

51. Throughout this period, many 15 in. splashes were seen in and around the smoke, mostly near the 5th Division, but also more wildly amongst all other ships.

52. After firing torpedoes, course was continued to the eastward until 1817 to obtain a clear view of the weather end of the smoke and if necessary to cover the convoy from the northeastward. While it was evident that the battleship and some cruisers were attempting to pass to leeward of the smoke, it was equally evident that the enemy's most effective course of action was to pass to windward (east) of it and that all his force was not with the battleship so that some cruisers might be taking this course of action.

53. Between 1816 and 1818 when a clear view was obtained to the northeast and north no enemy ships were seen. It is now evident that by this time 2 or 3 of the enemy 6-inch cruisers must have retired from the battle.

54. At 1817 course was altered to west, still making smoke and to rejoin the 1st and 5th Divisions in beating off the enemy to the west-northwestward.

PHASE IV.

The enemy driven off by Gun and Torpedo.

55. This phase started with all divisions attempting to carry out the torpedo attack ordered at 1759, and all converging on the all important point between the battleship and the convoy about 15 miles southeast of her.

56. Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla in JERVIS with the 1st Division and LEGION avoided 4 torpedo-bombers at 1823 by a turn to the southward but resumed a northwesterly and then a northerly course 4 minutes later. At 1834 he sighted a large enemy ship bearing 292 degs. about 6 miles, and at 1835 turned his division together to 270 degs. at 28 knots. He identified the enemy as one Littorio class battleship and 3 cruisers widely spaced in line ahead on approximate course 180 degs.

57. During the run in, the 1st Division carried out a concentration shoot on the battleship and two hits were seen. At the same time CLEOPATRA (the only ship of the 4th, 2nd or 3rd Divisions to get a clear view because of smoke) engaged the battleship when visible and the leading 8-inch cruiser at other times. CLEOPATRA was firing almost continuously from 1831 to 1856 closing to just under 10,000 yards at 1847. Two hits were seen by 1845, one of which started a considerable fire on the battleship's quarterdeck, and appeared to put her after turret out of action and further hits observed after she had turned away at 1845.

58. The enemy returned fire with 15-inch, 8-inch, 6-inch and smaller calibres. The battleship appeared to be in divided control, the forward 15-inch firing at the 1st Division and the after group towards our cruisers. All their fire was erratic and it was hard to say who was the target.

59. At 1841, at a range of about 6,000 yards, the 1st Division turned to starboard to fire

torpedoes. It appeared that LEGION (the southernmost ship) actually turned to port, and she was seen to be almost completely covered by a 15-inch salvo as she turned. She emerged from the splashes with speed unimpaired and apparently unharmed.

60. KINGSTON was hit by gunfire during the turn and suffered a fire in a boiler room and the engine room. She stopped but got the fire under control and reported at 1907 that she was able to proceed on one boiler at 16 knots. KELVIN stood by her whilst she was stopped. KINGSTON was accordingly ordered to join the convoy, or, if she could not find it, to proceed independently at her best speed to Malta. This latter in fact she did.

61. At 1840, the leading 8-inch cruiser had altered away, and at 1845 the battleship and the other two cruisers also altered away and to a course of about 340 degs.

62. At 1850, Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla in SIKH, who was steering northwest in an endeavour to get into a torpedo-firing position, observed a certain torpedo hit amidships on the battleship.

The 5th Division turned to fire torpedoes from the enemy's quarter at 1855, but smoke interfered with the aim and only LIVELY fired. She fired a full outfit (8 torpedoes) but no result was observed.

LIVELY had been damaged by a 15-inch near miss at 1852 and had her fore lower mess-deck flooded.

63. The enemy was now retiring rapidly to the northward. No further opportunities for torpedo or gunfire presented themselves, but smoke was continued until 1913—on a course to close the convoy.

64. At 1911, course was altered to the northward to concentrate the striking force and all ships joined company by 1920 when a southerly course was shaped again to close the convoy. KINGSTON was detached.

Air Attack

65. During this phase several torpedo-bomber attacks were made on the striking force, all ineffective, though they might well have used our smoke to their advantage. There were also a number of T/B attacks on the convoy, some combined with high-level bombing attacks. These also were beaten off without damage. No aircraft were seen after 1925.

Dispersal of the Force

66. At 1940, the convoy not being in sight and dark fast approaching, it was decided to turn Force B for Alexandria. Accordingly course was shaped 050 degs. at 22 knots, altering to 080 degs. at 2040. At 1949, BRECONSHIRE was ordered to carry out Operation "B". In fact she had already done so at 1900 and the convoy was already dispersed.

At this time (1940) it was known that the enemy was retiring to the northward. He had failed to make contact with the convoy by day, being driven off, and it was thought unlikely that he would attempt a night attack after having his battleship damaged by torpedo.