

SOVEREIGN in Force "B" if I considered this essential.

The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, was frankly sceptical and considered I was unduly pessimistic. In his opinion, the probability of an Italian concentration in the Western Mediterranean was more remote now than at any time since Operation "Hats" (30th August—5th September).

Since defects in ROYAL SOVEREIGN could not be completed in time she was unable to take part in the operation.

EXECUTION OF OPERATION "COLLAR."

17. The M.T. ships included in Force "F" passed through the Straits of Gibraltar during the night of 24th/25th November and were joined by the corvettes to the East of Gibraltar a.m. 25th November. The remainder of Forces "B" and "F" sailed at 0800 on 25th November.

The operation proceeded according to plan and without incident until the morning of 27th November. The corvettes had been detached on the evening of 26th November, as they were unable to keep up with the convoy. A detailed account of the situation at 0800 on 27th November and subsequent events on that day are given in the attached narrative.

POINTS OF INTEREST.

Enemy Intelligence prior to 27th November.

18. So far as I am aware, reliance was placed entirely on shore based air reconnaissance to locate the position of enemy units in the Western Mediterranean prior to 27th November. This reconnaissance proved quite inadequate for the purpose and there was insufficient information concerning the location of Italian naval forces prior to the 27th November and no report of enemy ships being at sea in the Western Mediterranean until they were sighted by carrier reconnaissance a.m. 27th November.

Enemy Intelligence on 27th November.

19. With the exception of a Sunderland flying boat operating from Malta to cover the area in which our forces would be operating on 27th November, air reconnaissance was limited to that furnished by ARK ROYAL's aircraft.

ARK ROYAL has a high proportion of young and inexperienced pilots and observers. Some of these had to be employed on the initial dawn reconnaissance, since it was necessary to hold the first air striking force in readiness to attack any enemy force attempting to interfere with the concentration of Forces "B" and "F" with Force "D".

Not only had many of these young observers little or no experience of reporting enemy formations, but the need for maintaining wireless silence, except in the immediate neighbourhood of Gibraltar provides little opportunity to exercise communications in the air.

These factors, coupled with variable visibility and the similarity of Italian warships' silhouettes, made their tasks difficult.

Taking the above into consideration, I consider the crews of the reconnaissance aircraft acquitted themselves with credit.

Results obtained by Air Striking Force Torpedo Attacks.

20. The results obtained by torpedo bomber attacks on high speed targets during the present

war have fallen far short of the estimates based on peacetime practices adjusted for "opposition."

So far as ARK ROYAL is concerned, this is attributed entirely to lack of initial training and subsequent runner practices.* Skilful, unobserved approaches were made in each case and the attacks pressed home with courage and resolution, but the results obtained were disappointing.

Delay in reporting Result of first Striking Force Attack.

21. It is not always appreciated that sustained observation on enemy ships by the crews of aircraft in the striking force is impracticable. Observations of "own drop" even in peacetime practices, is very difficult, and under action conditions, quite fortuitous. Succeeding attackers may, or may not, be able to observe hits from preceding attacks, but in general the only definite evidence is the subsequent behaviour of the target. On this occasion it was not until the return of the striking force to ARK ROYAL had afforded an opportunity for the interrogation of all aircraft crews, that the probability of one hit on the Littorio class was established. Subsequent observation of the target indicated that her speed had not been reduced to an extent which prevented her keeping in company with the Cavour class, at about 25 knots, but does not disprove the estimate that one hit was obtained.

Fighting Efficiency.

22. With the exception of RENOWN, ARK ROYAL, SHEFFIELD and the destroyers of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla (the permanent nucleus of Force "H"), the remaining ships taking part in the engagement had been drawn from various stations and in certain cases, met for the first time just before the action opened.

23. To illustrate the constant changes that have taken place in the composition of Force "H" since 1st of July, it is of interest to note that the following different ships have at some time or other been included in this force for operations, viz.:—

Seven capital ships,
Three aircraft carriers,
Thirteen cruisers,
Thirty three destroyers.

24. The fact that ships carried out their action duties correctly and with the minimum of signalled instructions is a tribute to the soundness of our tactical training in peace and to the "Fighting Instructions."

Decision to discontinue the Chase.

25. My reasons for deciding that a continuance of the chase offered no reasonable prospect of inflicting damage on the enemy and was not justified are contained in the Narrative. Had I received timely information before breaking off the action that some of the enemy ships appeared to have sustained damage, I should have felt justified in continuing the action for a short period. But I was not prepared to hazard the achievement of my main objective, the safe passage of the convoy, unless there was substantial assurance. I could inflict material

Admiralty footnote:—

* Runner practices—practice firings with torpedoes not fitted with warheads.