

7. On concentrating I made the following signal timed 1200/12th December to my Force:—

“ My policy with three cruisers in company versus one pocket battleship. Attack at once by day or night. By day act as two units, 1st Division (AJAX and ACHILLES) and EXETER diverged to permit flank marking. First Division will concentrate gunfire. By night ships will normally remain in company in open order. Be prepared for the signal ZMM* which is to have the same meaning as MM* except that for Division read Single Ship.”

8. I amplified this later in my signal 1813/12th December as follows:—

“ My object in the signal ZMM is to avoid torpedoes and take the enemy by surprise and cross his stern. Without further orders ships are to clear the line of fire by hauling astern of the new leading ship. The new leading ship is to lead the line without further orders so as to maintain decisive gun range.”

I exercised this manoeuvre during the evening of 12th December.

THE ACTION.

Wednesday, 13th December, 1939

0530-0623.

9. At 0520/13th December, the Squadron was in position 34 degrees 34' south, 49 degrees 17' west. With the last of the dawn I exercised manoeuvring signals, and then re-formed the squadron on a course of 060 speed 14 knots in the order AJAX, ACHILLES, EXETER. At 0614, smoke was sighted bearing 320 and EXETER was ordered to close and investigate it. At 0616 EXETER reported “ I think it is a pocket battleship ” and two minutes later the enemy opened fire, one 11-in. turret at EXETER and the other at AJAX.

10. The First Division immediately altered course together by signal to 340 degrees to close the range. Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. EXETER, hauled out of the line and altered course to the westward in accordance with my plan, in order to attack the enemy from a widely different bearing and permit flank marking. All ships increased speed.

EXETER opened fire at 0620, ARCHILLES at 0621 and AJAX at 0623.

An enemy report was immediately initiated and was broadcast at 0634. Amplifying reports were made at 0640, 0646 and 0722.

11. From this point until the action was broken off, no alter course signals were made. Captain W. E. Parry, Royal Navy, of H.M.S. ACHILLES manoeuvred his ship as necessary to clear her line of fire, remaining close to AJAX and conforming to her movements. EXETER proceeded independently, her initial course being about 280 degrees.

12. AJAX and ACHILLES opened in Single Ship firing, but Concentration was employed as soon as W/T touch had been established at about 0625.

* The signification of these signals was :

ZMM—ships are to turn to course . . . starting with the rear ship.

MM—Commanders of Divisions are to turn their Division to course . . . starting with the rear Division.

13. It appeared at this stage as if the enemy was undecided as to her gunnery policy. Her turrets were working under different controls, and she shifted target several times before eventually concentrating both turrets on EXETER.

0623-0630.

14. EXETER was straddled by GRAF SPEE's third salvo, one shell of which burst short amidships, killed the starboard tube's crew, damaged communications and riddled the searchlights and aircraft. Preparations were being made at this time for catapulting the aircraft, but as both were by then out of action, they were manhandled over the side.

15. At 0624, after EXETER had fired eight salvos, she received a direct hit from an 11-in. direct-action shell on the front of “ B ” turret. This shell burst on impact, put the turret out of action, and splinters swept the bridge, killing or wounding all personnel there with the exception of the Captain and two others, and wrecked the wheelhouse communications.

16. Captain F. S. Bell, Royal Navy, then decided to fight his ship from the after conning position, but owing to communications being destroyed it was some time before the ship could be brought under the control of that position, and then it could only be done by means of a chain of messengers to pass orders to the after steering position.

Meanwhile EXETER had swung to starboard, and was closing her “ A ” arcs,* but she was brought back to port by an order from the torpedo officer, Lieutenant-Commander C. J. Smith, Royal Navy, who succeeded in getting word through to the lower conning position.

Two more 11 in. hits were received in the fore part of the ship during this phase.

17. AJAX and ACHILLES were in Concentration firing and seemed to be making good shooting. They were closing the range rapidly and gaining bearing on the enemy.

0630-0638:

18. About this time, the GRAF SPEE shifted the fire of one 11 in. turret on to the First Division and AJAX was straddled three times at about 0631. The First Division turned slightly away to throw out the enemy's gunfire.

His secondary armament was firing alternately at AJAX and ACHILLES, but with no effect, though some salvos fell close.

19. AJAX catapulted her aircraft with Lieutenant E. D. G. Lewin, Royal Navy, as pilot, at 0637, a very fine evolution observing that “ X ” and “ Y ” turrets were at that time firing on a forward bearing. Owing to delay in establishing W/T communication the first air spotting report was not received until 0654. This method was then employed for the rest of the action.

20. The First Division turned back to port at 0634 in order to close the range.

21. EXETER fired her starboard torpedoes in local control at 0632 as she turned back to her westerly course, but at 0637 the GRAF SPEE altered course some 150 degrees to port,

* The arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, this allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.