

= Battle of the Strait of Otranto (1917) =

The 1917 Battle of the Strait of Otranto was the result of an Austro -Hungarian raid on the Otranto Barrage , an Allied naval blockade of the Strait of Otranto . The battle took place on 14 ? 15 May 1917 , and was the largest surface action in the Adriatic Sea during World War I. The Otranto Barrage was a fixed barrier , composed of lightly armed drifters with anti - submarine nets coupled with minefields and supported by Allied naval patrols .

The Austro -Hungarian navy planned to raid the Otranto Barrage with a force of three light cruisers and two destroyers under the command of Commander (later Admiral) Miklós Horthy , in an attempt to break the barrier to allow U - boats freer access to the Mediterranean , and Allied shipping . An Allied force composed of ships from three navies responded to the raid and in the ensuing battle , heavily damaged the Austro -Hungarian cruiser SMS Novara . However , the rapid approach of the Austro -Hungarian relief force persuaded Rear Admiral Acton , the Allied commander , to retreat .

= = Disposition of forces = =

Under the command of Horthy , three Austro -Hungarian cruisers : Novara , Saida , and Helgoland , modified to resemble large British destroyers , were to attack the drifters on the night of 14 May and attempt to destroy as many as possible before daybreak . The destroyers Csepel and Balaton were to mount a diversionary raid off the Albanian coast in order to confuse any Allied counter - attack . Two Austro -Hungarian U - boats ? U - 4 and U - 27 , along with the German U - boat UC - 25 ? were to participate in the operation as well . A supporting force composed of the armored cruiser Sankt Georg , two destroyers , and a number of torpedo boats was on standby if the raiders ran into trouble . The old pre - dreadnought battleship Budapest and a screen of torpedo boats were also available if necessary .

An Allied destroyer patrol was in the area on the night of 14 May , to the north of the Barrage . The Italian flotilla leader Mirabello was accompanied by the French destroyers Commandant Rivière , Bisson , and Cimeterre . The Italian destroyer Borea was also in the area , escorting a small convoy to Valona . A support force was based in the port of Brindisi , consisting of the British cruisers Dartmouth and Bristol and several French and Italian destroyers .

= = Raid on the drifters = =

The Italian convoy escorted by Borea was attacked by the Austro -Hungarian destroyers Csepel and Balaton at approximately 03 : 24 . The Austro -Hungarians sank Borea and a munitions ship , and a second was set on fire and abandoned .

The three cruisers were able to pass through the line of drifters , and at 03 : 30 began attacking the small barrage ships . The Austro -Hungarians frequently gave the drifter crews warning to abandon ship before opening fire . In some instances , the drifter crews chose to fight : Gowan Lee returned fire on the Austro -Hungarian ships . The ship was heavily damaged , but remained afloat ; her captain ? Joseph Watt ? was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during the battle .

There were 47 drifters in Barrage on the night of 14 May ; the Austro -Hungarians managed to sink 14 drifters and damage four more . The lack of sufficient Allied escorts forced the withdrawal of the remaining blockading ships , although only for a short time .

= = Battle = =

By this time , the Allied naval forces in the area were aware of the raid , and were in a position to block the Austro -Hungarian retreat . Rear Admiral Alfredo Acton ? the commanding officer of the Italian Scouting Division ? ordered Mirabello 's group southward at 04 : 35 , while he embarked on the British light cruiser HMS Dartmouth . By 06 : 45 , the cruisers Dartmouth and Bristol ? along

with the Italian destroyers Mosto , Pilo , Schiaffino , Acerbi , and Aquila ? were sailing north in an attempt to cut off the Austro @-@ Hungarian cruisers . The Italian light cruiser Marsala , the flotilla leader Racchia , and the destroyers Insidioso , Indomito , and Impavido were readying to sail in support as well .

