The Hunt for Goeben and Breslau

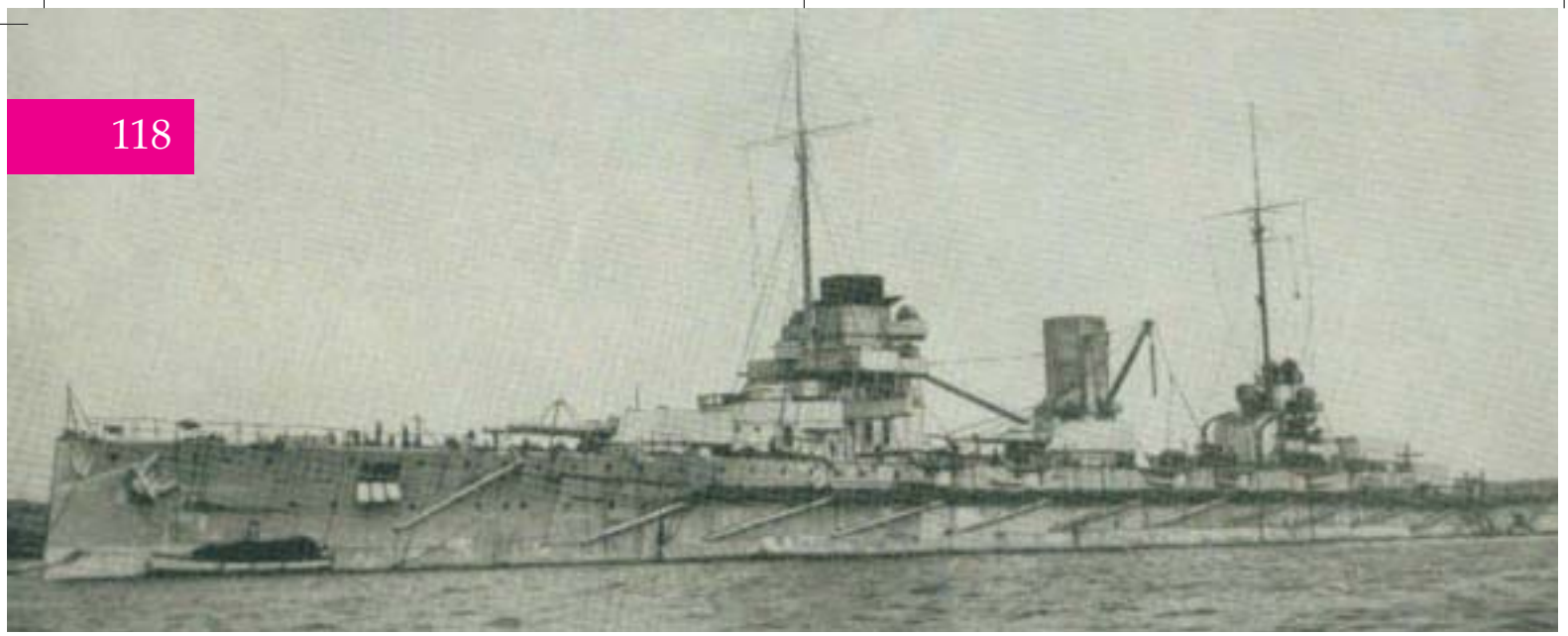
From Tee Emm, January 1942

In January, 1918, the whole of the forces in the Eastern Mediterranean were stirred into special activity by the sortie from the Dardanelles of the two German cruisers, Goeben and Breslau. A message that these cruisers had come out was intercepted at Mudros on the morning of January 20th, and all aircraft were immediately ordered to concentrate at Mudros and Imbros. The two cruisers had passed out of the Dardanelles about 5 a.m. with the object of attacking the two British monitors in Kusu Bay, Imbros, and of bombarding Mudros. Off Mavro Island the Goeben struck a mine, but the cruisers went ahead and they opened fire on the monitors and on general shipping in Kusu Bay about 8 a.m. Six or seven salvoes were fired, and these destroyed the two monitors.

The cruisers then turned off towards Mudros, but aircraft from Imbros were now on the scene and they began to attack with bombs. Before any hits were made, the bombing, indirectly, brought about the destruction of the Breslau. The anti-aircraft shells fired by the guns from the Goeben were seen to be falling close to the Breslau and the latter ship was thereupon ordered by her consort to take station ahead. As she moved to obey orders the Breslau was so harassed by the attacking aircraft that she zig-zagged into a mine-field near Rabbit Island and had her stern shattered by a mine. Almost at the same moment she received a direct hit from a bomb. The Goeben turned to take the Breslau in tow, but soon gave up the attempt and left the damaged cruiser to her fate. The Breslau struck more mines and finally sank.

The Goeben, meanwhile, continued her journey towards Mudros, but struck a mine on the way. Her commander thereupon decided to go back, but failed to find the gap he had made in the mine-field off the Dardanelles and struck another mine going in. As the Goeben entered the Straits two bomb-carrying Blackburn 'Baby' seaplanes, escorted by a Greek pilot in a ' Camel,' appeared over her, but they were promptly engaged by a formation of ten enemy seaplanes.

