

## PART 2 - USE OF SPECIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HOME OPERATIONS

### CHAPTER VIII

#### THE BATTLE OF THE NORTH CAPE, 26th DECEMBER 1943 SINKING OF "SCHARNHORST"

The "Scharnhorst" left the Baltic in March 1943 and after a short stay in Narvik Joined the "Tirpitz" and 4th Destroyer Flotilla in Altafjord at the beginning of April. Except for occasional exercises in the fjord and changes of berth to Kaafjord and Langfjord she was inactive. Her presence however, flanking the route of our convoys to and from North Russia, was an important factor in the arrangements made by the C. in C. Home Fleet for the safe conduct of these convoys. At this time Special Intelligence was serving us well and, beyond the periodical short delays in breaking, we were kept well informed of the activities in Altafjord.

"Scharnhorst" in  
Altafjord March -  
December 1943

On 11th December Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser (C. in C. Home Fleet), V.A.2, R.A.(D), C. in C. Rosyth, A.C.O.S., C.S.1, C.S.10, F.O.S/M, A.C.I.(C) and C. in C. Coastal Command were informed by Ultra that, on 9th December, "Scharnhorst" had arranged to carry out exercises in Altafjord on 14th December. They were kept informed of some details of these exercises until on the 19th they were told that the Admiral Commanding Battle Group had ordered the Battle Group to be at three hours' notice, and that reconnaissance from the Lofoten Islands was urgently requested against a British convoy to Russia, whose approach was assumed, as well as against heavy naval units also considered to be at sea. This tense situation was somewhat eased when C. in C. Home Fleet, was informed that the German reconnaissance had been cancelled on the 19th and again on the 20th and 21st owing to unfavourable weather, and that the Battle Group had reverted to six hours' notice at 1603 on 21st December.

Forewarnings  
and  
Preliminaries,  
11th 24th  
December

We will now leave the C. in C. Home Fleet with his knowledge that the Battle Group was awaiting intelligence before operating against the convoy, and consider the positions of our convoys and their escorts.

Convoy JW 55B, composed of 19 ships, left Loch Ewe at 1700 on 20th December bound for North Russia. At 0800/22nd - about three hours before the first known German sighting - the convoy's position was estimated by Admiralty to be about 60 miles N.N.E. of the Faroes. At 2300/23rd an escort force comprising H.M.S. "Duke of York" (wearing the flag of C. in C. Home Fleet), H.M.S. "Jamaica" and four destroyers left Akureyri (Iceland) to cover the onward passage of this convoy. RA 55A, a homeward-bound convoy of 21 vessels, sailed from Kola Inlet on 22nd December and was escorted by Admiral Sir Robert L. Burnett (C.S.10) in H.M.S. "Belfast", with H.M.Ships "Norfolk" and "Sheffield" in company.

The first sighting of convoy JW 553 by German ~~met reconnaissance~~ aircraft was made at 1045/22nd December in position 64°00' N. 06°00' W. An "Immediate" Ultra message was sent out at 0146/23rd reporting this to C. in C. Home Fleet and Flag Officers concerned, and adding that a U-boat had been ordered at

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1945/22nd to operate if conditions were favourable. At 1125 and 1214/23rd two further sightings of the convoy by enemy aircraft were reported, from which it was evident that the Germans appreciated that the convoy, probably covered by a strong escort, was making for the Bear Island area. C. in C. Home Fleet, C.S.10 and R.A. (D) were so informed at 0550/24th, and were given G.A.F. reconnaissance intentions for that day. They were also told of a message addressed to "Scharnhorst" at 2324/23rd which reported that no German U-boat was in contact with the convoy bound for North Russia. At 1025/24th C. in C. Home Fleet and C.S.10 were informed that the Battle Group had been ordered to three hours' readiness at 1300/22nd and that up to 0700/24th there were no signs that the Battle Group had left Altafjord. Weather conditions and defects in aircraft hampered German air reconnaissance throughout the 24th; but one sighting made at 1200 reported the convoy in 70°27' N. 03°25' E. on a course of 050°, speed 8 knots. This report was received in O.I.C. early on the 25th and was passed out by Ultra at 0210/25th.

