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ACTION BETWEEN BRITISH AND ITALIAN FORCES OFF CAPE SPARTIVENTO ON 27th NOVEMBER, 1940:

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 18th December, 1940, by Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O., Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H".

H.M.S. RENOWN.

18th December, 1940.

I be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached narrative of an engagement which took place on 27th November, 1940, during the execution of Operation "Collar", between forces under my command and an Italian Naval force in the area to the South of Sardinia.

Object of Operation "Collar".

2. The object of this operation was to secure the safe and timely passage through the Mediterranean of the following:—

1,400 Royal Air Force and Military personnel.

Two SOUTHAMPTON Class Cruisers,

Three M.T. ships,

Four Corvettes.

Composition of British Force.

3. The British force was composed as follows:—

Force "B". Battleship:—

RENOWN (Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H").

Aircraft Carrier:—

ARK ROYAL.

Force "B"—continued.

Cruisers:—

SHEFFIELD.
DESPATCH.

Destroyers:—

FAULKNOR.
FIREDRAKE.
FORESTER.
FURY.
DUNCAN.
WISHART.
ENCOUNTER.
KELVIN.
JAGUAR

Force "F". Cruisers:—

MANCHESTER (C.S.18)*
SOUTHAMPTON.

(Carrying approximately
700 R.A.F. and
Military personnel
each.)

Destroyer:—

HOTSPUR.

(With no asdics and
speed limited.)

Corvettes:—

PEONY.
SALVIA.
GLOXINIA.
HYACINTH.

(Corvettes fitted with
L.L. sweeps† and
asdics. Maximum
speed—16 knots.)

Admiralty footnotes:—

* C.S. 18—Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron.

† L.L. sweep—anti-magnetic mine sweep.

Force "F".—continued.

S.S. CLAN FORBES.
S.S. CLAN FRAZER.
S.S. NEW ZEALAND
STAR.
(M.T. ships carrying
mechanical transport,
etc., maximum speed
16 knots.)

Force "D". Battleship:—
RAMILLIES.

Cruisers:—
NEWCASTLE.
COVENTRY.
BERWICK.

Destroyers:—
DEFENDER.
GREYHOUND.
GRIFFIN.
HEREWARD.

Method of Execution.

4. Forces "B" and "F" to escort and cover the passage of the M.T. ships and corvettes through the Western Mediterranean, being met to the South of Sardinia at approximately noon on 27th November by Force "D" proceeding from the Eastern Mediterranean. Forces "B", "F" and "D" then to proceed in company to a position West of Skerki Bank, which would be reached at dusk. After dark, Force "F", the corvettes and COVENTRY with destroyers of Force "D" to part company and proceed through the Narrows to the Eastern Mediterranean, Force "B", with RAMILLIES, NEWCASTLE and BERWICK, proceeding to Gibraltar.

Condition of Ships taking part.

5. RENOWN, ARK ROYAL and SHEFFIELD were in good fighting condition with the exception that ARK ROYAL had an unduly high percentage of inexperienced pilots and observers, and the efficiency of her torpedo striking force was low, owing to lack of opportunity for exercise.

6. MANCHESTER and SOUTHAMPTON would each be carrying some 700 Royal Air Force and Military personnel.

7. BERWICK (so I had been informed by her Commanding Officer) was not capable of more than 27 knots owing to the removal of some rows of turbine blades and to the higher water temperature in the Mediterranean affecting her vacuum.

8. NEWCASTLE's boilers had developed defects, and judging from signals received, could not be considered entirely reliable.

9. The destroyers of the 8th and 13th Flotillas had been running very hard, but there was no reason to anticipate any definite defects developing during the operation. HOTSPUR was without asdics, had been temporarily repaired and her speed was limited, though in fine weather it was hoped she could reach 20 knots or possibly more.

10. The condition of RAMILLIES, COVENTRY and the Mediterranean Fleet destroyers was satisfactory so far as was known.

11. The corvettes were incapable of making a speed of advance of 14 knots except in fair weather.

12. With the exception of RENOWN, SHEFFIELD, ARK ROYAL and the destroyers of the 8th and 13th Flotillas, the ships taking part in this operation had not worked together as a squadron.

13. Doubts had been expressed by Vice Admiral L. E. Holland, C.B. (Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron) concerning the advisability of MANCHESTER and SOUTHAMPTON being included in Force "F", for the following reasons:—

(i) Extreme importance was attached to the safe and timely arrival of the R.A.F. personnel at Alexandria. The best way to ensure this was for the cruisers to proceed independently and rely upon their high speed and mobility for the achievement of their object;

(ii) With so many additional on board, the ships were not in a fit condition to fight. If obliged to engage, casualties amongst the R.A.F. personnel might be heavy and the object of this part of the operation compromised.

14. I agreed that these ships would not be in a satisfactory state to fight an action and that the achievement of part of our object, namely, the safe arrival of the personnel, would be assured with greater certainty if the cruisers proceeded independently.

