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War Diary of <sup>S</sup>H.M.S. HAMBURG in the Battle of  
Skagerrak. (Translation of Excerpts from).

Source  
or  
Author

Lieut.Comdr.Johann Heinmann, I.G.N.

NOTE

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A translation of an excerpt from the war diary (1916) of Lieutenant Commander Johann Heinemann regarding H.M.S. HAMBURG in the Battle of Skagerrak.

Since the middle of May we had a sort of indefinite feeling that something was going to happen. We supposed that it would be an offensive against the British coast with the cooperation of airships, as it had been last time; and as day after day passed without bringing the long-desired sailing order, we supposed that the delay was due to having to wait for better weather for the Zeppelins. At last the order arrived on May 30th although the weather continued rainy and squally. It was a briefly written order, to the effect that all the ships were to gather at 9 p.m. in the Schilligreede, the IV Scouting Group to which we belonged, gathering on the Weser. We sailed out of harbor at about 5 o'clock, passed by the High Sea Fleet which was concentrated at Schilligreede in almost complete numbers, and steered through the so-called Wasserfahrt to our anchorage where we cast anchor near the other small cruisers of the IV Scouting Group. The same evening between 10-11 o'clock we received the order to lift anchor at 4.10 the next morning, full steam in all the boilers.

The entire High Sea Fleet sailed the next morning at the appointed hour, steering northwards and west of Helgoland. The I and II scouting groups, consisting of battle cruisers and the newest small cruisers, sailed about 50 miles in front of the main body. The IV scouting group was as usual distributed around the main body for the protection of the flanks and of the sailing course; our HAMBURG sailed ahead to port.

The operations order which was only revealed at sea after we had passed a certain point, ran as follows: the I and II scouting groups were to advance in the Skagerrak and capture commercial ships in order to force the enemy to begin counter operations. Enemy forces were to be destroyed or in case of superiority, to be drawn on to our main body which was to take up position in a certain square in front of the Skagerrak. Our submarines were to concentrate in front of the Firth of Forth and other important points on the British coast, in order to intercept outgoing British warships. The II squadron was to remain behind for the protection of the German Bay; its subsequent movements would be dictated by the course of events. The air forces were to reconnoitre in a northwesterly direction as soon as the weather permitted. According to secret information, enemy forces had been sighted in various parts of the North Sea in the neighborhood of the British coast; a small group near the Firth of Forth was reported by one of our submarines.

As I mentioned above, no air scouting had been possible previous to the sailing of our forces, neither was it possible on the 31st owing to the weather. Our information concerning the enemy forces actually sailing on the sea were therefore necessarily very scarce. We had to be prepared for an unexpected encounter with the enemy at any moment, and also to reckon with the probability that as soon as the enemy got news of our sailing, he would try to intercept our return march

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with superior forces and to force us into a battle. The distance from the Thames mouth to the north of Helgoland being about equal to that of Skagerrak to Helgoland, the enemy forces would just have sufficient time to enter the German Bight after being informed of our entrance into the Skagerrak. These considerations probably induced the Chief Commander of the Fleet to summon the II squadron to join with the main forces, which came up with us towards 9 a.m.

Nothing of note happened during the morning or the early hours of the afternoon. We only met a few fishing steamers under neutral flags, one of which we captured, as it seemed suspicious, and sent it with a prize crew to Cuxhaven. We also sank a floating mine with machine gun fire and our escorting torpedo boat sank a second one, which exploded, sending up a gigantic water column, a timely warning not to approach within considerable distance of mines one intends to sink. We were beginning to fear that this expedition was going to end in nothing as had been the case so many times before, when our Naval Commander, Admiral Schœer, received a wireless from the Commander of the Scouting Division (Vice Admiral Hipper) reporting that the I Scouting Group had encountered 5 enemy battle-cruisers sailing a southern course, and had turned back in order to draw the enemy on to our main forces, according to orders. These tidings spread like lightning and we felt terribly excited at what was going to happen, although probably not a single man among us anticipated the importance of the coming event.

