

Air Attacks on the Fleet, p.m. 27th September (D.3).

(a) First Attack (1255-1310).

39. R.D.F. reports at 1255 indicated that two formations were approaching the fleet, one from the north and one from the east, both 30 miles distant. These formations were reported as diving.

Fighters were vectored towards the formations, but as they made contact with the enemy, R.D.F. plots became too confused to be used for fighter direction. One enemy T/B (probably Cant 1007) was shot down by Fulmars at 1300.

40. Six T/Bs (B.R.20) approached from the port bow and beam, and were engaged by the port wing of the screen and the ships on the port side of the fleet. Two T/B aircraft were shot down at 1302, probably by barrage fire from RODNEY and PRINCE OF WALES.

41. An unknown number of torpedoes was dropped about 5,000 yards on the port beam of the convoy, which altered course to 040° at 1304, turning to 075° three minutes later.

Three of the six attackers tried to approach over the port wing of the screen, but unable to face the barrage put up by the destroyers they dropped their torpedoes at the port wing ship, LANCE, who had considerable difficulty in avoiding them, two torpedoes passing very close.

The torpedoes were released from about 300 feet height, and appeared to take up their depth very quickly, the tracks showing up plainly. ISAAC SWEERS, next in the screen to LANCE, reported one torpedo passed within 30 yards; RODNEY was swung 60° to port to avoid a torpedo which passed 100 yards to starboard.

42. One of these three aircraft was shot down by the destroyers, and crashed in flames close to LIVELY. Another T/B aircraft was shot down by fighters north of the fleet at about this time.

43. At 1310, a Fulmar which had been among the fighters sent to intercept this attack and which was probably returning damaged from a combat with enemy fighters (C.R.42s), was shot down by barrage fire from PRINCE OF WALES, and the crew were killed. This unfortunate accident occurred through a phonetic misunderstanding between the A.D.P.* and Group Control Officer, and is deeply regretted.

44. On this occasion, and again twenty minutes later when another Fulmar was shot down, both fighters approached low down straight towards the convoy during a T/B attack, and appeared menacing. The considerable amount of smoke from bursting shell added to the difficulties of identification.

45. Three heavy underwater explosions were heard at 1312; these were probably torpedoes exploding at the end of their run.

46. *Result of First Attack.*—The enemy had lost 5 out of the 12 T/Bs which were subsequently reported by Fulmars to have approached in this attack; several others were

probably damaged. No ships had been hit, but one Fulmar had been accidentally shot down by the fleet.

(b) Second Attack (1327-1337).

47. A group of aircraft splitting into two formations was reported by R.D.F. closing from the eastward at 1327. Destroyers on the starboard wing of the screen opened fire at 1329, when 6 or 7 T/Bs (B.R.20) were seen approaching very low from the starboard bow and beam.

48. Three of the aircraft pressed on through the barrage of the starboard wing destroyers, and carried out a most determined attack on NELSON, who was swinging to starboard to comb the tracks. One aircraft dropped its torpedo about 450 yards 20° on NELSON's starboard bow, passing over the ship at about 200 feet height. This aircraft was almost certainly shot down astern of NELSON by SHEFFIELD and PRINCE OF WALES.

49. The track of the torpedo was not seen until about 150 yards dead ahead of the ship, which had been steadied on a course which proved to be the exact reciprocal of the torpedo. No avoiding action was possible and a second or two after the bubbles disappeared from sight there was a large "crump," the ship whipped considerably and a column of water rose approximately 15-20 feet above the fore-castle deck port side. The torpedo had hit on the port bow abreast 60 station, 10 feet below the water-line. NELSON's speed was reduced to 18 knots, pending a report on the damage sustained.

50. A few seconds later another T/B of this formation dropped a torpedo from about 500 feet 1,000 yards fine on the starboard bow of NELSON. This torpedo passed about 100 yards to starboard. The third of this enemy formation was shot down by destroyers just ahead of the screen at 1333. This aircraft was claimed by LAFOREY. FORESTER picked up the W/T operator, the only member of the crew alive. He had a badly broken leg.

51. Meanwhile, 3 or 4 T/Bs who had split up from this group attacked from the starboard quarter without result.

52. One enemy T/B was shot down by fighters, on the port quarter of the convoy at 1336.

A Fulmar was unfortunately shot down by RODNEY's pom-pom, but the crew were rescued by DUNCAN.

53. *Result of Second Attack.*—Three enemy T/Bs out of the 6 or 7 who attacked were shot down. NELSON's speed was reduced by a torpedo hit, but the gun armament remained unimpaired. One Fulmar was shot down but the crew were saved.

(c) Third Attack (1345-1405).

54. Six minutes after the end of the second attack, R.D.F. reported a group closing from the S.E. and diving. At 1345 a formation of 10 or 11 S.79s were sighted very low about 10 miles to the southward. These split up into two groups when they came under fire from the escorting ships on the starboard side of the convoy, and 7 or 8 retired to the southwest and disappeared.

Admiralty footnote :

* A.D.P.—Air Defence Position.