On the other hand, achievement of our complete object, which included the safe passage of the M.T. ships and corvettes, was more likely to be accomplished if we made a show of force, since this might deter the Italians from attempting to interfere with the operation.

15. At Admiral Holland's request I asked the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, whether the safe passage of personnel or the M.T. ships should receive priority, if circumstances arose which made a decision necessary after Force "F" had parted company for the passage of the Narrows. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, replied "Personnel," but subsequent instructions were received from the Admiralty that this must be subject to the overriding consideration that if Italian forces were in sight action taken by the cruisers must be the same as if personnel were not embarked.

ESTIMATE OF ENEMY FORCES LIKELY TO
BE ENCOUNTERED AND NEED FOR
REINFORCEMENT.

16. Prior to the commencement of Operation "Collar" I informed the Admiralty that I considered the inclusion of ROYAL SOVEREIGN (undergoing repairs in Gibraltar) in my force was desirable in view of a possible Italian concentration in the Western Mediterranean which I estimated could reach a total of

Three battleships,
Five to seven 8" cruisers,
Several 6" cruisers and other light forces.

The Admiralty reply indicated that some doubt was entertained concerning the necessity for this reinforcement, but approval was eventually given for the inclusion of ROYAL

SOVEREIGN in Force "B" if I considered this essential.

The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, was frankly sceptical and considered I was unduly pessimistic. In his opinion, the probability of an Italian concentration in the Western Mediterranean was more remote now than at any time since Operation "Hats" (30th August—5th September).

Since defects in ROYAL SOVEREIGN could not be completed in time she was unable to take part in the operation.

EXECUTION OF OPERATION "COLLAR."

17. The M.T. ships included in Force "F" passed through the Straits of Gibraltar during the night of 24th/25th November and were joined by the corvettes to the East of Gibraltar a.m. 25th November. The remainder of Forces "B" and "F" sailed at 0800 on 25th November.

The operation proceeded according to plan and without incident until the morning of 27th November. The corvettes had been detached on the evening of 26th November, as they were unable to keep up with the convoy. A detailed account of the situation at 0800 on 27th November and subsequent events on that day are given in the attached narrative.

POINTS OF INTEREST.

Enemy Intelligence prior to 27th November.

18. So far as I am aware, reliance was placed entirely on shore based air reconnaissance to locate the position of enemy units in the Western Mediterranean prior to 27th November. This reconnaissance proved quite inadequate for the purpose and there was insufficient information concerning the location of Italian naval forces prior to the 27th November and no report of enemy ships being at sea in the Western Mediterranean until they were sighted by carrier reconnaissance a.m. 27th November.

Enemy Intelligence on 27th November.

19. With the exception of a Sunderland flying boat operating from Malta to cover the area in which our forces would be operating on 27th November, air reconnaissance was limited to that furnished by ARK ROYAL's aircraft.

ARK ROYAL has a high proportion of young and inexperienced pilots and observers. Some of these had to be employed on the initial dawn reconnaissance, since it was necessary to hold the first air striking force in readiness to attack any enemy force attempting to interfere with the concentration of Forces "B" and "F" with Force "D".

Not only had many of these young observers little or no experience of reporting enemy formations, but the need for maintaining wireless silence, except in the immediate neighbourhood of Gibraltar provides little opportunity to exercise communications in the air.

These factors, coupled with variable visibility and the similarity of Italian warships' silhouettes, made their tasks difficult.

Taking the above into consideration, I consider the crews of the reconnaissance aircraft acquitted themselves with credit.

Results obtained by Air Striking Force Torpedo Attacks.

20. The results obtained by torpedo bomber attacks on high speed targets during the present

war have fallen far short of the estimates based on peacetime practices adjusted for "opposition."

So far as ARK ROYAL is concerned, this is attributed entirely to lack of initial training and subsequent runner practices.* Skilful, unobserved approaches were made in each case and the attacks pressed home with courage and resolution, but the results obtained were disappointing.

Delay in reporting Result of first Striking Force Attack.

21. It is not always appreciated that sustained observation on enemy ships by the crews of aircraft in the striking force is impracticable. Observations of "own drop" even in peacetime practices, is very difficult, and under action conditions, quite fortuitous. Succeeding attackers may, or may not, be able to observe hits from preceding attacks, but in general the only definite evidence is the subsequent behaviour of the target. On this occasion it was not until the return of the striking force to ARK ROYAL had afforded an opportunity for the interrogation of all aircraft crews, that the probability of one hit on the Littorio class was established. Subsequent observation of the target indicated that her speed had not been reduced to an extent which prevented her keeping in company with the Cavour class, at about 25 knots, but does not disprove the estimate that one hit was obtained.

Fighting Efficiency.

22. With the exception of RENOWN, ARK ROYAL, SHEFFIELD and the destroyers of the 8th Destroyer Flotilla (the permanent nucleus of Force "H"), the remaining ships taking part in the engagement had been drawn from various stations and in certain cases, met for the first time just before the action opened.

