



**SUPPLEMENT**

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**SINKING OF THE GERMAN BATTLE-CRUISER SCHARNHORST**

ON THE 26TH DECEMBER, 1943.

*The accompanying Despatch was submitted on the 28th January, 1944, to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty by Admiral Sir BRUCE A. FRASER, K.C.B., K.B.E., Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet.*

Be pleased to lay before The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty my despatch of the battle of 26th December, 1943, off the North Cape which culminated in the destruction of the German battlecruiser SCHARNHORST. All times are Zone minus one.

**PRELIMINARY DISPOSITIONS.**

2. After proceeding to Kola Inlet and providing battlefleet cover for J.W.55A\* I returned with Force 2 (See paragraph 17) to Akureyri† to refuel preparatory to covering convoy J.W.55B.

3. With the safe arrival of J.W.55A I felt very strongly that the SCHARNHORST would come out and endeavour to attack J.W.55B.

4. Fortunately my small force had now been in company for nearly a fortnight, we knew each other and had practised night encounter tactics together.

5. Before sailing on 23rd December, I had a final meeting with Commanding Officers at which I stated my intentions and stressed on this occasion that every officer and man must be doubly sure that he knew his night action duty. Such a reminder would hardly seem

\* Admiralty footnote:—J.W. convoys were those bound for Russia, R.A. Convoys those returning from Russia.

† Admiralty footnote:—Akureyri—on N. Coast of Iceland.

necessary except that within Home Fleet there are frequent changes of officers and men and, with constant escort requirements, adequate training is not easy to achieve.

6. Should the SCHARNHORST be encountered I had decided:—

(a) To close the enemy, opening fire with starshell at a range of about 12,000 yards.

(b) To form the four destroyers of my screen into sub-divisions and release them in time to take up positions for torpedo attack.

(c) To keep the JAMAICA in close support of DUKE OF YORK but with freedom of action to take drastic avoiding action and open the distance if engaged.

7. The endurance of my destroyers did not permit continuous cover to be given for the whole passage of the convoy and my intention was to reach the covering position at a speed of advance of 15 knots when the convoy was just east of Bear Island. This would allow me to spend some thirty hours in the area.

8. Force 2 sailed at 2300 on 23rd December, and in the early morning next day carried out a last practice attack using JAMAICA as target.

9. Meanwhile J.W.55B. had been located by enemy air the previous day and during the morning of 24th December, was being continuously shadowed.

10. Although German surface forces had never before made a sortie to the westward, the convoy which had reached the position 70° 40' N. 3° 10' E. at 1200 was entirely unsupported and I was uneasy lest a surface attack should be made.

11. At 1400 on 24th December, I therefore broke W/T silence and reversed the course of the convoy for three hours increasing the speed of Force 2 to 19 knots. If the enemy surface forces had searched to the westward this step would have had little effect in bringing the convoy closer, but it would have prevented the convoy being located by them before dark.

12. There was no further development that day and the original intentions for the covering force were resumed.

13. The J.W. convoy was not, however, making its scheduled speed and it appeared that the R.A. convoy was passing Bear Island without being contacted by the enemy. Shadowing of the J.W. convoy together with this fact implied that U-boats if present, might be concentrating on the J.W.

14. I therefore requested Rear Admiral, Destroyers, Home Fleet to take the following action if he thought it desirable:—

(a) To divert the R.A. convoy to the northward clear of the area.

(b) To detach four Fleet destroyers from R.A.55A to J.W.55B. This was successfully carried out.

15. I now felt confident that if the SCHARNHORST attacked the convoy, Force 1 and the escort destroyers would either drive her off or inflict damage which would give me time to close.

16. During the night of 25/26th December, the Battlefleet steamed to the eastward at 17 knots. There was an unpleasant sea and conditions in DUKE OF YORK were most uncomfortable, few people obtaining any sleep.

17. At 0339 Admiralty message timed 0319 was received in which Admiralty appreciated that SCHARNHORST was at sea. The stage was well set except that if SCHARNHORST attacked at daylight and immediately retired, I was not yet sufficiently close to cut her off. At 0400 the dispositions of Forces in the Bear Island area were as follows:

(a) *J.W.55B and Through Escorts.*

In position 73° 31' N. 18° 54' E. steering 070 at 8 knots. 19 merchant ships escorted by ONSLOW (Captain J. A. McCoy, D.S.O., R.N.), ONSLAUGHT (Commander W. H. Selby, D.S.C., R.N.), HAIDA (Commander H. G. de Wolf, R.C.N.), IROQUOIS (Commander J. C. Hibberd, D.S.C., R.C.N.), ORWELL (Lieutenant-Commander J. A. Hodges, D.S.O., R.N.), HURON (Lieutenant-Commander H. S. Rayner, D.S.C., R.C.N.), SCOURGE (Lieutenant-Commander G. L. M. Balfour, R.N.), IMPULSIVE (Lieutenant-Commander P. Bekenn, R.N.), and GLEANOR (Lieutenant-Commander F. J. S. Hewitt, D.S.C., R.N.), and the following ships belonging to the Western Approaches Command—WHITEHALL, WRESTLER, HONEYSUCKLE and OXLIP. This escort had also been recently reinforced by the following four destroyers detached from R.A.55A—MUSKETEER (Commander R. L. Fisher, D.S.O., O.B.E., R.N.), OPPORTUNE (Commander J. Le Barber, D.S.O., R.N.), VIRAGO (Lieutenant-Commander A. J. R. White, R.N.), and MATCHLESS (Lieutenant W. D. Shaw, R.N.).

(b) *R.A.55A and Through Escorts.*

In approximate position 74° 42' N. 5° 27' E. steering 267 at 8 knots. 22 merchant ships escorted by MILNE (Captain I. M. R. Campbell, D.S.O., R.N.), METEOR (Lieutenant-Commander D. J. P. Jewitt, R.N.), ASHANTI (Lieutenant-Commander J. R. Barnes, R.N.), ATHABASKAN (Lieutenant-Commander J. H. Stubbs, D.S.O. R.C.N.), and SEAGULL (Lieutenant-Commander R. W. Ellis, D.S.C., R.N.R.), and the following ships from the Western Approaches Command—BEAGLE, WESTCOTT, DIANELLA, POPPY and ACANTHUS.

(c) *Force 1.*

In approximate position 73° 52' N. 27° 12' E. steering 235 at 18 knots. BELFAST (Captain F. R. Parham, R.N. wearing the flag of Vice Admiral R. L. Burnett, C.B., D.S.O., O.B.E., Commanding Tenth Cruiser Squadron), NORFOLK (Captain D. K. Bain, R.N.), and SHEFFIELD (Captain C. T. Addis, R.N.).

