

destroyers of the cruiser force and await the return of the destroyer covering force. All the destroyers with the convoy were topped up in succession throughout the passage by the two oilers in company.

U-Boat and Air Attacks

43. Though several promising attacks on U-boats had already been made by the escorts, the first losses to the convoy from U-boat attack did not occur until just before Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers rejoined: two ships were sunk.

44. The air attacks started in the afternoon with a diversion by six bombers, followed immediately by a massed attack by forty to fifty torpedo aircraft, each carrying two torpedoes. This attack came in low, and little more than visual warning was obtained, with the result that the fighters were caught out of position, chasing bombers and shadowers. The attack was pressed right home and eight ships were sunk. Two smaller torpedo attacks were made that day, but no more ships were hit. One more serious loss occurred during the night, the large freighting tanker **ATHEL TEMPLAR** being sunk by U-boat.

45. As a result of his experience on the first day, the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. **AVENGER**, decided to change his tactics and reserve his fighters for the heavy attacks. Fighter patrols were relieved at short intervals, so that they should not be short of fuel or ammunition if an attack developed without warning, and the main force of fighters was not normally flown off until the striking force was actually in sight. This system, though it did not give the fighters time to prevent an attack from developing, did ensure that they should harass its final stages, disturbing the enemy and spoiling his aim.

46. Combined with the greater accuracy of anti-aircraft gunfire, which came with experience, the new tactics proved successful. Two heavy torpedo attacks, by twenty-two and twenty-five aircraft respectively, and two bombing attacks, all on 14th September, succeeded only in sinking one merchant ship; and a prolonged attack by about seventy bombers on the next day was entirely without success. During the whole period, just over two days, of concentrated air attack, the enemy lost at least forty aircraft: there can be little doubt that these heavy casualties, especially among his limited supply of really skilled torpedo pilots, was largely responsible for the steady decline in the size and vigour of his attacks.

47. The **AVENGER**, whose flying deck is too small for landing on when the ship is pitching, was fortunate in having calm weather throughout the operation. The precaution of attaching two Hunt class destroyers to the **AVENGER**, for her close protection, proved its value. Several attacks were directed especially at her, but she suffered no damage.

48. No more air attacks were made on P.Q.18 while the destroyer covering force was in company, but off Cape Kanin, near the entrance to the White Sea, three further attacks succeeded in sinking one more ship. Three more ran aground in a heavy gale off the Dvina Bar, but were later refloated, so that twenty-seven of the original forty, and all the escort, arrived safely at Archangel.

Q.P.14

49. The westbound convoy of sixteen merchant ships, escorted by two Hunt class destroyers, two anti-aircraft ships, four corvettes, three minesweepers and four trawlers, sailed from Archangel on 13th September. They were routed east of P.Q.18 to pass that convoy in approximate latitude 73° 30' North, off Nova Zemlya. Here, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers with his sixteen destroyers, the **AVENGER** and her two Hunt class destroyers, and the two convoy oilers, transferred in three groups from P.Q.18 to Q.P.14 during the night of 16th/17th September.

50. The latter convoy had been sighted earlier by German aircraft, but the weather was now thick and no shadowers were present to witness the transfer. Nor had any U-boats apparently succeeded in following the covering force across. The favourable weather continued, and in spite of one aircraft sighting on 18th September, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had hopes of getting safely past the southern end of Spitzbergen and evading further attack by a turn there to the north-westward. But the convoy was located again by two enemy aircraft on the morning of 19th September, and the U-boat pack joined up again during the day.

51. Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had decided not to weaken the escort by going again to Lowe Sound to refuel. He had detached two destroyers to bring one oiler from there to join the convoy, and to order the other, with her escort, to return to Iceland. One ship, which had straggled soon after leaving the White Sea, rejoined; and another straggler was collected by a destroyer detached from the convoy and escorted to join the Spitzbergen oiler force.

52. No air attacks developed, but the U-boat pack, whose performance so far had been mediocre, made a final effort to redeem their failure. In spite of vigorous counter-attacks by the powerful escort, they succeeded in sinking the minesweeper **LEDA** (Commander A. H. Wynne-Edwards, R.N.) and one merchant ship on 20th September, and in hitting the **SOMALI** (Lieutenant Commander C. D. Maud, D.S.C., R.N.) in the engine room. The latter was taken in tow by the **ASHANTI**. The tow continued under difficult and dangerous conditions for four nights and three days; but then a northerly gale arose and the **SOMALI** broke in half and sank, a most unfortunate end to a gallant attempt.

53. In view of the U-boat menace, Rear Admiral Commanding, Home Fleet Destroyers had meanwhile detached the **SCYLLA** and **AVENGER** to Seidisfiord, transferring his flag to the **MILNE**. On 22nd September two more merchant ships and the R.F.A. **GREY RANGER** were sunk by U-boats*. The convoy had been routed east of Iceland and through to Loch Ewe, and the covering force destroyers

Admiralty footnote:—

* As a result of these U-boat movements, the convoy was given anti-U-boat escort by Catalinas from Sullom Voe. On the 23rd September, one of these aircraft, although it did not actually meet the convoy, sighted a U-boat at 0533 Z in the vicinity of the convoy and steering a course of 160° towards it. This U-boat was attacked by the aircraft with six depth charges and destroyed.