Our main forces advanced full speed; the small cruisers of the IV Scouting Division fell behind, gathering in keel-line to starboard in the rear of the main body, according to the tactical orders. After about an hour, we began to hear the cannon of our cruisers which had apparently entered into action, and soon after our main body opened fire to port and clouds of smoke appeared through which we could discern the mast points and smokestacks of three ships, sailing northeast; apparently they forced the rear ships of the group against which our main fire was directed. We could clearly distinguish the huge water columns raised by our projectiles near the ships; as far as I could notice, the enemy fire fell short of, or beyond, our ships but did not cover them.

While we stood on the bridge watching this scene, our artillery officer (Lieut. Mohr) suddenly called out: "There's one going under." We followed his outstretched arm and saw a dark object rising perpendicularly out of the water about 3 miles ahead to starboard. It sank slowly and disappeared in about 2 minutes. Our glasses showed it to be the bow of a ship and we feared it might be one of our own torpedo boats. ~~sketches of the various copies on all copies.~~ Our fears were soon allayed, however, by some of our protective forces which hurried to the spot and rescued a number of the crew of an English destroyer, some of whom were badly wounded. We endeavored to lift them on board but had to give up the attempt because the sea-way was so strong that the boats could not get alongside. Very soon after this incident we had the satisfaction of observing

that our fire against the enemy ships on our port side was taking effect. A thick column of smoke burst suddenly from the rear ship; her masts and smokestacks inclined slowly forward and disappeared under the water. The ship had sunk

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and our boats rescued several wounded still floating on the surface. The other smoke clouds gradually disappeared from view.

During the following hour we could not observe much of what was going on in front and in the main body, although we continued to hear the cannon and could discern that the fire of our main body was directed eastward against enemy forces that we could not see. We feared that some of our ships might come short of munition. Twice we passed by masses of wreckage and the eddies showed that ships must have sunk here a very short time before. The incapacitated WIESSADEN could be discerned for a short time from the bridge. She lay in the middle of the battlefield under terrible enemy fire and several of our torpedo boats attempted to approach her. She was soon blotted out by the thick smoke that hung over the sea. We on the HAMBURG did not at all gether the impression of a great naval battle with the entire British fleet, such as we had so often pictured in our imagination. We had been advised by signals and wireless that, according to the evidence of prisoners, a fleet of over 20 lineships and a number of cruisers and destroyers were somewhere in the neighborhood. This information had been confirmed by our front forces. But as in spite of this overwhelming superiority of the enemy, we continued to hold the field and could even rescue the survivors of sunken ships, we supposed that our main body had not yet come into contact with the main enemy forces, and that it had only engaged the cruisers which, in their turn, were trying to draw us upon their own main forces. We only learned the truth later when we were back in harbor and our big ships reported that the British fleet had attacked us in full number and that our main body had succeeded from the very beginning in driving it back.

We were soon to learn that our HAMBURG was not fated to escape so easily. At 10:20 p.m. we were sailing a south course at the head of the main body, which had apparently begun its homeward course. Separate cannon shots could be heard at intervals and we saw them flashing like lightning through the smoke and fog. Suddenly several flashes burst out of the grey wall, which completely shut out the view, and the first shells struck the water around our foremost ship. The next fell near us. Unnumerable water columns shot up to mast height all around our ship at a distance of less than 100 meters, like gigantic fountains, and the whole bulk of the ship shuddered under the detonations. The enemy had forked and a covering salvo might hit us any moment. Our position was very unfavorable because we stood up against the sunset, making an excellent target, whereas the enemy was completely invisible except for the flashes of his shots. The only thing we could do was to shoot at haphazard into the grey wall and to veer, in order to offer the least possible surface for the enemy's artillery. Judging by the water hits we were being shelled by heavy calibers, no less than 20,3 cm. which seemed to point to the presence of armored cruisers which had probably sailed south during the battle in order to attack our foreposts in the night and to send out destroyer

~~flotillas against our main body.~~ circled around the destination of the copy intended for the particular destination so enclosed.