(d) *Force 2.*

In position 71° 7' N. 10° 48' E. steering 080 at 24 knots. DUKE OF YORK (Captain the Honourable G. H. E. Russell, C.B.E., R.N., wearing the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet), JAMAICA (Captain J. Hughes-Hallett, D.S.O., R.N.), SAVAGE (Commander M. D. G. Meyrick, R.N.), SCORPION (Lieutenant-Commander W. S. Clouston, R.N.), SAUMAREZ (Lieutenant-Commander E. W. Walmsley, D.S.C., R.N.), and STORD (Lieutenant-Commander S. Storeheill, R.Nor.N.).

18. As J.W.55B. had been consistently shadowed and reported by U-boats and aircraft throughout its passage, and R.A.55A was apparently undetected, I appreciated that SCHARNHORST would make for the former convoy.

19. While breaking W/T silence would give away the fact that covering forces were in the vicinity I decided that the safety of the convoy must be the primary object.

20. The following action was therefore taken:—

(a) The convoy was diverted to the north in the hope that the change of course would make it more difficult for the SCHARNHORST to find it.

(b) C.S. 10\* was ordered to report his position and D.17\* that of the convoy.

(c) My position, course and speed was indicated.

21. On the course and speed of Force 2 and in the following sea my destroyers had much difficulty in avoiding broaching to and the DUKE OF YORK'S bows were constantly under water.

22. At 0628 I altered the course of the convoy to 045 and, having received C.S.10's signal timed 0540 giving his course as 235, I ordered Force 1 to close the convoy for mutual

\* Admiralty footnote:—C.S. 10—Vice Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron. D.17—Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla.

support, as I wished C.S.10 to have destroyers with him. C.S.10 altered course to 270 at 0712, in order to approach the convoy from the southward and avoid, in the event of action, steaming into the strong south westerly wind and heavy seas. At 0815 after receiving the position, course and speed of the convoy from D.17, the course of Force 1 was adjusted to 305 and speed increased to 24 knots.

#### FIRST CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY BY FORCE 1.

23. At 0840 BELFAST'S radar picked up the enemy at 35,000 yards, bearing 295, when in an estimated position  $73^{\circ} 35' N. 23^{\circ} 21' E.$ ; at this time C.S.10 expected the convoy to bear 287, 48 miles. At the same time D.17 estimated that the enemy's position was about 36 miles bearing 125 from the convoy.

24. In BELFAST the range of the main echo shortened rapidly and at 0900 a second echo was obtained bearing 299 at 24,500 yards. This second echo remained on a steady bearing and was held until 0930 when, from its estimated speed of 8-10 knots, C.S.10 considered that it was probably a merchant ship from the convoy and disregarded it. It may well, however, have been one of the enemy destroyers, detached to shadow the convoy, which are mentioned in paragraph 30 below.

25. At 0915, by which time Force 1 was formed on a line of bearing 180 the main echo bore 250 at 13,000 yards, speed approximately 18 knots. Force 1 altered to a line of bearing 160 and at 0921 SHEFFIELD reported enemy in sight bearing 222, range 13,000 yards.

26. At 0924 BELFAST opened fire with starshell and five minutes later Force 1 was ordered to engage with main armament. At 0930 Force 1 altered to 265 and NORFOLK opened fire at a range of 9,800 yards but had to drop back to clear BELFAST'S range. At 0938 Force 1 altered to 105 and at 0946 to 170 by which time the range had opened to 24,000 yards and the enemy had altered course, to 150 steaming at about 30 knots.

27. NORFOLK alone of Force 1 continued firing until about 0940. She claimed one hit with her second or third salvo and this has since been confirmed by prisoners as a hit either in the crow's nest or the bridge port director which caused several casualties. Other observers consider that she scored a further hit on the forecassle without doing very much damage but prisoners have not yet confirmed this. The 6-inch cruisers did not open fire during this phase of the action and the enemy may at this time have been deceived as to the number of cruisers in Force 1 and thus made a second attempt to attack the convoy. From prisoners' statements, however, it seems that SCHARNHORST had been expecting to engage two or three cruisers.

28. After NORFOLK ceased firing Force 1 pursued the enemy to the southward but the range continued to open with the enemy's speed at 30 knots. At 0955 the enemy altered course to the north east and C.S.10 at once appreciated that he was trying to work round to the northward of the convoy and attack again. Possibly this was the result of an exhortation from Admiral Doenitz which appears to

have been received and read to the ship's company at about this time. In the prevailing weather conditions, with wind force 7-8 from the south west, Force 1's maximum speed was 24 knots and as that of the enemy was estimated at 28 to 30 knots C.S.10 decided that Force 1 must get between SCHARNHORST and the convoy. Force 1 therefore altered course to 305 at 1000 and to 325 at 1014. Six minutes later contact with the enemy was lost when he was bearing 078 at 36,000 yards and steering to the north east at about 28 knots.

29. During this engagement the convoy was turned to the northward by D.17 on my instructions at 0930; it remained on that course until 1030 when, realising that C.S.10 had lost touch with the enemy and was closing the convoy, I ordered D.17 to turn it back to 045. C.S.10 had previously asked for six destroyers to be detached to Force 1 but D.17 received my signal timed 0937 (ordering only four to join Force 1) before they were detached and so MUSKETEER, MATCHLESS, OPPORTUNE and VIRAGO (36th Division) left the convoy to join C.S.10 at 0951.

\*30. Throughout this first engagement I had appreciated that enemy destroyers might be in company with SCHARNHORST. In fact no visual contact with them was reported by any of our forces throughout the whole operation, though many unidentified destroyer radar echoes persisted during the day. From prisoners' reports, however, there seems little doubt that SCHARNHORST had three destroyers in company with her and that before Force 1 first made contact these destroyers had been sent ahead to shadow, report and if possible attack J.W.55B. Prisoners also state that the destroyers did make contact with the convoy and signalled that they had done so by Very lights before Force 1 engaged. If this is so neither the destroyers nor the Very lights were seen by the convoy escorts who reported nothing unusual until they sighted BELFAST'S starshell at 0925. It may well be that when SCHARNHORST was engaged these destroyers withdrew from the convoy either to assist her or to make good their escape.

