favourable weather continued, and in spite of one aircraft sighting on 18th September, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had hopes of getting safely past the southern end of Spitzbergen and evading further attack by a turn there to the north-westward. But the convoy was located again by two enemy aircraft on the morning of 19th September, and the U-boat pack joined up again during the day.

51. Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had decided not to weaken the escort by going again to Lowe Sound to refuel. He had detached two destroyers to bring one oiler from there to join the convoy, and to order the other, with her escort, to return to Iceland. One ship, which had straggled soon after leaving the White Sea, rejoined; and another straggler was collected by a destroyer detached from the convoy and escorted to join the Spitzbergen oiler force.

52. No air attacks developed, but the U-boat pack, whose performance so far had been mediocre, made a final effort to redeem their failure. In spite of vigorous counter-attacks by the powerful escort, they succeeded in sinking the minesweeper *LEDA* (Commander A. H. Wynne-Edwards, R.N.) and one merchant ship on 20th September, and in hitting the *SOMALI* (Lieutenant Commander C. D. Maud, D.S.C., R.N.) in the engine room. The latter was taken in tow by the *ASHANTI*. The tow continued under difficult and dangerous conditions for four nights and three days; but then a northerly gale arose and the *SOMALI* broke in half and sank, a most unfortunate end to a gallant attempt.

53. In view of the U-boat menace, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had meanwhile detached the *SCYLLA* and *AVENGER* to Seidisfiord, transferring his flag to the *MILNE*. On 22nd September two more merchant ships and the R.F.A. *GREY RANGER* were sunk by U-boats*. The convoy had been routed east of Iceland and through to Loch Ewe, and the covering force destroyers

Admiralty footnote:—

* As a result of these U-boat movements, the convoy was given anti-U-boat escort by Catalinas from Sullom Voe. On the 23rd September, one of these aircraft, although it did not actually meet the convoy, sighted a U-boat at 0533 Z in the vicinity of the convoy and steering a course of 160° towards it. This U-boat was attacked by the aircraft with six depth charges and destroyed.

remained in company as far as Cape Wrath, which was reached on 26th September without further loss.

54. They had been escorting the two convoys in succession in conditions of almost continual action for a period of 18 days. To their untiring vigilance is mainly due the fact that the losses were no heavier. These losses summarised were:—

P.Q.18. Ten merchant ships by air attack, three by U-boat. Arrived twenty-seven. Four fighters lost (three pilots safe).

Q.P.14. SOMALI, LEDA, GREY RANGER and three merchant ships by U-boat. Arrived sixteen.

German. At least three U-boats sunk and several more damaged. At least forty aircraft shot down and many more damaged. About two hundred and fifty aircraft torpedoes were expended.

Battlefleet

55. Vice Admiral Second in Command, Home Fleet, with the battlefleet, put to sea from Akureyri on 11th September, with the hope of inducing the enemy to believe that heavy cover as far as the Bear Island area was being provided as usual. In this he was probably successful, for he was sighted on 12th September, on a north-easterly course, and was not again located, though he returned to Akureyri two days later. A similar movement was made from 19th to 22nd September, but was not detected by the enemy.

Submarine Operations

56. All available submarines were employed providing cover and escort for these convoys. After the passage of *P.Q.18* and *Q.P.14*, the *TIGRIS* and *TRIBUNE* were diverted to patrol off the Lofotens for the German heavy ships returning to Narvik from Altenfiord; but nothing was seen of them. The *RUBIS* at the same time laid mines on their expected route. Shortly after parting company with *Q.P.14*, one of the escorting submarines, *P.614*, torpedoed and sank a U-boat.

Summary of Results

57. The approximate scale of attack and the losses for the convoys run during the quarter were:—

58. In attacks on convoys and escorts on this route, the German Air Force achieved the following results (figures for the previous quarter in brackets):—

	<i>Bombers</i>	<i>Torpedo aircraft</i>
Sorties	126 (248)	173 (44)
Sunk	0 (7)	13 (4)
Sorties per sinking	— (35)	13 (11)

EXTRACT FROM DESPATCH COVERING THE PERIOD 1ST OCTOBER TO 31ST DECEMBER, 1942

Home Fleet,
4th March, 1943.

