

flying operations difficult since high speed had to be used on each occasion and the flying-off course could not be predetermined with any accuracy.

Torpedo Bombing and High Level Bombing Attack on Fleet, a.m. 23rd July (D.3).

30. The first group of enemy aircraft was detected at 0910 bearing 055°, 60 miles. This developed into a well synchronised torpedo bomber and high level bombing attack which commenced at 0942 and was completed in approximately four minutes. Six torpedo planes attacked from ahead and concentrated on the convoy while eight high level bombers crossed from south to north dropping their bombs amongst the convoy.

31. The torpedo bombers approaching low down from ahead were engaged with barrage fire by the destroyer screen. This fire appeared effective and on coming within range the enemy split into two groups of three, one group altering course to port, the other to starboard. One of the starboard group followed by one of the port group attacked FEARLESS who was stationed in the starboard bow position on the screen. The remaining two aircraft of the port group pressed home their attack on the port bow of the convoy which took avoiding action. There is no clear record of any torpedoes having been dropped by the remaining two aircraft of the starboard group, but MANCHESTER observed two tracks from port and one from starboard before a final torpedo approaching from port hit her.

Loss of FEARLESS.

32. The two aircraft which attacked FEARLESS released their torpedoes from a height of 70 feet at a range of about 1,500 and 800 yards respectively. Avoiding action was taken and the first torpedo passed about 90 yards ahead. The torpedo from the second aircraft ran shallow. Course was shaped to comb the track but when abreast the stem on the port side, at a distance of about 30 feet, the torpedo broke surface, altered course to port, and hit the ship abreast the 3-inch gun.

33. Both engines were put out of action, the rudder was jammed at hard-a-port, all electric power failed due to the switchboard being demolished and an extensive fuel fire was started aft. One officer and 24 ratings were killed outright or died later. FEARLESS reported she was entirely disabled. As she was badly on fire and I did not consider the detachment of a second destroyer to attempt towing was justified under the circumstances, I ordered FORESTER to take off survivors and then sink the ship. This was effected by one torpedo at 1055.

Damage to, and Detachment of, MANCHESTER.

34. Meanwhile, MANCHESTER, who was to starboard of the convoy, sighted torpedoes approaching and turned to port to comb the tracks. Two torpedoes were seen to pass down the port side and another one passed astern from starboard. In order to avoid collision with PORT CHALMERS a turn to starboard was then commenced. At this time another aircraft released a torpedo from a position between the first and second M.T. ships of the port column.

Wheel was immediately reversed in an endeavour to avoid this torpedo, but it struck MANCHESTER aft on the port side.

35. The immediate effects of the torpedo hit were to cause a list of 12° to port with large reduction of speed and steering gear out of action. Steering was changed over to the after position and a reasonable degree of control was obtained. Subsequently the steering motors failed and hand steering had to be used. The explosion had travelled upwards through the decks to the upper deck, driving large quantities of oil fuel upwards into all the compartments affected. Water and oil fuel flooded the after engine room, after 4-inch magazine, main W/T office, 'X' magazine and various other compartments between 179 and 209 bulkheads. Many ratings were overcome by fumes from the oil fuel but most of these recovered after treatment and were able to resume their duties. Only the starboard outer shaft remained serviceable. A speed of 8 knots was at first obtained which very gradually increased to 12 knots. Emergency leads were run to the steering motors and mechanical steering was again in use by 1315.

36. MANCHESTER's initial signal informed me that she could steam 8 knots so I ordered her to return to Gibraltar escorted by AVON VALE. Her casualties were 3 naval officers, 5 military officers, 20 naval ratings and 7 other ranks killed, 3 naval ratings missing, and 1 military officer, 1 naval rating and 4 other ranks wounded.

37. MANCHESTER had approximately 750 military personnel on board but as the sea was calm I decided to limit her escort to one destroyer in the hope that a single cruiser and destroyer might either escape detection by enemy aircraft or else avoid attack in view of the better targets offered by the convoy and its escort.

High Level Bombing Attacks on Fleet, a.m. 23rd July (D.3).

38. The high level bombing attack carried out simultaneously with the T/B* attack was ineffective. The approach was made clear of the sun, and the aircraft were heavily engaged by all ships. Fire appeared to be accurate although no aircraft were seen to be hit. Bombs fell harmlessly amongst the convoy.

39. At 1011 a second wave of 5 high level bombers (probably B.R.20s) approached from north to south and dropped two groups of bombs, the first of which fell clear of the screen to port and the second close to SIKH and FOXHOUND on the port bow of the screen. This was rather a half-hearted attack and the aircraft which were at a height of over 17,000 feet were not engaged by the fleet until after the first bombs had fallen. The presence of 5 Fulmars 1,000 feet below and astern, endeavouring to overtake the bombers, may have induced them to get rid of their bomb loads as soon as possible.

40. In the first high level attack, Fulmars shot down two S.79s and two more probably failed to return. Three T/B aircraft (S.79s) were shot down by gunfire, AVON VALE

Admiralty footnote.

* T/B—torpedo bomber