#### SECOND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENEMY BY FORCE 1.

31. Force 1 closed the convoy and was joined at 1024 by the 36th Division. At 1045 Force 1 passed through position  $73^{\circ} 49' N. 21^{\circ} 58' E.$  and five minutes later made radar contact with the convoy bearing 324 at 28,000 yards. The cruisers commenced zig-zagging 10 miles ahead of it with the 36th Division disposed ahead of Force 1 as a screen.

32. At this time I appreciated that Force 2 would have little chance of finding the enemy unless some unit regained touch with him and shadowed. I informed C.S.10 of this at 1058 but as weather conditions gave the enemy an advantage of 4-6 knots in speed he rightly considered it undesirable to split his force by detaching one or more ships to search, feeling confident that the enemy would return to the convoy from the north or north east.

\* *Admiralty footnote*.—It is known that the three destroyers at sea with SCHARNHORST were detached early on the day of the action to seek and attack the J.W. Convoy and that thereafter they did not rejoin her.

33. At about noon I found myself in a difficult position on account of the destroyers' fuel situation. I had either to turn back or go on to Kola Inlet\*, and if the enemy had turned for home by this time there was obviously no chance of my catching him.

34. The convoy remained on a course of 045 but at 1122 I ordered D.17 to use his discretion regarding its course and at 1155 he altered round to 125 to keep Force 1 between the convoy and the enemy.

35. Force 1 was still zig-zagging ahead of the convoy. NORFOLK had reported a radar contact at 27,000 yards at 1137 but had lost it a few minutes later and by 1200, when the convoy was turning to 125, Force 1 was in 74° 11' N. 22° 18' E. steering 045 at 18 knots. Then, at 1205 with the convoy about 9 miles on the port quarter of Force 1, BELFAST made contact with the enemy by radar at 30,500 yards, bearing 075 and I knew now that there was every chance of catching the enemy.

36. C.S.10 concentrated the 36th Division on his starboard bow and at 1219 altered course to 100; the enemy course and speed was estimated at 240, 20 knots. A minute later the SCHARNHORST appeared to alter slightly to the westward, at 1221 SHEFFIELD reported enemy in sight and Force 1 was ordered to open fire at a range of 11,000 yards.

37. At the same time the 36th Division was ordered to attack with torpedoes. Unfortunately weather conditions, which reduced the destroyers' speed, and also the enemy's hurried retreat, prevented them from getting within range. MUSKETEER opened fire on the enemy at a range of 7,000 yards at 1222 and continued firing until 1236. During this time the range was never less than 4,100 yards and SCHARNHORST retiring at high speed was not considered to be a possible torpedo target.

38. This second action, fought by the cruisers at ranges from 4½ to 8 miles, lasted about 20 minutes and for the second time SCHARNHORST was most effectively driven off the convoy by Force 1's determined attack. The enemy quickly withdrew; his course altered round from west to south-east and the range began to open as his speed increased from 18 to 28 knots. Several hits were claimed by the cruisers during the opening salvos. Only one, which struck the port side aft and did not apparently explode, has been confirmed by prisoners but MUSKETEER from a distance of 4,500 yards considers there were others. Prisoners were agreed that the cruisers' fire was unpleasantly accurate and filled the air with fragments.

39. At 1233 NORFOLK received one hit through the barrette of "X" turret, which put the turret out of action and the magazine was flooded as a precaution; a second shell hit amidships. All radar became unserviceable except Type 284 and one officer and six ratings were killed and five ratings seriously wounded. At the same time an eleven inch salvo straddled SHEFFIELD and several pieces of shell described by C.S.10 as "up to football size" came inboard; fragments also penetrated the ship at various points.

\* Admiralty footnote:—Kola Inlet = the entrance to Murmansk.

40. By 1241 the enemy was on a course of 110 at 28 knots and the range had opened to 12,400 yards. C.S.10 decided to check fire and shadow with the whole of Force 1 until SCHARNHORST could be engaged by Force 2. Force 1 therefore increased speed to 28 knots and at 1250 the enemy range and bearing were steady at 13,400 yards, 138°.

The 36th Division to the westward of the cruisers continued to pursue the enemy in line ahead, their range opening to 20,000 yards and then remaining steady.

#### SHADOWING OF THE ENEMY BY FORCE 1.

41. For the next three hours SCHARNHORST'S course was to the south-east and southward. Prisoners state that by this time she had given up all idea of attacking the convoy. Force 1 shadowed and reported SCHARNHORST from a range of 7½ miles and slightly to the eastward of the enemy. As he was retiring on such an advantageous course for interception by Force 2 the cruisers remained in close company and did not attempt to engage, shadowing instead by radar from just outside visibility range.

42. The 36th Division to the westward of SCHARNHORST and rather further astern closed the range slightly but owing to the heavy sea were unable to close to attack and were later stationed to the westward (in accordance with my signal time 1559) to guard against SCHARNHORST turning in that direction and breaking back to the convoy or to Altenfjord. Had this happened neither DUKE OF YORK nor my destroyers could have kept up against the head sea.

43. Despite her damage NORFOLK kept up with Force 1. At 1603 she was obliged to reduce speed to fight a fire in a wing compartment but she rejoined the Force at 1700.

44. At 1610 SHEFFIELD dropped back and reported that her port inner shaft was out of action and her speed reduced to 10 knots for half an hour, but by 1621 she was catching up again at 23 knots. However, the delay, and her reduction in speed, prevented her from rejoining Force 1 until 2100 and for the rest of the action she remained some 10 miles astern conforming to the general movement of the battle.

45. At 1640 Force 1 made radar contact with Force 2 at 40,000 yards on a bearing of 176 and C.S.10 received my order to open fire on the enemy with starshell at the same time. The range of SCHARNHORST from BELFAST was then 19,300 yards. BELFAST opened fire at 1647 with starshell and four minutes later Force 1 observed Force 2 engaging the enemy.

#### MOVEMENTS OF FORCE 2.

46. Acting on the enemy reports of Force 1, Force 2 had been steering throughout the day to intercept.

47. The exemplary fashion in which C.S.10 with Force 1 shadowed the enemy until Force 2 made contact had given me all the information I required. At one time I feared that our respective positions might be in error but D/F bearings indicated that the approach was being made on a steady bearing.

48. Soon after 1000 three enemy aircraft shadowing from the starboard quarter at about 8½ miles had been picked up by radar and D/F. One was heard making enemy reports and was in radar contact for nearly three hours after which it was heard intermittently by D/F until about 1400; it then either lost touch or returned to base.

