

8th July—Flying boats on passage Malta-Zante-Malta.

12th July—Flying boats on passage Malta-Zante-Alexandria.

13th July—To a depth of 60 miles to the Westward of convoy M.S.One.

8. At 2339/7th July when in position 32° 35' N, 28° 30' E., HASTY sighted an Italian U-boat on passage on the surface at 1,000 yards range. A full pattern depth charge attack was made and the U-boat was probably sunk. At 0100/8 when rejoining Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron, another attack was carried out on a confirmed contact. It is considered that this attack damaged a second U-boat.

9. The night passed without incident, the Commander-in-Chief with Force B setting a mean line of advance of 305 degrees at 20 knots. At 0800/8 IMPERIAL was sighted returning to harbour with a burst feed tank.

10. At 0807 a report was received from PHOENIX of two enemy battleships and four destroyers in position 35° 36' N, 18° 28' E., steering 180 degrees at 0515. She attacked at extreme range but the attack was apparently unsuccessful.

As it was suspected from this report that this force might be covering an important convoy, Vice-Admiral, Malta, was ordered to arrange for a flying boat to locate and shadow this force. The course of the Fleet was maintained pending further information.

Two submarines were sighted by EAGLE's A/S patrols, one of which was attacked with bombs.

11. In the meantime all forces were subjected to heavy bombing attacks by aircraft which appeared to come from the Dodecanese. Seven attacks were delivered on WARSPITE between 1205 and 1812, about 50 bombs being dropped. There were no hits.

12. Between 0951 and 1749 six attacks were made on Force C, about 80 bombs being dropped. There were no hits.

13. Most ships experienced some very near misses but the only hit was on Force A, GLOUCESTER being hit by one bomb on the compass platform causing the following casualties:—

Officers, killed 7 (including Captain F. R. Garside, C.B.E.), 3 wounded.

Ratings, 11 killed and 6 wounded.

The damage caused to the bridge structure, and D.C.T.* necessitated gun control and steering from aft.

14. At 1510 flying boat L.5803 reported two battleships, 6 cruisers and 7 destroyers in position 33° 35' N, 19° 40' E., steering 340 degrees, and at 1610 that this force had altered to 070 degrees. This flying boat had to return to Malta at 1715 and no relief was available to continue shadowing. However, the enemy Fleet was resighted by another Sunderland from Malta early the following morning.

15. At the time, it was suspected that these two battleships were in fact 8" cruisers. The intensive bombing which had been experienced had already given the impression that the Italians had some special reason for wishing to keep us out of the Central Mediterranean.

This, in conjunction with these enemy reports, made it appear that the Italians might be covering the movement of some important convoy, probably to Benghazi, and it was decided temporarily to abandon the operations in hand and to move the fleet at best speed towards Taranto to get between the enemy and his base.

Force B maintained a mean line of advance of 310 degrees at 20 knots during the night.

16. There were no incidents during the night and at 0440 EAGLE flew off three aircraft to search to a depth of 60 miles between 180 and 300 degrees.

The Approach Period 9th July, 1940
(0600-1430).

17. At 0600 the fleet was concentrated in position 36° 55' N, 20° 30' E., and cruising disposition No. 1 was ordered. The 7th Cruiser Squadron and STUART were in the van 8 miles ahead of Commander-in-Chief in WARSPITE, who was screened by NUBIAN, MOHAWK, HERO, HEReward and DECOY. The Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron, in ROYAL SOVEREIGN, with MALAYA and EAGLE, screened by HYPERION, HOSTILE, HASTY, ILEX, DAINITY, DEFENDER, JUNO, JANUS, VAMPIRE and VOYAGER, was 8 miles to the rear of WARSPITE. The mean line of advance was 260 degrees, speed 15 knots.

18. At 0732 flying boat L.5807 reported the main enemy fleet consisting of 2 battleships, 4 cruisers and 10 destroyers in position 37° 14' N, 16° 51' E., steering 330 degrees at 15 knots, and at 0739 that 6 cruisers and 8 destroyers were stationed 080 degrees 20 miles from the main fleet, steering 360 degrees, and that at 0805 the main fleet had altered to 360 degrees.

At this time the main enemy fleet were about 145 miles 280 degrees from our own fleet.

At 0810, as a result of these reports, the mean line of advance of the fleet was altered to 305 degrees at 18 knots in order to work to the Northward of the enemy fleet and if possible get between him and his base.

At 0858 three aircraft from EAGLE were flown off to search a sector between 260 and 300 degrees to maximum depth.

Between 1026 and 1135 reports were received from flying boats 5807 and 9020 and EAGLE'S Duty B and Duty C, which, though they differed considerably, yet gave an indication of the movements of the enemy.

19. At 1105, EAGLE'S Duty D reported 2 battleships and one cruiser in position 38° 07' N, 16° 57' E., with 4 other cruisers near. At 1115 flying boat L.5807 reported the enemy battlefleet in position 38° 06' N, 17° 48' E., steering 360°.

It is probable that if in this latter report these ships were correctly identified, the real position should have been considerably further to the Westward. Reports up to this time indicated that the enemy forces consisted of at least 2 battleships, 12 cruisers and 20 destroyers, and that during the forenoon they were dispersed over a wide area. It seems probable that the cruisers and destroyers reported at 0739 took a wide sweep shortly afterwards to the North-eastward and that they were joined by other cruisers and destroyers, possibly those which had been with the main fleet.

Admiralty footnote —

* D.C.T.—Director Control Tower.