23. To illustrate the constant changes that have taken place in the composition of Force "H" since 1st of July, it is of interest to note that the following different ships have at some time or other been included in this force for operations, viz.:—

Seven capital ships,
Three aircraft carriers,
Thirteen cruisers,
Thirty three destroyers.

24. The fact that ships carried out their action duties correctly and with the minimum of signalled instructions is a tribute to the soundness of our tactical training in peace and to the "Fighting Instructions."

Decision to discontinue the Chase.

25. My reasons for deciding that a continuance of the chase offered no reasonable prospect of inflicting damage on the enemy and was not justified are contained in the Narrative. Had I received timely information before breaking off the action that some of the enemy ships appeared to have sustained damage, I should have felt justified in continuing the action for a short period. But I was not prepared to hazard the achievement of my main objective, the safe passage of the convoy, unless there was substantial assurance. I could inflict material

Admiralty footnote:—

* Runner practices—practice firings with torpedoes not fitted with warheads.

damage on the enemy by the destruction of one or more of his battleships. The policy I followed was in general accordance with the accepted principles of war and the "Fighting Instructions." I do not suggest that a rigid adherence to these principles and instructions is either necessary or desirable, but on the other hand I consider that the interests of the country are best served by general adherence to established principles, and instructions based on those principles.

Conduct of Officers and Men.

26. Both from personal observation and reports I have received, I am able to state that the conduct of officers and men taking part in this engagement left nothing to be desired. It was a pleasure to observe the enthusiasm with which the ship's company of RENOWN closed up at their action stations on hearing that enemy forces were in the vicinity and their subsequent disappointment when it was clear that the enemy did not intend to stand and fight was obvious.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE.
Vice-Admiral,
Flag Officer Commanding,
Force "H".

NARRATIVE OF THE ACTION BETWEEN BRITISH AND ITALIAN FORCES ON 27TH NOVEMBER, 1940.

Movements Prior to the Action.

Sunrise on the 27th November was at 0824 (zone + 2) and at 0800 the situation was as follows:—

(a) RENOWN in company with ARK ROYAL, SHEFFIELD and 4 destroyers (Group I) were in position at 37° 48' N, 07° 24' E, steering at 083° at 16 knots, a position of cover, 10 to 20 miles ahead and to the North Eastward of the convoy having been maintained throughout the night;

(b) Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron in MANCHESTER with SOUTHAMPTON, DESPATCH and 5 destroyers (Group II) were in company with the M.T. convoy in position 37° 37' N, 06° 54' E. The 4 corvettes were about 10 miles to the Westward of the convoy, having been unable to keep up with the latter.

2. At this time ARK ROYAL flew off a section of fighters, one A/S patrol, one meteorological machine and a reconnaissance of 7 T.S.R.s* designed to cover the area to the West of Sardinia, and between Sardinia and Africa; the depth of this reconnaissance to the Eastward being just sufficient to cover Force "D" which was approaching from Skerki Bank. The fighter section on their return to ARK ROYAL reported that they had shot down a Cant Z.506—10 miles North West of Bona at 0930.

3. Group I continued to the Eastward so as to be ready to concentrate with Force "D" should air reconnaissance reveal the presence of important enemy units in the vicinity of that Force. C.O.S. Alexandria's signal timed 0330/27 indicated that the presence of Force "D" might be known to the enemy.

4. At 0900, in the absence of any report from air reconnaissance, which by that time was expected to have reached a depth of 90 miles from Group I, course was shaped to the South West to join the convoy in accordance with the prearranged plan and provide additional A.A. defence by the time the first bombing attack was likely to develop.

5. The first sighting of the enemy from the air took place at 0852 when one of ARK ROYAL's reconnaissance aircraft sighted a group of warships and closed to investigate. At 0906 an Alarm Report was made of four cruisers and six destroyers but this report was not received by any ship.

6. At 0920, Group I sighted the convoy and course was adjusted to pass astern of it in order to place Group I to the South of the convoy, and up sun from the latter, whilst carrying out flying operations and thus in the probable direction of air attack.

7. At 0956, whilst Group I was still on the Port quarter of the convoy, an aircraft report (T.O.O.* 0920) of the presence of 5 cruisers and 5 destroyers was received by V/S† from ARK ROYAL.

8. It seemed possible that this might be a report of Force "D," and ARK ROYAL was asked to confirm that this was an enemy report. Steam for full speed was, however, at once ordered and Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, directed to detail 2 destroyers to screen ARK ROYAL and 2 to screen the convoy.

9. By 1016, as a result of further reports from aircraft, and confirmation from ARK ROYAL, the presence of enemy Battleships and Cruisers was established. RENOWN altered course to 075° to join RAMILLIES and speed was increased as rapidly as possible to 28 knots.

10. The composition and relative position of the enemy forces was far from clear, the situation as viewed on the Plot at 1035 being shown in Diagram 1.

11. I decided:—

(i) That the convoy should continue towards its destination but on a South Easterly course in order to keep well clear of any action that might develop;

(ii) To limit the escort of the convoy to DESPATCH, COVENTRY and 2 destroyers;

(iii) To proceed with all remaining forces to concentrate with Force "D" and then attack and drive off the enemy.

