

95. At 0748 the cruisers of Force X were reported by aircraft as bearing 110°, 22 miles from RENOWN with the destroyers six miles astern.

96. Force X joined Force H 26 miles N.W. of Galita Island at 0815 and course was shaped to the westward at NELSON's best speed.

*Movements of Force H and Force X, a.m. 25th July (D.5)*

97. There was a light breeze from 150° and considerable ground was lost each time the fleet turned to enable ARK ROYAL to fly on or off.

98. A Cant was sighted at 0715 but fighters failed to intercept due to poor air to air visibility especially up sun. The first combat of the day took place at 0822 when Fulmars shot down a Cant shadower in full view of the fleet. Unfortunately one of the attacking Fulmars was shot down in the encounter and crashed heavily leaving no survivors. Four Italians out of a crew of six were rescued from the Cant by FOXHOUND.

*High Level Bombing Attack on the Fleet, a.m. 25th July (D.5)*

99. At 1035 a large group of aircraft was detected bearing 080°, 69 miles closing. As the group continued to close fighters were ordered to an intercepting position 095°, 15 miles and at 1100 the first "Tally Ho" was received from the fighters. At 1103 another section of fighters got in touch and reported 8 high level bombers. A few minutes later the fighters also reported T/Bs.

100. The Fulmars attacked with great dash and bombs could be seen being jettisoned far away on the port quarter of the fleet between 1107 and 1110. Three S.79 high level bombers were shot down for certain, one was probably destroyed and two others were damaged.

101. In this encounter we lost two Fulmars. One crew was recovered unhurt by NESTOR. The other aircraft was seen by SIKH to crash vertically into the sea at high velocity. There were no survivors. No further attacks were attempted by the enemy.

*Movements of Various Units, p.m. 25th July (D.5)*

102. At 1610 a signal was intercepted from FIREDRAKE giving her position, course and speed at 1315 as 37° 10' N., 4° 00' E., 270°, 9 knots, proceeding under her own steam escorted by ERIDGE and AVON VALE. The latter had joined her after relief by WISHART as escort to MANCHESTER. FIREDRAKE's expected time of arrival at Gibraltar was 1700/27.

103. FORESTER was detached at 1720 to proceed at her best speed to Gibraltar to land the wounded and other survivors from FEARLESS.

104. As it now appeared that no ships would require fuel before arrival in harbour I requested Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic Station at 1922 to recall BROWN RANGER who had been sailed, escorted by BEVERLEY, in case she should have been required.

*Movements of Units, 26th July (D.6)*

105. MANCHESTER and Groups 1 and 2 of Convoy M.G.1 arrived safely at Gibraltar at 0239, 0800 and 1530 respectively.

106. ARK ROYAL maintained an A/S patrol of 2 aircraft throughout the day.

*Arrival at Gibraltar, 27th July (D.7)*

107. Ships of Group 3 of M.G.1 arrived at Gibraltar at 0215 and 0915. The remaining ships of Forces H and X, including the damaged FIREDRAKE and her escort, arrived during the day. S.S. SVENOR (Group 4 of M.G.1) arrived at 0500 on 28th.

*General.*

108. Outstanding points in this operation were:—

(a) *Effective work of Fulmars.*—The Fulmars of ARK ROYAL contributed in no small measure to the safe arrival of the convoy at its destination. On 23rd July formations of enemy aircraft were intercepted on three occasions. On the first occasion, two were shot down for certain and another two probably destroyed, whilst the survivors which reached the fleet were in no state to carry out an accurate attack. On the second occasion, as the Fulmars were about to intercept, the bombers released their bombs on the destroyer screen and immediately withdrew. Finally an attempted T/B attack was completely broken up and driven off, leaving two aircraft shot down with another damaged and possibly lost.

On 25th July the only enemy formations to approach the fleet were once again thoroughly routed. A force of torpedo bombers withdrew before the fighters could reach it and the only high level bombing attack was intercepted about 15 miles from the fleet, when four enemy planes were destroyed for certain with one probably destroyed and two more damaged. All bombs were jettisoned.

One Italian officer survivor stated he had been shot down by a Hurricane. It is evident that the enemy hold our Fleet Air Arm fighters in higher esteem than do our own Fulmar pilots.

(b) *Towing of FIREDRAKE by ERIDGE.*—Excellent seamanship and determination were displayed by ERIDGE whilst taking FIREDRAKE in tow in spite of difficulties caused by the latter's steering gear being out of action. The tow was maintained for 37 hours, during the whole of which period the ships were in close proximity to enemy air and surface ship bases and subjected to continuous air observation. The resolution and fine spirit displayed by both ships' companies was most creditable.

(c) *Prompt action and initiative displayed by NESTOR on two occasions.*—The successful avoiding action taken by the heavy ships at 2315/22 was only rendered possible by the prompt action taken, and quick and accurate report made, by NESTOR.

The initiative and resolution shown in bringing SYDNEY STAR safely into port after she had been torpedoed on the night of the 23rd/24th and stopped 4 miles from the enemy's base was a noteworthy achievement.