

68. I considered this most carefully but decided against such a detachment for the following reasons:—

(i) It would involve my main forces remaining in a position to support these cruisers and prevent them from being cut off by enemy forces.

(ii) Action as in (i) would cause an unacceptable delay in rejoining the convoy.

(iii) Isolated ships in such close proximity to the enemy coast would be singled out for air attack. BERWICK was most vulnerable to this form of attack and her disablement would have involved all my force to effect her extrication.

(iv) There was no evidence to indicate that the damaged ship would remain stopped and she might well effect an escape before she could be overtaken.

A subsequent air search failed to locate this cruiser, so it appears that the stoppage was, in fact, only temporary.

69. I therefore ordered Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, to join the convoy with MANCHESTER and SOUTHAMPTON and instructed ARK ROYAL to attack the damaged cruiser if he considered it feasible.

70. At 1410 ARK ROYAL flew off the second T/B Striking Force. This Force consisted of the T.S.R.s who had carried out the morning reconnaissance. The Squadron Leader was given the enemy battlefleet as his objective but with full liberty to change the objective if a successful attack was impracticable and if by so doing he considered he had more chance of achieving successful results.

71. The second T/B Striking Force located three cruisers screened by four destroyers 12 miles off the S.E. coast of Sardinia and steering to the Eastward at high speed. Some 8 miles ahead of the cruisers the two battleships were also seen now heavily screened by ten destroyers.

72. In view of the total absence of cloud cover it was considered essential to attack out of the sun if any surprise was to be achieved. An attempt to reach such a position on the battleships would inevitably have led to the cruisers sighting and reporting the position of the Striking Force. It was therefore decided to attack the cruisers.

73. As the first aircraft reached the dropping position the cruisers turned together to Starboard. This caused several of the following flights, who were already committed to their drop, to miss their targets, but one hit was observed on the rear cruiser and another possible hit on the leading cruiser.

74. The attack was unobserved until very late, only two salvos being fired before the first torpedo was dropped. After this the gunfire was intense but appeared to be quite regardless of direction or danger to their own ships. One large projectile was seen to hit the water close to the rear cruiser and shells from close range weapons were seen to burst close alongside all ships.

75. Two of our aircraft were hit by shrapnel but neither was unserviceable and all returned safely to ARK ROYAL.

76. A striking force of 7 Skuas which flew off from ARK ROYAL at 1500 failed to locate the damaged cruiser but attacked 3 cruisers of the Condottieri class steering North off the South West corner of Sardinia. An unobserved attack was carried out on the rear cruiser and two near misses may have caused some damage. On the way back to the carrier an Italian R.O.43 was shot down.

Enemy Air Attacks.

77. At 1407 whilst our surface forces were proceeding at 19 knots to rejoin the convoy R.D/F gave indications of enemy bomber formations in the vicinity. The line was staggered.

78. The first visual indication of the attack was bomb splash on the horizon. This was the result of an attack by the Fulmar Fighter Patrol which caused several of the enemy formation to jettison their bombs.

79. As soon as the enemy aircraft, which consisted of 10 S.79 in V formation, were sighted a Blue Turn* was executed to bring all guns to bear. The enemy maintained a steady course and dropped their bombs well clear of the heavy ships, their bombs falling close to the screening destroyers.

80. Two further attacks were made, each by squadrons of 5 aircraft. In both cases ARK ROYAL who had been engaged in flying operations and was not actually in the line, was the objective. In these attacks, apart from a few bombs which were jettisoned as a result of interception by our fighters, most accurate bombing was carried out. ARK ROYAL was completely obscured by bomb splashes two at least of which fell within 10 yards of the ship. No hits were however obtained and no damage resulted.

81. The complete failure of either fighter attack or gunfire to break up the formation flying of the Italian squadrons was most noteworthy.

82. No further bombing attacks took place, and the convoy was sighted at 1700.

Remarks on the Movements of Enemy Forces after the Action.

83. The movements of enemy units from the time when surface action ceased at 1312 until he was finally lost to sight by air reconnaissance at 1655 are not fully established. From analysis of various reports the following appear most probable:—

(a) Immediately after surface action ceased the enemy battlefleet, which consisted of 1 Littorio and 1 Cavour class screened by 7 destroyers, steered for Cagliari at about 25 knots. At about 1500 they turned to the Eastward and at about 1520 to the North Eastward round Cape Carbonira. When last seen at 1655 they were steering North up the East coast of Sardinia. At some time between the attacks of the first and second T/B Striking Forces they are reported to have increased their destroyer screen from 7 to 10 destroyers. There is no indication that their speed was ever materially reduced below 25 knots.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Blue Turn—ships turning together to the course ordered by the signal.