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The Sinking of SCHARMBORST

26 December 1943

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DECEMBER 26 1943

THE SINKING OF

SCHARAHORST

REFERMAP 1

Throughout the spring and summer of 1942, the much needed Artic convoys bringing urgent war supplies to Russia, pursued their perilous course over the northern tip of Norway, heading for Murmansk and Archangel in Russia.

The convoys experienced many losses to enemy submarines and aircraft, culminating in disastrous losses to convoy PQ17 east of the island of Spitzbergen in July 1942 and to convoy JW818 in the Barents Sea in December 1942. This caused a suspension of the Allied convoys for much of 1945.

They resumed with the first outward bound convoy JW54A which set out for Russia in November 1943 and JW55A to follow in December 1945.

The impending clash with SCHARNHORST had its beginnings when German reconnaissance located the third convoy JW55B coming from the west, while convoy RA55A of 22 ships and unknown at the time, was returning from the east. It was the battle which surrounded them that was to become known as the BATTLE OF NORTH CAPE and the SINKING OF SCHARNHORST.

The aim of the Royal Navy covering forces was simple, namely, the safe arrival of convoys JW55IB to Russia and the returning convoy RA55A to waters off Scotland. A secondary aim for them was to engage SCHARNHORST in action should the opportunity arise.

The British battleship DUKE OF YORK sent out to oppose SCHARNHORST had superior fire power, radar expertise and the determination to force an action.

The British battle force was under the command of Admiral Bruce Fraser, who had been in command of the Home Fleet since May 1943, with his Force 2 consisting of:

Flagship HMS DUKE OF YORK (battleship) accompanied by HMS JAMAICA (cruiser) and destroyers (4) SAVAGE, SCORPION, SAUMAREZ and STORD (Norge).

Convoy JW55B consisted of 19 merchant ships and the following destroyer escort: ONSLOW, ONSLAUGH, HAID A, IROQUOIS, ORWELL, HURON, SCOURGE, IMPULSE and M/S GLEANER.

Independent support was available from destroyers WHITEHALL and WRESTLER and corvettes HONEYSUCKLE and OXLIP.

Coming from the east with convoy RA55A was cruiser Force 1 consisting of:

Flagship HMS BELFAST (VAdm Bob Burnett)

HMS SHEFFIELD HMS NORFOLK

Convoy RA55A consisted of 22 cargo ships with the following destroyer escort: MUSKETEER, OPPORTUNE, VIRAGO, MATCHLESS, MILNE, ASHANTI and ATHABASCAN.

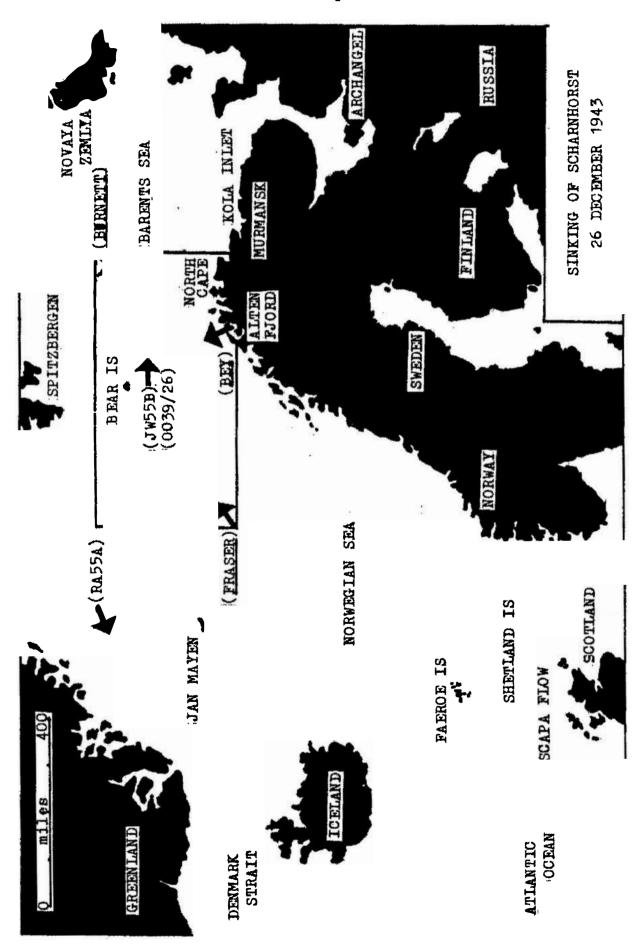
Independent support was available from destroyers BEAGLE and WESTCOTT and corvettes DIANELLA, POPPY and ACANTHUS.