The Mirabello group engaged the Austro @-@ Hungarian cruisers at 07 : 00 , but were heavily outgunned , and instead attempted to shadow the fleeing cruisers . At 07 : 45 , Rear Admiral Acton 's ships encountered the destroyers Csepel and Balaton . After 20 minutes , the Italian destroyers were able to close the distance to the Austro @-@ Hungarian ships ; the two groups engaged in a short artillery duel before a shot from Csepel struck Aquila and disabled the ship 's boilers . By this time , the Austro @-@ Hungarian destroyers were under the cover of the coastal batteries at Durazzo , and were able to make good their escape .

At 09 : 00 , Bristol 's lookouts spotted the smoke from the Austro @-@ Hungarian cruisers to the south of her position . The Allied ships turned to engage the Austro @-@ Hungarian ships ; the British ships had both a superiority in numbers and in firepower ; Dartmouth was armed with eight 6 in (150 mm) guns and Bristol had two 6 inch and ten 4 in (100 mm) , compared to the nine 3 @. @ 9 in (99 mm) guns on each of the Austro @-@ Hungarian ships . Unfortunately for the Allies , their numerical superiority was quickly lost , as their destroyers were either occupied with mechanical problems , or protecting those destroyers suffering from breakdowns . The support forces of both sides ? the Sankt Georg group for the Austro @-@ Hungarians , and the Marsala group for the Allies ? were quickly dispatched to the battle .

Dartmouth ? faster than Bristol ? closed to effective engagement range with the Austro @-@ Hungarian ships , and opened fire . A shell from Dartmouth struck Novara , at which point the Austro @-@ Hungarian ships laid a smoke screen in order to close the distance . Dartmouth was struck several times , and by 11 : 00 , Acton ordered the ship to reduce speed to allow Bristol to catch up . Novara was hit several more times , and her main feed pumps and starboard auxiliary steam pipe had been damaged , which caused the ship to begin losing speed . At 11 : 05 , Acton turned away in an attempt to separate Saida from Novara and Helgoland . At this point , Sankt Georg was approaching the scene , which prompted Acton to temporarily withdraw to consolidate his forces . This break in the action was enough time for the Austro @-@ Hungarians to save the crippled Novara ; Saida took the ship under tow while Helgoland covered them .

Unaware that Novara had been disabled , and fearing that his ships would be drawn too close to the Austrian naval base at Cattaro , Acton broke off the pursuit . The destroyer Acerbi misread the signal , and attempted to launch a torpedo attack , but was driven off by the combined fire of Novara , Saida , and Helgoland . At 12 : 05 , Acton realized the dire situation Novara was in , but by this time , the Sankt Georg group was too close . The Sankt Georg group rendezvoused with Novara , Saida , and Helgoland , and Csepel and Balaton reached the scene as well . The entire group returned to Cattaro together .

At 13 : 30 , the submarine UC @-@ 25 torpedoed Dartmouth , causing serious damage . The escorting destroyers forced UC @-@ 25 from the area , but Dartmouth had to be abandoned for a period of time , before it could be towed back to port . The French destroyer Boutefeu attempted to pursue the German submarine , but struck a mine laid by UC @-@ 25 that morning and sank rapidly .

= = Aftermath = =

As a result of the raid , it was decided by the British naval command that unless sufficient destroyers were available to protect the barrage , the drifters would have to be withdrawn at night . The drifters would only be operating for less than twelve hours a day , and would have to leave their positions by 15 : 00 every day . Despite the damage received by the Austro @-@ Hungarian cruisers during the pursuit by Dartmouth and Bristol , the Austro @-@ Hungarian forces inflicted more serious casualties on the Allied blockade . In addition to the sunk and damaged drifters , the cruiser Dartmouth was nearly sunk by the German submarine UC @-@ 25 , the French destroyer Boutefeu was mined and sunk , and a munitions convoy to Valona was interdicted .

However , in a strategic sense , the battle had little impact on the war . The barrage was never particularly effective at preventing the U @-@ boat operations of Germany and Austria @-@ Hungary in the first place . The drifters could cover approximately .5 mi (0 @.@ 80 km) apiece ; of the 40 mi (64 km) -wide Strait , only slightly more than $\frac{1}{2}$ was covered . The raid risked some of the most advanced units of the Austro @-@ Hungarian fleet on an operation that offered minimal strategic returns .