Return of Hampden Crews

1. After the passages of *P.Q.18* and *Q.P.14*, the two squadrons of Hampden torpedo aircraft which had flown to Russia for this operation were presented to the Russians. The *ARGONAUT*, *INTREPID* and *OBDURATE* sailed on 13th October to bring home the crews of these aircraft. On the outward passage these ships carried the medical unit, which the Soviet Government had now consented to allow ashore, and food for the British forces in North Russia. The Norwegian expedition in Spitzbergen had also discovered some fresh needs for the winter; and the ships called at Barentsburg on the way.

2. The passage was made without incident, save for one sighting by enemy aircraft: the force reached Kola Inlet on 21st October, sailed the next day and arrived at Scapa on 28th October.

Independent Sailings

3. After considerable discussion with the Admiralty, it was decided at the end of October to sail about ten ships independently each way between Iceland and North Russia, taking advantage of the long nights and the passage north of Bear Island. The original plan was to sail the ships at 100-mile intervals in order of speed; but for political reasons it was necessary to sail British and American ships alternately, which led occasionally to one ship overtaking another on passage. Trawlers were spaced along the route for life-saving; and the Admiralty ordered two submarines as well to be used for this purpose.

4. The first eastbound ship left Reykjavik on 29th October and was followed by twelve others. The first indication to the enemy that

Convoy	Ships sailed	Attacked by	Ships lost	Reached destination
<i>P.Q. 17</i>	38 (+ 2 rescue vessels joined later)	U-boats 6 bombers 33 torpedo aircraft ...	0 } +21 0 } after 3 } scattering	13
<i>Q.P. 13</i>	35	No	5 own minefield ...	30
<i>P.Q. 18</i>	40	U-boats 140 torpedo aircraft ... 120 bombers	3 10 0	27
<i>Q.P. 14</i>	20	U-boats	4	16

Notes

(i) In *P.Q.17*, two of the ships turned back to their port of departure, whilst one went aground the day after sailing but was subsequently salvaged.

(ii) About 15 U-boats operated against each pair of convoys.

(iii) Fleet oilers and rescue vessels in company with the convoys are included in these numbers, but escorts are not.

anything was in the wind was an attack by the NORTHERN SPRAY, one of the rescue trawlers, on a U-boat near Jan Mayen Island. It is probable that the news of this encounter led the enemy to increase his air reconnaissance and U-boat patrols. Of the thirteen east-bound ships, five reached Archangel, four were sunk, one ran aground near South Cape, Spitzbergen, and three returned to Iceland. Only four westbound ships were sailed, of which three arrived safely at Akureyri: the fourth was recalled when it became apparent that there was considerable enemy activity in the Barents Sea, but failed to get the signal and was sunk. A fifth westbound Russian ship was sailed on 14th November, just ahead of Q.P.15, and arrived safely. The Russians thereafter continued to sail ships independently in the intervals between convoys: four more were sailed late in November and fifteen in December: all arrived without loss.

Q:P.15

5. The operations for the occupation of French North Africa left too few ships in the Home Fleet to provide escorts on the earlier scale; but the light and ice conditions, more favourable than at any other time of the year, and the withdrawal of much of the German Air Force in Northern Norway offered opportunities for more lightly escorted convoys. It was therefore decided to resume this traffic in mid-November with a westbound convoy from the White Sea.

6. As the passage would be made in almost continuous darkness, and foul weather could also be expected, I requested that the convoy should be limited to twenty ships, but the Admiralty directed that thirty ships should be included. It sailed on 17th November, escorted by five minesweepers, four corvettes, one trawler and one A.A. ship; and was to be reinforced in the Barents Sea by five destroyers under the command of Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, relieved by five others from a position west of Bear Island. The Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron*, in the LONDON, with the SUFFOLK and three destroyers, provided surface cover west of Bear Island. One Russian and three British submarines operated off the exits from Altenfiord, to deter the HIPPER and KOLN from sailing.

7. The convoy met a succession of gales throughout its passage. These, with the almost complete lack of daylight, caused it to become very scattered. Neither destroyer force succeeded in making contact with the main body; and by the time the convoy had passed Bear Island, it and its escort had broken up into a number of small groups, spread over a large area and without knowledge of each other's whereabouts. The route was adjusted to pass south of Bear Island and avoid the normal U-boat concentration between there and Spitzbergen, but many ships did not receive the amending signal.

8. In the absence of air reconnaissance, for which the weather was quite unsuitable, the enemy was presumably even more lacking in knowledge of the situation than ourselves. Of the thirty ships which sailed, twenty-seven

arrived safely in Icelandic waters, one returned to Kola Inlet and two were sunk, both probably by U-boats. The safe arrivals were rounded up and taken straight on in two convoys to Loch Ewe.

