

BERWICK engaged the left hand ship of the same group whilst SOUTHAMPTON engaged the left hand ship of the Eastern group.

48. No concentration of fire was ordered owing to the speed with which the situation changed and to the large selection of targets available. Moreover, as Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, states in his report, it is doubtful what the results of an attempt at concentration would have been, as ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron had not been in company for a considerable time and assembled on the battleground from Rosyth, Reykjavik, Malta and the vicinity of the Azores.

49. MANCHESTER and SHEFFIELD continued firing at the same cruiser until 1236 and 1240 respectively but NEWCASTLE after 18 broadsides shifted to BERWICK's target, whilst SOUTHAMPTON, after 5 salvos at her original target engaged a destroyer for eleven minutes. This destroyer was seen to be hit. At least one other destroyer is believed to have been hit during this phase and FAULKNER at 1227 and NEWCASTLE at 1233½ report seeing a hit on a cruiser—in the case of NEWCASTLE the left hand ship of the Western group—by what appeared to be a large calibre shell. These hits were not observed in RENOWN.

50. The enemy's fire was accurate, particularly in the early stages, and MANCHESTER was exceptionally lucky not to have received damage. His rate of fire was however extremely slow and when he was fully engaged his spread became ragged and his accuracy deteriorated rapidly. BERWICK was hit at 1222 by an 8-inch shell, Y turret was put out of action and some casualties were incurred.

51. By 1234 the Western group were almost lost in smoke and Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, decided that the Eastern group should in future form his target. MANCHESTER accordingly shifted to the left hand ship of the Eastern group, 30 degrees on his Starboard bow at a range of 21,000 yards. This ship was identified as an 8-inch cruiser, probably of the Zara class.

52. Between 1233 and 1240 all ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron shifted target on to the Eastern group of the enemy. BERWICK was again hit at 1235, officers' cabins being damaged and the Port After Breaker Room wrecked, but without further casualties. At this time she had just started to engage a ship of the Eastern group which was thought to be an 8-inch cruiser of the Pola class. 47 salvos were fired at this target between 1238 and 1308.

53. In order to ensure that the Eastern group should not be able to work round ahead and attack the convoy, Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron altered the course of the Squadron from North to 090° bringing the Eastern group on to his Port bow. To counter what appeared to be an attempt of the Eastern group to cross the T of the 18th Cruiser Squadron, the course of the latter was altered to the Southward. The enemy however immediately resumed their North Easterly course and the 18th Cruiser Squadron led back to 070° at 1256 and to 030° at 1258.

54. During this period the rear ship of the enemy line was observed by MANCHESTER,

NEWCASTLE and SOUTHAMPTON to be heavily on fire aft. Between 1252 and 1259 this ship appeared to lose speed, but thereafter picked up again and drew away with her consorts. No report of this damage to the enemy was received by Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H" until after the action. Subsequent reports indicate that at least one enemy destroyer with the Eastern group was frequently straddled and possibly hit.

55. Whilst the action between the 18th Cruiser Squadron and the Eastern group was starting, the first T/B Striking Force was nearing its objective. On their way they had first sighted the Western group retiring in a rather scattered state to the N.E., and then the Eastern group steaming to the South East at high speed in line ahead. Shortly after this, 2 battleships were observed 20 to 30 miles further to the Eastward and steering a South Easterly course. As the Striking Force manoeuvred to get up sun from the enemy the latter were seen to turn in succession to S.W. and then a few minutes later they turned together into line ahead on a North Easterly course.

56. Shortly after this last turn had been completed, the Striking Force attacked the enemy battle fleet. They dropped their torpedoes inside the screen of 7 destroyers at a range between 700 and 800 yards. The leader of this Striking Force slightly overshot his target—the leading battleship which was of the Littorio class—and therefore swung away and attacked the second ship which was of the Cavour class. The remaining ten pilots attacked the leading ship. Immediately after the attack the leading ship hauled round to the Northward and it was thought that the Cavour class ship went ahead of her, but there was no apparent loss of speed. As a result of careful comparison of notes on return to ARK ROYAL it was considered that one hit had probably been obtained on the Littorio class battleship. As the Striking Force turned away from their "drop" they machine-gunned the bridges of the capital ships and destroyers. The Eastern group of cruisers had tried to attract the attention of the battle fleet to the impending attack by firing at the Striking Force—though well out of range—as they approached. These bursts were seen in RENOWN. Nevertheless the attack was not observed in the battleships until the leading aircraft had dropped to about 1,500 feet, when an intense but mainly ill directed fire was opened.

57. As the Striking Force completed their attack at about 1245 the Eastern group of cruisers coming up at high speed from the Westwards opened a heavy and accurate fire on them, but fortunately without success, and all returned safely to ARK ROYAL.

58. At the same time as the Striking Force made their attack on the enemy battle fleet RENOWN had lost sight of her final target of the Western group in the smoke and was looking for a further target. At this moment two large ships steering to the Westward emerged out of the smoke cloud left by the Western group. Turrets were trained on to the new targets but fortunately before fire was opened they were identified as three-funnelled French liners.