49. During the first two engagements by the cruisers the composition of the enemy force was not clear as the earlier radar reports from Force 1 had indicated that SCHARNHORST might be accompanied by destroyers. When C.S.10 had confirmed that only one heavy unit was present I decided to engage on similar courses with JAMAICA in support, opening fire at about 13,000 yards, detaching the destroyers of the screen to make a torpedo attack.

50. At 1400 I appreciated that if the enemy maintained his course and speed Force 2 would engage him about 1715. In the event he altered round to the south soon afterwards and was first picked up by DUKE OF YORK'S radar at 45,500 yards at 1617, bearing 020. A radar report was made including my position (my signal timed 1617).

At 1637 destroyers were ordered to take up the most advantageous position for torpedo attack, Force 2's screen having been formed into sub-divisions on either bow shortly after DUKE OF YORK first obtained radar contact.

51. The range closed rapidly and BELFAST was soon picked up astern of the target. DUKE OF YORK's Fire Control Radar found the target at 1632 at 29,700 yards when the enemy appeared to be zigzagging on a mean course of 160. At 1642 the enemy seemed to alter slightly to port. Two minutes later Force 2 altered to 080 to open A arcs\* and at 1647 BELFAST opened fire with starshell, followed at 1648 by DUKE OF YORK. At 1650 DUKE OF YORK'S starshell illuminated the enemy, Force 2 opened fire with main armament and my first enemy report was made timed 1650.

#### FIRST ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENEMY BY FORCE 2.

52. When DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA opened fire at 12,000 yards there was every indication that SCHARNHORST was completely unaware of their presence. Although I assumed that reports of the aircraft which had shadowed Force 2 earlier in the afternoon would have been passed to her, SCHARNHORST was closed on a steady bearing and prisoners confirm that she made no radar contact. When first sighted her turrets were reported trained fore and aft, she did not immediately engage Force 2 and her opening salvos were erratic. Prisoners state they had been told they would not have to engage anything larger than a cruiser and were badly shaken when informed that a capital ship to the southward was engaging them.

53. The enemy altered round at once to the northward and DUKE OF YORK to 060 to follow and to avoid torpedoes which the enemy, had he been on the alert, might have fired.

\* *Admiralty footnote*:—A arcs are the arcs on which all guns of the main armament will bear, thus allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.

As SCHARNHORST turned to the northward BELFAST prepared to fire torpedoes and then with NORFOLK engaged her with main armament as she altered round on to an easterly course, probably to avoid Force 1 and to open her A arcs. By 1708 SCHARNHORST was steady on an easterly course and engaging DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA with her main armament. Her tactics were to turn to the southward, fire a broadside and then turn end on away to the east until ready to fire the next, making DUKE OF YORK'S gunnery a difficult problem.

54. The situation as the chase to the eastward began showed DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA to the southward of SCHARNHORST pursuing her and adopting similar tactics. Astern of SCHARNHORST, Force 2's screen, SAVAGE and SAUMAREZ on her port quarter, and SCORPION and STORD on her starboard quarter, crept slowly ahead to deliver their torpedo attacks, taking individual avoiding action from time to time when engaged by the enemy though this, for reasons given later, was not often, until they had closed in to 10,000 yards.

55. To the northward BELFAST and NORFOLK engaged the enemy turning away to the east until 1712, while she remained within range; SCHARNHORST replied to the cruisers' fire with two salvos. These two cruisers then followed the enemy to the eastward keeping to the northward of him. SHEFFIELD was still astern of Force 1 and dropping slowly back owing to her reduced speed.

56. The 36th Division to the north westward of the enemy altered round at 1700 to follow SCHARNHORST to the east and crept forward to the northward of her to deliver their torpedo attacks. MUSKETEER hoped to synchronise these attacks with those of Force 2's screen but owing to a technical failure in MUSKETEER'S W/T equipment she was never in W/T touch with SAVAGE and Force 2's screen delivered their attack nearly 40 minutes before the 36th Division reached the target area.

57. DUKE OF YORK probably obtained hits with her first and third salvos which prisoners state were low down forward (a hit which may have put "A" turret out of action as it did not fire again) and on the quarterdeck close to "C" turret. Little is known of other hits on the enemy during this first engagement but it seems certain that DUKE OF YORK obtained at least three, the last of which caused underwater damage and eventually reduced the enemy's speed. SCHARNHORST'S own gunfire was erratic to begin with but improved in speed and accuracy as the range increased until, between 17,000 yards and 20,000 yards, DUKE OF YORK was frequently straddled and there were many near misses.

58. JAMAICA, keeping six cables astern of and slightly to one or the other quarter of DUKE OF YORK, conformed to the flagship's movements. She opened fire at 1652 at a range of 13,000 yards and continued firing as opportunity offered until 1742 when the range had opened to 18,000 yards. At this range she considered her blind fire of doubtful value and liable to confuse DUKE OF YORK'S radar spotting. JAMAICA claimed one hit during this engagement.

59. By the time JAMAICA ceased firing all cruisers were out of range and the destroyers had not yet been seriously engaged by the enemy. The gun duel between DUKE OF YORK and SCHARNHORST continued until 1820 when SCHARNHORST ceased firing at 20,000 yards probably due to a hit by DUKE OF YORK which reduced her speed, although this was not apparent at the time. DUKE OF YORK checked fire at 1844 when the range had opened to 21,400 yards.

#### FIRST DESTROYER TORPEDO ATTACK BY SCREEN OF FORCE 2.

60. At this time it seemed quite probable that SCHARNHORST would escape and much depended upon the four "S" class destroyers. At 1713 they had been ordered to attack with torpedoes and I could now see them on my radar very slowly gaining bearing on SCHARNHORST waiting for her to make an appreciable alteration of course to allow them to attack. By 1820 they had closed in to 12,000 yards but were gaining little. At this time they started to forge ahead and this must have been due to the DUKE OF YORK's hit which reduced SCHARNHORST'S speed and has already been referred to. This was borne out by the radar plot and the fact that she ceased firing at this time.

61. As the effect of this was not apparent for some time I had already decided to turn towards the Norwegian coast, hoping the enemy would also lead round and so give my destroyers a chance to attack. When, however, I saw the speed reduction I turned in straight at the SCHARNHORST.