Mid-winter Policy

9. From late November to mid-January the lack of daylight is such that air reconnaissance in the Arctic is virtually impossible. Provided that a convoy is of such a size that it can be handled and kept together, it therefore stands an excellent chance of evading both U-boat and surface attack, and even of completing the passage without the enemy knowing of its existence. A large convoy, on the other hand, is likely to fail to keep in company and to split, as did Q.P.15, into a large number of small groups, covering a vast area and unaware of each other's position or composition. Such small groups would be more liable to detection by U-boats than a single concentrated convoy, and would present the enemy surface forces with an ideal opportunity for an offensive sweep. Our own covering forces are always handicapped by having to identify a radar contact before they are free to attack: the enemy need not do so. The splitting of the convoy into a large number of scattered units would greatly add to this handicap.

10. It was obviously advantageous to run through as many ships as possible during this short dark period, rather than to defer our commitments until air reconnaissance could start again. Though it would be impossible to provide strong surface escort for a large number of small convoys, the chances of evasion were, in my opinion, so good that the risk of interception by superior surface forces should be accepted.

11. I had asked that about six merchant ships, escorted by three trawlers, should be held ready in Iceland to sail shortly before the arrival of Q.P.15 if the U-boats were drawn out of position by that convoy; but the Admiralty did not approve this suggestion. They proposed instead to wait until 22nd December and then to sail a convoy of thirty-one ships, with an escort of summer dimensions. The experience of Q.P.15 confirmed my opinion that a convoy of this size could not be handled: the Admiralty proposal, moreover, would waste the first half of the dark period.

12. I therefore signalled my intention on 25th November to limit the convoy in size and asked that the assembly of the first ten ships might be hastened. This small convoy was to be escorted by four destroyers from the Home Fleet and any minesweepers and trawlers which could be made available. The Admiralty, however, insisted in their reply of 26th November that it was essential to provide a covering force strong enough to deal with the scale of attack which they expected, and considered that the only alternatives were either to sail thirty ships in company, or in three groups so close together that one force could cover all three. After further discussion, including a visit to London by my Chief of Staff, I was directed to sail the convoy in two parts of sixteen ships each, escorted by seven destroyers and some smaller craft; and the Home Fleet was reinforced by two 6-inch

Admiralty footnote:—

* Rear Admiral L. H. K. Hamilton, D.S.O.

cruisers to allow of cruiser cover in the Barents Sea.

13. The large number of U-boats which usually surround and accompany these seven-knot convoys are a serious menace to covering cruisers so far from their base. The experience of the past year, and especially the loss of the EDINBURGH, had underlined this risk. After balancing it against the risk of surface attack, my intention had been that the 6-inch cruisers, if they became available, should provide cover as far as 25° East and then return to Iceland. The Admiralty, however, were insistent that the cruisers should cover the convoys right through to Kola; this insistence was fully justified in the event, for otherwise the cruiser force would probably not have been present at the action on New Year's Eve.

J.W.51A

14. For security reasons, the titles of the convoys were changed from P.Q. and Q.P. to J.W. and R.A., both starting with the number 51. The first sixteen ships were assembled at Loch Ewe on 15th December. So that no more time should be wasted, it was decided to sail them direct from there, followed a week later by the next sixteen, all routed east of the Faroes.

15. The first group, J.W.51A, was escorted from Loch Ewe by three Hunt class destroyers, one minesweeper, two corvettes and two trawlers, the Hunts being relieved north-east of Iceland by seven destroyers under Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla from Seidisfiord. The Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet* in the SHEFFIELD, with the JAMAICA, OPPORTUNE and MATCHLESS, was to provide cover to the vicinity of Iceland, enter Seidisfiord to refuel and again provide cover from 15° East: but low visibility prevented the cruisers from getting into Seidisfiord, so the two destroyers were detached to fuel and join the close escort, while the Rear Admiral (D) proceeded with the cruisers.

16. I sailed from Scapa on 19th December in the KING GEORGE V, with the BERWICK and three destroyers, to provide cover to the westwards of 15° East, subsequently returning to Scapa. Four submarines were disposed off the exits from Altenfiord.

17. No enemy forces of any sort were encountered, and the convoy arrived intact at Kola Inlet on Christmas Day, the only incident having been a report by a Russian aircraft of two ships which proved to be the OPPORTUNE and MATCHLESS. Five ships of the convoy were detached off Kildin Island and arrived at Molotovsk, in the White Sea, on 27th December.