REFER MAP 2

At 0539 of 26 December 1943, Fraser (Force 2) was 200 miles to the rear of convoy JW55B and Burnett (Force 1) was 150 miles away from convoy RA55A.



Map 1



Fraser had two trump cards.

Firstly, the enormous advantage of ULTRA code-breaking information about the German intentions and he played the intelligence knowledge to great advantage.

And secondly, the application of radar gunnery control, giving Fraser reliable indications of range, etc. even in adverse weather conditions or darkness, where in this instance little more than one hour of daylight prevailed, which was a surprise to the enemy of British superiority in this sphere.

The aim on the Germans part, was really to justify the continued existence of the surface fleet by proving that a major warship could intercept and destroy a British convoy as well as, if not better than, submarines or aircraft.

As will be shown in the following account, the fact that neither SCHARNHORST nor any of her accompanying destroyers were able to fire a single shot at the convoys is testimony to how well the British ships maintained their aim and, indeed, how poorly the Germans maintained theirs.

The German battle force was anchored in Alten Fjord and was under the Acting C-in-C 1st Battle Group of Rear Admiral Eric Bey, formerly, Flag Officer, Commander of Destroyers, and consisting of:

Flagship SCHARNHORST (battlecruiser)

and 5 heavy destroyers 4th Destroyer Flotilla (Capt Johannesan) Z29, Z30, Z53, Z34 and Z38

At 0339 of 26 December 1943. Bey (1st Battle Group) was only 100 miles south of convoy. JW55B.

ACTION

On 23 December, Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft first sighted JW55B and again on 24th by both aircraft and U-boats.

At 1325 on 24 December, Fraser <u>broke</u> the sacrosanctity of radio silence to order JW55B to reverse course for three hours to enable him to catch up. However, due to dispersion caused by the already bad weather, with the wind from the south west at about force 3 and with a heavy swell and low cloud, the convoy complied the only way it could, by reducing speed.

On 25 December, Fraser <u>again broke</u> radio silence and ordered the detachment of four destroyers from RA55A to JW55B.

At 1420 on 25 December, a German U-boat again reported the convoy JW55B and lack of any sighting of a covering force prompted C-in-C German Navy Admiral Doenitz to order the sailing of SCHARNHORST.

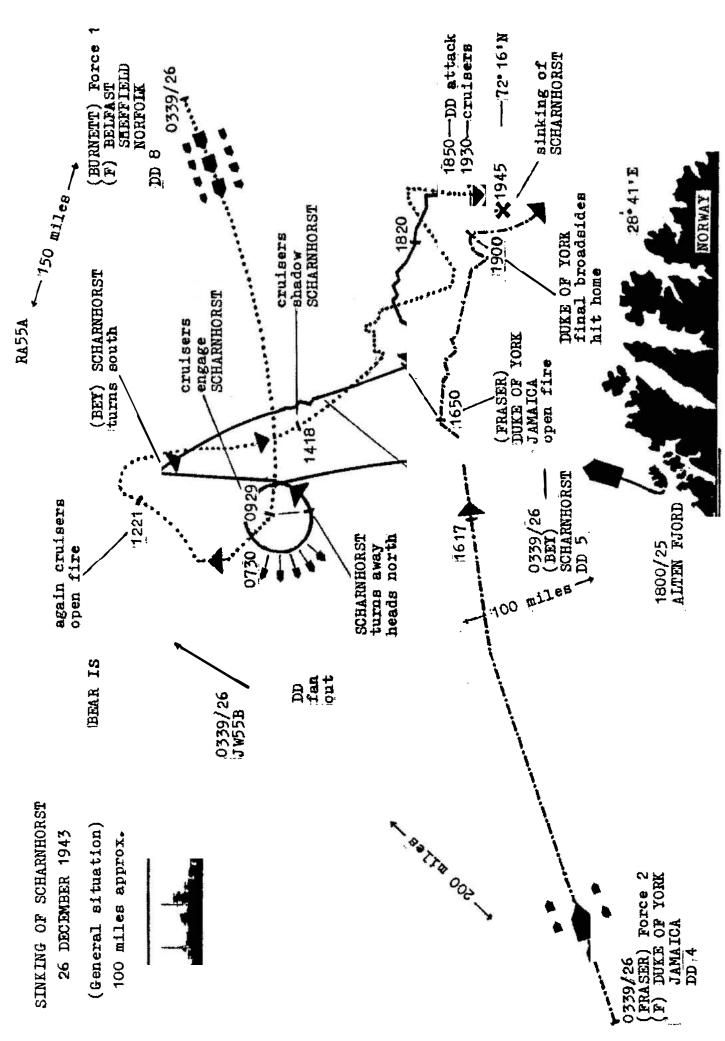
At 0217 on 26 December, Fraser received a signal that SCHARNHORST had probably sailed at 1800/25 on the previous day, so he was now aware of the task in front of him.

