

minutes later I ordered ARK ROYAL to fly off two shadowers and at 1427 to fly off the striking force as soon as ready. The shadowers took off at 1448, being delayed by ARK ROYAL's main armament being in action and two Fulmars having to land on short of fuel.

69. At 1425 a further signal (timed 1350) was received from aircraft B reporting 4 cruisers and 8 destroyers some 15 miles W.S.W. of the enemy battlefleet and steering the same course and speed. Ten minutes later a signal was received (timed 1425) that the total enemy force consisted of 2 battleships, 4 cruisers and 16 destroyers.

70. Meanwhile the battleships had been ordered at 1417 to form on NELSON who had increased speed to proceed ahead of the convoy. At 1433, however, it became necessary for NELSON to reduce to 15 knots to avoid further flooding due to the damage sustained.

71. I therefore modified my previous instructions, informed Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet that NELSON's speed was reduced to 15 knots and ordered him to proceed with PRINCE OF WALES, RODNEY, EDINBURGH, SHEFFIELD and 6 destroyers at best speed to close and drive off the enemy. The cruisers were ordered to rejoin the convoy before dark if possible. NELSON took station astern of the convoy, as she was becoming sluggish under helm.

72. While these instructions were in transit, a signal from aircraft (timed 1445 and received at 1506) reported that the enemy fleet had reversed course to 360°. This was followed by a further signal (timed 1503 and received at 1543) that the enemy was steering 060°. A report was also received from Vice-Admiral, Malta, that the two enemy battleships were Littorio class and not Cavours as was originally believed.

73. It was now clear that the enemy intended to avoid contact. I still hoped, however, that the air striking force might be able to materially reduce his speed and allow the Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to overtake him before dark.

74. At 1445 an aircraft was seen to fall in flames on the starboard quarter of the fleet. As no combat took place at that time, this must have been one damaged earlier in the action, probably by fighters.

A Fulmar, short of petrol, force-landed astern of ARK ROYAL at 1530. The crew was picked up by PIORUN.

75. About 1525, while ARK ROYAL was ranging her torpedo striking force, she sighted 4 S.79s pass right over the fleet at 17,000 feet, but could not engage because of her aircraft on deck. COSSACK reported them as dive bombers, but they were thought later to be Fulmars and were not engaged. No attack was made by these aircraft. The striking force of 12 Swordfish escorted by 4 Fulmars took departure at 1540.

76. Between 1620 and 1645, Fulmars drove off an attack threatening from the port side of the convoy, and at the later time another section of Fulmars shot down a shadower 10 miles astern.

77. By 1650 there had been no sighting reports from the shadowing aircraft which had taken departure two hours earlier. The last report made by R.A.F. aircraft was timed 1503 and "no change reports" had not been received.

78. With the position of the enemy force in doubt, and since available evidence suggested he was probably retiring at speed to the north-east, I signalled to Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet at 1658 to rejoin. My appreciation at this time was that even if the striking force succeeded in reducing the speed of the enemy radically it would not be possible for Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to make contact until after dark and consequently a successful issue was highly problematical. On the other hand it was essential for the cruisers to return to the convoy before dark, and the destroyers were also required to furnish a screen for NELSON and ARK ROYAL. Any further reduction of Force X destroyers for this purpose was, in my opinion, unacceptable.

*Movements of the Force under Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet while Detached.*

79. Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet's appreciation at 1530 was that it was possible for the enemy:—

(a) To continue on his course;

(b) To attempt to cut in to the eastward between Marittimo and Skerki Bank, with a view to attacking the convoy under the cover of darkness;

(c) To draw the British force northwards in order to cut in to the westward and attack the convoy from rear.

80. Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet decided to try and close the passage between Skerki and Marittimo, while keeping well placed to fall back on the convoy. Course 080° was therefore set to pass north of Skerki Bank.

81. When recalled at 1659, Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet was just reaching a position from which he considered a movement either to the eastward or westward feasible without fear of the enemy achieving his object.

82. The air striking force reported to ARK ROYAL at 1740 that they were unable to find the enemy, and I ordered ARK ROYAL to recall them. The cause of this failure to locate the enemy is explained in paragraph 97.

83. At 1800 Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet's force came in sight to the north-eastward. Two formations of enemy aircraft were detected by R.D.F. at 1820, but they did not approach nearer than 24 miles.

*Detachment of Force X.*

84. Force A, consisting of the battleships and carrier, with destroyer screen, parted company from the convoy and Force X (cruisers and destroyers) at 1855 on reaching the entrance to the Skerki Channel.

Force A turned to 285°, while Force X and the convoy continued to the eastward under the command of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron.