

CONVOY P.Q. 17

R.F.A. ALDERSDALE left her anchorage off Reykjavik in Iceland at 1700 on Saturday, the 27th June, 1942, under the command of CAPTAIN A. HOBSON and sailed in Convoy P.Q.17, which was to become later the most discussed convoy of the War. ALDERSDALE had but recently returned from Greenock and an extensive "oiling at sea" refit. She was now under orders to sail in the convoy and thence to a rendezvous within the Arctic Circle. A RANGER Class tanker was detailed to carry out oiling duties with the convoy.

Thick fog soon developed, but after about two days, the fog thinned and almost immediately a German reconnaissance plane showed up. Shortly afterwards ALDERSDALE received a signal to take over the duties of the RANGER which had sustained damage and was returning to Iceland. There were now three Blohm Voss planes snooping around and it was to become apparent, in later air attacks, that they had correctly reported the convoy position of the Fleet Oiler.

Attacks by aircraft and U-boats quickly followed but although American and Russian ships in the Convoy were severely damaged the ALDERSDALE went on, miraculously unscathed. Her guns kept up a ceaseless Are and her crew claimed one of the six aircraft destroyed. The concentrated fire of all the ships was terrific, and also very dangerous to those who kept the bridge, as gunners were generally very young and enthusiastic and the planes were diving very low!

The stillness of the after battle was very strange; five ships were burning or sinking and the survivors had been taken aboard the rescue ships. Most felt rather stimulated by the outcome of the savage battle, but this was to turn into shocked numbness when the signal was made which led to so much controversy and bitterness. "The Convoy will disperse and proceed independently to Russian ports"—few did not realise that this was as good as a death warrant for most of the ships.

Ships of the Convoy appeared and disappeared on their chosen courses, and soon reports were coming in of the slaughter taking place. Submarines and planes were taking their victims like sitting ducks.

On the afternoon of 5th July three planes appeared and attacked ALDERSDALE from astern. The first and second scored some near misses which shook but did not stop her, and machine-gunned the decks and bridge. The third plane came in at an even lower angle of attack, and a terrific explosion appeared to lift the ship out of the water and her engines immediately stopped. The engines were wrecked and she was rapidly making water, but amazingly no one had even suffered an injury. The Captain made his decision to abandon ship. A minesweeper was now standing by, boats were lowered, manned in an orderly fashion without any mishap and all were picked up.

On the 6th July, the minesweeper made the Matoshkin Straits where other remnants of Convoy P.Q. 17 had gathered. As this hiding place would not remain long undiscovered, it was decided to run for it on the 7th. After fog, ice, more attacks and more sinkings, Archangel was eventually reached on 12th July, but they were to be there many weeks before making the hazardous return. CAPTAIN HOBSON, Chief Engineer W. J. BROWN and Chief Officer EVANS (all of whom were later awarded D.S.C.'s) returned on an American destroyer, while some weeks later, on 13th September, the remainder of the crew left Archangel for home.