At 0401 for the third time Fraser directed Force 1 cruisers and convoy RA55A to alter course to the north, to make it harder for SCHARNHORST to reach the convoy and at the same time give Faser that extra badly needed time to catch up.

PHASE 1

At about 0730/26, Bey took the risk of spreading his destroyers ahead to the south west to carry out a sweep for JW55B. The destroyers never rejoined the flagship and were not to play any further significant part in the action.

Burnett's cruisers (Force 1) made contact with SCHARNHORST at 0840/26 at 5500 yards distant on Type 273 surface warning radar and although having an inferior force closed the range and engaged SCHARNHORST at 0929. Bey, unaware of the size of the forces engaging him, turned away and attempted to gain distance to the north to attack the convoy from a different direction. Burnett being aware that he would be unable to keep up with SCHARNHORST in the prevailing weather conditions of wind force 7-8 and rough seas, broke contact in order to place his force in a position between the convoy and his assessment of SCHARNHORST's most likely direction of attack.



PHASE II

Then at 1205, BELFAST's radar picked up SCHARNORST again. This time the position was reversed, with Burnett's ships to the westward of Bey; and the British cruisers opened fire at 1221.

Bey, mindful of his orders not to risk SCHARNHORST, repeated his tactic of shying away, which prevented the British destroyers from making torpedo attacks. However, in the 20 minute duel NORFOLK was hit twice by 11" shells, one turret was wrecked and only one of her radar sets was left usable. Burnett continued to shadow and report SCHARNHORST'S position (1418).

In this second cruiser action, Bey had once again suffered from the absence of his destroyers whose tactics may have enabled SCHARNHORST to pick off the more lightly armed cruisers, one at a time, and then perhaps, to fulfill his main aim of destroying the convoy.

Again, bad reconnaissance reporting to Bey at this time, from the Luftwaffe Group Lofoten, of a British force to the westward consisting of several small and one heavy ship, in the repeat of the message omitted any reference to a heavy ship.

PHASE III

So Bey stood on a south east course for an inevitable meeting with Fraser, while at 1418 ordering his destroyers to discontinue the search and return to Alten Fjord.

The delaying actions fought by the cruisers (Force 1) during the morning and early afternoon, allowed Fraser to place his ships (Force 2) between SCHARNHORST and her base and as a result at 1617 DUKE OF YORK, 22miles to the south west, picked up the SCHARNHORST on her radar Type 273 at 4500 yards for the first time, and now Beys position was being plotted by two sets of radar.

DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA opened fire at 1650, thus surprising Bey for the third time even to the extent that SCHARNHORSTs gun turrets were trained fore and aft, and mercilessly illuminating SCHARNHORST by starshells.

For the third time, too, Bey swung away to his disengaged side but now he had Burnett's cruiser/destroyer squadron to force him back on his former course. However, SCHARNHORST began to engage DUKE OF YORK with 11" salvos, which fell uncomfortably close to the British battleship.