62. By 1840 the first sub-division (SAVAGE and SAUMAREZ) astern of the enemy and the second sub-division (SCORPION and STORD) on her starboard beam had closed in to about 10,000 yards. At this time SCHARNHORST opened up a fairly heavy though ineffective fire on SAVAGE and SAUMAREZ which the two destroyers returned when the range closed to 7,000 yards. That both sub-divisions were not engaged by even heavier fire and considerably earlier on appears, from prisoners' statements, to have been due to the muddled handling of the SCHARNHORST'S A.A. and secondary armament. When DUKE OF YORK first engaged the enemy SCHARNHORST'S A.A. armament (4.1 in. guns' crews and below) were ordered to take cover, leaving only a skeleton crew at the guns and this order never appears to have been countermanded. The secondary armament, on the other hand, seems to have suffered from considerable disagreement between the ship's gunnery officers, resulting in a series of contradictory orders.

63. While the first sub-division to the north-westward, and still closing rapidly, was drawing the enemy's fire, the second sub-division closed in apparently unseen and certainly unengaged from the south eastward. At 1849 the enemy, his speed now definitely reduced, was illuminated by the first sub-division's starshells and was considered by SCORPION to be altering course to southward. This alteration may have been to avoid torpedoes fired by STORD who at this moment was turning to fire. SCORPION immediately turned and fired 8 torpedoes at 2,100 yards and STORD 8 at 1,800 yards. SCORPION claimed one hit, STORD none,

probably due to the fact that SCHARNHORST combed the tracks. SCHARNHORST continued to alter round to starboard after this attack thus placing the first sub-division, attacking a few minutes later, in an excellent position on her starboard bow. The second sub-division was engaged by the enemy's secondary and lighter armament while retiring but the firing was wild and no damage was incurred. Both destroyers replied to the enemy's fire and scored several hits on her superstructure.

64. At 1851 SCHARNHORST was clearly seen by the first sub-division in their own starshell to be altering to a southerly and then, after the second sub-division's attack, to a south westerly course. SAVAGE with SAUMAREZ on her starboard quarter both hastily trained their tubes to starboard and turned in to attack at 1855 when on the starboard bow of SCHARNHORST; SAVAGE fired 8 torpedoes at a range of 3,500 yards and SAUMAREZ, under heavy fire and only able to train one set of tubes owing to casualties and damage, 4 torpedoes at about 1,800 yards. Both destroyers came under heavy fire from the enemy's entire armament as they attacked and both ships returned the fire as they retired to the northward. SAVAGE was undamaged but SAUMAREZ suffered damage, fortunately above the waterline, and casualties. Shells passed through her director and under her range-finder director without exploding but she suffered considerable splinter damage which reduced her speed to 10 knots on one engine only. One officer and ten ratings were killed and eleven ratings wounded. Three hits were observed from SAVAGE and one from SAUMAREZ. From subsequent analysis it seems probable that the first sub-division scored three hits altogether though it is not possible to say from which destroyers the torpedoes were fired.

65. This gallant attack was practically unsupported and carried out, particularly in the case of the first sub-division, in the face of heavy fire from the enemy. Three heavy underwater explosions were heard in DUKE OF YORK and six in BELFAST during this time. Prisoners state that at least three hits were scored and that the ship's company were generally aghast at the relentless attack by what turned out to be four destroyers. They attributed the success of the attack mainly to the bad handling of SCHARNHORST'S secondary and A.A. armament. One torpedo appears to have hit in a boiler room and damaged a shaft which immediately reduced the enemy's speed to 22 knots; another is said to have flooded several compartments aft. After their attacks the destroyers withdrew to the northward and SCHARNHORST steadied temporarily on a southerly course, still making good about 20 knots though this speed slowly decreased as Force 2 closed in from the west to re-engage.

#### SECOND ENGAGEMENT BY FORCE 2.

66. During the destroyer attack Force 2 closed the enemy rapidly and as the destroyers withdrew to the northward, DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA re-engaged at 1901 at a range of 10,400 yards, the enemy still steering to the southward. Soon afterwards NORFOLK opened fire but checked after two salvos owing to difficulty in finding the right target. Hits

were immediately scored while the enemy continued to fire at the retiring destroyers. After five minutes, when SCHARNHORST had been repeatedly hit and fires and flashes from exploding ammunition were flaring up, she shifted her secondary armament fire to DUKE OF YORK at a range of 8,000 yards. During this second engagement she apparently engaged DUKE OF YORK and JAMAICA only occasionally with part of her main armament.

67. After this the battle was soon over. Between 1901 and 1928 the enemy's speed was estimated to decrease from 20 to 5 knots. At 1915 BELFAST opened fire on her at a range of 17,000 yards and a few minutes later she steadied on a northerly course. At 1928 fire was checked in DUKE OF YORK to enable BELFAST and JAMAICA to deliver their torpedo attacks.

68. Little information is forthcoming from prisoners about this part of the action as they were not unnaturally stunned by the success of our destroyer attacks and the pounding which their ship was receiving. They have, however, been able to account for at least ten of DUKE OF YORK'S hits during this period.

69. Of the enemy's main armament, 'A' turret does not appear to have fired at all during this second engagement probably due to damage earlier on; 'B' turret, although damaged and filled with smoke, seems to have functioned intermittently until shortly before the ship sank; 'C' turret was believed by prisoners to have continued firing right up to the end. Most of the crews of the secondary and A.A. armament are thought to have been killed during this second engagement with DUKE OF YORK and by the time the final torpedo attacks came resistance was practically at an end. Prisoners state that the Captain had sent his final signal to Hitler, assuring him that SCHARNHORST would fight to the last shell, and that the Admiral and Captain had then shot themselves on the bridge, though as regards the Captain this is not borne out by SCORPION'S evidence (paragraph 77).

#### TORPEDO ATTACKS BY BELFAST AND JAMAICA.

70. At 1919 I ordered JAMAICA, and at 1920 BELFAST, to close the enemy, who by this time appeared to be almost stationary, and sink her with torpedoes. Both ships at once closed. JAMAICA fired three torpedoes (one of which misfired) to port at 1925 at a range of 3,500 yards but no hits were claimed, probably due to an under-estimation of the enemy's speed. BELFAST fired three torpedoes to starboard at 1927 and claimed one hit which was unobserved and considered unlikely. Both cruisers hauled round to fire their remaining tubes, JAMAICA engaging the enemy with main and secondary armament while doing so and scoring several hits. SCHARNHORST replied with wild fire from secondary armament and light weapons, causing no damage. Enemy fire had ceased before JAMAICA fired three torpedoes to starboard at 1937 at a range of 3,750 yards with the enemy broadside on and almost stopped. Two hits were claimed but were not observed as the target was completely hidden by smoke; they are considered probable as underwater explosions were felt after the correct interval. When BELFAST turned to fire her port torpedoes at 1935 she found such

a melee of ships and fire round the target that she altered round to the southward to await a more favourable opportunity. She came in again for her final attack at 1948 but on firing starshell to illuminate the target it was clear from the surrounding wreckage that SCHARNHORST had by this time sunk.

