

5. It was on the morning of the 22nd May, that things commenced to go awry. The enemy convoy sighted by Force C was almost certainly a large one (see paragraph 27). The Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron was presented with a unique opportunity of effecting its destruction but unfortunately, in the face of heavy air attacks, and with H.A. ammunition stocks beginning to run low, he decided that he would not have been justified in pressing on to the northward and gave the order to withdraw. The situation was undoubtedly a difficult one for him, as this attack was certainly on a majestic scale but it appears that no diminution of risk could have been achieved by retirement and that, in fact, the safest place for the squadron would have been among the enemy ships. The brief action did, however, have the effect of turning back the convoy, and the troops, if they ever did reach Crete, were not in time to influence the battle.

6. In the meantime, a further unlucky decision had been taken (see paragraphs 25 and 26). DIDO, wearing the flag of the Rear Admiral (D), Mediterranean, had expended 70 per cent. of her A.A. ammunition. The destroyers were also running low, but AJAX and ORION had 42 and 38 per cent. respectively remaining. The Rear Admiral (D), Mediterranean, correctly decided that DIDO must withdraw from the Aegean; but, from very natural reluctance to leave other ships of his squadron to face the music after he himself had retired, he took AJAX and ORION with him. This decision, although such results could hardly have been foreseen, deprived the hard pressed Force C of their assistance at a time when the weight of their A.A. fire would have been an invaluable support.

7. The junction of Forces A and C on the afternoon of the 22nd May, left the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, after a gruelling two days, in command of the combined force. Before he had really time to grasp the situation of his force, a series of disasters occurred, the loss of GREYHOUND, GLOUCESTER and finally FIJI.

8. Past experience had gone to show that when under heavy scale of air attack it is essential to keep ships together for mutual support. The decision to send KANDAHAR and KINGSTON to the rescue of GREYHOUND's people cannot be cavilled at but in the light of subsequent events it would probably have been better had the whole force closed to their support. The Rear Admiral Commanding, 15th Cruiser Squadron was however not aware of the shortage of A.A. ammunition in GLOUCESTER and FIJI. As a final misfortune, when rejoining after the loss of GLOUCESTER, FIJI steered a course diverging from that of the fleet, which she could no longer see.

9. Late on the 22nd May, a "Most Immediate" message was received by the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, from the Rear Admiral Commanding, Seventh Cruiser Squadron, from which it appeared, owing to calligraphic error, that the battleships of Force A1 had no pom-pom ammunition left. In fact they had plenty. It was on this account that orders were given at 0408/23rd

May for all forces to withdraw to the eastward. Had this error not occurred the battleships would not have been ordered back to Alexandria and would have been available as a support and rallying point for the 5th Destroyer Flotilla on the morning of the 23rd May, so that the loss of KELLY and KASHMIR might well have been avoided (see paragraph 46).

10. That the fleet suffered disastrously in this encounter with the unhampered German Air Force is evident but it has to be remembered on the credit side that the Navy's duty was achieved and no enemy ship whether warship or transport succeeded in reaching Crete or intervening in the battle during these critical days. Nor should the losses sustained blind one to the magnificent courage and endurance that was displayed throughout. I have never felt prouder of the Mediterranean Fleet than at the close of these particular operations, except perhaps, at the fashion in which it faced up to the even greater strain which was so soon to be imposed upon it.

11. Where so much that was meritorious was performed it is almost invidious to particularise, but I feel that I must draw the attention of Their Lordships to two outstanding examples. These are the conduct of KANDAHAR (Commander W. G. A. Robson, Royal Navy) and KINGSTON (Lieutenant Commander P. Somerville, D.S.O., Royal Navy) during the whole period of the operation and, in particular, the rescue of the crews of GREYHOUND and FIJI (see paragraphs 34 to 39). KANDAHAR has recorded that between 1445 and 1930 she was subjected to 22 separate air attacks and all the rescue work during daylight was carried out in face of heavy bombing and machine gunning. The other story is that of the gallantry and devotion of Commander W. R. Marshall A'Deane, Royal Navy, of GREYHOUND, whose self sacrifice stands out even amongst this record of fine deeds.

After the loss of his own ship he was picked up by KANDAHAR. Whilst KANDAHAR was engaged in rescuing the crew of the FIJI, Commander Marshall A'Deane dived overboard, in the darkness, to the assistance of a man some way from the ship. He was not seen again.

12. Rear Admiral H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E., in the WARSPITE, had a particularly anxious time. He handled a series of difficult situations in a determined and skilful manner and by his timely support undoubtedly did all possible to extricate Forces C and D from their awkward situation on the evening of the 22nd May.

13. The skilful operation of the forces under the Rear Admiral (D), Mediterranean, which led to the destruction of the first enemy convoy has already been mentioned.

14. The Naval Officer-in-Charge, Suda, Captain J. A. V. Morse, D.S.O., Royal Navy, followed up his excellent work in organising the port at Suda by consistently presenting a clear and concise picture of the situation by his signals during the battle. His presence at Suda was invaluable.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM.
Admiral.
Commander-in-Chief,
Mediterranean.