12. To implement these decisions ARK ROYAL was instructed to prepare and fly off a T/B‡ striking force and to act independently under cover of the battle fleet. DESPATCH was placed in charge of the convoy which was ordered to steer 120° at full speed. Cruisers and destroyers of Force "F" were ordered to join Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H"; COVENTRY was ordered to join the convoy, and RAMILLIES was informed of Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H"'s position, course and speed.

Admiralty footnote:—

* T.S.R.—Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance aircraft.

Admiralty footnotes:—

* T.O.O.—time of origin.

† V/S—visual signal.

‡ T/B—Torpedo Bomber.

13. MANCHESTER, SHEFFIELD and SOUTHAMPTON were now concentrating in the van, cruisers and destroyers being stationed 050° 5 miles from RENOWN, i.e. on the estimated bearing of the enemy. This position was subsequently adjusted as requisite.

14. At 1032 I made a signal to Malta W/T reporting the position of 2 enemy battleships.

15. At 1058 a Sunderland flying-boat closed RENOWN and reported the position of Force "D" as being 34 miles, 070°. The flying-boat was ordered to shadow and report the composition of the enemy bearing 025°, 50 miles.

16. Reconnaissance aircraft from ARK ROYAL had meanwhile sighted and reported two groups of cruisers and 2 battleships. There were, however, a number of discrepancies between the reports both as to position and composition so that it was not possible to get a clear picture of the situation. It seemed certain that five or six enemy cruisers were present but it was doubtful whether the number of battleships was one, two or three. But, whatever the composition of the enemy force, it was clear to me that in order to achieve my object—the safe and timely arrival of the convoy at its destination—it was essential to show a bold front and attack the enemy as soon as possible.

17. The enemy who had originally been reported as steering to the Westward, were now reported as altering course to the Eastward at 1115.

18. An Observer who witnessed this alteration of course reported that the Eastern group of cruisers appeared to be thrown into a state of confusion. The leading ship turned 180° whilst the two following ships turned only 90°. Collisions appeared to have been narrowly averted and at one time all three ships appeared to be stopped with their bows nearly touching each other.

19. Based on the Sunderland's report of the position of Force "D", junction with that Force now appeared to be assured. Speed was therefore reduced to 24 knots to maintain a position between the estimated position of the enemy battle fleet and the convoy.

20. At 1128 Force "D" was sighted bearing 073° approximately 24 miles. Shortly after this ARK ROYAL flew off the first T/B Striking Force.

21. Aircraft reports now available appeared to show that the enemy's force consisted of 2 battleships, about 6 or more cruisers and a considerable number of destroyers. RAMILLIES was therefore ordered to steer 045° so as not to lose ground as the action appeared likely to develop into a chase. BERWICK and NEWCASTLE joined Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, who had been placed in command of all cruisers in the van.

The Approach.

22. At 1134, acting on the latest estimate of the enemy's bearing and distance, speed was increased to 28 knots and at 1140 course altered to 050° to close the enemy.

23. At this time MANCHESTER, SOUTHAMPTON and SHEFFIELD were in single line ahead about five miles fine on the Port bow of RENOWN with BERWICK and NEWCASTLE joining Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, from the Eastward.

24. Two miles astern of the cruisers, Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla in FAULKNER was gradually collecting the Eighth Flotilla and ENCOUNTER, some of whom had been screening the convoy. The four destroyers of Force "D" were also joining Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla, and were eventually stationed 3 miles, 270° from FAULKNER. Ten miles fine on the Starboard bow of RENOWN, RAMILLIES was just turning up to a parallel course. ARK ROYAL had dropped well astern and was between our main force and the convoy carrying out flying operations.

25. At 1154 the Sunderland flying-boat returned and reported 6 cruisers and 8 destroyers bearing 330° 30 miles from RENOWN, and that no battleships had been sighted. Unfortunately her report gave no course or speed of the cruisers and she had disappeared from sight before this information could be obtained. This report which was the first visual link received appeared to show that one group of the enemy forces was considerably further to the West than the groups previously reported by aircraft and that it was in a position to work round astern to attack ARK ROYAL and the convoy if the course of our forces to the North East was maintained.

26. No further report of this group was received during the action and I was consequently in doubts as to its whereabouts and intentions. ARK ROYAL was however between my main forces and the convoy and I considered that returning aircraft would sight and report this group should they attempt to work round to a position from which to attack the convoy.

27. Course was however altered to North so as not to get too far to the Eastward.

28. The situation as it appeared to me from the Plot just before noon is shown in Diagram 2. The number of enemy battleships and cruisers present was still not definitely established, but I judged that in all probability only two battleships were present.

29. At this time the prospects of bringing the enemy to action appeared favourable.

(i) We had effected our concentration of which the enemy appeared to be unaware, since no shadows had been sighted or reported by R.D.F., and his speed had been reported as between 14 and 18 knots, which suggested he was still awaiting the reports of reconnaissance.