#### TORPEDO ATTACKS BY THE 36TH DIVISION.

71. Throughout the foregoing engagement while SCHARNHORST was fleeing to the eastward the 36th Division, starting its chase well to the westward and therefore well astern of the other forces, had been tracking the enemy by radar and slowly gaining bearing on a parallel course some miles to the northward. As previously mentioned an attempt had been made to synchronise the attack with that of Force 2's screen, but unfortunately MUSKETEER never gained W/T touch with SAVAGE. Although MUSKETEER'S action in attempting to synchronise attacks was correct, SAVAGE would have been justified in proceeding with his attack as it was essential that SCHARNHORST'S speed should be reduced at the earliest possible moment.

72. When SAVAGE'S division delivered its attack the 36th Division was still a long way astern and despite the SCHARNHORST'S alteration of course to the south westward nearly forty minutes elapsed before their own attack was delivered. However, the range closed rapidly and the 71st Sub-Division (MUSKETEER and MATCHLESS) and 72nd Sub-Division (OPPORTUNE and VIRAGO) arrived in the target area at approximately the same time that BELFAST and JAMAICA were completing their first torpedo attacks. At this time SCHARNHORST, steering an erratic course, was altering round from the north east to the south west, but by the time the two sub-divisions fired she was fairly steady on a south westerly course and almost stopped. The destroyers closed from the north and astern of SCHARNHORST on a similar course.

73. The 71st Sub-Division attacked the enemy on the port side. MUSKETEER led the sub-division in and at 1933 fired four torpedoes to starboard at a range of 1,000 yards, observing two, possibly three, hits between the funnel and the mainmast. She then withdrew to the westward. MATCHLESS followed MUSKETEER in but was less fortunate. Shortly before the attack a sea had hit her mountings while the tubes were being trained and had strained the training gear. As the attack developed the tubes had to be trained from port to starboard and before this order could be passed a heavy sea struck MATCHLESS' bridge and broke all communications with the tubes. The training gear being strained, the order to train to starboard did not reach the tubes in time to be carried out. MATCHLESS therefore hauled round without firing and came in to attack again on the enemy's port bow but by this time the SCHARNHORST had sunk and she joined SCORPION picking up survivors from the wreckage.

74. On the starboard side of SCHARNHORST the 72nd Sub-Division led by OPPORTUNE attacked at the same time. OPPORTUNE fired four torpedoes at 1931 at a range of 2,100 yards and claimed one unobserved hit; two minutes later she fired a



second salvo of four torpedoes at a range of 2,500 yards and claimed a further unobserved hit. VIRAGO followed OPPORTUNE in and at 1934 fired seven torpedoes at a range of 2,800 yards and observed two hits. The Sub-Division then retired to the westward, VIRAGO opening fire on the enemy while still visible.

75. The hits scored by the 36th Division are again difficult to assess as some were not observed and as the cruisers were attacking at about the same time; five hits in all is considered the most probable assessment. Little information is available from prisoners, most of whom were engaged in abandoning ship, but SCHARNHORST seems to have taken a list to starboard and they therefore consider that most of the hits were on her starboard side. One prisoner has confirmed three hits from the same destroyer, possibly MUSKETEER or SAVAGE.

#### SINKING OF THE SCHARNHORST.

76. Three cruisers and eight destroyers were now in the target area and DUKE OF YORK steered to the northward to avoid the mêlée. All that could be seen of the SCHARNHORST was a dull glow through a dense cloud of smoke, which the starshell and searchlights of the surrounding ships could not penetrate. No ship therefore saw the enemy sink but it seems fairly certain that she sank after a heavy underwater explosion which was heard and felt in several ships at about 1945. JAMAICA, MATCHLESS and VIRAGO were the last ships to sight her at about 1938; at 1948 when BELFAST closed to deliver a second torpedo attack she had definitely sunk in approximate position  $72^{\circ} 16' N. 28^{\circ} 41' E.$

77. JAMAICA rejoined DUKE OF YORK to the northward whilst BELFAST, NORFOLK and most of the destroyers searched the area until 2040, during which time SCORPION picked up 30 survivors and MATCHLESS six. SCORPION reported subsequently that the Captain and the Commander of SCHARNHORST were seen in the water seriously wounded; the Captain was dead before he could be reached, the Commander grasped a life-line but succumbed before he could be hauled in. Soon after 2100 SHEFFIELD rejoined Force 1 and I ordered all forces in the area to proceed independently to Kola Inlet where they arrived without incident throughout 27th December.

78. The 36 prisoners picked up by the destroyers were transferred to DUKE OF YORK at Kola Inlet and were provisionally interrogated on board during the ship's return to Scapa. No officers survived, the most senior of the prisoners being of the equivalent rating of Acting Petty Officer.

#### CONDUCT OF OFFICERS AND MEN.

79. The conduct of all officers and men throughout the action was in accordance with the highest traditions of the Service.

80. Earlier in the day, the resolute attack by Force 1 to drive off the enemy undoubtedly saved the convoy and their subsequent shadowing was invaluable to me in my approach.

81. DUKE OF YORK fought hard and well having drawn, for over an hour and a half, the whole of the enemy's fire. She was frequently straddled with near misses, ahead, astern and on the beam. Both masts were shot through by 11 inch shell which fortunately did not explode.

82. That she was not hit was probably due to masterly handling aided by accurate advice from the plot. There is no doubt that the DUKE OF YORK was the principal factor in the battle. She fought the SCHARNHORST at night and she won.

83. This in no way detracts from the achievements of the "S" class destroyers who with great gallantry and dash pressed in unsupported, to the closest ranges, to deliver their attacks, being subjected the while to the whole fire power of the enemy. Their resolution and skill shortened the battle and ensured the sinking of the ship.

84. In general the speed of wireless communication and the exceptional performance of radar reflects the greatest credit on the personnel concerned and in this night battle contributed in great measure to its success.

85. Plotting arrangements in the Fleet Flagship worked well and were of great assistance both to me and to the ship. I myself alternated between the plot and the Admiral's bridge, the Chief of Staff remaining in the plot. I feel very strongly that the officers in the plot must always be in the closest contact with the Admiral who should obviously be on the bridge.

86. Although failings in material and personnel were few during this action it should of course be remembered that the enemy inflicted very little damage on our ships and they were not therefore extensively tested under adverse conditions.

