

59. As *REOWN* was no longer engaged, and with the information then available it appeared that action with the battleships might be imminent, I decided to concentrate on *RAMILLIES*. Shortly after starting to turn however, the Eastern group of cruisers was seen to present a possible target and as the Plot indicated that the enemy battleships were heading North East, course was steadied on 070° to engage these new targets.

60. At 1300, after a swing to Starboard to avoid a reported submarine, course was altered to 045° to close the position of two battleships which had just been reported on that bearing by Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron.

61. At 1311 *REOWN* fired two ranging salvos at the left hand of the two ships believed at the time to be battleships. It is now considered that they were more probably two of the Eastern group of cruisers. Both salvos fell well short and the range was opening rapidly.

62. When sighted by Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron at 1300 the two enemy battleships were steering to the South West and closing the range rapidly. At 1305 the 18th Cruiser Squadron therefore turned to work round the flank of the enemy battleships and to close the gap on *REOWN*, but, at the same time the battleships altered course to the North Eastward and appeared to be retiring at high speed, whereupon the 18th Cruiser Squadron was turned back to a course of 050°.

63. During this short phase of the action large splashes, confirming the presence of capital ships, fell in the vicinity of *BERWICK* and *MANCHESTER*.

64. The relative position of my forces and those of the enemy as given by the Plot at 1315 is shown in Diagram 3. The situation was as follows:—

(i) Firing had practically ceased owing to the enemy drawing out of range.

(ii) The heavy smoke made by the enemy had prevented accurate fire during the chase and so far as could be ascertained, no damage had been inflicted.

(iii) In reply to a signal from me to C.S.18 at 1308 "Is there any hope of catching cruisers?" I was informed "No". (A later message from C.S.18 estimated the enemy had three knots excess speed.)

(iv) It was known that the Striking Force had attacked. No report of results had been received, but it was evident that the speed of the enemy had not been materially reduced and was certainly not as low as 20 knots. It was presumed that the attack had been unsuccessful and this was not unexpected.

65. In view of our rapid approach to the enemy coast I had to decide whether a continuance of the chase was justified and likely to be profitable. The arguments for and against continuing the chase appeared to be:—

For Continuing the Chase.

(i) The possibility that the speed of the enemy might be reduced by some unforeseen eventuality.

(ii) He might appreciate that his force was superior to mine and decide to turn and fight.

Against Continuing the Chase.

(i) There was no sign that any of the enemy ships and especially his battleships had suffered damage, nor was there reasonable prospect of inflicting damage by gunfire in view of their superior speed. Unless the speed of the enemy battleships was reduced very materially he could enter Cagliari before I could bring him to action with *REOWN* and *RAMILLIES*.

(ii) I was being led towards the enemy air and submarine base at Cagliari and this might well prove a trap. His appearance in this area appeared to be pre-meditated since it was unlikely that this was occasioned solely by the information he had received the previous night of Force "D's" presence in the Narrows.

(iii) The extrication of one of my ships damaged by air or submarine attack from my present position would certainly require the whole of my force and must involve leaving the convoy uncovered and insufficiently escorted during the passage of the Narrows.

(iv) The enemy main units had been driven off sufficiently far to ensure they could no longer interfere with the passage of the convoy.

(v) A second T/B attack could not take place until 1530 to 1600 by which time the convoy would be entirely uncovered and the enemy fleet could be under the cover of the A/A batteries and fighters at Cagliari. I entertained little hope that the attack would prove effective as I knew that the second flight was even less experienced than the first.

(vi) I had no assurance that the cruisers reported to the North West might not be working round towards the convoy and *ARK ROYAL*.

(vii) It was necessary for contact to be made with the convoy before dark to ensure the cruisers and destroyers required for escort through the Narrows should be properly formed up. It was also necessary to provide the fullest possible scale defence against T/B and light surface force attack at dusk. To effect this a retirement between 1300 and 1400 was necessary.

*Decision to Break Off the Chase.*

66. After reviewing these pros and cons I had no doubt in my mind whatsoever that the correct course was to break off the chase and re-join the convoy as soon as possible. I consequently ordered a course of 130° to be steered.

67. At approximately 1335 I received a report of an enemy damaged cruiser in position about 30 miles from me and ten miles from the enemy coast. I considered the desirability of detaching two cruisers to search for and attack this cruiser. It was obviously undesirable to use *MANCHESTER* or *SOUTHAMPTON*. *SHEFFIELD*'s R.D/F was required to deal with the bombing attacks which would inevitably develop and this left *BERWICK* and *NEWCASTLE*.