

## Battle of the Barents Sea

31 December 1942

(submitted by: George Gerolimos)

The closing month of 1942 would prove to be decisive for the *Kriegsmarine*, though hardly in the way German Naval Staffs expected. Ever since Exercise Rhine, German naval commanders had searched for new opportunities for the surface forces of the navy. *Grossadmiral* Raeder, taking a hint from Hitler's continued preoccupation with the possibility of an invasion of Norway, suggested that the navy's heavy forces (including the newly commissioned *Tirpitz*) be centered in Norwegian waters, the "zone of destiny". The redeployment met at first with spectacular success, such as the "Channel Dash" of the Brest squadron (*Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau*, and *Prinz Eugen*), though German commanders may have privately noted that the redeployment of Germany's heavy ships in Norway was tacit admission that the Atlantic forays were over.

By the last months of 1942, despite the presence of considerable forces in northern waters, German surface units had yet to make much of an impact. True, the convoy PQ17 was nearly annihilated, but the destruction was wrought by the *Luftwaffe* and U-boats. The outcome of the *Bismarck* episode made Hitler extremely wary of risking his heavy ships, and one of the conditions imposed on Raeder was that the convoy must not be escorted by aircraft-carriers. *Tirpitz* and escorting units did sail, but saw practically no action.

At 0300 hours, 30 December 1942, U354 reported a lightly guarded convoy of six to ten ships 50 miles south of Bear Island. As the various shore and sea commands buzzed in anticipation, it seemed that the surface fleet could be finally used in an offensive mission. Originally, *Admiral Hipper* and six escorting destroyers were slated to attack the convoy, but it was decided to use *Lützow* as well, as the short distance to the target area meant that her low speed might not be a problem, whereas her heavy guns could be decisive. However, the avoidance of risk that had characterized most heavy-unit sorties since *Rheinübung* again reared its head: *Lützow* was to conduct Arctic operations on her own at the conclusion of "*Regenbogen*", as the present operation was now named. Thus, VADM Kummetz, commander of the cruiser force, was ordered to avoid action with "superior forces", later amended to "equal forces."

Kummetz's plan was simple: with the six destroyers strung-out in a north-south search line, *Hipper* would stay to the north and make contact with the convoy from astern, herding the ships into the guns of the southerly *Lützow*. In the extreme north at this time of year, there was little real light: the surface forces would have to make do with a weak twilight at 08:05.

By 0718 *Hipper* had detected shadows to starboard, but postponed action until the visibility improved with the Arctic twilight. It was the destroyer *Eckoldt* which alerted the British that the convoy was threatened. The destroyer *Obdurate* informed CAPT Sherbrooke, commander of the British escorting forces (aboard *Onslow*) of the situation. The latter immediately ordered the destroyers *Obedient* and *Orwell* to concentrate under his command, while the *Obdurate* was to maintain contact with the enemy. *Achates* was to lay smoke.

The first phase of the battle was a classic holding-action by the British destroyers, who were the only forces between the *Hipper* and her escorts and the convoy to the

south. Using the benefit of poor visibility, smokescreens, and simulated torpedo attacks, the inferior British forces held the Germans at bay, while Force R, consisting of the light cruisers *Sheffield* and *Jamaica* (under RADM R. Burnett), raced south to succor the beleaguered escorts. The southern pincer of the German attack, *Lützow*, never threatened the convoy, as the poor visibility coupled with restrictive orders prevented her captain from aggressively using *Lützow's* formidable 11" guns.

By 1016 the tide of battle had seemed to swing in favor of the Germans – *Hipper* finally fixed the range to *Onslow*, hitting her heavily, wounding Sherbrooke. The damage suffered by his flagship forced him to transfer command to LTCDR Kinloch of *Obedient*.