J.W.51B and R.A.51

18. Only fourteen ships were ready for the next convoy, J.W.51B, which left Loch Ewe on 22nd December with an escort similar to its predecessor. The BULLDOG, on passage to Seidisfiord, suffered severe weather damage; so Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla had only six destroyers in company when he sailed from there to join the convoy. Cover as far as 15° East was provided by the ANSON, wearing the flag of the Vice Admiral Second in

Command, Home Fleet*, with the CUMBERLAND and three destroyers, sailing from Akureyri on 26th December.

19. A westbound convoy, R.A.51, of thirteen ships, with the escort from J.W.51A, left Kola Inlet on 30th December. The Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet, with his cruiser force, was to cover both these convoys in the Barents Sea and subsequently, if fuel permitted, to return to Seidisfiord.

20. The first part of the passage of J.W.51B was without incident, though it is possible that the convoy was sighted by enemy aircraft on 24th December. The ORIBI had a gyro compass failure and lost touch on 28th: after searching for twenty-four hours she failed to regain contact, and proceeded independently to Kola. During that night a gale arose and the port wing column of the convoy lost touch: the BRAMBLE was detached to search for these ships and the VIZALMA, stationed astern of the column, also lost touch with the main body. Neither of these rejoined the convoy, but three of the merchant ships later succeeded in doing so.

Surface Action

21. At 0830 on New Year's Eve, the situation was therefore as follows. The convoy, now reduced to twelve ships, was on an easterly course, about 220 miles north-north-west of the Kola Inlet and 13 miles south of its ordered route. The escort still in company consisted of H.M. destroyers ONSLOW (Captain R. St. V. Sherbrooke, D.S.O., R.N., Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla), OBEDIENT (Lieutenant Commander D. C. Kinloch, R.N.), ORWELL (Lieutenant Commander N. H. G. Austen, D.S.O., R.N.), OBDURATE (Lieutenant Commander C. E. L. Sclater, D.S.O., R.N.) and ACHATES (Lieutenant Commander A. H. T. Johns, R.N.), H.M. corvettes RHODODENDRON (Lieutenant Commander L. A. Sayers, R.N.R.) and HYDERABAD (Lieutenant S. C. B. Hickman, D.S.C., R.N.R.), and H.M. trawler NORTHERN GEM (Skipper Lieutenant W. J. Mullender, R.D., R.N.R.). Some 35 miles to the northward was H.M. trawler VIZALMA (Temporary Lieutenant J. R. Anglebeck, R.N.V.R.) with one merchant ship in company, and about 15 miles to the north-eastward was H.M.S. BRAMBLE (Commander H. T. Rust, D.S.O., R.N.). Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., O.B.E. (Rear Admiral (D), Home Fleet) flying his flag in H.M.S. SHEFFIELD (Captain A. W. Clarke, R.N.), with H.M.S. JAMAICA (Captain J. L. Storey, R.N.) in company, was about 25 miles north of the convoy and 10 miles south of the VIZALMA. None of these four groups knew each other's relative position, and there was one other straggler in the vicinity.

22. Reports had been received of D/F bearings on one U-boat well ahead of the convoy, one U-boat well to the southward and an enemy destroyer off North Cape; and a suspected U-boat had been reported and attacked without success the evening before. But there was otherwise no indication that the enemy was at sea, or even aware of the passage of the convoy.

23. The visibility in the twilight was about 7 miles to the northward and 10 miles to the

Admiralty footnote:—

*Rear Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., O.B.E.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Vice Admiral Sir Bruce A. Fraser, K.B.E., C.B.

southward. The sky was mostly covered with low cloud; wind W.N.W. force 3; sea slight with no swell. There were 16 degrees of frost, and ice on all ships.

24. The HYDERABAD, on the starboard quarter of the convoy, sighted two destroyers (later seen to be three) bearing 180° at 0820: she thought they were Russian destroyers coming to reinforce the escort and did not report them: but they were sighted and reported soon afterwards by the OBDURATE, stationed on the starboard beam of the convoy. She closed them at best speed and they retired to the north-westward, across the stern of the convoy, opening fire at 0930 on the OBDURATE, who retired on the convoy. Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla, from ahead, altered down the port side of the convoy and ordered the destroyers to concentrate. While the ORWELL, OBEDIENT and OBDURATE were moving to comply, the ACHATES, whose station was on the port quarter, started to lay a smoke screen to cover the convoy, which made an emergency turn to 135°.