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I was standing in the leakage control station where I had my battle post, when there came such a terrific crash that I thought we had been hit, and hastened to ask all sections if anything had happened. The cause of this awful concussion was an enemy shell that had burst near our stern. The commander had seen the great water column pour down and had feared that the latter might be heavily damaged. Curiously enough, the enemy had also fired upon us with shrapnel, the puffs peculiar to shrapnel as well as hits of shrapnel having been quite clearly observed by our crew.

We soon took up our old course again which led us back to our point of support. A little later the sun rose on the first of June - in English terminology the "glorious first of June" of which the British are so proud. For the rest of Christendom it was Ascension Day, a day consecrated to peace and meditation and which was to become one of bitter and murderous conflict. None of us anticipated that this dawn was to be the last for many of our number.

I was standing on the bridge where I had relieved the commander for a few minutes shortly before midnight. It was light enough to see the horizon except that portion of it which lay to port where a veil of fog shut out the view. All at once we saw several ships coming towards us out of the fog; I took them for our own ships because they crossed the course of our II scouting group cruisers, which lay far away to port and which could recognize them as friend or foe sooner than we could. However, our artillery officer (Lieut. Mohr) who was watching the approaching ships through his strong artillery glass, called to the Commander that they were destroyers with 4 smokestacks, which showed them to be enemy ships. We could not quite believe him because it seemed impossible that they should have passed our ships that stood far off to port, without attacking them and apparently without even recognizing them, sailing full towards them. Besides I could not discern a fourth smokestack through my night glass and so I continued to believe them to be some of our new destroyers. Meanwhile the ships had come up to us; at a distance of about 1500 meters, the leading ship veered till it sailed parallel to us and the second followed in its wake. At this moment of greatest tension, our rear ship, the ELBING gave the recognition signal. It was not answered and we turned on the stern projector; the direction was wrong, however, and we were ordered to screen it again. At the second attempt the ray of the projector fell full on the second ship which appeared clearly illuminated at a distance of about 1000 meters. We immediately opened fire which was as quickly answered. The ship seemed to be one of the newest type of destroyers with 4 smokestacks, the foremost being very slender and situated close behind the bridge, thus making it scarcely discernible in the dark. The caliber of the shells which we ascertained later from exploded fragments, showed the ship to be one of the newest small cruisers of these so-called destroyer leaders of the NOMAD class; they were armed with 15 cm guns and were far superior to ourselves both as regards speed and torpedo armament.

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I was just leaving the bridge on the way to my battle post and was watching our shells bursting among the enemy ships when we were hit by a salvo. I was so stunned by the roar and the flash that I hesitated for a moment thinking that the stern boilers had been hit and that we would all blow up into the air the next minute. Nothing happened, however, and I ran on into the leak station. The next moment the telephone rang: "Fire in the port engine", and a moment later, "Fire extinguished". The next message was from the front of the ship saying that a hole 1 sq. meter in size had been struck in the side in the VII compartment on the port side. I ordered the machinists to the fore part of the ship to close the hole and soon followed them myself. The narrow passage in the middle deck was a horrible sight. The shell had burst in the wall of the hull about 1 meter above the water-line and the fragments had torn through the longitudinal bunker partition and the passage, bursting in the smokestack. Some fragments had penetrated into the rear ~~aux~~ bulkhead. Three stokers lay on the floor of the passage terribly wounded in the stomach and limbs. It was horrible to see them lying in pools of blood in their soot-blackened overalls. They were very brave, making no sound. One of them, a powerfully built man whose black beard gave him a sombre expression, showed me the fragment that had shattered his thigh; it was the bottom of a 15 cm shell, as large as a plate. Another was heavily wounded in the intestines by a shell splinter; his legs were badly injured as well. He was quite a young fellow - one of the engine attendants - and I read in his eyes that he was proud to give his life for his country. He died in less than two hours. A fourth stoker lay in the boiler room behind the VII compartment, badly wounded by splinters that had penetrated through the bulkhead.

