

C.B., D.S.O., who by his skilful manoeuvring managed to maintain a position in the van and to hold the enemy cruiser squadrons, and at the same time avoid damage to his own force. WARSPITE was able to assist him with her fire in the early stages of the action.

11. The enemy's smoke tactics were impressive and the smoke screens laid by his destroyers were very effective in completely covering his high speed retirement. With his excess speed of at least 5 knots there was little hope of catching him once he had decided to break off the action. An aircraft torpedo hit on one of his battleships was the only chance and this unfortunately did not occur.

12. The chase was continued under exceedingly heavy bombing attacks until the British Fleet was 25 miles from the Calabrian Coast, and was then reluctantly abandoned, the destroyers being very short of fuel and the enemy fleet well below the horizon.

13. A feature of the action was the value, and in some cases the amusement, derived from intercepted plain language enemy signals.

14. My remarks on the bombing attacks experienced by the Fleet during the course of these operations have already been forwarded.

15. I cannot conclude these remarks without a reference to H.M.S. EAGLE. This obsolescent aircraft carrier, with only 17 Swordfish embarked, found and kept touch with the enemy fleet, flew off two striking forces of 9 torpedo bombers within the space of 4 hours, both of which attacked, and all aircraft returned. 24 hours later a torpedo striking force was launched on shipping in Augusta and throughout the 5 days operations EAGLE maintained constant A/S patrols in daylight and carried out several searches. Much of EAGLE's aircraft operating work was done in the fleeting intervals between, and even during, bombing attacks and I consider her performance reflects great credit on Captain A. M. Bridge, Royal Navy, her Commanding Officer.

Individual pilots and observers have already been rewarded for their work during these operations.

16. The meagre material results derived from this brief meeting with the Italian Fleet were naturally very disappointing to me and all under my command, but the action was not without value. It must have shown the Italians that their Air Force and submarines cannot stop our Fleet penetrating into the Central Mediterranean and that only their main fleet can seriously interfere with our operating there. It established, I think, a certain degree of moral ascendancy, since although superior in battleships, our Fleet was heavily outnumbered in cruisers and destroyers, and the Italians had strong shore based air forces within easy range, compared to our few carrier borne aircraft.

On our side the action has shown those without previous war experience how difficult it is to hit with the gun at long range, and therefore the necessity of closing in, when this can be done, in order to get decisive results. It showed that high level bombing, even on the heavy and accurate scale experienced during these operations, yields few hits and that it is more alarming than dangerous.

Finally, these operations and the action off Calabria produced throughout the Fleet a determination to overcome the air menace and not to let it interfere with our freedom of manoeuvre and hence our control of the Mediterranean.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM.

*Admiral.
Commander-in-Chief,
Mediterranean.*

NARRATIVE

FLEET OPERATIONS—PERIOD, 7TH TO 13TH JULY, 1940.

The Mediterranean Fleet, less RAMILLIES and the 3rd Cruiser Squadron, left Alexandria on 7th July to carry out Operation M.A.5, the object being the safe and timely arrival at Alexandria of two convoys from Malta with evacuees and Fleet stores.

2. It was intended that the Fleet should reach a position of cover East of Cape Passero p.m. on 9th July, detaching destroyers to Malta, which with JERVIS and DIAMOND, who were already at Malta, would sail p.m. escorting the convoys. It was also intended to carry out operations against the Sicilian Coast on the 9th.

3. The fast convoy, M.F.One, consisted of the Egyptian ship EL NIL, the ex-Italian ship RODI and the British ship KNIGHT OF MALTA. The slow convoy, M.S.One, consisted of the British ships ZEELAND, KIRKLAND and MASIRAH and the Norwegian ship NOVASLI.

4. The Fleet sailed from Alexandria in three groups:—

Force A—7th Cruiser Squadron* and destroyer STUART.

Force B—Commander-in-Chief in WARSPITE, with destroyers NUBIAN, MOHAWK, HERO, HEReward and DECOY.

Force C—Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron† in ROYAL SOVEREIGN, with MALAYA, EAGLE and destroyers HYPERRION, HOSTILE, HASTY, ILEX, IMPERIAL, DAINTY, DEFENDER, JUNO, JANUS, VAMPIRE and VOYAGER.

5. All forces were clear of the harbour by 0001 on 8th July and proceeded as follows:—

Force A—To pass through position 35° 00' N, 21° 30' E.

Force B—To pass through position 34° 15' N, 24° 50' E.

Force C—To pass through position 33° 20' N, 27° 50' E.

6. LIVERPOOL, who was at Port Said, having just arrived there after transporting troops to Aden, sailed to rendezvous direct with Vice-Admiral (D).‡

Flying Boat Patrols.

7. The following flying boat patrols were arranged by 201 Group (R.A.F.):—

9th, 10th and 11th July—Continuous patrol on lines Malta-Cape Spartivento and Cape Colonne-Corfu.

Admiralty footnotes —

* The 7th Cruiser Squadron consisted of ORION, NEPTUNE, SYDNEY, GLOUCESTER and LIVERPOOL.

† Rear-Admiral 1st Battle Squadron—Rear-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell.

‡ Vice-Admiral (D)—Vice-Admiral J. C. Tovey, C.B., D.S.O.