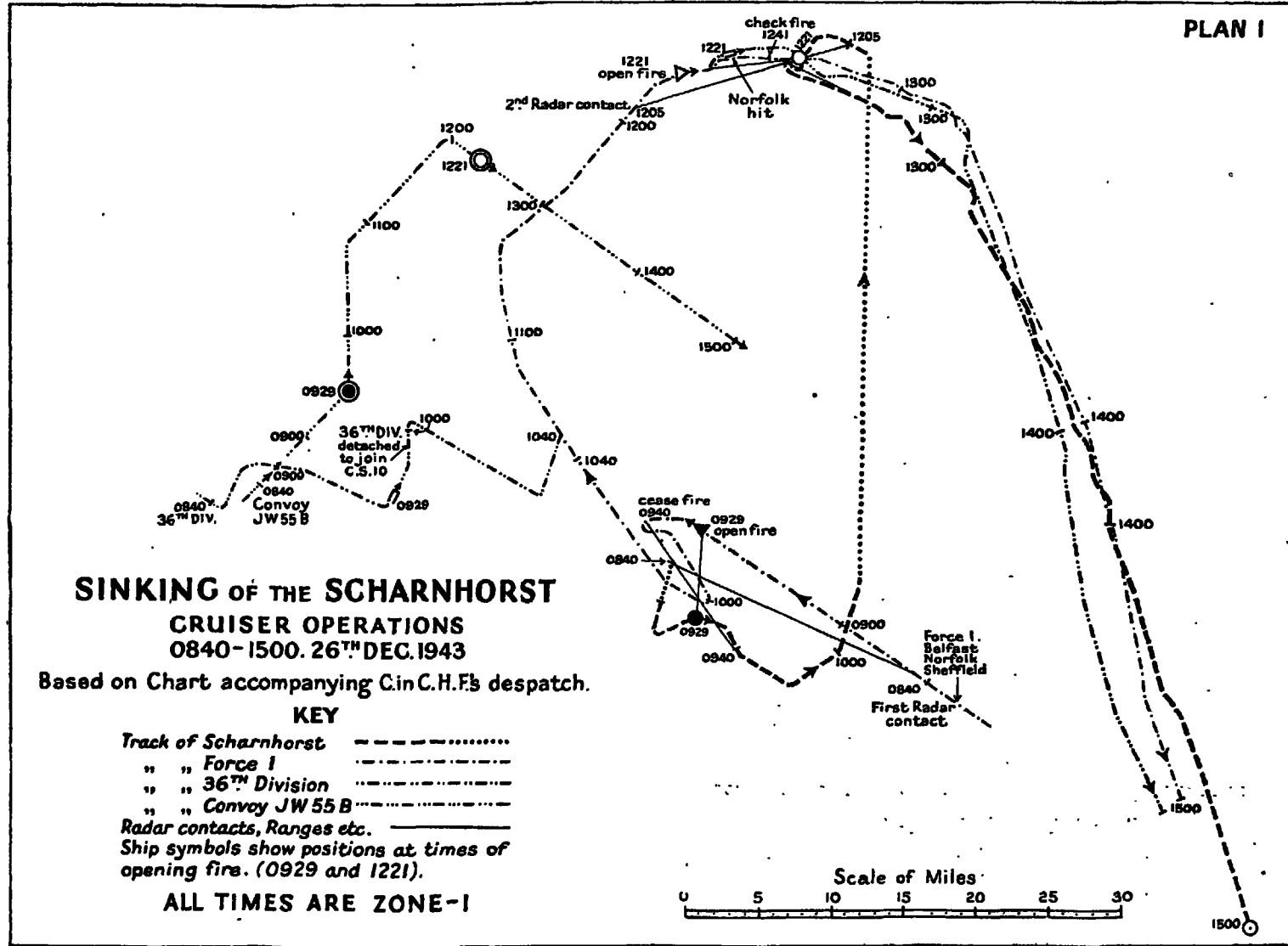
87. I should also like to record that the accurate and concise information supplied by the Admiralty in the early stages of this operation was of great assistance.

88. I have forwarded separately my recommendations for honours and awards as a result of this action.

(Signed) BRUCE FRASER,  
*Admiral.*



PLAN I



B

PLAN 2

# SINKING OF THE SCHARNHORST

## CRUISER SHADOWING AND BATTLESHIP ACTION

1500-1900. 26<sup>TH</sup> DEC. 1943.

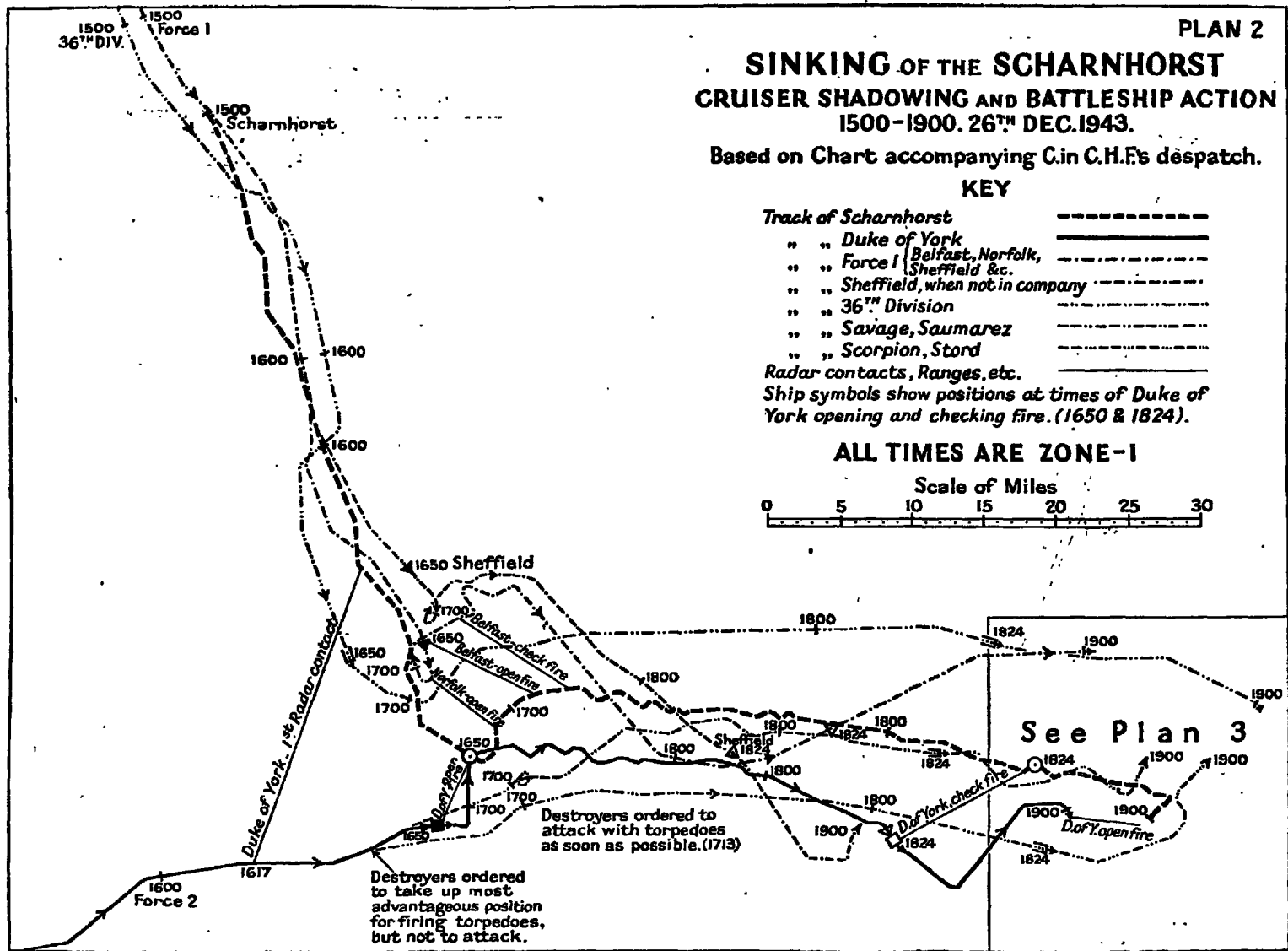
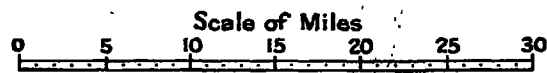
Based on Chart accompanying C.in C.H.F.'s despatch.