We received three hits during this encounter; one in the bunkers, a second through the rear smokestack, whose mantel was perforated by two square holes of about 15 cm diameter; the shell had burst beyond the ship and had not caused any further damage. The third hit had passed through the machine skylight bursting in the leak sail which lay rolled up on the barring. The sail was torn to shreds and caught fire; shell splinters had wounded some of the personnel of the third port gun - some of them severely - and tore through the middle longitudinal bulkhead of the engine skylight, striking against the engine grating, which stopped it from reaching the engine. Explosion gases penetrated into the port engine room, affecting some of the men with nausea and faintness. If it had not been for the sail, the shell would probably have struck through into the star-board engine and disabled it. Our fate would then have been sealed.

The hole in the VII compartment was hurriedly stopped up with matting and boards; the wounded were bandaged and bedded as comfortably as possible under the circumstances, being placed in hammocks in the middle deck. After seeing to all these things, I went to the commander and reported that our battle efficiency had not been impaired, although we had

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sustained an encounter with an enemy superior to ourselves in every respect. We talked a little over what had happened and were proud to be able to say that the behavior of the men had been worthy of the highest praise. I may add that they showed the same courage in subsequent encounters. We could find no explanation for the enemy's behavior at the beginning of the fight. Instead of opening fire upon us the moment our projectors had discovered us to them, they waited for our fire, thereby losing the advantage of the attacking party. Possibly we had not been recognized, the enemy mistaking us for one of their own forces. The audacity with which the enemy veered parallel to us was astounding, until our first salvo had shown him his mistake. He had then decided to escape us as fast as possible, having probably suffered considerable damage.

Our conversation was cut short by flashes of fire on the southeastern horizon, followed by the distant roar of heavy artillery. This meant that we had to face new dangers and we felt that we must pull ourselves together and put an iron grip upon our nerves, in order that the calmness and decision of our attitude should inspire the men with courage and confidence in the successful issue of the encounter.

Meanwhile darkness had come on. At 1 a.m. the ship was cleared, and a large cruiser with 4 smokestacks attacked us from the port side, overwhelming us with murderous fire from a distance of 800-1000 meters. Our guns answered readily and we veered but we only owed our rescue to the timely intervention of one of our large ships, presumably the lineship EDENIG which was sailing on our port side and which now fired a salvo into the enemy cruiser, causing it to explode. I was in the leak station during the encounter so that I saw nothing of it. But the terrific concussions we experienced were a proof of the true sin of the enemy shells which exploded in closest vicinity to our ship. We only got one hit, but that one had a devastating effect. The shell must have burst against the short reserve signal yard of the front smokestack, not a single man escaping of all those who stood on the signal deck and on the port side of the bridge at that moment. Our artillery officer, Lieut. Mohr, and our helmsman (Schlie) were among the killed. The only survivors on the signal deck were the II artillery officer (First naval reserve lieutenant Leu) whose left arm was shattered, and one signal mate whose left arm and two fingers of his right hand were torn off. On the bridge all who were not killed were more or less heavily wounded. Our commander (Commander von Gaudewer) was wounded in the left thigh; the navigating officer (Reserve lieutenant Rose) and the officer on watch (Lieut. Ehlers) were wounded in the arms. No one had escaped except the chief submarine officer and his staff who were standing on the starboard side at the moment of the hit. The front smokestack was riddled like a sieve from top to bottom, the signal deck, the bridge and the forecastle were perforated in many places; even the crew's

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nest high up on the foremast was riddled with shell splinters. A projector, the bridge rudder, the machine telegraph and all the signalling apparatus were destroyed. The steam poured out of the shattered fog-horn with a horrible hissing sound. There were also some wounded near the first port gun at the bow; one man had lost his speech although he was not visibly wounded; a mind wound, the doctor called it.

