

13. MANCHESTER, SHEFFIELD and SOUTHAMPTON were now concentrating in the van, cruisers and destroyers being stationed 050° 5 miles from RENOWN, i.e. on the estimated bearing of the enemy. This position was subsequently adjusted as requisite.

14. At 1032 I made a signal to Malta W/T reporting the position of 2 enemy battleships.

15. At 1058 a Sunderland flying-boat closed RENOWN and reported the position of Force "D" as being 34 miles, 070°. The flying-boat was ordered to shadow and report the composition of the enemy bearing 025°, 50 miles.

16. Reconnaissance aircraft from ARK ROYAL had meanwhile sighted and reported two groups of cruisers and 2 battleships. There were, however, a number of discrepancies between the reports both as to position and composition so that it was not possible to get a clear picture of the situation. It seemed certain that five or six enemy cruisers were present but it was doubtful whether the number of battleships was one, two or three. But, whatever the composition of the enemy force, it was clear to me that in order to achieve my object—the safe and timely arrival of the convoy at its destination—it was essential to show a bold front and attack the enemy as soon as possible.

17. The enemy who had originally been reported as steering to the Westward, were now reported as altering course to the Eastward at 1115.

18. An Observer who witnessed this alteration of course reported that the Eastern group of cruisers appeared to be thrown into a state of confusion. The leading ship turned 180° whilst the two following ships turned only 90°. Collisions appeared to have been narrowly averted and at one time all three ships appeared to be stopped with their bows nearly touching each other.

19. Based on the Sunderland's report of the position of Force "D", junction with that Force now appeared to be assured. Speed was therefore reduced to 24 knots to maintain a position between the estimated position of the enemy battle fleet and the convoy.

20. At 1128 Force "D" was sighted bearing 073° approximately 24 miles. Shortly after this ARK ROYAL flew off the first T/B Striking Force.

21. Aircraft reports now available appeared to show that the enemy's force consisted of 2 battleships, about 6 or more cruisers and a considerable number of destroyers. RAMILLIES was therefore ordered to steer 045° so as not to lose ground as the action appeared likely to develop into a chase. BERWICK and NEWCASTLE joined Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, who had been placed in command of all cruisers in the van.

The Approach.

22. At 1134, acting on the latest estimate of the enemy's bearing and distance, speed was increased to 28 knots and at 1140 course altered to 050° to close the enemy.

23. At this time MANCHESTER, SOUTHAMPTON and SHEFFIELD were in single line ahead about five miles fine on the Port bow of RENOWN with BERWICK and NEWCASTLE joining Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, from the Eastward.

24. Two miles astern of the cruisers, Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla in FAULKNER was gradually collecting the Eighth Flotilla and ENCOUNTER, some of whom had been screening the convoy. The four destroyers of Force "D" were also joining Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, and were eventually stationed 3 miles, 270° from FAULKNER. Ten miles fine on the Starboard bow of RENOWN, RAMILLIES was just turning up to a parallel course. ARK ROYAL had dropped well astern and was between our main force and the convoy carrying out flying operations.

25. At 1154 the Sunderland flying-boat returned and reported 6 cruisers and 8 destroyers bearing 330° 30 miles from RENOWN, and that no battleships had been sighted. Unfortunately her report gave no course or speed of the cruisers and she had disappeared from sight before this information could be obtained. This report which was the first visual link received appeared to show that one group of the enemy forces was considerably further to the West than the groups previously reported by aircraft and that it was in a position to work round astern to attack ARK ROYAL and the convoy if the course of our forces to the North East was maintained.

26. No further report of this group was received during the action and I was consequently in doubts as to its whereabouts and intentions. ARK ROYAL was however between my main forces and the convoy and I considered that returning aircraft would sight and report this group should they attempt to work round to a position from which to attack the convoy.

27. Course was however altered to North so as not to get too far to the Eastward.

28. The situation as it appeared to me from the Plot just before noon is shown in Diagram 2. The number of enemy battleships and cruisers present was still not definitely established, but I judged that in all probability only two battleships were present.

29. At this time the prospects of bringing the enemy to action appeared favourable.

(i) We had effected our concentration of which the enemy appeared to be unaware, since no shadowers had been sighted or reported by R.D/F, and his speed had been reported as between 14 and 18 knots, which suggested he was still awaiting the reports of reconnaissance.

(ii) The sun was immediately astern and if remaining unclouded would give us the advantage of light.

(iii) There seemed every possibility of a synchronised surface and T/B attack if the nearest position of the enemy was correct, and providing he did not retire at once at high speed.