

watching the movements of the Mediterranean Fleet made it appear possible that an operation by enemy surface forces was intended.

The most probable actions by enemy surface forces appeared to be:—

(a) An attack on our convoy routes in the Aegean.

(b) The escorting of a convoy to the Dodecanese.

(c) A diversion to cover a landing either in Cyrenaica or in Greece.

(d) The possibility of an attack on Malta could not be excluded.

3. The Commander-in-Chief was therefore faced with the problem of meeting a threat which he knew to exist, but whose nature he could not foretell. Our most vulnerable point at this time lay undoubtedly in the convoys carrying troops and material to Greece. They were moving, at the time, comparatively lightly escorted, under the rather inadequate cover of the Seventh Cruiser Squadron in the Aegean.

It was important to avoid interruption in the passage of these convoys if possible.

4. The obvious course to prevent enemy surface action against the convoys would have been to move the battlefleet into the area west of Crete. It was, however, almost certain that, had this been done, the fleet would have been sighted on its way, in which case the enemy would have only deferred his operation until the fleet was obliged to return to harbour to fuel.

5. After consideration it appeared most undesirable to defer this unknown threat which was impending. It was accordingly decided that the best course would be to clear the threatened area of convoys and merchant shipping so that the enemy's blow would be struck in a vacuum, at the same time making such disposition of available forces as would enable us to engage enemy surface forces should they appear.

6. At the same time it was important to maintain an appearance of normality in the area concerned, lest the enemy should "smell a rat". It was lucky that only one convoy was actually at sea, A.G.9 bound for Piraeus with troops, which was then south of Crete. This convoy was ordered to maintain its course until nightfall 27th and then turn back in its tracks. A southbound convoy from Piraeus was ordered not to sail.

In the meantime authorities in the Aegean were warned at the last possible moment to clear the area of shipping.

Dispositions.

7. The following dispositions were then ordered:—

(a) Force B, consisting of Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, with four cruisers and four destroyers to be south-west of Gavdo Island at daylight 28th March.

(b) Force C, consisting of five destroyers to join him at that time.

(c) *T.S.R. Squadrons in Crete and Cyrenaica to be reinforced.

(d) Royal Air Force requested to exert maximum effort of reconnaissance and bomber aircraft in Aegean and to west of Crete on 28th March.

(e) H.M. Submarines ROVER and TRIUMPH ordered to patrol off Suda Bay and Milo respectively.

(f) Force D, consisting of H.M. Ships JUNO, JAGUAR, and DEFENDER, who were at Piraeus, to be at short notice.

(g) H.M.S. CARLISLE ordered to Suda Bay to augment A.A. defences.

(h) Greek Naval forces warned to be at short notice.

Air Reconnaissance Report.

8. This plan was adhered to in the main but at noon/27th three enemy cruisers and one destroyer were sighted by air reconnaissance in position 36 degs. 30 mins. N., 16 degs. 40 mins. E., steering 120 degs. This position was later amended to 36 degs. 54 mins. N., 17 degs. 10 mins. E. Visibility was bad and the flying boat could not shadow. The Commander-in-Chief decided to take the battlefleet to sea, cancelled the move to Cyrenaica of the T.S.R. aircraft, and made the following re-dispositions:—

Force "B," consisting of the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces in ORION, AJAX, PERTH, GLOUCESTER, the Captain (D), Second Destroyer Flotilla in ILEX, HASTY, HEReward and VENDETTA (all from operations in the Aegean) were to rendezvous and be in position 34 degs. 20 mins. N., 24 degs. 10 mins. E., at 0630/28th. GLOUCESTER'S speed was reported down to 24 knots due to trouble with a plunger block.

Force "C" was to remain with the battlefleet.

Royal Air Force reconnaissance was arranged for 28th over the southern Ionian Sea, the south-west Aegean, and south of Crete.

Fleet Sailing from Alexandria.

9. Enemy reconnaissance planes were over the fleet at Alexandria at noon and again p.m. 27th. At dusk, 1900/27th, the Commander-in-Chief sailed the Fleet from Alexandria. WARSPITE, BARHAM, VALIANT and FORMIDABLE were in company, the Rear-Admiral, First Battle Squadron, being in BARHAM, and the Rear-Admiral, Mediterranean Aircraft Carriers, in FORMIDABLE. The fleet was screened by Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla in JERVIS, JANUS, NUBIAN, MOHAWK, the Captain (D), Tenth Destroyer Flotilla in STUART, GREYHOUND, GRIFFIN, HOTSPUR and HAVOCK. Course was set 300 degs. at 20 knots.

28th March, 1941—First Sight and Contact with the Enemy—Forenoon Action.

10. A dawn air search was flown off from FORMIDABLE and at 0739 an aircraft reported four cruisers and six destroyers (to be known as Force "X") about 30 miles south of Gavdo Island steering 160 degs. This was at first thought to be an inaccurate report of Force "B" which was known to be in that area, but at 0827 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' first sighting report of three cruisers and destroyers was received. The Commander-in-Chief increased speed to 22 knots maintaining course 300 degs. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was estimated to bear 267 degs. 90 miles from the battlefleet and the enemy were reported 009 degs. 18 miles from him steering first 100 degs. and then 160 degs. At 0900 the enemy were reported turning back to 300 degs. with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, also turning to the north-westward. The Commander-in-Chief detached VALIANT to proceed

* Admiralty footnote:—T.S.R.—Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance.