

The weather was strong south-easterly to east-southeasterly gale, with a rising sea and swell. Fuel in the "K" class and Hunt class destroyers was insufficient to allow an extra day to be spent in the central basin west of Benghazi, so it was necessary to get as far east as possible through bomb alley by daylight.

The Return Passage

67. At 2004, PENELOPE and LEGION were ordered to join the convoy.

AVON VALE had been ordered to proceed to Malta with the convoy, as, in the prevailing weather, it was considered she would hold the rest of Force B back. In accordance with the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station's message timed 1302 of 22nd March, 1942, CARLISLE was also ordered to remain with the convoy.

68. At 2130, owing to the strong easterly gale speed had to be reduced to 18 knots, and at 0325 on 23rd March, to 15 knots.

Even so, only one destroyer (SIKH) had not lagged by daylight, ZULU had to reduce to 10 knots for half an hour at 0530. At 0630 the cruisers turned to 1180 degs. to collect destroyers, and at 0700 proceeded at 14 knots.

At 0800 force was in position 34 degs. 23 mins. N., 20 degs. 14 mins. E., course 080 degs.; course was altered at 0900 to 100 degs.

69. During 23rd March speed was gradually increased as the weather slowly improved. By 1300, 20 knots was achieved, but at 1535 speed had to be reduced for an hour to enable LIVELY to repair weather and action damage.

Air Attack and Fighter Protection

70. Two Beaufighters arrived at 0756 and from this time on with a few intervals fighters were present. Fighter Direction was not good because of bad communications.

Shadowing by the enemy aircraft commenced in the forenoon but no attack developed until 1610 when 8 JU.87s attacked. Six of these aircraft attacked LIVELY who was then astern of the cruisers. No damage was sustained.

From this time until dusk, sporadic attacks were made by JU.88s and torpedo-bombers.

71. At 2200 the weather having moderated considerably, speed was increased to 22 knots. An evasive course well north of the normal track was used during the night.

At 2248 LIVELY reported that she was unable to maintain more than 17 knots and she was detached to Tobruk where it was considered she could repair damage before proceeding to Alexandria.

72. At daylight on 24th March speed was increased to 26 knots.

Air—on 24th March

73. At 0730 on 24th March an A.S.V.* Sunderland arrived, and at 0735 two more aircraft, thought at first to be Beaufighters, made an almost unopposed torpedo attack. No damage resulted and no further attacks developed. Fighter escort was provided from 0800.

74. The Force arrived at Alexandria at 1230 where they were honoured to receive the great demonstration which then ensued.

* Admiralty footnote: A.S.V.—radar equipment.

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