The situation from the German angle on the afternoon of 24th December was, therefore, that the Germans knew of the position of convoy JW 55B and had estimated its course and speed. They knew nothing of convoy RA 55A and had not yet confirmed their suspicions that heavy British units were at sea. No U-boats were in touch with any of our forces. From the British angle the two British convoys were approaching each other on opposite courses; the C. in C. Home Fleet was at sea providing distant cover. He was aware of the probability of "Scharnhorst" attacking the convoys, but had no information that she had yet left Altafjord. He knew that JW 55B had been sighted by German air on 23rd December, but had no information that RA 55A had been sighted.

Mention must now be made of the U-boat situation of which we were kept fully informed by Special Intelligence.

At 0049/18th December four U-boats known as the "Arctic Group", reinforced by three more from the Baltic, were ordered to take up positions along a line 135 miles east of Bear Island. On the 19th these seven U-boats were ordered to move farther westward. Much signal traffic to and from these U-boats was read giving positions of attacking areas, warnings of intended air reconnaissance and flights, reports of hydrophone contacts, etc. This information was passed out by Ultra.

At 1800/24th the seven Arctic Group U-boats were ordered to occupy specified attacking areas. At 0900/25th one U-boat of this group reported a convoy on a course of 060° in position 72°25' N. 12°30' E. At 1045 the remaining U-boats were ordered to operate on the basis of this report. The U-boat in contact maintained hydrophone contact with destroyers and unidentified vessels until 1800/25th. One U-boat sustained damage and at 1917/25th was ordered to Hammerfest, the remainder to steer at maximum speed for a new patrol line extending from 72°27' N. 20°30' E. to 72°27' N. 22°10' E.

Situation 24th-  
25th December  
'43

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Meanwhile, in the Altafjord area, at 1056/25th "Scharnhorst" and 4th Destroyer Flotilla were ordered to be at one hour's notice from 1300/25th; at 1158/25th an R-boat was ordered by "Emergency" message to proceed forthwith to "Scharnhorst" in Langfjord, where she would receive further instructions; and at 1516 the Battle Group reported "readiness for sea at 1630". At 1715/25th a patrol vessel, apparently in Altafjord, was told that "Scharnhorst" would pass outwardbound at 1800/25th.

"Scharnhorst"  
sails, 25th  
December '43

These messages were broken in the middle watch of 26th December. At 0217/26th an "Emergency" Ultra was sent to C. in C. Home Fleet, C.S.10, R.A.(D), F.O.S/M, C.S.1, V.A.2, A.C.O.S., A.C.I.(C) and C. in C. Rosyth:

"Scharnhorst" probably sailed 1800A/25th December." There followed immediately a further Ultra giving fuller details, and adding a German reconnaissance report made at 1413/25th in position 72°52' N. 13°15' E. of a convoy 20 miles distant. This was the only sighting made by any of the six G.A.F. aircraft on reconnaissance duty on 25th December. A shadowing aircraft did, however, report in the evening of the 25th that there was no support group within 50 miles of the convoy, but gave no details of the composition of the convoy. It was therefore possible to assume early on 26th December that no British cruiser or heavy unit had been sighted by the enemy since at least the morning of 23rd December. The "Scharnhorst", now at sea, reported at 2100/25th that the weather conditions anticipated in the operation area would greatly impair the offensive action of destroyers, by reducing their speed. At 0800/26th the Admiralty estimated the position of convoy JW 55B as 60 miles south-east of Bear Island, and the position of the homeward-bound RA 55A as some 200 miles W.S.W. of Bear Island. There was no evidence as yet that the Germans suspected the presence of the latter. i

