

onwards. They had, on the previous day, also provided cover until 0900; a notable achievement at a distance of over 300 miles from their base.

20. Force B arrived at Alexandria at 1230 24th March without further incident of note, and received a deservedly great welcome.

#### *Arrival of the Convoy at Malta*

21. At 1900 on 22nd March the convoy was dispersed by order of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, and made for Malta in an attempt to reach harbour by daylight. H.M. Ships PENELOPE, CARLISLE, HAVOCK, LEGION, KINGSTON and the whole of the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla were either escorting or covering.

22. All ships were subjected to heavy air attack shortly after daylight on 23rd March, though under fighter protection from Malta Spitfires and Hurricanes. Several German aircraft were destroyed or damaged by the fighters who also forced other enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs. S.S. TALABOT and S.S. PAMPAS had made good time, and passed the breakwater at 0915 and 0930 respectively. H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, having completed all but the last eight miles of this hazardous journey, was, at 0920, hit and stopped. H.M. Ships CARLISLE and PENELOPE both made unavailing attempts to take her in tow, and she eventually anchored off Zonkor Beacon.

23. S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, who had, all through, been the slowest ship, found herself some 50 miles south of Malta at daylight, escorted by H.M.S. ERIDGE. Attacks soon developed, and, at 1030, S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL was hit. Her engine room flooded and she sank shortly afterwards. H.M.S. ERIDGE picked up 112 of S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL's people; a difficult operation which, in the heavy weather prevailing, took 2½ hours. H.M.S. LEGION had been ordered to join H.M.S. ERIDGE and S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, but herself sustained damage from a near miss and had to be beached in Marsa Xlokk.

24. H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE was eventually got into Marsa Xlokk during the night 24th/25th after a fine piece of towing under most difficult circumstances by H.M. Tug ANCIENT, under the direction of Captain A. D. Nicholl (H.M.S. PENELOPE) and Mr. Murphy, Senior Pilot. Unfortunately during the operations to screen H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE while she was at anchor, H.M.S. SOUTHWOLD was mined. She sank after the most determined efforts to save her had been defeated by the weather. Finally, H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE was again bombed, and sank on her side.

25. Thus two out of the original four ships in the convoy actually arrived in the Grand Harbour.

#### *Dispersal of H.M. Ships from Malta.*

26. An extremely heavy scale of air attack was developed on ships in harbour, and it became imperative to get as many ships as possible away before they sustained further damage. Accordingly ships were sailed as follows:—

25th March—CARLISLE, HURWORTH, DULVERTON, ERIDGE and BEAUFORT for Alexandria.

29th March—AURORA and AVON VALE for Gibraltar.

5th April—HAVOCK for Gibraltar.

8th April—PENELOPE for Gibraltar.

27. The sailing of these ships from Malta represents a series of the most determined efforts on the part of both the ships themselves and the dockyard authorities in the face of continuous and heavy attack. H.M.S. PENELOPE actually expended her outfit of A.A. ammunition and had to re-ammunition before she could sail. With the exception of H.M.S. HAVOCK, all ships reached their destinations without further damage. H.M.S. HAVOCK grounded at high speed near Kelibia.\* She was destroyed by her own ship's company, who were interned by the French authorities.

#### *Unloading of Convoy.*

28. In the face of the heavy and relentless air attack which was maintained after the arrival of the convoy, unloading and berthing arrangements proved unsatisfactory. Both the ships which reached Grand Harbour were damaged and eventually sunk. As a result only 5,000 tons of the 25,900 tons of cargo which had been carried to Malta at such risk and price was safely unloaded.

29. It is evident that before another Malta convoy is run, air superiority in the island must be assured. In addition, ships will be berthed in shallow water or beached, and steps are being taken to ensure that there shall be no delay in starting to unload, and that the highest possible rate of unloading is maintained.

#### *Personnel.*

30. The behaviour of all personnel throughout the many phases of this hazardous and testing operation was worthy of the highest traditions of the service. In addition to the many outstanding acts already referred to, particular mention must be made of the gallant and devoted endeavours made by the officers and men of the damaged destroyers to save their ships. It is noteworthy that all these efforts were successful except for H.M.S. SOUTHWOLD, and in this case the weather completed the enemy's unfinished handiwork.

31. The loss of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, after a long and arduous career running stores to Malta, was particularly galling, occurring as it did, so near the end of the journey. The gallant fight put up by H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE before finally being sunk is typical of the stalwart determination of her Commanding Officer, Captain C. A. G. Hutchison, Royal Navy.

32. The good handling of the merchant ships and the excellent work done by the naval liaison officers has already been remarked on. There can be no doubt that the defeat of the heavy air attacks on the convoy on 22nd March was due in no small measure to the excellent seamanship and discipline displayed by the merchant ships.

33. During the action on 22nd March, the determination and team-work of all ships more than fulfilled the high standard that had been expected. This, combined with the resolute

\* Admiralty footnote: Kelibia—on N.E. coast of Tunis, south of Cape Bon.