



## Seekriegsleitung Operation order for Operation *Rheinübung*

Commander-in-Chief of the Navy  
and Chief of the Seekriegsleitung  
B. Nr. 1. Skl. I Op. 410/41 Gkdos Chefs.

Berlin, 2.IV.1941

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OFFICER COURIER ONLY!

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COMMANDERS ONLY

I.) Copies to:           Group West  
                              Group North  
                              Fleet Command  
                              Commander-in-Chief of U-Boats

Subj.: Directives for Future Operations by Surface Forces.  
No direct references

- I. During the past winter the conduct of the war was fundamentally in accord with the Seekriegsleitung's directives for the war in the winter 40/41 (Seekriegsleitung I. Op. 2270/41 Chefs.) and closed with the first extended battleship operation in the open Atlantic.

Besides achieving important tactical results, this battleship operation, as well as the operations of the cruiser *Hipper*, showed what important strategic effects a similar sortie could have. They would reach beyond the immediate area of operations to other theaters of war (Mediterranean, South Atlantic).

The goal of the war at sea must be to maintain and increase these effects by repeating such operations as often as possible. To accomplish this, the experience already gained must be exploited and the operations themselves expanded.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the decisive objective in our struggle with England is to destroy her trade. This can be most effectively accomplished in the North Atlantic, where all her supply lines come together and where, even in case of interruption in more distant seas, supplies can still get through on the direct route from North America. The employment and operational area of our battleships and cruisers must take this viewpoint into account.

Gaining command of the sea in the North Atlantic is the best solution to this problem, but this is not possible with the forces that at this moment we can commit to this purpose, and given the constraint that we must preserve our numerically inferior forces. Nevertheless, we must strive for local and temporary command of the sea in this area and gradually, methodically, and systematically extend it.

During the first battleship operation in the Atlantic the enemy was able always to deploy one battleship against our two on both the main supply lines. However, it became clear that providing this defense of his convoys brought him to the limit of the possibilities open to him, and the only way he can significantly strengthen his escort forces is by weakening positions important to him (Mediterranean, home waters) or by reducing convoy traffic. (Escort by American warships or active intervention by the USA would necessitate new decisions.)

What we need to do is, on the one hand, cause the enemy to disperse his strength by continually changing both our operational methods and our area of operations, and, on the other hand, attack with concentrated forces the weak points thus created.

As soon as the two battleships of the *Bismarck* class are ready for deployment, we will be able to seek engagement with the forces escorting enemy convoys and, when they have been eliminated, destroy the convoy itself. As of now, we cannot follow that course, but it will soon be possible, as an intermediate step, for us to use the battleship *Bismarck* to

distract the hostile escorting forces, in order to enable the other units engaged to operate against the convoy itself. In the beginning, we will have the advantage of surprise, because some of the ships involved will be making their first appearance and, based on his experience in the previous battleship operations, the enemy will assume that *one* battleship will be enough to defend a convoy.

- II. The main features of the conduct of the war in the summer of 1941 will be determined by their connection to Operation Barbarossa. The relevant general directives are set out in Seekriegsleitung I op 262/ 41 Chfs. of 6.3.41.

The regions of emphasis and the assignment in broad outline of forces and missions in the group command areas will be according to that directive.

The following directive, therefore, deals only with the next deployment of battleships and cruisers to the Atlantic.

- III. Directive for the Deployment of the Battleships Bismarck and Gneisenau and the Cruiser Prinz Eugen in the North Atlantic at the End of April.

- 1) At the earliest possible date, which it is hoped will be during the new-moon period of April, *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen*, led by the Fleet Commander, are to be deployed as commerce-raiders in the Atlantic.

At a time that will depend on the completion of the repairs she is currently undergoing, *Gneisenau* will also be sent into the Atlantic.