At 0043/26th U-boats were informed that "Scharnhorst" and five destroyers had left LoppHAVet the previous night with the intention of attacking the convoy at about 0900/26th. At 0945 the northernmost U-boat on the patrol line reported the convoy in 72°57' N. 19°30' E. with the result that at 1021 all U-boats were ordered to operate<sup>1</sup>. At 1055 a German aircraft reported a destroyer, and at 1012 a second aircraft located several unspecified vessels in 71°52' N. 20°45' E. but soon lost contact in the dark. Contact between surface forces was first made at 0936, when C.S.10 in H.M.S. "Belfast", with "Norfolk" and "Sheffield" in company, sighted "Scharnhorst" about 30 miles S.E. of Bear Island. "Scharnhorst" at first made off to the north, but at about 1200, still shadowed by C.S.10, she turned S.S.E. and twice attempted to attack the convoy, but on each occasion was driven off by the cruisers.

First Contacts,  
26th December

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<sup>1</sup> This information was sent out by Ultra at 1304/26th.

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Meanwhile C. in C. Home Fleet in H.M.S. 'Duke of York', accompanied by H.M.S. "Jamaica" and four destroyers, was moving up from the south-west and by 1200/26th was approximately 150 miles S.W. of "Scharnhorst", who continued to withdraw to the south-east. At 1617 C. in C. Home Fleet reported making contact, and an action of three and a half hours' duration ensued. At about 1700 "Scharnhorst" changed course towards the north; and a few minutes later to eastward. A hit by "Duke of York" on "Scharnhorst" at about 1806 appears to have reduced her speed and enabled destroyers to attack at 1845 and score three torpedo hits. This so reduced the range that "Duke of York" was able to open direct fire at 1900 at a range of 10,000 yards. At 1929 "Scharnhorst" was on fire and at 1945 sank about 60 miles north-east of Bear Island.

"Scharnhorst"  
sunk

*4 o/c on a dark  
winter's afternoon.  
Heavy ships to fight  
instead of unarmed  
m/v to massacre [?]*

The picture of the action afforded by Special Intelligence, but not available till after the action, was as follows: ,At 1240/26th the Battle Group reported being engaged by several heavy units in position 74°21' N. 22°50' E. Another message reported action with a "heavy battleship" at 1656, and at 1819 "Scharnhorst" reported from 72°09' N. 28°30' E. that her opponent was firing by R.D/F location at over 18,000 metres' range. At 1732 she was surrounded by heavy units. At 1825 a last message from her Commanding Officer and F.O. Cruisers was addressed to the Fuehrer and read "We shall fight to the last shell". The final transmission was made at 1925 - twenty minutes before she sank - but was only available to Special Intelligence three weeks later. In this signal "Scharnhorst" gave her position as 71°57' N. 28°30' E., on passage to Tanafjord at 20 knots.

S.I. of the Action  
received later

*1<sup>st</sup> SL Fraser  
lecture [?]*

At 1907 destroyer Z 29 (one of the five which had accompanied "Scharnhorst") signalled her position, course and speed. Further reports were received from her and from another destroyer, Z 33, at 2000; and at 2328 Admiral Commanding Northern Waters acknowledged a signal from S.O. 4th Destroyer Flotilla that all five destroyers were proceeding into port. At 0150/27th Z 29, Z 30, Z 34 and Z 38 entered the inner leads east of Soeroeya and requested "Tirpitz" to have the Kaafjord boom open at 0500. Destroyer Z 33 had been out of contact with the other four since 1200/26th, but evidently reached Kaafjord independently at 0430/27th. It was later learned from Special Intelligence that this destroyer had suffered damage, the extent and nature of which were not known.