The darkness prevented the terrific effects of the hit from being immediately ascertained. I got the message: "All incapacitated on the bridge", and hurried up into the commanding station where the men at the rudder and the machine telegraphs were calling for orders. I ordered Lieut. Bender, who had followed me, to remain in the turret, and ran on to the bridge, where I heard the commander's voice from somewhere out of the thick darkness in which I could see nothing, calling to me that he still held the command. I heaved a sigh of relief.

I hardly had time to report that everything was in order aft, when we were faced by a very imminent danger which was due to the lack of commanding officers, and which was only averted by the extraordinary presence of mind and energy of our commander. Shortly after we had veered off from the enemy cruiser, the ELBING passed us to starboard at such a short distance that we could hear each other's voices. I heard someone call out whether we needed help, whereupon our commander answered that we were incapable of manoeuvring and asked the ELBING to make room for us to starboard. The ELBING sailed ahead at high speed and disappeared about three points ahead into the darkness. Shortly afterwards she was rammed by one of our large ships and had to be sunk in order to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy. Scarcely had the ELBING passed us when a ship of the OSTFRIESLAND type, sailing some 4 points to port ahead of us, suddenly veered to starboard. Our engines were running full steam and as there was no means of communicating orders, a collision seemed inevitable. I ran back to my leak station in order to have the leak protection in readiness for every emergency; the danger, however, was averted by our commander who had managed to get the ship under control and avoided the collision by turning hard and reversing with the starboard stern engine. We thus escaped a fate which in the best of cases, would have been that of the ELBING.

After this we continued our course which was interrupted by a short encounter with an enemy destroyer at 1:30 a.m. We made several effectual hits but were obliged to cease fire, because one of our small cruisers came into the sphere of fire. It is very probable that the destroyer sank later.

Never in all my life did the hours drag so slowly as those in which we waited for the dawn. We continued to hear the roar of the guns telling us that the battle was not yet over and that we could expect to be attacked every minute. We knew nothing about the general situation; our wireless

~~Being destroyed we were cut off from all means of communication.~~

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8.

We discussed the possibility of taking the course around Skagen into the Baltic, which was open to light battleships, because we could only discern two large ships to port and feared to lose all contact with our main body in the fog.

Happily for us all, however, our commander decided to catch up with the two line-ships; if we had attempted to gain the Baltic over Skagen, there is no doubt that we would have been destroyed by superior enemy forces. When we entered into the wake of the lineships we discovered to port several ships of the II Squadron which gradually dropped to the rear. About 3 a.m. a strong concussion shook our ship. The POMMERN had blown up about 300 m from us. At the moment of the explosion or very soon after, a scraping sound was audible in our engine rooms as if we had passed over some hard object. This led to the supposition that we had rammed the submarine which had torpedoed the POMMERN. The subsequent investigation of the ship in the dry docks did not, however, show any signs on her bottom to justify such an assumption. The official naval report seems rather to give conclusive evidence that the POMMERN was blown up by a destroyer.

We passed by three or four burning ships - a ghastly sight with their great tongues of flame shooting out of the red blaze into the inky darkness above. We could not tell whether they belonged to friend or foe, but the sight was enough to shake the most disciplined nerves. Our imagination pictured horrible scenes of agony and death struggles which were enhanced by the apprehensions due to our own predicament. I think there was not one among us who did not feel the horrible grip of fear that night. About 4 o'clock we came upon several torpedo-boats surrounding a sinking ship. It had struck a mine and they were busy rescuing the crew. The bow of the ship was almost completely submerged.

It was getting light at last and I ordered the deck and the battle stations to be thoroughly cleansed and a hearty breakfast prepared for the men. After all the ghastly traces of last night's work had been removed and the men had been given their breakfast, and had rested, we felt that we were still able to face gallantly any fate which the coming day might have in store for us. We were quite sure to have some more fighting because we thought that the enemy had kept in touch with us during the night and would now try to intercept our march with fresh forces, with the object of inflicting the greatest possible losses and damage upon the German fleet before it returned into its "rat hole" as Mr. Churchill expressed it.