- 2) The lessons learned in the last battleship operation indicate that *Gneisenau* should join up with the *Bismarck* group, but a diversionary sweep by the *Gneisenau* in the area between Cape Verde and the Azores may be planned before this happens.
- 3) The heavy cruiser is to spend most of her time operating tactically with *Bismarck*, or with *Bismarck* and *Gneisenau*.

The disadvantage that is accepted by bringing along the cruiser, with her lesser radius of action, will be offset by the advantages of greater search capability, availability of a ship suitable for operations against light forces and shadowers, and her powerful torpedo armament (12 tubes), which could be useful in attacking strongly defended convoys as well as disengaging from superior enemy covering forces.

The difficulties created by her lesser operational radius must be surmounted by the appropriate disposition of tankers, by periodically releasing her to fuel, or in emergencies, by transferring fuel to her from *Bismarck*.

The release of dispatch of the cruiser on special missions remains the option of the operational command or, while at sea, of the Fleet Commander.

- 4) In contrast to previous directives to the *Gneisenau-Schamhorst* task force, it is the mission of this task force to also attack escorted convoys. However, the objective of the battleship *Bismarck* should not be to *defeat, in an all-out engagement*, enemies of equal strength, but to tie them down in a delaying action, while preserving her own combat capability as much as possible, so as to allow the other ships to get at the merchant vessels in the convoy.

***The primary mission of this operation also is the destruction of the enemy's merchant shipping; enemy warships will be engaged only when that primary mission makes it necessary and it can be done without excessive risk.***

- 5) The operational area will be defined as the entire North Atlantic north of the equator, with the exception of the territorial waters (3-nautical-mile limit) of neutral states.

In all probability, respect for the American Neutrality Zone will no longer need to be taken into account at the time of the operation. Because of the danger of shadowing by U.S. forces, however, it does not appear expedient to station supply ships or tankers in the part of the existing Neutrality Zone that lies in the sphere of the USA.

- 6) Previous experiences have shown that, contrary to what might be expected, we do not have enough knowledge of convoy routes and schedules to determine the time and place in the vast area involved where convoys might be intercepted. One major difficulty is posed by the weather conditions in the Atlantic, which often restrict visibility and prevent the use of embarked aircraft.

The effectiveness of the operation must therefore be improved by every conceivable form of reconnaissance. For this, there come into question:

- a) *U-Boats*

The last battleship operation showed that cooperation between surface forces

and U-boats in the same area can have advantages for both. For this, there must be a means of direct communication between the surface forces and the U-boats and there will be. The U-boat short-signal book is to be enlarged and copies placed on board the ships.

In general it would not be advisable to have battleships cruise in a line of search with U-boats that are deployed as scouts for surface forces, because such positioning would make it more difficult for them to respond. It would be better to deploy the U-boats in the designated area of operations in a scout line and to charge them with reporting targets to the battleships and subsequent shadowing or attack.

Conversely, the Fleet Commander, either by shadowing reports or direct order, will be able to advise the U-boats of any sighted convoy.

As a further test of this collaboration, the following orders will -provided the discussions held in preparation for this operation do not produce more promising possibilities- apply to the proposed operation:

- 1) There will be at least two boats in the U-boats' Operations Area South (Freetown area) throughout the operation, and they will be under the command of the Commander-in-Chief, U-Boats. Should the opportunity arise for direct cooperation with the fleet forces, however, the Fleet Commander has the right to give the boats operational orders.
- 2) On the Halifax convoy route, two or more boats of the northern group will be deployed far enough to the west to support, by reconnaissance or attack, an operation of the Fleet Commander between 30° and 45° west. Command and control as under paragraph 1) above.
- 3) The supplying of these U-boats with fuel, provisions, and munitions is to be provided for by outfitting more store and escort ships. Allocation of supplies by Commander-in-Chief, U-Boats, or Fleet Commander.

#### b) Scouts

Besides the deployment of U-boats, camouflaged ships could be deployed as scouts for the fleet formation.

