

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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