

battleships from the air. The situation did not, therefore, appear unduly alarming, but the air striking force was made ready and H.M.S. VALIANT ordered ahead to join V.A.L.F.

8. The sighting by Force "B" of a battleship at 1058 (see diagram No. 3) put a very different complexion on affairs. The enemy was known to be fast and H.M.S. GLOUCESTER had been reported only capable of 24 knots. Force "B" looked like being sandwiched between the VITTORIO VENETO and the 8 inch cruisers they had already engaged. It was with great relief that it was realised that Force "B" was able to make 30 knots and that the range was not closing.

V.A.L.F. handled the squadron with great skill, holding the range open and taking every advantage of his smoke screen as he worked round to south-east to close the battlefleet; but there were some unpleasant minutes with 15 inch salvos straddling the cruisers before the intervention of the Torpedo/Bomber striking force which gained a hit on the VITTORIO had caused her to turn away (see paragraph 15 and diagram No. 4).

9. It had always previously been my intention, if contact were made with the enemy's fleet, to hold back the torpedo air striking force until the battlefleets had closed within about 50 miles of each other, or until the enemy had definitely turned away. On this occasion owing to the exposed position of the cruisers it was necessary to launch the striking force unduly early. Few things could have been more timely than their intervention but it had the effect I had always feared, that the damaged enemy turned for home with a lead which could not be closed to gun range in daylight.

10. Meanwhile the battlefleet was pressing on fast to close the enemy. V.A.L.F.'s signal timed 1210 reporting he had lost touch actually reached me as Force "B" hove in sight at 1230. It might be argued that Force "B" should have followed and maintained touch when the enemy turned westward, but with the considerable chance which then existed of being cut off by superior force, and adequate air reconnaissance being available, it is considered that the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was correct in his decision to gain visual contact with the battlefleet and check respective positions before resuming the chase. His force had been outranged and outgunned by all enemy vessels with which he had so far made contact.

11. The attacks carried out by Royal Air Force Blenheim bombers from Greece were most welcome as giving the enemy a taste of his own medicine, this being the first time that our bombing aircraft had co-operated with the fleet at sea. In actual fact it is not thought that any hits were scored, certainly no appreciable damage was done, but the attacks must have worried the enemy and made him even more chary of approaching our coasts. The work of 230 Fighter/Bomber Squadron was, as ever, invaluable.

12. It cannot be said for certain how many, if any, further hits were obtained on VITTORIO by the successive Fleet Air Arm attacks during the afternoon (diagram No. 5) and evening. All that is certain is that the POLA was hit and stopped in a dusk attack, but, whatever the result, the gallantry and perseverance of the aircraft crews and the

smooth efficiency of deck and ground crews in H.M.S. FORMIDABLE and at Maleme are deserving of high praise.

An example of the spirit of these young officers is the case of Lieutenant F. M. A. Torrens Spence, Royal Navy, who, rather than be left out, flew with the only available aircraft and torpedo from Eleusis to Maleme and in spite of reconnaissance difficulties and bad communications arranged his own reconnaissance and finally took off with a second aircraft in company and took part in the dusk attack.

13. In spite of continual air sighting reports the situation towards the end of the afternoon had become rather confused. This was due to the presence of both ship borne and shore based reconnaissance aircraft, a considerable change of wind, the presence of several separate enemy squadrons and finally the ever present difficulty of distinguishing the silhouettes of enemy warships. It was difficult to decide the tactics for the night.

The situation was however rapidly cleared up by about 1800. V.A.L.F.'s cruisers were just gaining touch ahead and two aircraft, Duty V of H.M.S. FORMIDABLE and Duty Q from H.M.S. WARSPITE had made contact. Mention must here be made of the excellent work of H.M.S. WARSPITE'S catapult aircraft (Lieutenant-Commander A. S. Bolt, D.S.C., Royal Navy, Observer). This aircraft had, by a fortunate mistake, returned to the ship instead of going to Suda Bay as ordered. It was recovered, refuelled and catapulted as Duty Q at 1745. Within an hour and a half this experienced observer had presented me with an accurate picture of the situation which was of the utmost value at this time (diagram No. 6).

14. The last report, however, showed that a difficult problem was before us. The enemy had concentrated in a mass which presented a most formidable obstacle to attack by cruisers and destroyers. By morning he would be drawing under cover of dive bombing aircraft from Sicily. The question was whether to send the destroyers in now to attack this difficult target or wait until morning in the hope of engaging at dawn, but with the certainty of exposing the fleet to a heavy scale of air attack. Decision was taken to attack with destroyers and to follow up with the battlefleet.

15. Meanwhile the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was also faced with difficult decisions. As dusk fell he was drawing up on the enemy with his cruisers spread, to maintain contact. In the last of the afterglow it appeared that an enemy squadron was turning back towards him which obliged him to concentrate his force. This was undoubtedly a right decision, but from then onward every time he wished to spread his cruisers to resume the search he was foiled by some circumstances, not least of which was the decision of Captain (D) 14th Destroyer Flotilla to lead the destroyer flotillas round the northern flank of the enemy before attacking. This decision of Captain D.14 was most unfortunate, as it cramped the cruiser squadron and left the southern flank of the enemy open for escape (diagram No. 6). It is thought that the enemy did in fact "jink" to the south about this time and thus get away.

16. The battleship night action (diagram Nos. 7 and 8) presented no novel aspect, apart from the employment of Radar and the outstanding success of the indirect illumination provided by