The first rays of the rising sun gave us a silent answer to the question which had haunted each one of us, from the commander down to the last sailor; we saw the ships of the I and II squadron sailing to starboard, and not a single ship was missing! Had the British lines also escaped uninjured?

Our telegraph officer had succeeded in repairing

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wireless antennae. This removed our helplessness and we could once more survey the situation. About 5 a.m. a dirigible reconnoitering to northwest reported a group of 11 large ships with cruisers and destroyers in a square about the middle of the line Terschelling-Hornriff. They had been sighted sailing northeast and shortly afterwards had veered to west. What had moved the English Admiral to do this? Had he got news of severe losses in other groups which made it seem advisable to avoid an encounter with us? Or had he been informed by submarines that the German fleet had issued uninjured from the battle and did he fear to engage in a fight which, judging from the experience of his partner on May 31 was not likely to bring him anything but heavy losses? Answers to these questions were given later in the official report of the Chief Commander of the Fleet: the reported enemy group was nothing more or less than the larger half of Jellicoe's fleet with the remaining battle cruisers. It had crossed our course at 11 p.m. on the night before, about 18 miles ahead of our foremost ship, steering 33W until it reached the above-mentioned square; whereupon the commander apparently discovered that his forces were disunited and could not be brought together into battle readiness against the closed lines of the German fleet. The smaller half of Jellicoe's fleet lay far away in the Jamberbuht. Probably no conclusive evidence will ever be given as to the cause of this division of the British fleet. Was it occasioned by the bad weather or by the attacks of our destroyers? England does not care particularly for the triumph of truth when it tends to lessen her own prestige. All the available evidence seems to point to the fact that the division was due to the attacks of our destroyers and not to the intentional manoeuvre of the British commander with the object of intercepting our march, which object was frustrated by our apparent "flight". Such is the garbled public version given to the British report. If this had been the case why did he not steer a south-eastern course, which would have led him back again upon our main body - under unfavorable tactical and strategical conditions for the English fleet?

Shortly after the above-mentioned wireless from the dirigible, we intercepted a message to the Chief Commander reporting that the LUTZOW had been sunk in consequences of damages she had sustained which made it seem hopeless to steer her into harbor, although her engines were uninjured. Her entire crew including the wounded had been removed on to the torpedo-boats, which did not, however, prevent the latter from attacking any cruiser or destroyer that came within their range.

No further incidents occurred to hinder the latter part of our return march. A lineship of the OSTFRIESLAND type ran against a mine but no damage was done; the whale group including the damaged ship, ~~continued on its course~~ furnishing a striking evidence of the high quality of our ship material. The delayed ships of the IV scouting squadron came up and gathered about the STETTIN; they ran into harbor west of Helgoland. The BRAUNELON was missing, having been hit in the

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in the hull during the battle, shortly after midnight. The main body with the II Squadron which was to join them on the Jade, steered a course east of the island. We were the first to sail into the entrance at 4 p.m. Rumors of the battle had begun to spread on Ascension Day and a festive crowd had gathered on the dike looking out eagerly for the returning ships. After making fast at our old anchoring place, we set to work to unload our wounded. Two of the 18 severely wounded died; the remaining being lightly wounded could be given medical attendance on board. We then transported our dead on to the shore, the whole crew lining up on deck for a last solemn farewell. We had lost 14 men.

The body of our artillery officer, Lieut. Mohr, remained on board and was laid out in state the next day under the poop. Our Commander in Chief came on board after all the ships had run into harbor, to hear the details of the death of his brother-in-law. After receiving our commander's report he thanked the crew for the courage they had shown in the fulfillment of their duties. From what he told us we gathered the extent of the enemies losses of which we had known nothing until then and which made us almost feel sorry for the chagrin they were now feeling. Later on our boats arrived bringing the prisoners - about 150 men and several officers. They lined up on deck and seemed to have got quite accustomed to the detestable Prussian militarism. Next morning at breakfast our men read the special newspaper which made known their achievements to the world. No words can express the feelings with which we read the short official report.

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