

*'Our destroyers had a job to keep up with Duke of York who at full speed was plunging under the huge waves of a following sea which made her look like a submarine just breaking surface. A number of close-range AA weapons which had been fitted on the foc'sle were torn from their mountings and water poured into the messdecks through the rivet holes. On the totally enclosed admiral's bridge all was calm and comfortable with the C-in-C puffing at his pipe, quietly confident.'*

At 1617 *Scharnhorst* was detected by *Duke of York*'s radar at about 22 miles. Fraser didn't want to alert *Scharnhorst*, so allowed the range to close to about six miles before ordering *Belfast* to illuminate and then allowing *Duke of York* to open fire, apparently achieving complete surprise. Courage again:

*'It was a dramatic moment, especially as the C-in-C nearly became a casualty. A large 'kitchen' clock was hung on the bulkhead of the Admiral's bridge - essential in connection with changes of course when zig-zagging. Normally before a full calibre firing such items are taken down but in the long drawn out run-up to the action this had been overlooked. With the first salvo it fell with a loud crash between the C-in-C and myself. That was our most dangerous moment, and also the only time either of us saw the Scharnhorst. The C-in-C then went back to the Plot while I remained outside in the darkness and could see nothing except the splashing of Scharnhorst's shells which seemed to be much too close for comfort.'*

Dawnay had sent out the first enemy report at full power on Fleet Wave to Scapa:

*'Would we get Scapa at this range or fail like Belfast? It was with profound relief that I heard Scapa give us the 'R' for the message. The roar and concussion of the first 14-inch 10-gun broadside occurred just as this enemy report was being transmitted, and although the Leading Tel on the key was, as usual, nearly shot off his chair, I shall never forget the calm manner in which he continued as if nothing had happened.'*

On the bridge, Courage remembers seeing the two large battle ensigns which the Signal Boatswain, Harold Kelly, had broken out at each masthead as the first salvo was fired - 'an inspiring sight when illuminated by the flash of our guns'. Then he heard what sounded like the aerials being shot away and shouted the news down the voice-pipe to Dawnay, but a quick trial showed that they seemed to be still in good order. (Both masts had in fact been hit, one tripod being severed and some W/T and radar aerials damaged; Webber and the radar officer, Lieut H Bates, RNVR, managed to make temporary repairs, the latter climbing halfway up the mast at the height of the action in a freezing gale).

Force 1 joined in just before 1700, but *Scharnhorst*'s superior speed was telling and after twenty minutes the cruisers were out-ranged.

At 1723 Fraser signalled to Burnett: 'Steer south to get between enemy and his base'. *Duke of York* continued firing as the range increased but at about 1830 it became apparent that *Scharnhorst's* speed had been reduced - she had been hit and a broken steam pipe temporarily reduced her speed to ten knots. This enabled the four destroyers - *Savage*, *Scorpion*, *Saumarez* and the Norwegian *Stord* - to close in and attack her with torpedoes.

In the RCO things had risen to a crescendo:

*'One had no time to think of the enemy's shells which could be heard whistling overhead and exploding with sharp cracks. Our own broadsides became less noticeable, as did the rough sea. Quick decisions had to be made, and with a backlog of coding and decoding in the small RCO, when an urgent signal for CS10 was handed in from the plot I ordered it to be made in plain language as it could not help the enemy even if he read it. Having broken the ice, we used P/L from time to time when appropriate.'*

No one actually saw the *Scharnhorst* sink - she just disappeared from radar screens. When destroyers reported picking up survivors, Courage was at last able to originate the signal: 'Admiralty from C-in-C: *Scharnhorst* Sunk - 262100'. Dawnay remembered:

*'I had great difficulty in getting the signal through and eventually got Iceland to take it - just two groups of Fleet Code. Then came a busy hour of signalling, clearing up the mess and giving instructions what to do and where to go. By this time the *Duke of York* was steaming by herself at high speed for the Kola Inlet; with U-Boats about, she had been hanging around for quite long enough. Having transmitted the last orders I re-imposed silence on MF, and comparative peace reigned once more'.*

But the problems faced by Courage and Dawnay were not over:

*'A situation dreaded by all signal officers arose; Admiral Fraser wished to talk to Admiral Burnett on the R/T. Neither had received any training whatever in how to use this method of communication'.*

Unable to persuade the C-in-C to desist, Dawnay embarked on a lesson:

*'First Sir, you press this thing when you wish to speak; when you have finished, you say "Over" and release it, and listen to Admiral Burnett. Finally, you must use callsigns or you will make it too easy for the Germans. Yours, Sir, is WIGLEY, and Admiral Burnett's is REMBRANDT. Then the trouble started. "WIGLEY? Who gave me this ridiculous name? You?"'*

Meanwhile Admiral Burnett was happily in ignorance of the fact that he was about to be summoned to the microphone, nor did he have the benefit of instruction from the Fleet Wireless Officer.