

division made a further threat but turned away again as BLANKNEY manoeuvred his division to engage.

16. During this time CAIRO was on a course roughly parallel to the enemy but kept continuously under wheel to avoid enemy salvos. The enemy's gunnery was good and he appeared at this stage to have split the armament of his cruisers, each cruiser firing four-gun salvos at CAIRO while the remainder of the armament engaged our attacking destroyers. At this stage one hit by a six-inch projectile was made on CAIRO but did little damage. The shell hit on the fore superstructure.

17. By 0715 BEDOUIN and PARTRIDGE were out of the action lying stopped and I decided to concentrate the remaining fleet destroyers on CAIRO.

18. At 0745 the enemy was observed to turn away and open the range; I then turned to port to effect the concentration with the destroyers.

19. By 0822 both Fleet and Hunt classes of destroyer were concentrated on CAIRO; meanwhile the enemy had turned to the northward and was closing the range. At this stage the convoy appeared to be steering on a southeasterly course and I signalled to the Commodore to turn 180° to port at 0834. CAIRO and the destroyers circled between the enemy and the convoy making smoke.

20. The enemy turned on a north-easterly course at about 0840, CAIRO and destroyers steering on an approximately parallel course. At this stage CAIRO received a hit from a six-inch projectile on the starboard side which penetrated an oil tank and the inner bottom. The engine room started to flood but it was possible to keep the water down by using the 790-ton pump working to full capacity. The shell failed to explode and remained lodged in the oil tank where it was discovered later. Had this shell exploded it is more than likely that the ship would have been disabled. At 0848 I detached the 12th Division to return to protect the convoy against air attack and the possibility of enemy destroyers working round from the north or south.

21. By 0930 the enemy had opened the range and had disappeared to the eastward. I therefore altered to a north-westerly course to rejoin the convoy.

22. At about 1000 I had decided to turn the convoy towards Malta as the enemy was no longer barring this route, and made a signal to BLANKNEY to turn but he had already anticipated my wishes and had turned the convoy to 180° soon after 1000. A course of 130° was resumed at 1030.

23. At 0930, BEDOUIN then in tow of PARTRIDGE, had informed me that he intended steering to the westward but I ordered him to make for the convoy as I considered that this gave me the best chance of giving him protection.

24. I rejoined the convoy at about 1030 and re-formed the screen. The position then was as follows:—TROILUS, ORARI, and BURDWAN undamaged. KENTUCKY disabled in tow of HEBE screened by RYE and HYTHE. CHANT had been sunk.

25. These casualties to CHANT and KENTUCKY had occurred in an air attack on the convoy at about 0710, which is believed to have been made by 8 JU.87s. CHANT had received three direct hits and KENTUCKY had been near missed. One enemy plane had been brought down by ships' gunfire.

26. Previous reference has been made (paragraph 7) to an enemy report made at 0620 by a Beaufighter escorting the convoy. This aircraft is understood to have returned to its base to make a full report seeing that surface action was imminent. Contact with the other aircraft of this flight, and also the relief flight, was not made and it is not known whether they were in the vicinity. It was not until 0930 that communication was established with a flight of night-flying Beaufighters.

27. From 0930 onwards fighters from Malta provided continuous escort except for two short periods of about 10 minutes when escorting sections, having been in combat, had used up their ammunition and were short of fuel and had had to return to their base before the reliefs arrived. It is unfortunate and probably more than a coincidence that enemy air attacks were made during these two periods.

28. The speed of the convoy was reduced while I considered what to do in regard to KENTUCKY. I had ordered ITHURIEL to take this ship in tow at 1033 hoping it might be possible to obtain a speed of 10 or 11 knots, while the best that could be hoped for with HEBE towing was about 6 knots. I reconsidered and cancelled this order as I came to the conclusion that I could not afford to immobilise one of the three remaining fleet destroyers for this purpose while the threat from enemy surface vessels was considerable.

29. A dive bombing attack by 3 JU.88s developed at 1040 but the enemy were driven off by fighters and gunfire before dropping their bombs. One enemy aircraft was shot down by fighters.

30. At 1120 a heavy high level and dive bombing attack by JU.88s and JU.87s was made. This attack had been detected coming in by radar, but unfortunately the escorting aircraft, having been engaged previously, were short of fuel and ammunition and had had to return to base before being relieved. The relieving section of Spitfires arrived in time to take their toll of the enemy but were too late to enable the fighter directing officers in CAIRO to intercept the attack. In this attack BURDWAN was near missed and reported she was disabled. I ordered BADSWORTH to take her in tow and shortly received reports through BADSWORTH that the merchant ship intended to scuttle. I believe Masters had received instructions regarding scuttling in the event of damage, but I do not know what these orders were.

31. The position then was as follows:—Two ships of the convoy intact, TROILUS and ORARI. KENTUCKY in tow some distance astern making from 4 to 6 knots. BURDWAN disabled and preparing to scuttle with BADSWORTH standing by. BEDOUIN disabled in tow of PARTRIDGE making about 8 knots and approaching the convoy from the east.