

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.