

The Operation.

7. As no adequate escort was available in Malta, it was necessary for part of the escort force from Alexandria to remain with the convoy until arrival at Malta. H.M.S. CARLISLE and five Hunts were selected for this duty.

8. The Fifth Destroyer Flotilla* left Alexandria at 1130 19th March to carry out A/S sweeps between Alexandria and Tobruk. In the course of these operations H.M.S. HEYTHROP (Lieutenant-Commander R. S. Stafford, R.N.) was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat.

9. The Flotilla arrived at Tobruk at 1830 20th March, fuelled, and sailed during the night to rendezvous with M.W.10 at dawn 21st March. H.M.S. BEAUFORT was delayed through fouling her starboard screw with a berthing wire, but rejoined the Flotilla by dawn 22nd March.

10. At 0700 20th March, convoy M.W.10 consisting of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, and S.S.s CLAN CAMPBELL, PAMPAS and TALABOT (Norwegian) left Alexandria, escorted by H.M.S. CARLISLE and six destroyers. The Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron† and four destroyers followed at 1800 the same day. All these forces were in company by 0600 22nd March, H.M. Ships PENELOPE and LEGION from Malta two hours later.

11. It was hoped that the enemy had so far failed to locate the convoy, but at 0131 22nd March, H.M.S. P.36‡ reported a force, including heavy ships, leaving Taranto. It was evident that the convoy had been reported, probably by U-boat on the afternoon of 21st March. A flight of five JU.52s had been sighted at 1705 the same day, and it seems certain that these also reported the force.

12. Air attacks began at 0930 22nd, and continued all day at intervals. At 1410 H.M.S. EURYALUS reported smoke to the northward, which by 1434 had resolved itself into enemy surface forces.

Attempted Interception by Enemy Surface Forces.

13. The ensuing action is graphically described in the report of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron and individual ships. The battle plan which the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, had evolved and practised for this eventuality was, in brief, to lay smoke between the enemy and the convoy, and to attack with torpedoes under cover of the smoke should the enemy attempt to break through in pursuit of the convoy.

14. The strong south-easterly wind was favourable to the execution of this plan, which was brilliantly executed, and the enemy was driven off. The weather had also caused the enemy to dispense with his destroyer screen in

order to maintain the speed necessary to intercept the convoy before dark. As had been anticipated, the enemy was unwilling to risk coming through the smoke, and further played into the hands of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, by attempting to work round to leeward of the smoke area.

15. Nevertheless a critical period ensued at about 1640, when the enemy which by now included a Littorio battleship, again made contact to the northward of the convoy. The Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron was at the time in search of two enemy ships unaccounted for and thought to be working round to windward of the smoke. It thus fell to H.M.S. SIKH (Captain St. J. A. Micklethwait, D.S.O., R.N.) with H.M. Ships HAVOCK, LIVELY and HERO, to hold off the enemy for half an hour until the return of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron. During this remarkable and determinedly fought action, H.M.S. HAVOCK was hit and stopped, but was later able to proceed to Malta.

16. The situation, relieved, but not saved, was finally turned to our advantage by a most determined torpedo attack carried out by the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla* supported by H.M.S. CLEOPATRA and H.M.S. EURYALUS. In the face of this attack, the enemy turned away. It is almost certain that the battleship sustained one torpedo hit, and hits from the cruisers' gunfire. H.M.S. LIVELY sustained damage from a 15-inch salvo which straddled and hit her, but she was able to return to Alexandria.

17. This ended the enemy's attempts to intercept, and he was last seen on a northerly course at 1900. It is noteworthy that no attempt was, apparently, made to intercept the convoy after dark. The actual damage to the enemy cannot be accurately assessed but in addition to the damage to the battleship it is known that one cruiser was seriously damaged.

18. Meanwhile the convoy, making the best of its way westward, had been subjected to heavy and continuous air attack, from which it emerged unscathed. The credit for this must go to the fine gunnery of H.M.S. CARLISLE and the Hunt class destroyers,† and to the admirable handling of the merchant ships in the convoy. Without in any way wishing to detract from the fine work of the masters, there is little doubt that the presence of naval liaison officers in the merchant ships contributed largely to the defeat of these attacks.

Return of Force B to Alexandria

19. Owing to heavy weather during the night 22nd-23rd March, Force B was faced with a long passage through "Bomb Alley"‡ in daylight. Shadowing started early, but no attacks developed until the afternoon, when H.M.S. LIVELY, who had dropped astern, was the target. Beaufighters of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group provided cover from 0800

* Admiralty footnote: Fifth Destroyer Flotilla—SOUTHWOLD (Commander C. T. Jellicoe, D.S.C.), BEAUFORT, DULVERTON, HURWORTH, AVON VALE, ERIDGE and HEYTHROP.

† Admiralty footnote: Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron—CLEOPATRA (flying the flag of Rear-Admiral P. L. Vian, D.S.O.), DIDO, EURYALUS and CARLISLE.

‡ Admiralty footnote: H.M.S. P.36—a submarine.

* Admiralty footnote: Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla—Captain A. L. Poland, D.S.O., D.S.C.

† Admiralty footnote: Destroyers of the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla.

‡ Admiralty footnote: "Bomb Alley"—the waters between Cyrenaica and Crete.