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BATTLE OF MATAPAN.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 11th November, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

Mediterranean,
11th November, 1941.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached reports of the Battle of Matapan, 27th-30th March, 1941. Five ships of the enemy fleet were sunk, burned or destroyed as per margin.* Except for the loss of one aircraft in action, our fleet suffered no damage or casualties.

2. The events and information prior to the action, on which my appreciation was based, are already known to Their Lordships. Long and anxious consideration had been given to the disposition of available forces, important factors being the necessity to maintain the flow of "Lustre"† convoys to Greece, and the difficulty of finding sufficient destroyers for a fleet operation when demands for convoy escorts were so heavy.

The disablement of H.M.S. YORK at Suda Bay at the outset of these deliberations was a serious blow.

3. The disposition described in paragraph 7 of the Commander-in-Chief's narrative was adopted with the intention of countering a possible cruiser raid into the Aegean. It was designed to give flexibility and allowed for a quick change of plan if more intelligence came to hand to clarify the situation.

I was concerned to avoid any movement which might alarm the enemy and cause him to defer any operation he might have in mind. To allow a state of suspense to continue, with Operation "Lustre" in full swing, would have imposed an increased strain on the light forces of the fleet.

Note:—UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED REFERENCES ARE TO PARAGRAPHS IN THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION'S NARRATIVE.

* 10,000 ton cruisers:—ZARA, POLA, FIUME. 1,500 ton destroyers, two, probably:—GIOBERTI, MAESTRALE.

† Admiralty footnote:—Operation "Lustre" was the transport of British troops and supplies to Greece.

4. The disposition originally ordered left the cruisers without support. The battlefleet could if necessary have put to sea, but very inadequately screened. Further consideration led to the retention of sufficient destroyers to screen the battlefleet. The moment was a lucky one when more destroyers than usual were at Alexandria having just returned from or just awaiting escort duty.

5. It had already been decided to take the battlefleet to sea under cover of night on the evening of the 27th, when air reconnaissance from Malta reported enemy cruisers steaming eastward p.m./27th. The battlefleet accordingly proceeded with all possible secrecy. It was well that it did so, for the forenoon of the 28th found the enemy south of Gavdo and the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces (Vice-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell), with Force "B"* in an awkward situation which might have been serious had the support of the battlefleet been lacking.

6. The situation at 0812 (Diagram No. 1), when surface contact was first made did not appear unsatisfactory although in fact at this time Force "B" was very uncomfortably placed with a second and powerful enemy cruiser squadron out of sight to the north-east and well placed to cut Force "B" off from the battlefleet. This squadron had actually been sighted and reported by H.M.S. GLOUCESTER'S spotting aircraft (see paragraph 10 and Report of V.A.L.F., paragraph 11) but fortunately for everybody's peace of mind this report did not get beyond H.M.S. GLOUCESTER'S T.S.† (see diagrams 1 and 2).

7. Aircraft from H.M.S. FORMIDABLE had sighted and reported a further force to the northward of the cruisers and in one case had reported battleships, but the situation was not very clear. The aircraft were not at this time using duty letters which made for confusion: previous experience had taught us how often cruisers of the Italian Navy are reported as

* Admiralty footnote:—Force "B" consisted of H.M. Ships ORION (Flag of V.A.L.F.), AJAX, PERTH and GLOUCESTER, the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla comprising ILEX (Captain D.12), HASTY, HERWARD and VENDETTA.

† Admiralty footnote:—T.S. Transmitting Station.