(ii) The sun was immediately astern and if remaining unclouded would give us the advantage of light.

(iii) There seemed every possibility of a synchronised surface and T/B attack if the nearest position of the enemy was correct, and providing he did not retire at once at high speed.

30. My intentions at this time and throughout the ensuing chase were as follows:—

(i) To drive off the enemy from any position from which he could attack the convoy.

(ii) To accept some risk to the convoy providing there was a reasonable prospect of sinking one or more of the enemy battleships.

To achieve (ii) I considered the following conditions must be fulfilled:—

(a) A reduction of speed of the enemy to 20 knots or less by T/B attack.

(b) Engagement of enemy battleships by RENOWN and RAMILLIES in concert.

31. At 1207 RENOWN was reported as having a hot bearing on one shaft. Revolutions on this shaft had to be reduced. This, combined with a dirty bottom and paravanes, limited her speed to 27½ knots.

32. At the same time as this report was received puffs of smoke were observed on the horizon bearing 006° and cruisers in the van sighted masts and ships between the bearings of 346° and 006°.

33. At 1213 ARK ROYAL's signal timed 1147 was received reporting the composition of the enemy as 2 battleships and 6 cruisers accompanied by destroyers. This however did not disprove the Sunderland's information that a further group of 6 cruisers and destroyers was still further to the Westward.

34. By this time our cruisers were concentrated in the van and had formed a line of bearing 075°—255°, in sequence from West to East, SHEFFIELD, SOUTHAMPTON, NEWCASTLE, MANCHESTER and BERWICK. NEWCASTLE could not maintain the speed of the remainder and never quite reached her ordered station.

35. At 1158 BERWICK signalled that as his speed was limited to 27 knots he proposed to join RENOWN. Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron ordered BERWICK to join him but by that time the BERWICK had already turned to implement his proposal and consequently lost ground. BERWICK took station on the Starboard bow of MANCHESTER but owing to lack of speed dropped back during the action.

36. During the approach the 9 destroyers in company (three being detachable with the convoy and two with ARK ROYAL) were moving up to a position 5 miles 040° from RENOWN. This position was selected so that they would be available to counter attack any destroyers attempting to launch an attack on RENOWN or RAMILLIES.

37. The situation as seen from the cruisers immediately before the action commenced was as follows:—

(i) 3 enemy cruisers and some destroyers—hereafter referred to as the Western group—were visible between the bearings of approximately 340° and 350°, at a range of about 11 miles hull down and steering a Northerly course.

(ii) A second group of cruisers also accompanied by destroyers—hereafter referred to as the Eastern group—to the right of the Western group, were further away and steering approximately 100°.

Evidence as to the movements of the Western group immediately before action was joined is conflicting. It appears probable however that the Western group was in line ahead on a Southerly course until 1210 when they turned together to a Northerly course. Between 1210 and 1220 further alterations of course may have been made, as, when first observed from RENOWN they appeared to have a fairly broad inclination to the Eastwards.

The Action.

38. At 1220 the enemy opened fire and immediately afterwards our advanced forces replied. The enemy's first salvo fell close to MANCHESTER being exact for range but a hundred yards out for line.

39. At 1223 I informed Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, that I was engaging the enemy.

40. Immediately fire was opened by our advanced forces on ships of the Western group, they made smoke and retired on courses varying between N.W. and N.E. Behind their smoke screen they appeared to make large and frequent alterations of course becoming visible at intervals—sometimes almost end on, and sometimes at quite a broad inclination—remaining in sight for a few minutes before again becoming lost in their smoke.

41. Just before opening fire at the Western group, who were already wreathed in smoke, RENOWN sighted two ships, who were not making smoke, at extreme visibility, bearing 020°. It was thought at the time that these might be the enemy battleships but they later proved to be cruisers of the Eastern group.

42. At 1224 RENOWN opened fire at the right hand ship of the Western group at a mean range of 26,500 yards. Six salvos were fired before the latter was lost in smoke.

43. At 1226, RAMILLIES fired two salvos at maximum elevation to test the range. Thereafter RAMILLIES—proceeding at 20.7 knots—dropped astern and followed in the wake of RENOWN throughout the action.

44. When RENOWN's target became obscured, course was altered to Starboard to close the supposed battleships and to bring the Western group of cruisers broader on the bow. Shortly afterwards two salvos were fired at a fleeting glimpse of the centre cruiser of the Western group.

45. Course was then further altered to Starboard to open "A" arcs* on the left hand ship of the Western group which now bore 356°. Eight salvos were fired at her when she next appeared, but at 1245 she too was lost to sight in smoke.

46. During this time our cruisers had been hotly engaged with the Western group at ranges varying between 23,000 and 16,000 yards. Many straddles were obtained but smoke rendered spotting and observation generally extremely difficult.

47. MANCHESTER, SHEFFIELD and NEWCASTLE all opened fire initially on the right hand ship of the Western group,

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.