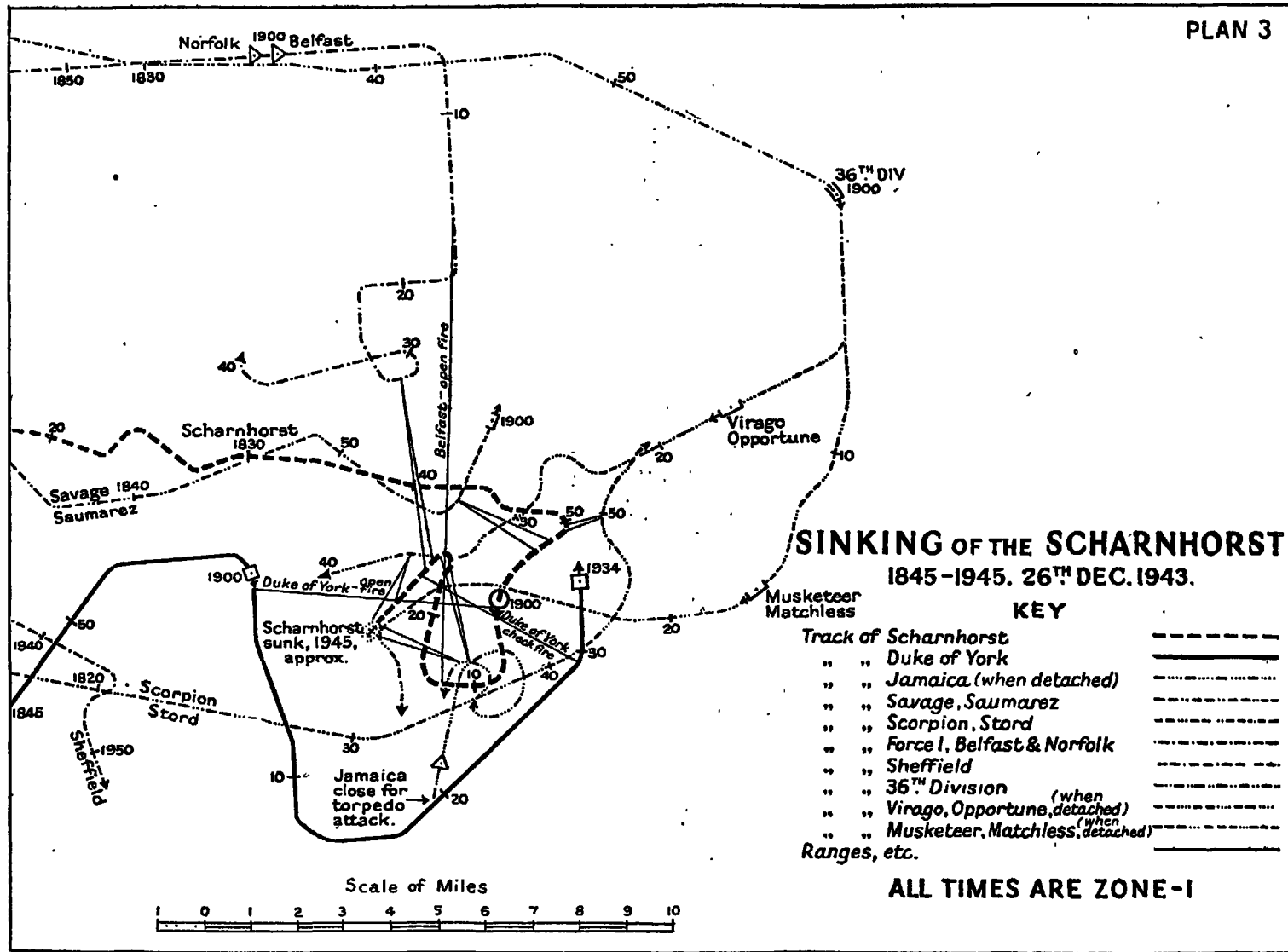
### KEY

- Track of Scharnhorst -----
- " " Duke of York \_\_\_\_\_
- " " Force I (Belfast, Norfolk, Sheffield &c.) - - - - -
- " " Sheffield, when not in company - - - - -
- " " 36<sup>TH</sup> Division - - - - -
- " " Savage, Saumarez - - - - -
- " " Scorpion, Stord - - - - -

Radar contacts, Ranges, etc.  
 Ship symbols show positions at times of Duke of York opening and checking fire. (1650 & 1824).

ALL TIMES ARE ZONE-1





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