25. Before the other destroyers had joined, the ONSLOW sighted a large ship to the north-westward, coming towards her at high speed. This was probably the HIPPER. She turned east and opened fire on the ACHATES, who was very conspicuous because of her smoke screen. The ONSLOW immediately opened fire, at 9,000 yards, and turned to a course parallel to the enemy to keep between her and the convoy. The other three "O" class destroyers were now joining and the enemy retired to the northward under smoke, firing a few salvos at the convoy as she did so.

26. Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla concluded that the enemy was unwilling to face the risk of torpedo attack by our destroyers and for the next 25 minutes he made use of this fact. He detached the OBEDIENT and OBDURATE to close the convoy and increase its protection against any attempt by the enemy destroyers to attack; and himself in the ONSLOW, with the ORWELL in company, conducted an intermittent action with the HIPPER, scoring several hits and preventing her from coming any closer to the convoy. At 1020, however, the ONSLOW was hit four times in rapid succession and suffered considerable damage. A and B guns were put out of action and fire broke out in the fore superstructure and messdeck, the main aerials and both radar sets were destroyed, the engine room holed, and Captain (D) was severely wounded in the face, disabling the left eye so that he could not see. In spite of this severe handicap he continued to direct the flotilla and his ship until compelled to disengage the ONSLOW as a result of a further hit. Only after receiving reports that the hole in his engine room was plugged, that the main engines and steering gear were still efficient and that OBEDIENT had taken charge of the destroyers in accordance with his signalled instructions did he consent to leave his bridge to receive medical attention. From his sea cabin he continued to receive reports of the action and to advise Lieutenant Commander T. J. G. Marchant, R.N., who assumed command of the ONSLOW.*

Admiralty footnote:—

* Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla, Captain R. St. V. Sherbrooke, D.S.O., R.N., was subsequently awarded the V.C. for his conduct on this occasion.

27. Rear Admiral (D) meanwhile, away to the northward, had at 0858 obtained radar contact on a ship to the north-westward of his force. While closing to identify this echo he sighted at 0932 gun flashes over the horizon to the southward, but considered that they were H.A. fire. The echo was the VIZALMA and her merchant vessel; but before they could be identified as such, the gunfire to the southward increased and an enemy report was received from Captain (D) 17. Course was altered to close and speed worked up to 31 knots.

28. About 1030, soon after the ONSLOW had suffered her damage, two ships were detected by SHEFFIELD's radar, one bearing 180° and the other 140°, both on an easterly course. From subsequent examination of the reports it appears probable (but by no means certain) that the former was the HIPPER and the latter the LUTZOW, some miles ahead of her. Although both ships came in sight soon after and were seen to be larger than destroyers, and therefore enemy; it was impossible to identify them precisely: Rear Admiral (D) therefore altered to the eastward to allow the radar action plot to become clearer*.

29. After the cruisers had been on this course for about 20 minutes, the leading enemy ship (probably LUTZOW) altered to starboard towards the convoy and Rear Admiral (D) turned towards the other, who soon followed her consort to the southward. The SHEFFIELD and JAMAICA opened fire on this second ship (probably HIPPER) and appeared to take her completely by surprise, as she failed to reply till after the SHEFFIELD's fourth salvo. Hits were seen almost at once and the enemy appeared to alter towards under cover of smoke. While the SHEFFIELD was starting to conform, a destroyer was suddenly sighted fine on the bow and fire was shifted to this new target. She was hit at once and repeatedly, and left in a sinking condition. The Germans later admitted the loss of this destroyer. The JAMAICA meanwhile was engaging another destroyer, which turned away and was lost to view.

30. During this action the radar had continued to track the original target (probably HIPPER), and as soon as it was over the chase was resumed. She was sighted again at 1215 and soon after two destroyers and the second large ship (probably LUTZOW) came in sight, all steering to the westward. The last named ship had probably made a wider sweep to the east and south than her consort and sank the BRAMBLE in the course of it; for a report was received from the BRAMBLE of an enemy cruiser, and an engagement was seen in her probable direction between a heavy ship and a much smaller one which fired a single gun and pom-pom tracer. At 1045 an enemy ship from the north-eastward came in sight of the OBEDIENT, and the destroyers protecting the convoy once more went into action. It is not possible definitely to establish which ship this was: there is some evidence to suggest that it was a third heavy ship, possibly a 6-inch cruiser, or it may have been the LUTZOW.