BERWICK engaged the left hand ship of the same group whilst SOUTHAMPTON engaged the left hand ship of the Eastern group.

48. No concentration of fire was ordered owing to the speed with which the situation changed and to the large selection of targets available. Moreover, as Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, states in his report, it is doubtful what the results of an attempt at concentration would have been, as ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron had not been in company for a considerable time and assembled on the battleground from Rosyth, Reykjavik, Malta and the vicinity of the Azores.

49. MANCHESTER and SHEFFIELD continued firing at the same cruiser until 1236 and 1240 respectively but NEWCASTLE after 18 broadsides shifted to BERWICK's target, whilst SOUTHAMPTON, after 5 salvos at her original target engaged a destroyer for eleven minutes. This destroyer was seen to be hit. At least one other destroyer is believed to have been hit during this phase and FAULKNER at 1227 and NEWCASTLE at 1233½ report seeing a hit on a cruiser—in the case of NEWCASTLE the left hand ship of the Western group—by what appeared to be a large calibre shell. These hits were not observed in RENOWN.

50. The enemy's fire was accurate, particularly in the early stages, and MANCHESTER was exceptionally lucky not to have received damage. His rate of fire was however extremely slow and when he was fully engaged his spread became ragged and his accuracy deteriorated rapidly. BERWICK was hit at 1222 by an 8-inch shell, Y turret was put out of action and some casualties were incurred.

51. By 1234 the Western group were almost lost in smoke and Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, decided that the Eastern group should in future form his target. MANCHESTER accordingly shifted to the left hand ship of the Eastern group, 30 degrees on his Starboard bow at a range of 21,000 yards. This ship was identified as an 8-inch cruiser, probably of the Zara class.

52. Between 1233 and 1240 all ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron shifted target on to the Eastern group of the enemy. BERWICK was again hit at 1235, officers' cabins being damaged and the Port After Breaker Room wrecked, but without further casualties. At this time she had just started to engage a ship of the Eastern group which was thought to be an 8-inch cruiser of the Pola class. 47 salvos were fired at this target between 1238 and 1308.

53. In order to ensure that the Eastern group should not be able to work round ahead and attack the convoy, Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron altered the course of the Squadron from North to 090° bringing the Eastern group on to his Port bow. To counter what appeared to be an attempt of the Eastern group to cross the T of the 18th Cruiser Squadron, the course of the latter was altered to the Southward. The enemy however immediately resumed their North Easterly course and the 18th Cruiser Squadron led back to 070° at 1256 and to 030° at 1258.

54. During this period the rear ship of the enemy line was observed by MANCHESTER,

NEWCASTLE and SOUTHAMPTON to be heavily on fire aft. Between 1252 and 1259 this ship appeared to lose speed, but thereafter picked up again and drew away with her consorts. No report of this damage to the enemy was received by Flag Officer Commanding, Force "H" until after the action. Subsequent reports indicate that at least one enemy destroyer with the Eastern group was frequently straddled and possibly hit.

55. Whilst the action between the 18th Cruiser Squadron and the Eastern group was starting, the first T/B Striking Force was nearing its objective. On their way they had first sighted the Western group retiring in a rather scattered state to the N.E., and then the Eastern group steaming to the South East at high speed in line ahead. Shortly after this, 2 battleships were observed 20 to 30 miles further to the Eastward and steering a South Easterly course. As the Striking Force manoeuvred to get up sun from the enemy the latter were seen to turn in succession to S.W. and then a few minutes later they turned together into line ahead on a North Easterly course.

56. Shortly after this last turn had been completed, the Striking Force attacked the enemy battle fleet. They dropped their torpedoes inside the screen of 7 destroyers at a range between 700 and 800 yards. The leader of this Striking Force slightly overshot his target—the leading battleship which was of the Littorio class—and therefore swung away and attacked the second ship which was of the Cavour class. The remaining ten pilots attacked the leading ship. Immediately after the attack the leading ship hauled round to the Northward and it was thought that the Cavour class ship went ahead of her, but there was no apparent loss of speed. As a result of careful comparison of notes on return to ARK ROYAL it was considered that one hit had probably been obtained on the Littorio class battleship. As the Striking Force turned away from their "drop" they machine-gunned the bridges of the capital ships and destroyers. The Eastern group of cruisers had tried to attract the attention of the battle fleet to the impending attack by firing at the Striking Force—though well out of range—as they approached. These bursts were seen in RENOWN. Nevertheless, the attack was not observed in the battleships until the leading aircraft had dropped to about 1,500 feet, when an intense but mainly ill directed fire was opened.

57. As the Striking Force completed their attack at about 1245 the Eastern group of cruisers coming up at high speed from the Westwards opened a heavy and accurate fire on them, but fortunately without success, and all returned safely to ARK ROYAL.

58. At the same time as the Striking Force made their attack on the enemy battle fleet RENOWN had lost sight of her final target of the Western group in the smoke and was looking for a further target. At this moment two large ships steering to the Westward emerged out of the smoke cloud left by the Western group. Turrets were trained on to the new targets but fortunately before fire was opened they were identified as three-funnelled French liners.

