

FROM... The Commanding Officer, H.M.S. "Whitley".

DATE... 15th December 1939.

No. 1588/R.

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TO... The Captain (D), Rosyth Escort Force.

Convoy F.S.52 - Letter of Proceedings.

Left Tyne 0215 December 9th, a clear fine night.

"Stork" had previously left harbour at dusk, in order to patrol ships assembling outside.

Most ships were awaigh as "Whitley" passed, and followed out along the searched channel, Commodore's ship leading.

At dawn 25 ships were in company and were formed up in two columns, proceeding south along swept channel.

During the forenoon, as weather was fine and clear, it was decided to carry out a short H.A. gunnery practice in "Whitley", "Whitley" not having fired her guns for approximately six weeks.

Air escort, "Stork" and Convoy having been warned that this practice was about to take place, a smoke shell was fired, and used as a target. (A separate report on this practice is forwarded).

At 11.30 a Belgian Trawler, "Graaf van Vlanderan" No.0.92, observed to be in company with the convoy, and in view of the Admiralty signal 314 AZ, she was examined, and nothing suspicious being found was ordered to keep clear of Convoy.

Visibility decreased after 1300/9th December, and Convoy was formed in single ~~column~~ line at 1545.

Owing to poor visibility and heavy rain, nothing was seen of the outer Dowsing Light Vessel, but the fog signal of the E. Dudgeon Light Vessel was heard and gave an approximate position, shortly afterwards "Whitley" lost touch with the leading ship of Convoy, regained touch later.

H.M.S. "Curlew" passed on an opposite course at 2110/9th December.

Heavy rain and fog during the night obscured the few lights which were still burning, and added to the anxieties of leading the Convoy safely through the more intricate part of the voyage, past the Haisboro' Light Vessel, etc.

At 0330/10th December, a small body of ships were encountered at anchor in the vicinity of the Cross Sand Light Vessel, and these, I suspect were the seven ships which I was informed would be joining the Convoy from the Humber, but which hitherto had not been sighted.

At daylight Convoy was much spread out, but ships were formed in two columns and ordered to close up.

Position X was reached at 1045/10th December, and Convoy led into Thames Estuary via Knock Deep and Edinburgh Channels.

At dusk Convoy was ordered to anchor as convenient in Knob Channel, ships to proceed independently up the river at daylight.

"Whitley" went on and anchored off Nore Light Vessel at 1620/10th Dec.

Orders were received from C. in C. Nore to be ready to lead out Convoy F.N.53 at 0700/11th December. However, thick fog prevailed until that time. Fog lifted at about 0700, and "Whitley" proceeded in company with many merchant ships (O.A. Convoy).

As no information was vouchsafed as to the number of ships composing F.N.53, or the name of Commodore's ship, or the time this Convoy actually sailed, it became necessary to make a W/T signal to C. in C. Nore asking for further information, as it was quite out of the question to identify any particular convoy, partly on account of poor visibility, but principally on account of the very large number of ships of all sorts and sizes, both in the vicinity of the Nore Light Vessel, and in the various channels leading from it.

"Whitley" proceeded seaward at 0730/11th December, but as no signs of Convoy F.N.53 had been seen, it was decided to anchor in the Knob Channel and await their passing. Almost immediately thick fog descended. "Stork" weighed and again proceeded seaward; it was still uncertain,



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ascertain whether F.N.53 had passed out or not.  
Shortly after this a signal was received from C. in C. More  
stating that F.N.53 was still anchored at Southend, and ordering  
"Whitley" and "Stork" to await their passing out the next morning.  
"Whitley" and "Stork" therefore again anchored for the night near  
the Southern end of the Black Deep.  
At 0930/12th December, Convoy F.N.53 was sighted proceeding seaward,  
"Whitley" and "Stork" weighed and joined them, "Whitley" ahead, "Stork"  
astern.