31. Since the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. OBEDIENT had taken command and the

Admiralty footnote:—

* The enemy force was in fact LUTZOW, HIPPER and six large destroyers, one of which was sunk.

HIPPER had been driven off, the close escort had been shepherding the convoy to the southward. Several enemy ships had been reported, but none of these attacked and it is possible that these reports were mistaken. The OBEDIENT, ORWELL and OBDURATE were concentrated between the convoy and the enemy heavy ships, the ONSLOW was stationed at the head of the convoy, and the ACHATES, who reported that she was holed forward and speed reduced to 15 knots, was ordered to proceed to the same position. She had been covering the convoy with smoke, with the utmost coolness and efficiency, since the start of the action, and had sustained this damage from a near miss at about 0945.

32. Unfortunately, she again became the first target of the attacking heavy unit (LUTZOW or 6-inch cruiser). Her bridge was hit, her Commanding Officer killed, and considerable damage was sustained in a boiler room and elsewhere. In spite of this she continued, under the command of her First Lieutenant, Lieutenant L. E. P. Jones, R.N., to screen the convoy with smoke for another hour and forty minutes, until compelled at 1300 to ask the NORTHERN GEM to stand by. Half an hour later the ACHATES sank. The loss of this ship and so many of her fine company, after the outstanding work she had done, is most deeply regretted. Eighty-one survivors were picked up.

33. The enemy ship, after damaging the ACHATES, had been engaging the remaining three destroyers, trying to break through to the convoy. She managed to put the OBEDIENT's W/T out of action, and the OBDURATE was ordered to assume command, but apart from this she had no success, while several hits were claimed on her. Two destroyers which followed her took no part in the action. She disappeared to the north-westwards at 1130. Twice more during the next forty minutes did an enemy heavy ship approach the convoy but each time she was driven off by the escort. On the first of these occasions the shell splashes are reported to have been larger than any others seen that day, and it seems probable that these two attacks, at any rate, were made by the LUTZOW. Finally, this ship, whoever she was, also withdrew to the north-westward.

34. The SHEFFIELD and JAMAICA maintained touch with the two heavy ships until 1345, by which time it was established beyond all doubt that they were retiring towards their base. Minor splinter damage was sustained but no casualties. The cruisers then returned to cover the convoy.

35. The close escort, who were unaware that the enemy had finally left, spent an anxious night; but no further attack developed and the convoy arrived complete at Kola Inlet.

36. The conduct of all officers and men of the escort and covering forces throughout this successful action against greatly superior forces was in accordance with the traditions of the service. That an enemy force of at least one pocket battleship, one heavy cruiser and six destroyers, with all the advantage of surprise and concentration, should be held off for four hours by five destroyers and driven from the area by two 6-inch cruisers, without any loss to the convoy, is most creditable and satisfactory.

Additional Cover.

37. Though full information of the progress of this action did not become available till later, it was evident that the cruiser force was unlikely to have enough fuel remaining to cover R.A.51 throughout the dangerous part of its passage. I therefore put to sea in the KING GEORGE V, with the HOWE, KENT, BERWICK, BERMUDA and six destroyers, to give additional cover. The weather limited the speed of the destroyers, so the Rear Admiral Commanding, 1st Cruiser Squadron was detached with the two heavy cruisers to proceed at best speed to a covering position south-west of Bear Island; the battlefleet occupied a covering area further to the west.

38. The enemy surface forces, however, had apparently had enough. Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, in command of the escort, by the help of D/F bearings and contacts obtained with radar, manoeuvred the convoy to avoid the small number of U-boats which were on patrol and brought it without loss to the United Kingdom.

Summary of Results

39. The approximate scale of attack and the losses of merchant shipping on this route during the quarter were:—

Convoy	Ships sailed	Attacked by	Ships lost	Reached destination
Q.P. 15	30	U-boats	2	27
J.W. 51A	16	—	—	16
J.W. 51B	14	Heavy surface forces... U-boats	—	14
R.A. 51	14	—	—	14
Independents ...	37	Unknown	6	28

Notes

(i) Where the sum of the columns 4 and 5 is less than column 2, the remaining ships returned to their port of departure.

(ii) The U-boat effort was smaller than in the previous quarters, and varied between 3 and 7 against each convoy.

(iii) Air attacks were experienced by a few of the independently sailed ships only.

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