

damage on the enemy by the destruction of one or more of his battleships. The policy I followed was in general accordance with the accepted principles of war and the "Fighting Instructions." I do not suggest that a rigid adherence to these principles and instructions is either necessary or desirable, but on the other hand I consider that the interests of the country are best served by general adherence to established principles, and instructions based on those principles.

Conduct of Officers and Men.

26. Both from personal observation and reports I have received, I am able to state that the conduct of officers and men taking part in this engagement left nothing to be desired. It was a pleasure to observe the enthusiasm with which the ship's company of RENOWN closed up at their action stations on hearing that enemy forces were in the vicinity and their subsequent disappointment when it was clear that the enemy did not intend to stand and fight was obvious.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE.
Vice-Admiral,
Flag Officer Commanding,
Force "H".

NARRATIVE OF THE ACTION BETWEEN BRITISH AND ITALIAN FORCES ON 27TH NOVEMBER, 1940.

Movements Prior to the Action.

Sunrise on the 27th November was at 0824 (zone - 2) and at 0800 the situation was as follows:—

(a) RENOWN in company with ARK ROYAL, SHEFFIELD and 4 destroyers (Group I) were in position at 37° 48' N, 07° 24' E, steering at 083° at 16 knots, a position of cover, 10 to 20 miles ahead and to the North Eastward of the convoy having been maintained throughout the night;

(b) Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron in MANCHESTER with SOUTHAMPTON, DESPATCH and 5 destroyers (Group II) were in company with the M.T. convoy in position 37° 37' N, 06° 54' E. The 4 corvettes were about 10 miles to the Westward of the convoy, having been unable to keep up with the latter.

2. At this time ARK ROYAL flew off a section of fighters, one A/S patrol, one meteorological machine and a reconnaissance of 7 T.S.R.s* designed to cover the area to the West of Sardinia, and between Sardinia and Africa; the depth of this reconnaissance to the Eastward being just sufficient to cover Force "D" which was approaching from Skerki Bank. The fighter section on their return to ARK ROYAL reported that they had shot down a Cant. Z.506—10 miles North West of Bona at 0930.

3. Group I continued to the Eastward so as to be ready to concentrate with Force "D" should air reconnaissance reveal the presence of important enemy units in the vicinity of that Force. C.O.S. Alexandria's signal timed 0330/27 indicated that the presence of Force "D" might be known to the enemy.

4. At 0900, in the absence of any report from air reconnaissance, which by that time was expected to have reached a depth of 90 miles from Group I, course was shaped to the South West to join the convoy in accordance with the prearranged plan and provide additional A.A. defence by the time the first bombing attack was likely to develop.

5. The first sighting of the enemy from the air took place at 0852 when one of ARK ROYAL's reconnaissance aircraft sighted a group of warships and closed to investigate. At 0906 an Alarm Report was made of four cruisers and six destroyers but this report was not received by any ship.

6. At 0920, Group I sighted the convoy and course was adjusted to pass astern of it in order to place Group I to the South of the convoy, and up sun from the latter, whilst carrying out flying operations and thus in the probable direction of air attack.

7. At 0956, whilst Group I was still on the Port quarter of the convoy, an aircraft report (T.O.O.* 0920) of the presence of 5 cruisers and 5 destroyers was received by V/S† from ARK ROYAL.

8. It seemed possible that this might be a report of Force "D," and ARK ROYAL was asked to confirm that this was an enemy report. Steam for full speed was, however, at once ordered and Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, directed to detail 2 destroyers to screen ARK ROYAL and 2 to screen the convoy.

9. By 1016, as a result of further reports from aircraft, and confirmation from ARK ROYAL, the presence of enemy Battleships and Cruisers was established. RENOWN altered course to 075° to join RAMILLIES and speed was increased as rapidly as possible to 28 knots.

10. The composition and relative position of the enemy forces was far from clear, the situation as viewed on the Plot at 1035 being shown in Diagram 1.

11. I decided:—

(i) That the convoy should continue towards its destination but on a South Easterly course in order to keep well clear of any action that might develop;

(ii) To limit the escort of the convoy to DESPATCH, COVENTRY and 2 destroyers;

(iii) To proceed with all remaining forces to concentrate with Force "D" and then attack and drive off the enemy.

12. To implement these decisions ARK ROYAL was instructed to prepare and fly off a T/B‡ striking force and to act independently under cover of the battle fleet. DESPATCH was placed in charge of the convoy which was ordered to steer 120° at full speed. Cruisers and destroyers of Force "F" were ordered to join Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H", COVENTRY was ordered to join the convoy, and RAMILLIES was informed of Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H" 's position, course and speed.

Admiralty footnote:—

* T.S.R.—Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance aircraft.

Admiralty footnotes:—

* T.O.O.—time of origin.

† V/S—visual signal.

‡ T/B—Torpedo Bomber.