At 1539/12th December, "Flamingo" took over command of Convoy.  
Position X was passed at 1400/12th December, where six oil tankers,  
escorted by Polish destroyer joined up.  
Convoy then proceeded North up searched channel without further  
incident until dark on 13th December. At 1810 orders were received to  
bring Convoy into Tees Bay and anchor there, an enemy minefield  
having been laid off the Tyne.

"Flamingo" passed signals by flashing down the two columns of the  
Convoy, ordering Convoy to follow and anchor in Tees Bay.  
It was extremely dark at the time, but as far as could be seen from  
"Whitley", most of the Convoy, including all the tankers bringing up the  
rear, turned some fourteen points to port, and made for Tees Bay.  
The Convoy apparently lost all formation during this manoeuvre, and  
ships proceeded more or less independently.

The Heugh Light was sighted at approximately 1930/13th December,  
and was a valuable aid to Navigation, as nothing else was visible.  
"Whitley" anchored close to the Heugh Light at 2005/13th December.  
At 0800/14th December, Convoy and escort (less "Stork") weighed and  
proceeded, shaping course for the buoy at end of searched channel leading  
to the Tyne. Ships for Tyne were stationed in Port column, remainder  
Starboard column.

"Whitley" was ordered to lead Port column into the Tyne, the entrance  
being sighted half a mile distant, at 1130/14th December. Convoy passed  
in, and "Whitley" turned 16 points and proceeded out along the swept  
channel to rejoin remainder of Northbound Convoy.

At 1140/39 a tremendous explosion was observed bearing 062° about  
distant. ("Whitley"s position 54° 59.4' N. 01° 19.2' W.) As the  
column of smoke etc subsided, flames were observed and then it could be seen  
that the largest of the four tankers, the s.s. "Inverlane" was burning  
violently from stem to stern.

Speed was increased to the maximum, and "Whitley" arrived at the  
scene of the accident at approximately noon.

The situation was then as follows:-

s.s. "Inverlane" a blazing inferno, s.s. "Atholtemplar" abandoned.  
and stopped, down by the bows, anchors awash. This ship should never have  
been abandoned and appeared capable of steaming at slow speed, her  
propeller being still submerged, s.s. "British Fortune", stopped half a  
mile distant.

Remainder of the Convoy disappearing in the mist to the Northward.  
"Flamingo" and two trawlers rescuing survivors from "Inverlane".

A signal was received from "Flamingo" on arrival, "submarines about"  
and an all round Asdic sweep was commenced but no contacts made.

To me it seemed unlikely that the attack had been made by a  
submarine, as we were at that moment close to the edge of a known enemy  
minefield (reported the previous evening), and it would appear improbable  
that an enemy submarine would operate in waters so closely adjacent.

Again, had the attack been made by a submarine, she would have had  
ample opportunity of repeating her attack on the already damaged and  
abandoned "Atholtemplar", and on the "British Fortune" who very foolishly  
was lying stopped, all hands standing by to abandon ship, close at hand.

"Whitley" approached the burning "Inverlane" and came on a water-  
logged boat with two survivors in it.

These were Mr H.P. Cullen, 2nd Officer, and Ord. Sea. C.E. Sharp. Both were  
covered with oil, having had to jump overboard from their ship, and were  
suffering severely from cold and shock. After attention both were put to  
bed.

Sharp was on lookout on the fo'c'sle at the time of the explosion,  
and saw no torpedo tracks.



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"Whitley" ordered s.s. "British Fortune" to proceed on a course  
at her maximum speed, and after making a further search for survivors  
was ordered to take remainder of Convoy under her orders and take them  
on to Firth of Fourth.  
Only s.s. "British Fortune" was sighted, and she was accompanied as  
far as Largo Bay without further incident.  
"Whitley" anchored in Largo Bay at 2256/14th December, and weighed  
and proceeded up harbour at daylight 15th December, arriving in Rosyth  
at 1000/15th December.



*Palassidi*

Commander in Command.