

signal was broadcast to the Chief of the Italian Naval Staff giving the position of the remaining survivors. The Greek flotilla was ordered to return to Athens.

42. The fleet was shadowed during the forenoon and at 1530 a dive-bombing attack was made by about 12 JU.88s, the main attack being directed on FORMIDABLE. There was no damage, however, the fleet "umbrella barrage" proving effective. One JU.88 was shot down and one Fulmar crashed in the sea just before landing on. There were shadowers during the rest of the day but no further attack developed. STUART, GRIFFIN and HEReward were detached at 0920 to Piraeus as escort for Convoy G.A.8, and AJAX, PERTH, DEFENDER and HASTY at 1930 to Suda Bay in order to cover Aegean convoys. BONAVENTURE was also detached at this time to join convoy G.A.8 at daylight 30th March.

Damage Inflicted on the Enemy.

43. It was not at all clear to the Commander-in-Chief what ships had been sunk, and the fate of the LITTORIO battleship was in doubt. But it seemed certain from the 900 survivors on board ships of the fleet that POLA was the damaged cruiser that had been detected stopped and that she had been sunk; that the two 8-inch cruisers engaged by the battlefleet were ZARA and FIUME and that they were both sunk; that HAVOCK had sunk one destroyer and the battlefleet possibly another; in addition there might be further losses due to the Royal Air Force bombing attacks. It was also a possibility that the enemy had suffered damage in an encounter between their own forces.

30th March, 1941—Fleet Return to Alexandria.

44. The fleet continued to Alexandria and arrived there at 1730. An S.79 shadower was shot down by fleet fighters at 0834. A submarine was reported just as the fleet entered the Great Pass and the destroyer screen were ordered to clear the area ahead of the fleet with depth charges. This operation had no result apart from creating a marked impression on the Italian survivors.

From: THE VICE ADMIRAL, LIGHT FORCES,
MEDITERRANEAN, H.M.S. ORION.

To: THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
MEDITERRANEAN.

Date: 10th April, 1941.

ORION, AJAX, PERTH, GLOUCESTER, VENDETTA and HEReward, having fuelled, left Piraeus at 1300 on 27th March, 1941.

2. GLOUCESTER had, on the previous day, run a plumper block bearing and had replaced it with a spare while in Piraeus, but at the same time divers had found excessive slackness in one "A" bracket and her maximum safe speed had to be regarded as 24 knots.

3. ILEX and HASTY were ordered to leave Suda Bay so as to join the cruisers thirty miles south of Gavdo Island (in position 34 20 N., 24 10 E.) at 0630 on 28th March.

4. On the way HEReward examined an A/S contact in approximate position 012 degs. Phalconera 15 miles. This may have been the wreck of the U-Boat attacked by VENDETTA on 18th March in this position. Light oil was still to be seen on the surface in the vicinity.

5. The passage to the rendezvous was made without incident and at 0607 on 28th March two

destroyers were sighted to the northward which proved to be ILEX and HASTY.

6. The course of 200 degs. at 0645 was selected to take the squadron further from the likely area of enemy air reconnaissance, while remaining in a position suitable for any eventuality.

PHASE I (0630-1230).

7. As soon as the enemy aircraft shadowing was identified, at 0633, as a type that is sometimes carried in catapult ships, it was realised that enemy surface forces might be in the vicinity. But when the first enemy report from one of FORMIDABLE'S aircraft reported four cruisers and four destroyers (a force identical in composition with my own), some 35 miles to the north-east of my position, steering a course similar to my own, I was in some doubt whether it was not, in fact, my own force that was being reported. Enemy warships were sighted astern before any further aircraft reports had been received and decoded.

8. The enemy sighted were at once suspected of being ZARA class, since cruisers of this class had been reported at sea on the previous day by flying boats. This suspicion soon proved correct. Knowing that vessels of that class could outrange my squadron and that, having superior speed, they could choose the range I decided to try to draw them towards our own battlefleet and carrier.

9. The enemy followed and opened fire at 25,500 yards at 0812. At the same time one of the enemy cruisers was seen to catapult one aircraft. The fire was accurate to begin with and the enemy appeared to be concentrating on GLOUCESTER. She snaked the line to avoid hits.

10. At 0829, when the range had closed to 23,500 yards, GLOUCESTER opened fire with three salvos, but they all fell short. The enemy made an alteration of some 35 degs. away after the first salvo and put himself outside our gun range. After this time, although the enemy resumed a course similar to my own and continued to fire till 0855, all his salvos fell short.

11. GLOUCESTER flew off her aircraft at 0830 and it carried out action observation, but her reports were not received in ORION owing to her not using the frequency ordered.

12. During this action VENDETTA soon began to lag behind and caused some embarrassment. By 0834 she was about three miles astern and I ordered her to steer to the southward clear of the action.

13. At 0855 the enemy turned away to port and ceased fire. He eventually steadied on a course of about 300 degs. I decided to follow and endeavour to keep touch. VENDETTA, by cutting off corners, rejoined at 0925. She was ordered to join the battlefleet.

14. At 0854 a signal from aircraft 5F had been received, reporting 3 enemy battleships at 0805 in a position which was seven miles from my own position at 0805. Though this report was manifestly incorrect as regards position, it prepared me for a meeting with enemy battleships at any moment.

15. H.M.S. FORMIDABLE reported that at about 1045 or 1100, her striking force was fired at by my squadron. This may have been so. Fire was opened on various unidentified single aircraft at long range about this time.