

picking up six Italians (2 officers, 1 warrant officer and 3 ratings) from one of these in a rubber dinghy. Three Fulmars were lost, all of which force-landed in the sea, but all crews were picked up, uninjured, by destroyers.

41. These attacks, which took place 105 miles S.S.W. of Cagliari, appeared to be unsupported by enemy fighters, none of which was seen throughout the day.

Torpedo Bomber Attack on MANCHESTER and AVON VALE, p.m. 23rd July (D.3).

42. At 1805 MANCHESTER and AVON VALE were attacked by three torpedo bombers. These approached from astern and proceeded well inside territorial waters to reach a position up sun. AVON VALE, anticipating an attack from out of the sun, moved in that direction to a distance of about two miles from MANCHESTER. The aircraft then approached low down on the starboard bow and were subjected to a heavy flanking fire from AVON VALE and to a barrage from 'A' and 'B' turrets backed up by the starboard 4-inch battery in MANCHESTER. The enemy appeared so deterred by the volume of fire that they did not press home the attack. One torpedo was dropped at AVON VALE and the other two were dropped at such long range that MANCHESTER had no difficulty in taking avoiding action. One torpedo was seen to surface at the end of its run and detonated shortly afterwards.

Abortive Torpedo Bomber Attack on Fleet, p.m. 23rd July (D.3).

43. At 1643 a group of aircraft was detected bearing 338°, 43 miles, closing the convoy. Fifteen minutes later five S.79s led by a Cant were sighted low down on the port quarter. Fighters intercepted this group which consisted of torpedo planes and shot down two S.79s and damaged the Cant. The remainder retired without attacking.

Detachment of Force X.

44. By 1713 the convoy and escort had reached the entrance to the Skerki Channel and HERMIONE was ordered to take MANCHESTER's place in Force X. Group 4 parted company and withdrew westward with the intention of covering MANCHESTER and affording such protection to M.G.1 on D.4 as was practicable. A section of fighters remained with the convoy until 1830, when they were relieved by Beaufighters from Malta. The Fulmars returned to ARK ROYAL at 1922. At 1833 Force H encountered the wreckage of one of the S. 79s shot down by the fighters at 1658. FORESIGHT picked up four survivors including one officer from a rubber dinghy. The officer thought they had been shot down by a Hurricane.

Passage of Force X through the Narrows on the Night of 23rd/24th July (D.3/D.4).

45. While Force H returned to the west, Force X and the convoy continued through the Skerki Channel towards Malta, one destroyer with T.S.D.S.* streamed and locked in the low speed setting being stationed ahead of each column of the convoy. They were

attacked at 1900 by four T/Bs which approached from the starboard beam and were heavily engaged. One aircraft was seen by FARNDALE to crash. Avoiding action was taken but two torpedoes passed close to EDINBURGH and one close to HERMIONE. The Beaufighters failed to intercept this raid.

High Level Bombing Attack on Force X, 1945 on 23rd July (D.3).

46. At 1945 a high level bombing attack developed from 12,000 feet. Two Beaufighters at 8,000 failed to intercept. They had been instructed by R/T* from EDINBURGH to circle at 10,000 feet, 5 miles, 070° from the convoy, in a position to intercept the incoming aircraft. They failed to do this and approached from the same direction as the enemy without identifying themselves and were engaged by the gunfire of the fleet. They then withdrew as the enemy approached, 3,000 feet above them. About 20 heavy bombs fell and one either hit or very near missed FIREDRAKE who was towing T.S.D.S. ahead of the port column. At the same time one torpedo passed astern of EDINBURGH but as no T/B aircraft were seen this torpedo may have come from a U-Boat.

Damage to, and Withdrawal of, FIREDRAKE.

47. FIREDRAKE was holed in Nos. 1 and 2 boiler rooms and temporarily immobilised, but suffered no serious casualties. ERIDGE having been ordered by the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron to stand by and escort her to Gibraltar, FIREDRAKE reported that she hoped to have steam in one boiler shortly. In the meantime ERIDGE took her in tow, this being successfully accomplished by 2038. FIREDRAKE's steering gear being out of action, considerable difficulty was experienced in turning to the course for the Galita Channel, and equal difficulty in maintaining that course. Fortunately the steering gear was repaired by midnight, and no further difficulties arose; speed being slowly worked up to 10 knots. The hopes that had been raised regarding the possibility of steaming the one remaining boiler proved false, for this boiler primed so badly that FIREDRAKE reported she would be unable to steam for some considerable time.

48. The two ships were shadowed by aircraft almost continuously throughout the next day. Air attack was expected at any moment, but for some reason or another, no attack developed. Possibly the shadowers failed to observe the tow, or it may be that the aircraft preferred to attack the merchant ships of Convoy M.G.1.

49. At dark on the 24th, the third degree of readiness was assumed, both ships having then been at action stations for 37 hours. ERIDGE reports that there seemed to be a feeling of genuine regret when darkness fell without any offensive action having been taken against them.

50. At 0930/25 FIREDRAKE slipped, after being in tow for 37 hours. ERIDGE then towed her alongside for 2 hours, during which 10½ tons of feed water and 2 tons of drinking water were transferred. FIREDRAKE then cast off and proceeded at 9 knots under her own power.

Admiralty footnote.

* T S D S—two speed destroyer minesweep

Admiralty footnote

* R/T—radio telephony.