At the same time, SCHARNHORST with superior speed, drew away to the south east increasing the distance by 4 miles and causing Fraser much concern, thinking that after all the days effort, SCHARNHORST might still be able to slip away. Accordingly at 1847, Fraser signalled to Burnett: "I see little hope of catching SCHARNHORST and am proceeding to support convoy".

Fortunately, the full broadside and high trajectory of DUKE OF YORK's 14" shells fired by Type 284 gunnery radar became steeper and steeper - and therefore more lethal. This was decisively proved at 1820, when the destroyers astern of SCHARNHORST abruptly stopped firing. DUKE OF YORK's fire had struck home by completely wrecking 'A' turret and the magazines had to be flooded and with one shell exploding in the starboard boiler room, this all amounted to a subsequent loss of speed. About this time SCHARNHORST radioed her last message, "We shall fight to the last shell".

At 1850, the British destroyers SAVAGE, SAUMAREZ and SCORPION with the Norwegion STORD from Force 2 moved in and at the close range of 1800 to 2100 yards, hit SCHARNHORST with at least three torpedoes and causing further disastrous damage

At 1900, DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA re-opened fire and at a distance of only 5 miles and SCHARNHORST fought back with her secondary armament, as her 11" guns had successfully been knocked out. To add to her misery, NORFOLK and BELFAST joined in the cannonade sealing SCHARNHORST's fate.

At 1930, Fraser ordered the cruisers JAMAICA and BELFAST to finish her off with torpedoes aided by 4 destroyers from Force 1 namely, MUSKETEER, MATCHLESS, OPPORTUNE and VIRAGO, Altogether 55 torpedoes were leashed at SCHARNHORST in the last half hour, 11 of which were said to have hit home.







HMS Sheffield



HMS Jamaica



HMS Duke of York

The end finally came at 1945, when SCHARNHORST capsized and sank in approximately,

72 degrees 16 minutes north;

28 degrees 41 minutes east.

The action was the first to be fought entirely on radar, and visibility was so poor that nobody was able to see SCHARNHORST sink. In fact, it took a while for Fraser to accept that SCHARNHORST was no more. Although SCHARNHORST had disappeared on the radar screen, it was only after he had sent ships back and to pick up the German survivors that any doubt was obliterated.

In all SCHARNHORST had received at least 13 gun hits from DUKE OF YORK, about 12 from the cruiser's fire and 11 torpedo hits.

Of the ship's company of 1,800 men, only 36 survived the ordeal.

In retrospect it is worthwhile to examine and consider aspects that won or lost the BATTLE OF NORTH CAPE and the SINKING OF SCHARNHORST.

COMMAND

Admiral Fraser, as Commander-in-Chief Home Forces was delegated complete responsibility to conduct operations as he saw fit, basing his judgement on all information and reports received at the time.

On the German side, the chain of command was unwieldly cumbersome and illogical, being comprised of,

Supreme Commander (Hitler)

Commander-in-Chief (Grand Admiral Donitz)

Naval Group North Naval Group West

Navy/North

Navy/North Norway

Northern Battle Squadron (Rear Admiral Bey)

(temporary relief for Adm Kummetz) SCHARNHORST and 5 destroyers.

It is hardly surprising that the commander at sea often received confusing and conflicting orders. Added to this was the fact that while the German High Command were keen to achieve results, they were not prepared to accept any risk or loss.

Hence such orders as:

"The tactical situation must be exploited with skill and daring.... use your own judgement as to when engagement will be broken off".

and followed in the very next sentence by:

"If a superior force is encountered, you are to disengage".

SECURITY

While both the British and German forces were guilty of breaking radio silence, their reasons for doing so were quite different.

Admiral Fraser restricted his occasions for transmitting to matters of extreme tactical importance, such as altering the course of the convoy.

Admiral Bey was more indiscriminate. For example, he broke radio silence to inform his superiors ashore that the weather conditions would have a marked effect on the fighting capability of his destroyers. A function, perhaps, of the degree of control that his superiors ashore exercised over the force at sea.