This deployment might be in tactical association with the task force or in specially designated, remote scouting areas. For the former type of deployment, the ships, preferably oil-burners, should have adequate operational range and a cruising speed of at least 12 knots. Ships that do not have these characteristics are not suitable for tactical association with the fleet, but can be used in the latter type of deployment.

An effort will be made to deploy two suitable ships for use in the former capacity. Prizes taken during the operation may also be used for this purpose.

Moreover, Group West will be charged with examining the captured whalers and, if satisfactory, providing one of them for use in the former capacity and *Schiff 13* and *24* in the latter.

The severe shortage of shipping tonnage caused by newly arisen transport missions will make it scarcely possible to prepare other, special ships for this purpose, but the question will be examined by the *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine*, as will the deployment of *Schiff 23* and *Togo* for scouting purposes.

#### c) Aircraft Mother Ships

The question of deploying such ships (catapult; two to three aircraft, landing mat) will be examined by the *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine*. The existing catapult ships *Priesenland* and *Schwabenland* are not suitable.

#### d) Supply Ships

During the last operation the deployment of supply ships for tactical cooperation with the fleet formation proved extremely useful. Nevertheless, these ships should be used for this mission only if all other possibilities fail, as their loss would have critical consequences, not only for this operation but also for subsequent ones with large formations. Moreover valuable cargoes (munitions) would be in jeopardy. With this warning, however, their deployment is left up to the Fleet Commander.

The same applies to fleet oilers.

- 7) *Ermland* is available as a supply ship, *Heide*, *Weissenburg*, *Brehme*, *Esso, III*, *Spichern*, and *Lothringen* as fleet oilers.

Care is to be taken that the requisite readiness dates are not upset by modifications

or the installation of equipment. If necessary, ships undergoing such work and unable to meet the schedule must be deployed as reserve tankers.

*Thorn* and *Egerland*, which have been prepared for other uses, will not be available at first.

*Uckermark* probably cannot be made available because she is deployed with the cruiser *Lützow*; other supply ships (*Dithmarschen*, *Kärnten*, *Passat*) probably will not be operational until a later date (1. 7, 1.9, 1.10).

- 8) The group commands have operational control in their zones. The Fleet Commander has control at sea, the U-boat groups attached to him will be under his tactical command for the duration of the joint operations (the Commander-in-Chief, U-Boats, will detail a U-boat officer to the Fleet Commander's staff for the duration of the operation).
  - 9) The groups will contact as soon as possible the Fleet Command and the Commander-in-Chief, U-Boats, regarding the execution of the operation and will report the result from such contact to the Seekriegsleitung at least fourteen days before the operation begins.
- IV. As already indicated under 1, the objective must be to confront the enemy with new situations created by wide-ranging changes of the areas of operations.

Upon further confirmation of the manner of conduct of the war up to now, consideration may be given to extending the next-following operation as far as the South Atlantic.

When the need to respect the PanAmerican Neutrality Zone has passed, the intersection of the route from North and Central America to Freetown and Central Africa (important military supplies) with the La Plata route, and also with the Cape-Freetown route, will offer promising operational possibilities.

The prerequisite for the execution of such a distant operation is the deployment of the greatest possible number of auxiliaries. The Seekriegsleitung will initiate appropriate measures.

Such a shift in the area of operations may prove necessary if, as a consequence of the next operation and those past, the North Atlantic routes that we have been attacking become more strongly defended by the enemy.

Until *Tirpitz* becomes operational, attacks against strongly defended convoys on the main supply lines in the North Atlantic will not have good prospects for success.

The time for extending operations to the south must remain open at the moment. The reason for announcing the intention is that it will enable Group Command West and the fleet to evaluate their experiences with regard to this new area of operations.

RAEDER

Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine

SCHNIEWIND

Chief of the Seekriegsleitung

FRICKE

Chief of the Seekriegsleitung Operations section