In a sharp fight, three of the enemy seaplanes were driven down by the ' Camel ' pilot, and one of the Blackburn 'Baby' seaplanes fell in flames. By this time the hostile formation had been broken and



The cruiser Goeben

the second Blackburn 'Baby' pilot persisted in his bombing attack and aimed his 65-lb bombs at the Goeben, but without the luck of a hit. He was then forced, by engine trouble, to land in the Straits. Soon after this attack two D.H.4 aeroplanes found the Goeben, apparently in trouble, and they saw her run aground south of Nagara. Before returning to report her plight the D.H.4s dropped their bombs and scored a hit on a vessel making to assist the German cruiser.

When the position of the Goeben became known, aircraft were sent up to take photographs, and the concentration of bombers and fighters at Imbros and Mudros was pressed forward. In the afternoon there were low clouds and some patches of mist, but four 112-lb bombs were dropped, without direct results, by D.H.4 aeroplanes. At the same time a widespread air patrol of the waters off Mudros was made by all available aircraft to test the truth of statements, made by rescued members of the crew of the Breslau, that mine-fields had been laid outside the harbour by U-boats. No mines were discovered, and it is a point of interest that the prisoners' statements, whether they were made in good faith or with the intention to deceive, had the effect of diverting temporarily the activities of aircraft from the possible bombing of the Goeben.

The attack on the battle cruiser was resumed at dawn next morning, January 21st, but clouds at 500 feet and mist hampered the bombing operations. Three separate attacks were made during the day, but only one bomb, of 112-lb weight, hit the Goeben. After dark, nine aeroplanes were sent to the Straits, but they got a poor view of their target and no hits were claimed.

On the 22nd and 23rd day and night attacks were kept up; one direct hit was claimed on the morning of the 22nd, with a 112-lb bomb dropped from a D.H.4. All the bombing formations were escorted by fighters, but there was no opposition other than heavy anti-aircraft gun-fire, by which a Greek pilot was shot down on the 23rd. On January 24th the carrier Empress arrived and her pilots were used to relieve the over-worked officers at Mudros and Imbros. Next day, also, the Manxman reached Mudros with badly needed supplies of bombs. Strong winds and low clouds continued to make bombing difficult up to the morning of the 27th. On the evening of the 24th a monitor, with aircraft observation, attempted to fire at the Goeben, but just when her shells were being signalled near the target a haze spread over the Straits, and no further spotting was possible. On the morning of the 27th a 'Camel' pilot, in difficult conditions of weather, reached the Straits to find no trace of the German cruiser, but a little later another 'Camel' pilot thought he could distinguish her in the mist. She had, in fact, got off on the 26th, and by the morning of the 27th had reached Constantinople under her own steam, but it was not until the morning of the 28th that the weather was clear enough for air observers to say definitely that she had gone. During the few days in which she had been grounded in the Straits fifteen tons of bombs had been dropped. Pilots had been tireless in their efforts to disable their enemy, but they had no luck, nor could they be expected to achieve much with the only bombs immediately available which

were of 65-lb or 112-lb weight, too light to inflict serious damage on a ship of the Goeben's construction.

No reliable torpedo-carrying aircraft were in the Eastern Mediterranean when the Goeben ran aground. An attempt was made to fit a 14-inch torpedo to one of the old Shorts in the Ark Royal, but the seaplane, so loaded, would not move off the water. When the Manxman arrived in Mudros harbour from Brindisi at 7 a.m. on January 25th, she brought with her two seaplanes fitted with 18-inch torpedoes, but there was an unaccountable delay in sending up her seaplanes, and, on the 26th, the day of the Goeben's departure, the wind freshened and the sea was judged too choppy for the torpedo-loaded seaplanes to get away.

Meanwhile the officers of the Ark Royal had succeeded in fitting one of the Short seaplanes to take depth-charges of 300 lb or 18-inch warheads. On the night of the 27th, when it was still doubtful whether the Goeben had gone, a pilot set out in a Henri Farman aeroplane, loaded with a warhead, to search for her. The visibility over the Dardanelles was poor, and although the pilot could not locate the Goeben, he decided to drop the warhead, from 1,600 feet over Nagara Point, in the hope that the ship, although not visible through the mist, might still be aground. The resultant explosion was so heavy as to shock the anti-aircraft gunners into immediate silence.

Other naval seaplanes were over the Straits that night to keep the attention of the Dardanelles garrison off the entrance in order to make easier the passage of a British submarine, the E.14, which had been sent out in the afternoon to attack the German cruiser. The E.14 got through to Nagara, but found that her quarry had gone and that her gallant attempt had been made in vain. Nor did she otherwise have the luck she deserved: on her homeward journey she was sunk by gun-fire off Kum Kale.

Many subsequent reconnaissance flights, by D.H.4 aeroplanes fitted with extra fuel tanks to give an endurance of seven hours, were made to Constantinople to keep watch on the Goeben in Stenia Bay. But she never came out again.

Note the moral: In spite of the persistent air attacks and the losses incurred, the Goeben was not sunk—but she never came out again. So, too, have our aircraft played their part in this war. They have persisted in attack after attack over the harbour of Brest; their losses have not been light; nor have they yet sunk either the Scharnhorst or the Gneisenau. But for nine months now those two would-be commerce raiders, later joined by the scurrying Prinz Eugen, have been kept off the seas, bottled up firmly in harbour. Their anti-aircraft defences are something more terrible than the last war ever knew, the targets are skilfully camouflaged and smoke-screened and naturally a heavy toll is taken of our visiting aircraft. But the courage and self-sacrifice of our raiding pilots have kept those ships there where they are not much more useful than if they were at the bottom of the sea. And perhaps that moment won't be so far off either.