59. As *RENOWN* was no longer engaged, and with the information then available it appeared that action with the battleships might be imminent, I decided to concentrate on *RAMILLIES*. Shortly after starting to turn however, the Eastern group of cruisers was seen to present a possible target and as the Plot indicated that the enemy battleships were heading North East, course was steadied on 070° to engage these new targets.

60. At 1300, after a swing to Starboard to avoid a reported submarine, course was altered to 045° to close the position of two battleships which had just been reported on that bearing by Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron.

61. At 1311 *RENOWN* fired two ranging salvos at the left hand of the two ships believed at the time to be battleships. It is now considered that they were more probably two of the Eastern group of cruisers. Both salvos fell well short and the range was opening rapidly.

62. When sighted by Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron at 1300 the two enemy battleships were steering to the South West and closing the range rapidly. At 1305 the 18th Cruiser Squadron therefore turned to work round the flank of the enemy battleships and to close the gap on *RENOWN*, but, at the same time the battleships altered course to the North Eastward and appeared to be retiring at high speed, whereupon the 18th Cruiser Squadron was turned back to a course of 050°.

63. During this short phase of the action large splashes, confirming the presence of capital ships, fell in the vicinity of *BERWICK* and *MANCHESTER*.

64. The relative position of my forces and those of the enemy as given by the Plot at 1315 is shown in Diagram 3. The situation was as follows:—

(i) Firing had practically ceased owing to the enemy drawing out of range.

(ii) The heavy smoke made by the enemy had prevented accurate fire during the chase and so far as could be ascertained, no damage had been inflicted.

(iii) In reply to a signal from me to C.S.18 at 1308 "Is there any hope of catching cruisers?" I was informed "No". (A later message from C.S.18 estimated the enemy had three knots excess speed.)

(iv) It was known that the Striking Force had attacked. No report of results had been received, but it was evident that the speed of the enemy had not been materially reduced and was certainly not as low as 20 knots. It was presumed that the attack had been unsuccessful and this was not unexpected.

65. In view of our rapid approach to the enemy coast I had to decide whether a continuance of the chase was justified and likely to be profitable. The arguments for and against continuing the chase appeared to be:—

For Continuing the Chase.

(i) The possibility that the speed of the enemy might be reduced by some unforeseen eventuality.

(ii) He might appreciate that his force was superior to mine and decide to turn and fight.

Against Continuing the Chase.

(i) There was no sign that any of the enemy ships and especially his battleships had suffered damage, nor was there reasonable prospect of inflicting damage by gunfire in view of their superior speed. Unless the speed of the enemy battleships was reduced very materially he could enter Cagliari before I could bring him to action with *RENOWN* and *RAMILLIES*.

(ii) I was being led towards the enemy air and submarine base at Cagliari and this might well prove a trap. His appearance in this area appeared to be premeditated since it was unlikely that this was occasioned solely by the information he had received the previous night of Force "D's" presence in the Narrows.

(iii) The extrication of one of my ships damaged by air or submarine attack from my present position would certainly require the whole of my force and must involve leaving the convoy uncovered and insufficiently escorted during the passage of the Narrows.

(iv) The enemy main units had been driven off sufficiently far to ensure they could no longer interfere with the passage of the convoy.

(v) A second T/B attack could not take place until 1530 to 1600 by which time the convoy would be entirely uncovered and the enemy fleet could be under the cover of the A/A batteries and fighters at Cagliari. I entertained little hope that the attack would prove effective as I knew that the second flight was even less experienced than the first.

(vi) I had no assurance that the cruisers reported to the North West might not be working round towards the convoy and *ARK ROYAL*.

(vii) It was necessary for contact to be made with the convoy before dark to ensure the cruisers and destroyers required for escort through the Narrows should be properly formed up. It was also necessary to provide the fullest possible scale defence against T/B and light surface force attack at dusk. To effect this a retirement between 1300 and 1400 was necessary.

Decision to Break Off the Chase.

66. After reviewing these pros and cons I had no doubt in my mind whatsoever that the correct course was to break off the chase and rejoin the convoy as soon as possible. I consequently ordered a course of 130° to be steered.

67. At approximately 1335 I received a report of an enemy damaged cruiser in position about 30 miles from me and ten miles from the enemy coast. I considered the desirability of detaching two cruisers to search for and attack this cruiser. It was obviously undesirable to use *MANCHESTER* or *SOUTHAMPTON*. *SHEFFIELD*'s R.D/F was required to deal with the bombing attacks which would inevitably develop and this left *BERWICK* and *NEWCASTLE*.

68. I considered this most carefully but decided against such a detachment for the following reasons:—

(i) It would involve my main forces remaining in a position to support these cruisers and prevent them from being cut off by enemy forces.

(ii) Action as in (i) would cause an unacceptable delay in rejoining the convoy.