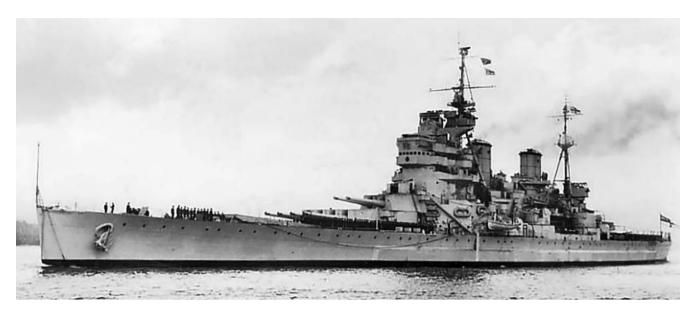
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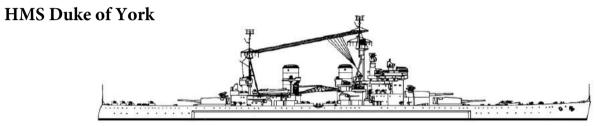
It is very significant that the British felt confident enough that one battleship was sufficient to dispose of SCHARNHORST and a reflection of the high regard held for the fighting efficiency of the crew.

REPORTING

After more than four years of war, the German Navy and the Luftwaffe were still incapable of a swift











and reliable exchange of information. A joint frequency on which air reconnaissance reports could be received direct, did not exist. The result was that Admiral Bey in SCHARNHORST, only received vital information via a land station, delayed, filtered and very much secondhand.

By comparison, a message from the British Admiralty stating that it was appreciated that SCHARNHORST was at sea, was received by Admiral Fraser in DUKE OF YORK just twenty minutes later.

SURPRISE

In any hunt, the hunter depends for his success largely upon the element of surprise. Without it, the hunter may well become the hunted and this is exactly what happened to SCHARNHORST in her hunt for the convoy.

It was the superior radar possessed by the British ships, combined with some bold tactics, which gave them the advantage of surprise over SCHARNHORST.

The first that Admiral Bey knew of the presence of the cruiser Force 1 was the bursting of star shells which illuminated SCHARNHORST against the bleak background of the Artic winter.

The hunt was on and SCHARNHORST the hunter had become the hunted, resulted in the 'sinking of SCHARNHORST'.

INTELLIGENCE

The <u>BATTLE OF NORTH CAPE</u> and <u>SINKING OF SCEARNHORST</u> provides a classic example of the use, abuse, awareness of and lack of awareness of the capabilities of military intelligence.

The English had by 1943 developed the use of intercepted signal intelligence (or SIGINT) to a high level, and the local commanders, in this case Admiral Fraser, had developed a healthy respect for the accuracy and value of signals bearing the caveat ULTRA.

A summary of the intelligence available to Admiral Fraser shed an interesting light on many of his actions. As early as September 1943 he had been informed that SCHARNHORST had been exercising with unusal frequency, apparently as a prelude to a sortie against an Artic convoy. An intercepted report from a German agent at Loch Ewe, who was subsequently captured, prompted Admiral Fraser to provide a battleship as cover for convoy JW55A for the whole of the passage to Kola Inlet, ie, Murmansk in Russia.

The safe passage of JW5SA convinced Fraser that SCHARNHORST would shortly make a sortie. On 18 December he sailed from Kola Inlet and proceeded to Iceland to refuel, sailing from there on 23 December to provide cover for the convoys of RA55A and JW55B as described in this manuscript. Through intercepts Fraser had received reports from the Luftwaffe and U-boats on the progress of convoy JW55B.

An intercept of the order to the reconnaissance aircraft to search for a covering force astern of the convoy was also received. The lack of any positive sighting was certainly a contributing factor in the decision to sail SCHARNHORST. It was at this stage on 24 December, that Fraser first broke radio silence, a decision made in an attempt to improve his chances of defending the convoy and destroying SCHARNHORST. This transmission was intercepted by the German SIGINT service, the B-DIENST.

