

85. Between 1915 and 1930 some enemy aircraft approached the convoy, but twice turned away when fire was opened. They were probably C.R.42 fighters.

86. Course was altered to 156° at 1915 for flying-on, course 285° being resumed at 1930.

Flying Operations from ARK ROYAL, p.m. 27th September (D.3).

87. At 1200, 16 Fulmars were in the air. It was necessary to land on 4 at 1230, but the number in the air was increased to 15 between 1315 and 1330 when T/B attacks were in progress.

88. At about 1250, one fighter section was vectored to the north of the fleet towards a suspected shadower. They made contact with 12 T/B aircraft (B.R.20 and Cant 1007B) and three more fighter sections were sent to assist.

In the ensuing fight at sea-level, one T/B was shot down, and three others were engaged. An escort of 6 C.R.42 fighters flying at 7,000 feet did not interfere.

One Fulmar section encountered a number of C.R.42s in the clouds, and ARK ROYAL reports that one Fulmar of this section is presumed to have fallen to the enemy fighters. Later information indicates that this Fulmar was probably damaged by the C.R.42s and whilst attempting to reach the protection of the fleet, was shot down by gunfire from the ships (*vide* paragraph 43).

89. Seven Fulmars were flown off at 1315. The wind was very light from the west and flying-off was carried out down wind, to avoid ARK ROYAL becoming detached. Six out of eight fighters already in the air landed on.

90. Fighters were sent to intercept a raid coming from the south-eastward, and one B.R.20 was shot down.

During the subsequent attack, one Fulmar section which was over the convoy, shot down a T/B which had crossed the convoy from south to north without dropping his torpedoes.

Another section attacked and damaged one other B.R.20, and about this time one Fulmar attacked 3 C.R.42s from astern, but with no visible result.

91. Between 1330 and 1430, the few remaining fighters in the air were moved from one danger point to another so far as extremely heavy atmospheric interference with R/T would allow. There were continued R.D.F. reports of enemy aircraft on widely different bearings during this period, but no interceptions were made although several potential attacks were turned away.

92. At 1410, ARK ROYAL was ordered to range the striking force and fly off two shadowers to shadow the enemy battlefleet which had been reported by R.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft 74 miles, 076° from NELSON.

The shadowers were ranged as soon as gunfire ceased and two Fulmars who were short of petrol had been landed on; they took off at 1448.

93. When the shadowers took departure, they were informed that the position of the enemy battlefleet was 078°, 60 miles, steering

190°. A report that the enemy had reversed his course to 360° at 1445 was received by ARK ROYAL at 1510, but owing to W/T congestion and bad W/T conditions considerable difficulty was experienced in passing this report to the aircraft.

94. Shadower A, who had not fully received the signal reporting the enemy's course as 360°, turned at 1539 to sight the fleet in order to take a new departure whilst waiting to receive the signal correctly. Subsequently he was attacked and badly damaged by seven C.R.42s and was obliged to return and land on.

Shadower B proceeded initially to the north-eastward, with the object of approaching the enemy on the most suitable bearing for A.S.V.* search (*i.e.*, with the enemy bearing between bow and beam). Having reached the anticipated position of the enemy at about 1600, and sighted nothing, he commenced a square search. The report of the enemy's alteration of course to 360° had not been received by this aircraft before ARK ROYAL received and passed on an amended position and new course of 060° of the enemy's battlefleet (R.A.F. aircraft B's signal timed 1503). On receiving this report at about 1630, course was set for the new position, and height increased to 9,000 feet to increase A.S.V. range to fifty miles. When thirty miles short of the enemy's estimated position, A.S.V. failed; a visual search to twelve miles beyond failed to locate the enemy. This aircraft eventually landed on after five hours five minutes in the air.

95. Twelve Swordfish aircraft with torpedoes, escorted by four Fulmars, were flown off at 1540. When they took departure, the enemy fleet were estimated to be 056°, 54 miles from the carrier, steering 360°.

A few minutes later an enemy report timed 1503 was received, giving a position 14 miles north of the previous ones, M.L.A.† 060°. This was passed to the striking force by W/T.

96. Having reached the enemy's estimated position, and seen nothing nor obtained any echoes on the ten A.S.V. sets in the formation, the striking force searched to the southward, and were able to obtain a fix by A.S.V. bearing and distance of Marittimo Island. They then proceeded for 40 miles to the north and carried out two complete circles at 5,000 feet, during which the A.S.V. sets should have discovered any large ships within 45 miles. The striking force then reported they were unable to locate the enemy, and were recalled.

97. This failure to locate the enemy is attributed to the fact that no report of the enemy battlefleet timed later than 1503 was received, nor was any report that shadowing had been broken off. Subsequent investigation by the Vice-Admiral, Malta has established that a signal timed 1515 was sent by the shadowing aircraft reporting that the enemy had altered course to the north. This signal was not received by Malta W/T Station, nor by any of H.M. Ships. This alteration resulted in the enemy passing at the extreme limit of the A.S.V. search.

Admiralty footnotes :

* A.S.V.—a radar equipment.

† M.L.A.—mean line of advance.