

Three others tried to work round the starboard bow, and the convoy was turned away 60° to port. These aircraft were turned away by the gunfire of the screening destroyers, having dropped their torpedoes well outside the screen. One torpedo narrowly missed LIGHTNING, but they dropped at too great a range to be a danger to the convoy. One of these aircraft was shot down by fighters as it retired.

55. Of the 7 or 8 aircraft who turned away when first fired at, 3 returned from astern of the convoy at 1354, two of which retired again on being fired at. The third pressed on to attack ARK ROYAL, but was shot down by the combined fire of that ship and NELSON, while still 1,000 yards from ARK ROYAL and before he had dropped a torpedo.

56. At 1358 one aircraft, seen right ahead of NELSON, dropped a torpedo outside the screen. COSSACK was able to avoid this torpedo by the warning given by hydrophone effect on her A/S set.

57. At this time (1359) one C.R.42 was seen to be diving on the starboard wing destroyers, and performing aerobatics over them, evidently to make a diversion for the T/Bs. In so far as the destroyers expended a large amount of ammunition he succeeded, but after six minutes was either shot down or failed to pull out from a dive. None of the destroyers reported being machine-gunned.

58. *Result of Third Attack.*—Two more enemy T/Bs and one C.R.42 fighter were shot down, and no further damage inflicted on H.M. Ships or convoy.

It was most noticeable that this attack was not pressed home with the same determination as the first two attacks. Of the 10 or 11 S.79s which originally approached, only four fired torpedoes, and these were dropped at too great a distance to endanger the convoy. The only aircraft of this group to close within effective range was destroyed before its torpedo was dropped.

59. No further actual attacks developed before dark, though on several occasions R.D.F. indicated that enemy aircraft were closing the fleet. Generally by the time they were within 15 miles of the fleet, R.D.F. reported our fighters among them and they were driven off.

An attack threatened from the port bow at 1409 and the convoy made an emergency turn towards to 060° but as no attack developed course 096° was resumed a few minutes later.

#### *General Remarks on Day Attacks.*

60. So far as can be ascertained 30 T/B aircraft attempted to attack, but not more than 18 came within torpedo range.

#### *Aircraft Destroyed:*

6 T/Bs and 1 fighter certainly destroyed by gunfire.

4 T/Bs and 1 shadower certainly destroyed by fighters.

1 T/B probably destroyed (cause unknown).

*Total:* Certain 10 T/Bs, 1 fighter, 1 Cant 506 float plane.

We lost 3 Fulmars, two crews being saved.

One torpedo hit was inflicted on NELSON.

61. H.L.B.\* attacks had been expected, synchronised with T/B attacks, but none developed at the time and no bombs were dropped.

#### *Attempt to Intercept Enemy Battlefleet, p.m. 27th September (D.3).*

62. Reports of air reconnaissance from Malta carried out on D.2 (26th September), indicated that main units of the Italian fleet were located as follows:—

Taranto—1 Cavour in floating dock,  
2 Littorios and 1 Cavour,  
6 Cruisers,  
5 Destroyers.

Naples—2 Cavours,  
1 Cruiser,  
12 Destroyers or Torpedo-Boats.

Messina—Bolzano.

Palermo—Nil.

63. While the third T/B attack was still in progress at 1404, an emergency report was received from aircraft B (R.A.F. Malta) of 2 battleships and 8 destroyers in position 38° 20' N., 10° 40' E., steering 190° at 20 knots at 1340.

64. NELSON's position when this report was received was 37° 46' N., 09° 04' E.; the enemy unit was therefore 74 miles, 076° from NELSON assuming it had continued at the same course and speed. At this time NELSON, with gun armament unimpaired, was thought to be capable of 18 knots or possibly more.

65. My appreciation of the enemy's intentions was that either he did not realise I had more than one battleship with the convoy and that he would attempt to intercept the convoy near the western entrance to the Skerki Channel, or that he wished to draw away my escorting force to the north-eastwards, thus leaving the convoy open to attack by light surface forces in the Skerki Channel at dusk.

66. I therefore decided:—

(i) To proceed towards the enemy at best speed with NELSON, PRINCE OF WALES, RODNEY and 6 destroyers, leaving KENYA, EDINBURGH, SHEFFIELD and 10 destroyers with the convoy; ARK ROYAL escorted by EURYALUS, HERMIONE, PIORUN and LEGION to continue operating in the vicinity of the convoy.

(ii) To fly off two Swordfish from ARK ROYAL to take over shadowing duties and keep the enemy under observation until the striking force could attack.

(iii) To fuel, arm, range and fly off an air striking force as soon as possible.

67. These dispositions would place the battleships between the enemy and the convoy and enable the enemy to be brought to action should he persist in attempting to intercept the convoy.

68. At 1408 I ordered ARK ROYAL to prepare an air striking force. This involved a delay of at least an hour before the striking force could be flown off since as stated previously the Swordfish had been drained of fuel to reduce fire risks during air attacks. Two

*Admiralty footnote:*

\* H.L.B.—high level bombing