

30. My intentions at this time and throughout the ensuing chase were as follows:—

(i) To drive off the enemy from any position from which he could attack the convoy.

(ii) To accept some risk to the convoy providing there was a reasonable prospect of sinking one or more of the enemy battleships.

To achieve (ii) I considered the following conditions must be fulfilled:—

(a) A reduction of speed of the enemy to 20 knots or less by T/B attack.

(b) Engagement of enemy battleships by RENOWN and RAMILLIES in concert.

31. At 1207 RENOWN was reported as having a hot bearing on one shaft. Revolutions on this shaft had to be reduced. This, combined with a dirty bottom and paravanes, limited her speed to 27½ knots.

32. At the same time as this report was received puffs of smoke were observed on the horizon bearing 006° and cruisers in the van sighted masts and ships between the bearings of 346° and 006°.

33. At 1213 ARK ROYAL's signal timed 1147 was received reporting the composition of the enemy as 2 battleships and 6 cruisers accompanied by destroyers. This however did not disprove the Sunderland's information that a further group of 6 cruisers and destroyers was still further to the Westward.

34. By this time our cruisers were concentrated in the van and had formed a line of bearing 075°—255°, in sequence from West to East, SHEFFIELD, SOUTHAMPTON, NEWCASTLE, MANCHESTER and BERWICK. NEWCASTLE could not maintain the speed of the remainder and never quite reached her ordered station.

35. At 1158 BERWICK signalled that as his speed was limited to 27 knots he proposed to join RENOWN. Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron ordered BERWICK to join him but by that time the BERWICK had already turned to implement his proposal and consequently lost ground. BERWICK took station on the Starboard bow of MANCHESTER but owing to lack of speed dropped back during the action.

36. During the approach the 9 destroyers in company (three being detachable with the convoy and two with ARK ROYAL) were moving up to a position 5 miles 040° from RENOWN. This position was selected so that they would be available to counter attack any destroyers attempting to launch an attack on RENOWN or RAMILLIES.

37. The situation as seen from the cruisers immediately before the action commenced was as follows:—

(i) 3 enemy cruisers and some destroyers—hereafter referred to as the Western group—were visible between the bearings of approximately 340° and 350°, at a range of about 11 miles hull down and steering a Northerly course.

(ii) A second group of cruisers also accompanied by destroyers—hereafter referred to as the Eastern group—to the right of the Western group, were further away and steering approximately 100°.

Evidence as to the movements of the Western group immediately before action was joined is conflicting. It appears probable however that the Western group was in line ahead on a Southerly course until 1210 when they turned together to a Northerly course. Between 1210 and 1220 further alterations of course may have been made, as, when first observed from RENOWN they appeared to have a fairly broad inclination to the Eastwards.

The Action.

38. At 1220 the enemy opened fire and immediately afterwards our advanced forces replied. The enemy's first salvo fell close to MANCHESTER being exact for range but a hundred yards out for line.

39. At 1223 I informed Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, that I was engaging the enemy.

40. Immediately fire was opened by our advanced forces on ships of the Western group, they made smoke and retired on courses varying between N.W. and N.E. Behind their smoke screen they appeared to make large and frequent alterations of course becoming visible at intervals—sometimes almost end on, and sometimes at quite a broad inclination—remaining in sight for a few minutes before again becoming lost in their smoke.

41. Just before opening fire at the Western group, who were already wreathed in smoke, RENOWN sighted two ships, who were not making smoke, at extreme visibility, bearing 020°. It was thought at the time that these might be the enemy battleships but they later proved to be cruisers of the Eastern group.

42. At 1224 RENOWN opened fire at the right hand ship of the Western group at a mean range of 26,500 yards. Six salvos were fired before the latter was lost in smoke.

43. At 1226, RAMILLIES fired two salvos at maximum elevation to test the range. Thereafter RAMILLIES—proceeding at 20.7 knots—dropped astern and followed in the wake of RENOWN throughout the action.

44. When RENOWN's target became obscured, course was altered to Starboard to close the supposed battleships and to bring the Western group of cruisers broader on the bow. Shortly afterwards two salvos were fired at a fleeting glimpse of the centre cruiser of the Western group.

45. Course was then further altered to Starboard to open "A" arcs* on the left hand ship of the Western group which now bore 356°. Eight salvos were fired at her when she next appeared, but at 1245 she too was lost to sight in smoke.

46. During this time our cruisers had been hotly engaged with the Western group at ranges varying between 23,000 and 16,000 yards. Many straddles were obtained but smoke rendered spotting and observation generally extremely difficult.

47. MANCHESTER, SHEFFIELD and NEWCASTLE all opened fire initially on the right hand ship of the Western group,

Admiralty footnote:—

* "A" arcs—the arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, thus allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.