

20. Acting on reconnaissance reports received up to 1115, EAGLE's striking force was flown off at 1145 to attack the enemy fleet, which at this time was believed to be in position 295 degrees 90 miles from WARSPITE, steaming North.

This position seems to have been approximately correct but, owing to an insufficiency of aircraft in EAGLE, touch was lost at 1135 and, in the event, the enemy battlefleet altered course to the Southward about this time and the striking force failed to find them.

21. WARSPITE's noon position was 37° 30' N, 18° 40' E

22. At 1215 flying boat 5803 reported 6 cruisers and 10 destroyers in position 37° 56' N, 17° 48' E., steering 220 degrees, at 25 knots, and at 1220 three 8" cruisers in position 37° 55' N, 17° 55' E., steering 225 degrees.

23. At 1252 the striking force, having missed the battlefleet, sighted a large number of enemy ships steering to the Southward and, assuming that the battlefleet last reported steering North had altered to the Southward, worked round to the Westward of this force and attacked the rear ship of the enemy line at 1330. At the time this was presumed to be a battleship, but from the high speed and rapid turning which was observed it was almost certainly a cruiser. The two battleships were by this time considerably further to the Southward. No hits were observed. Heavy A.A. fire was encountered from the cruisers and attendant destroyers but the aircraft received only superficial damage. The striking force landed on at 1434.

24. A search by EAGLE's aircraft Duty C reported no enemy ships between bearings 334 and 291 degrees to a depth of 60 miles from 38° N, 18° E., at 1330. It was now clear that at about 1200 the main enemy battlefleet had turned Southward and that the cruiser forces which had been sweeping to the North-eastward had turned South-west to effect a concentration in approximately 37° 45' N, 17° 20' E. (See Diagram No. 1.)

25. At 1340, flying boat 9020 reported 3 battleships and a large number of cruisers and destroyers in position 37° 58' N, 17° 55' E., steering 220 degrees, and at 1415 that the enemy's course and speed was 020 degrees, 18 knots. It was now clear that after concentrating the enemy had turned Northward again and that our Fleet was rapidly closing the enemy.

At this time the impression was growing that the enemy intended to stand and fight, albeit on his own ground and with more than one road of escape left open to him.

Course was maintained to the North-westward to cut him off from Taranto until it became clear at 1400 that this object had been achieved, when course was altered to 270 degrees to increase the rate of closing.

26. Speed of approach was limited by the maximum speed of ROYAL SOVEREIGN, with WARSPITE acting as a battle cruiser to support the 7th Cruiser Squadron, who, being so few and lacking in 8" ships, were very weak compared with the enemy's cruiser force.

At 1430 the Commander-in-Chief in WARSPITE was in position 38° 02' N, 18° 25' E., steering 270 degrees at 22 knots. The 7th Cruiser Squadron were 8 miles ahead, with ROYAL SOVEREIGN, MALAYA and

EAGLE 10 miles astern. EAGLE's striking force landed on at 1434. At 1435, EAGLE's Duty C reported the enemy course and speed as 360 degrees 15 knots and at 1439 that the enemy centre was 260 degrees 30 miles from WARSPITE. This ended the approach period and surface contact was made soon afterwards.

Weather during the Approach.

27. During the forenoon the wind veered from North-west to North by West, force 5, but later back to North-west again. The sea was slight, visibility 15 to 20 miles. The sky was clear up to 0800 but was 2/10ths clouded at noon.

The Fleet Action.

28. At 1452 NEPTUNE reported two enemy vessels in sight bearing 238 degrees.

At 1455 ORION sighted 3 destroyers bearing 234 degrees, 31,000 yards.

At 1500 ORION sighted three destroyers and 4 cruisers between 240 and 270 degrees.

29. At 1500 (See Diagram No. 2) the 7th Cruiser Squadron, except the damaged GLOUCESTER who had been ordered to join EAGLE, was 10 miles 260 degrees from WARSPITE and were formed on a line of bearing 320 degrees and steering 270 degrees at 18 knots. NUBIAN and 4 destroyers were screening WARSPITE.

EAGLE, screened by VOYAGER and VAMPIRE, was proceeding to take up a position 10 miles to Eastward of WARSPITE and was shortly joined by GLOUCESTER who, by reason of her bomb hit the previous day, was unfit to engage in serious action.

30. The cruisers were then rapidly closing the enemy forces which were distant 12 to 18 miles between bearings of 235 and 270 degrees. At 1508 NEPTUNE sighted 2 enemy battleships bearing 250 degrees 15 miles, and the course of the 7th Cruiser Squadron was altered to 000 degrees and then to 045 degrees at 1510 to avoid getting too heavily engaged until WARSPITE was in a position to give support. At 1514 the 7th Cruiser Squadron's line of bearing was altered to 350 degrees and the enemy cruisers marked "C" in the diagram opened fire at a range of 23,600 yards. At 1516 the 7th Cruiser Squadron altered course to 025 degrees and at 1520 to 030 degrees to open "A" arcs.*

31. At 1512 the 7th Cruiser Squadron was ordered by Vice-Admiral (D) to engage an equal number of enemy ships. NEPTUNE and LIVERPOOL opened fire at a range of 22,100 yards and SYDNEY opened fire at the fourth cruiser from the right, thought to be of the ZARA class. ORION opened fire first on a destroyer (Z in Diagram No. 2) then on the right hand cruiser bearing 249 degrees, range 23,700 yards.

32. In the meantime the enemy advanced forces were sighted from WARSPITE who opened fire on an 8" cruiser bearing 265 degrees at a range of 26,400 yards. This was a cruiser in "C" Squadron (Diagram No. 2) which was then engaging and being engaged

Admiralty footnote —

* "A" arcs—the arcs on which all guns of a ship's main armament will bear, thus allowing them to fire simultaneously at the enemy.