

H.M.S. GREYHOUND, but a curious contrast of opinion has arisen over the actual targets engaged. The technical records of the action show that H.M.S. WARSPITE engaged the rear-most ship first and subsequently shifted target *left* to the second ship in the enemy line (the leading ship is now thought to have been a destroyer).

*My own opinion supported by the Chief of Staff, the Captain of the Fleet and several Staff Officers, is that H.M.S. WARSPITE engaged the leading 8 inch cruiser (2nd in the line) and subsequently shifted fire *right* to the rear ship. It is a point which cannot be absolutely decided until the full story of this action from both sides is known, but it appears that the Gunnery Records must be wrong.

17. On conclusion of the battlefleet action, the signal was made "All forces not engaged in sinking the enemy, retire north-east". The order was intended to ensure withdrawal on parallel tracks clear of the destroyer melee, and was made under the impression that cruisers and striking force were in contact with the enemy. Heavy fighting had been observed to the south westward which supported this belief. Unfortunately the cruisers were not in fact engaged and the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, accordingly withdrew to the north-east. He had sighted a red pyrotechnic signal some distance to the north-west 40 minutes earlier and was at this time about to spread to investigate (see report of V.A.L.F., paragraph 35). This red light signal was sighted simultaneously by Captain D.14 bearing 010 degrees, who seeing it in the direction of the 7th Cruiser Squadron and knowing from their †G.A.B. signal they had seen it, forebore to investigate.

There seems little doubt, from subsequent analysis, that this must have been the remainder of the Italian Fleet withdrawing to the north-west (see diagram No. 9).

I am of the opinion that the course I selected for withdrawal led the fleet too far to the eastward, and that a more northerly course should have been steered.

18. I hoped when ordering the eight destroyers of the striking force to attack that the cruisers would regain touch to assist Captain D.14 to launch his attack. The bearing and distance of the enemy given to the striking force when detached (286 degrees 35 miles from H.M.S. WARSPITE) was based on the plot and was in fact approximately correct but the enemy's course appears to have been 45 degrees further to the north-westward than that estimated. In spite, therefore, of Captain D.14's intention to pass to the northward of the enemy, the striking force apparently passed under the stern of the enemy to his southern flank whilst the cruisers were steering on an approximately parallel course on the enemy's northern flank (see diagram No. 7). The red pyrotechnic was shown between these two British forces.

19. The mistake made by H.M.S. HAVOCK (paragraph 38) in reporting the POLA as a LITTORIO class did not actually bring about any ill effect, since the flotillas had by then missed the VITTORIO and did useful work in polishing off the damaged cruisers (diagram No. 10). The movements and the results

achieved by H.M.A.S. STUART's division during the night remain most obscure. H.M.S. HAVOCK certainly sank an enemy destroyer.

They had an exciting night and did considerable execution, but the presence of undamaged enemy cruisers in the area at that time seems unlikely and it is not improbable that the ships so reported by H.M.A.S. STUART were in fact some of the others of his own division.

20. It seems that the enemy must have been able to increase speed again during the night, since although extensive reconnaissance was flown next morning, he remained unsighted and must by then have been nearing the Italian coast. The search for survivors was interrupted by the appearance of German aircraft and it was decided to withdraw the fleet before the expected heavy air attacks developed, as no more useful work appeared to remain to be done.

The fleet was in fact subjected to a fairly severe dive bombing attack by Ju 88s at 1530, when H.M.S. FORMIDABLE was narrowly missed by several bombs.

21. The mistake which prevented the Greek destroyer flotilla taking part in the action was perhaps not unfortunate (see paragraph 39). These destroyers had been sent through the Corinth Canal to Argostoli with admirable promptitude to a position where they were well placed to intercept the retreating enemy fleet, a task which they would certainly have undertaken with characteristic gallantry. Nevertheless the presence of yet another detached force in the area, and that force one with which I could not readily communicate, would have seriously added to the complexity of the situation. It was, however, disappointing for the Greeks.

22. The results of the action cannot be viewed with entire satisfaction, since the damaged VITTORIO VENETO was allowed to escape. The failure of the cruisers and destroyers to make contact with her during the night was unlucky and is much to be regretted. Nevertheless substantial results were achieved in the destruction of the three ZARA Class cruisers. These fast well armed and armoured ships had always been a source of anxiety as a threat to our own less well armed cruisers and I was well content to see them disposed of in this summary fashion. There is little doubt that the rough handling given the enemy on this occasion served us in good stead during the subsequent evacuations of Greece and Crete. Much of these later operations may be said to have been conducted under the cover of the Battle of Matapan.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM,
Admiral.

NARRATIVE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN.

Preliminary Intelligence.

From the 25th March onwards various indications were noticed of increasing activity on the part of German and Italian forces. Features of the activity noticed were an increasingly active sea reconnaissance by aircraft to the south and west of Greece and Crete and daily attempts to reconnoitre Alexandria harbour.

2. These activities together with the obvious imminence of the German attack on Greece and Yugo Slavia led to belief that some important step by the enemy was impending. The unusual keenness with which the enemy was

*Admiralty footnote:—Subsequent analysis tends to show that WARSPITE first engaged FIUME, the second cruiser, and that she then shifted target and with VALIANT fired at ZARA the leading cruiser.

†Admiralty footnote:—G.A.B. signifies General Alarm Bearing.