A "Most Immediate" Ultra sent to C. in C. Home Fleet and C.S.10 at 2351/26th stated that the U-boat group had been ordered at 1815 to steer at top speed for the area 72°18' N. 26°00' - 27°00' E. It was evident that by 2245/26th the Germans had only an approximate idea of the position of "Scharnhorst's" sinking as the U-boats were then asked to report the exact position. They were to search for survivors in a 70-mile sweep on a course of 140°, starting from a position line 72°57' N. 28°30' E. to approximately 72°39' N. 26°50' E. U-boats were permitted to attack warships and were warned of the possible presence of Russian submarines in the search area. This information was sent out by Ultra at 0625/27th. At 0705 U-boats were ordered to continue the search on a reciprocal course after completing the 70-mile sweep, the terminal point of which was now

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extended to 72°39' N. 27° 10' E. Search was broken off at 1657/27th and U-boats were ordered to form a new patrol-line to the eastward of the searched area.

During the early hours of the 27th, in spite of unfavourable weather, several reports were made by reconnaissance aircraft. At 0330/27th a group of He 115's was ordered to be at one hour's notice from 0800 to 1200 to attack forces appearing along the coast. At 1755/27th a FW 200 reported having located the convoy in 74°32' N. 26°35' E. while another aircraft had located a target by R.D/F during the afternoon. Positions of these locations were given to C. in C. Home Fleet, C.S.10, etc. in an "Immediate" Ultra signal at 2239/27th.

German Air Force authorities in North Norway and Finland were informed at 1430/27th that German W/T intelligence showed a westbound convoy was at sea on the way from Russia. This was the first intimation in Special Intelligence that the enemy was aware of the presence of RA 55A.

The reactions of the German Admiralty to the loss of "Scharnhorst" were embodied in a decree promulgated by Grossadmiral Doenitz to the German Navy. This document, issued on 29th December and read in Special Intelligence on the same day, began by emphasising the imperative need for the Battle Group's intervention in support of the Army on the eastern front. Doenitz went on to say that prospects for attack were favourable, as air reconnaissance had established the presence of comparatively light forces escorting the convoy, and it was assumed that limitations imposed by weather conditions on the use of armament would be to the advantage of "Scharnhorst". He also counted on an element of surprise, as two recent convoys had got through to North Russia unmolested. A brief account of the engagement followed, in which it was explained that after first making contact with escorting cruisers "Scharnhorst" was engaged by a "heavy enemy unit". Acting in accordance with orders "Scharnhorst" thereupon broke off the action, but throughout her attempted withdrawal was located by R.D/F. Further heavy forces were brought up and "Scharnhorst" was encircled sinking about 1930/26th after fighting heroically.

Reactions of  
Doenitz

Doenitz explained at this point that the powerful concentration of heavy British forces was possibly connected with the passage of a second convoy on its homeward journey, hitherto undetected. He stressed that the weightiest lesson to be drawn from the battle was the fact that British forces were able to establish the "Scharnhorst's" presence at over thirty miles, and by the aid of R.D/F to shadow her and bombard her unseen at a range of 19,500 yards.

Another point revealed by this decree was the fact that the Germans had as yet no idea of the damage which they themselves had inflicted. This, in fact, amounted to a hit aft in H.M.S. "Norfolk", which put one turret out of action and flooded a magazine, and minor damage to "Sheffield" and "Saumarez". Ships in the convoy were untouched.

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The steady flow of Special Intelligence material up to the time that our forces made contact with the enemy enabled the O.I.C. to keep C. in C. Home Fleet and C.S.10 regularly informed of German surface, aircraft and U-boat moves. The interval between the time of origin of a German message and that of the Ultra signal based thereon varied from five to twelve hours. The value of Special Intelligence in this particular operation can be judged by the fact that it provided the only source of information on "Scharnhorst's" departure from Altafjord. It also revealed the enemy's ignorance of the odds with which he was called upon to contend.

*C/F Overlord  
39 mins*

Contribution of S.I.

*i.e. agent [?]  
inward [?]  
example of  
limitation for  
[?] the case of  
Gilwatilee [?]*