(iii) Isolated ships in such close proximity to the enemy coast would be singled out for air attack. BERWICK was most vulnerable to this form of attack and her disablement would have involved all my force to effect her extrication.

(iv) There was no evidence to indicate that the damaged ship would remain stopped and she might well effect an escape before she could be overtaken.

A subsequent air search failed to locate this cruiser, so it appears that the stoppage was, in fact, only temporary.

69. I therefore ordered Vice Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, to join the convoy with MANCHESTER and SOUTHAMPTON and instructed ARK ROYAL to attack the damaged cruiser if he considered it feasible.

70. At 1410 ARK ROYAL flew off the second T/B Striking Force. This Force consisted of the T.S.R.s who had carried out the morning reconnaissance. The Squadron Leader was given the enemy battlefleet as his objective but with full liberty to change the objective if a successful attack was impracticable and if by so doing he considered he had more chance of achieving successful results.

71. The second T/B Striking Force located three cruisers screened by four destroyers 12 miles off the S.E. coast of Sardinia and steering to the Eastward at high speed. Some 8 miles ahead of the cruisers the two battleships were also seen now heavily screened by ten destroyers.

72. In view of the total absence of cloud cover it was considered essential to attack out of the sun if any surprise was to be achieved. An attempt to reach such a position on the battleships would inevitably have led to the cruisers sighting and reporting the position of the Striking Force. It was therefore decided to attack the cruisers.

73. As the first aircraft reached the dropping position the cruisers turned together to Starboard. This caused several of the following flights, who were already committed to their drop, to miss their targets, but one hit was observed on the rear cruiser and another possible hit on the leading cruiser.

74. The attack was unobserved until very late, only two salvos being fired before the first torpedo was dropped. After this the gunfire was intense but appeared to be quite regardless of direction or danger to their own ships. One large projectile was seen to hit the water close to the rear cruiser and shells from close range weapons were seen to burst close alongside all ships.

75. Two of our aircraft were hit by shrapnel but neither was unserviceable and all returned safely to ARK ROYAL.

76. A striking force of 7 Skuas which flew off from ARK ROYAL at 1500 failed to locate the damaged cruiser but attacked 3 cruisers of the Condottieri class steering North off the South West corner of Sardinia. An unobserved attack was carried out on the rear cruiser and two near misses may have caused some damage. On the way back to the carrier an Italian R.O.43 was shot down.

Enemy Air Attacks.

77. At 1407 whilst our surface forces were proceeding at 19 knots to rejoin the convoy R.D/F gave indications of enemy bomber formations in the vicinity. The line was staggered.

78. The first visual indication of the attack was bomb splash on the horizon. This was the result of an attack by the Fulmar Fighter Patrol which caused several of the enemy formation to jettison their bombs.

79. As soon as the enemy aircraft, which consisted of 10 S.79 in V formation, were sighted a Blue Turn* was executed to bring all guns to bear. The enemy maintained a steady course and dropped their bombs well clear of the heavy ships, their bombs falling close to the screening destroyers.

80. Two further attacks were made, each by squadrons of 5 aircraft. In both cases ARK ROYAL who had been engaged in flying operations and was not actually in the line, was the objective. In these attacks, apart from a few bombs which were jettisoned as a result of interception by our fighters, most accurate bombing was carried out. ARK ROYAL was completely obscured by bomb splashes two at least of which fell within 10 yards of the ship. No hits were however obtained and no damage resulted.

81. The complete failure of either fighter attack or gunfire to break up the formation flying of the Italian squadrons was most noteworthy.

82. No further bombing attacks took place, and the convoy was sighted at 1700.

Remarks on the Movements of Enemy Forces after the Action.

83. The movements of enemy units from the time when surface action ceased at 1312 until he was finally lost to sight by air reconnaissance at 1655 are not fully established. From analysis of various reports the following appear most probable:—

(a) Immediately after surface action ceased the enemy battlefleet, which consisted of 1 Littorio and 1 Cavour class screened by 7 destroyers, steered for Cagliari at about 25 knots. At about 1500 they turned to the Eastward and at about 1520 to the North Eastward round Cape Carbonira. When last seen at 1655 they were steering North up the East coast of Sardinia. At some time between the attacks of the first and second T/B Striking Forces they are reported to have increased their destroyer screen from 7 to 10 destroyers. There is no indication that their speed was ever materially reduced below 25 knots.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Blue Turn—ships turning together to the course ordered by the signal.

(b) The Eastern group of cruisers had closed to about 8 miles from the battlefleet at 1240 and thereafter probably followed astern of them. When attacked by the second T/B Striking Force at 1520 they were on an Easterly course South of Sardinia and at that time were screened by 4 destroyers. After the attack it seemed probable that one cruiser became detached and may have proceeded to

Cagliari. One ship of this group had been heavily hit aft by 6-inch fire.

(c) When the action ceased the Western group were a considerable distance to the North and West of their own battlefleet and the Eastern group, due to the direction of their retirement. It is probable that they then turned towards Cagliari and rejoined their battlefleet, but their movements are very uncertain.

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