By the morning of 25 December, Fraser was made aware by ULTRA signal, of the disposition of U-boats in the area and the fact that his earlier transmission had been detected and a rough position obtained. At this stage it should be pointed out that onboard DUKE OF YORK was a SIGINT team, termed a Y-team, from the RAF who were tasked specifically towards intercepting reports from the Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft. The delay in intelligence reaching Fraser at this time was about 10 hours from the time of transmission by the Germans. A further delay occurred around midday on the 25 December while the new codes that had come into force at that time were broken, and as such it was not until 0130 on 26 December that Fraser was informed of the signal ordering SCHARNHORST to sail, however at this stage the import of the signal was not understood. It was not until 0217 that Fraser received the signal that he had been waiting for. This was the intercept of the signal that SCHARNHORST had made to the patrol vessel informing it that she was sailing at 1800 on the 25 December. This was the last intercept

that had a direct bearing on the destruction of the SCHARNHORST. By the time Fraser received the intercept of Bey's signal about the weather the cruisers of Force 1 had already made contact.

On the German side, their intelligence service did not enjoy the reputation of their Brithish counterparts. The initial reconnaissance reports had not mentioned a covering force, indeed the analysis made by German naval intelligence suggested that Fraser was relaxing his guard due to the safe passage of JW55A and preceeding convoys.

<u>The first</u> indication of Fraser's Force 2 was the intercept of Fraser's first signal. Fortunately for the English the German code breakers were not able to decipher the message, however its interception in an apparently unbreakable code and the location obtained by Direction Finding (DF) were strongly suggestive of the presence of a covering force, but the negative reports from the Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft led to this intercept being ignored and as a result SCHARNHORST was ordered to sail.

The second opportunity to save SCHARNHORST occurred when a Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft obtained a radar contact of five ships steaming north east towards SCHARNHORST's position. This information was transmitted at 1000 on 26 December and was in fact intercepted by the RAF I-team on board DUKE OF YORK. As there was not a common frequency allocated for communications between the Luftwaffe and German naval units the information was not re-transmitted until 1306, over three hours later. By then SCHARNHORST had broken off the second cruiser engagement and was attempting to return to Norway. Fraser had by this time placed himself between SCHARNHORST and her base and the interception was accomplished three hours later.

<u>The third</u> and possibly worst oversight by the German B-DIENST was the interception of Fraser's reply to Burnett's enemy contact report. At this time the intelligence assessment was changed to include the presence of a second covering force, yet amazingly enough no action was taken to warn SCHARNHORST. If prompt action had been taken it is quite possible that SCHARNHORST could have broken off contact and escaped.

In assessing the part played by intelligence in the destruction of SCHARNHORST it is possibly not wise to dwell too much on the failings of the Germans. These would not have been crucial unless the British forces had been in a position to take advantage of them; and the fact that the British forces were so placed was due to the high quality of British intelligence.

The <u>BATTLE OF NORTH CAPE</u> and <u>SINKING OF SCHARNHORST</u> was a tribute to Admiral Fraser's imaginative and decisive use of SIGINT information, which owed so much to the confidence he knew he could place in it.



SINKING OF SCHARNHORST

26 DECEMBER 1943

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SHIP DETAILS:

SCHARNHORST	Tonnage 38,100 tons. Armament 9x11", 12x5.9", 14x4.4", 36 smaller AA. 6x21" torpedo tubes, 2 Catapults x 4 aircraft Belt 13". Turrets 13". Deck 3". Barbettes 10". 32 knots.
DUKE OF YORK	Tonnage 36,750 tons (as modified 38,000). Armament 10x14", 16x5.25", 64x2pdr porn porns, 10x40 mm Bofors, 10x20mm Oerlikons, Protection Belt 15" over magazines, Turrets 16", Deck 6 mgs, Bartelles 16". 29¼ knots.
SHEFFIELD(Southampton Class)	. 9,633 tons. Armament 12x6", 8x4P. 6x21" torpedoes.
BELFAST (Edinburgh Class Mod Town)	. 10,300 tons. Armament 12x6". 12x4". 6x21" torpedoes.
JAMAICA(Fiji Class)	. 8,524 tons. Armament 12x6", 8x4". 6x21" torpedoes.
NORFOLK(Devonshire Class)	. 9593 tons. Armament 8x8", 4x4". 8x21" torpedoes.

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