At just that moment a forest of shells towered over *Hipper*. Her captain and Kummertz were stunned. An emergency turn to starboard was ordered, which threw the *Hipper* in a sharp heel to port. A 6" shell then crashed into No. 3 boiler room, temporarily cutting the cruiser's speed to 15 kn. By 1137 *Hipper* had been hit again, and a message from the high command, "no unnecessary risk", confirmed Kummertz's decision to break off action. *Eckoldt*, unaware that there were British cruiser in the vicinity, blundered into *Jamaica* and *Sheffield*: the latter promptly blew her apart. There were no survivors – her complement was 340 men. In return the Germans had sunk *Achates*, the diminutive minesweeper *Bramble*, and had heavily damaged *Onslow*. *Lützow's* contribution amounted to a few desultory shots against the convoy and Burnett's cruisers. Her Arctic foray was canceled.

The bitter recriminations that followed among German naval leaders resulted in Raeder's resignation and Hitler's categorical order to decommission or scrap major units of the surface fleet. Raeder's replacement, ADM Dönitz, seemed to confirm that the days of surface combat for German ships were numbered. Nevertheless, Dönitz managed to convince Hitler that the scrapping of heavy units would be a great waste, and hence planned to use assets such as *Scharnhorst* in future attacks.

Time: 0830 – 1215 (dawn 0805 at 70° north)

Weather: Snow squalls, very cold, visibility 10 nm to the south, 7 nm to the north

Sea State: low overcast, calm sea, gentle breeze from NNW at 16 kn

Special conditions: The cold temperatures affected the optics of ships on both sides. Players may elect to reduce H by -1 on a roll of 01-40, -2 on a roll of 01-25, and -3 on a roll of 01-10.

Set – up: At 0930 *Hipper*, escorted by *Z16 (Eckoldt)*, *Z4 (Beitzen)* and *Z29*, was closing the convoy from astern on a course 110° and 25 kn. *Obdurate* was 10nm (20,000 yd) south heading due east. A few minutes after 0930, *Onslow* was 10 nm to the east of *Obdurate* and headed NW to intercept the German vessels. In company was *Orwell* and *Obedient* shortly thereafter. *Achates* was somewhere between *Obdurate* and *Onslow*. Force R was about 50,000 yd north of this action when lookouts spotted gun flashes at 0930. *Lützow* and her escorts, *Z30*, *Z31* and *Z9 (Riedel)* were about the same distance from the battle as Burnett's cruisers were, but to the south. None of the commanders of the British ships knew where the others were, and Kummertz was hampered by interference from shore command, so the G.O.D may elect to restrict communication between admirals and captains to reflect these situations.

## Order of Battle

### German

*Admiral Hipper* [0486-1] – flagship of VADM O. Kummetz, CAPT H. Hartmann

*Lützow* [2649-2] CAPT R. Stange

*Eckoldt (Z16)* [0572-1]– flagship of 5<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla; CAPT A. Schemmel

*Beitzen (Z4)* [0556-1]– CDR H. von Davidson

*Riedel (Z6)* [0558-1]– CDR W. Riede

*Z29* [4143-0]– CDR C. Rechel

*Z30* [4144-0]– CDR H. Kaiser

*Z31* [4145-0]– CDR H. Alberts

Command and crew quality should be average or better, though Kummetz may be given a lower Flag Command Rating if so desired.

### British

Force R (RADM R. L. Burnett, in *Sheffield*)

*Sheffield* [0939-2] – CAPT A.W. Clarke

*Jamaica* [0968-0] – CAPT J.L. Storey

### Close escort

*Onslow* [1301-0] – CAPT R. St.V. Sherbrooke

*Achates* [8491-1] – LCDR A.H.T. Johns

*Obedient* [1307-0] – LCDR D.C. Kinloch

*Obdurate* [1306-0] – LCDR. C.E.L. Sclater

*Bramble* [8553-1] – CDR H.T. Rust

*Orwell* [1309-0] – LCDR N.H.G. Austen

*Rhododendron* [8596-0]

*Hyderabad* [8596-0]