

Intervention by Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla.

13. By 1730, in search of two enemy ships not accounted for and which I thought might be working round in the rear, I got too far to the eastward: the situation was retrieved by Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla, in H.M.S. SIKH, who, with HAVOCK (detached after being hit shortly afterwards), LIVELY and HERO, held off the enemy without other support for nearly half an hour: a remarkable feat. It transpired subsequently that the two enemy ships the search for which had led me astray had been hit hard earlier and had withdrawn from the action.

14. At 1800, on my return, the situation appeared critical: CLEOPATRA fired torpedoes at the enemy line, which turned them away, and I ordered a general attack by torpedoes to be made on the enemy under cover of smoke.

Torpedo Attack.

15. Such an attack presented considerable difficulties owing to great pall of smoke, the falling visibility and the rising wind (force 6) and sea (44)* at this time.

Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla went in to the attack on a broad line of bearing, in the traditional manner at 1840: the attack was pushed home to a range of about 3 miles against very heavy fire and certainly obtained one hit on LITTORIO.

KINGSTON was stopped by a hit and set on fire but was later able to proceed and make Malta.

Gunfire from CLEOPATRA and EURYALUS following the destroyers in, started a fire in the after part of LITTORIO which was burning 20 minutes later, and obtained hits forward also.

16. The enemy turned from south to north-west in the face of Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla's attack: Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla, who had reached a good firing position was baulked by the turn and by smoke but in his division LIVELY, who had suffered flooded compartments from a 15-inch straddle, had a funnel on fire and her tubes jammed, so far recovered to fire 8 torpedoes with the right settings before retiring.

Enemy breaks off action and retires.

17. LITTORIO and cruisers were last sighted at 1900 steering north-northwest, the former still with a fire aft; the convoy was dispersed for Malta at this time, and at 1940 Force B shaped course for Alexandria.

Damage suffered by the enemy.

18. In addition to the damage suffered by LITTORIO, it is apparent from intelligence reports that one cruiser was seriously damaged and a second damaged.

Air Attack

19. During the 28 raids on the convoy made concurrently with the surface action, 4 aircraft were shot down and many damaged by

CARLISLE and the Hunts whilst no ship in the convoy or escort suffered damage—a remarkable result.

Concurrent attacks on Cruisers and Fleet Destroyers were less intense; EURYALUS shot down one torpedo-bomber.

Beaufort Striking Force

20. At 1800, I received your message informing me of the despatch of our air striking force: homing signals were made by EURYALUS, but aircraft did not arrive as the enemy fleet was beyond their range.

Force B—Passage Eastward

21. The return passage to Alexandria was made against an easterly gale: the scale of air attack developed was only a fraction of what was expected; LIVELY had to act the part when attacked by 6 Stukas.

The immunity from air on Day 2 and relative immunity on Day 4 must be due largely to the work of the fighters of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, operating in a storm at great distance from their bases.

PART II—NARRATIVE

Convoy M.W.10, consisting of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE (Captain C. A. G. Hutchison, R.N.), S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, S.S. PAMPAS and S.S. TALABOT escorted by the Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships SIKH (Captain St. J. A. Micklethwait, D.S.O., R.N.), ZULU, LIVELY, HERO, HAVOCK and HASTY), and H.M.S. CARLISLE (Captain D. M. L. Neame, D.S.O., R.N.), sailed from Alexandria at 0800 on 20th March, 1942.

2. In view of the uncertainty of weather and of fuel considerations, Force B consisting of H.M. Ships CLEOPATRA (Captain G. Grantham, D.S.O., R.N.) (Flag of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron), DIDO (Captain H. W. U. McCall, R.N.), EURYALUS (Captain E. W. Bush, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.), and the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships JERVIS (Captain A. L. Poland, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.), KIPLING, KELVIN and KINGSTON) sailed at 1800 on 20th March, 1942, by a northerly route to rendezvous with M.W.10 at 0800 21st March, 1942.

3. Rendezvous was made with M.W.10 at 0940 on 21st March in position 33 degs. 20 mins. N., 24 degs. 40 mins. E. The Fifth Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships SOUTHWOLD (Commander C. T. Jellicoe, D.S.C., R.N.), DULVERTON, ERIDGE, AVON VALE and HURWORTH) had also joined the convoy by this time from Tobruk. Cruising Disposition No. 4 was formed slightly amended to meet existing conditions, and course 294 degs. shaped with the whole force, at 13 knots, carrying out zig-zag No. 12.

4. Owing to lack of facilities at Tobruk and late arrival there owing to the torpedoing of HEYTHROP the day before, DULVERTON, ERIDGE and HURWORTH had left Tobruk with 60 per cent. fuel. BEAUFORT was delayed at Tobruk by a fouled propeller.

5. CLAN CAMPBELL had difficulty in maintaining the speed of the convoy. At 1245 zig-zag No. 10 was started, CLAN CAMPBELL maintaining a steady course so as to keep up with the convoy.

* Admiralty footnote: Wind (force 6)—a reference to the Beaufort scale denoting "Strong Breeze—(21-26 knots)."

Sea (44)—a reference to the combined sea and swell scale, denoting "Rough sea and moderate swell."