



SUPPLEMENT

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REPORT OF AN ACTION WITH THE ITALIAN FLEET OFF CALABRIA, 9th JULY, 1940.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 29th January, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

H.M.S. WARSPITE

29th January, 1941.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the accompanying narrative of operations by the Mediterranean Fleet during the period 7th to 13th July, 1940 (Operation M.A.5)*, which included the brief engagement which took place with the Italian Fleet off the Calabrian Coast on the afternoon of 9th July.

2. It was during these operations that the Fleet first received serious attention from the Italian Air Force, and Calabria was the first time contact was made with Italian surface forces, other than destroyers.

3. It is still not clear what brought the enemy fleet to sea on this occasion, but it seems probable that it was engaged on an operation designed to cover the movement of a convoy to Libya. When our Fleet was reported South of Crete, it seems that the enemy retired close to his bases, fuelled his destroyers by relays, and then waited, hoping to draw us into an engagement in his own waters (under cover of his Air Force and possibly with a submarine concentration to the Southward of him) whence he could use his superior speed to withdraw at his own time.

4. If these were, in fact, the enemy's intentions, he was not altogether disappointed, but the submarines, if there were any in the vicinity of the action, did not materialise, and fortunately for us, his air attacks failed to synchronise with the gun action.

5. From an examination of enemy reports it appears that the enemy forces consisted of two battleships, 16 (possibly 17 or 18) cruisers, of which 6 (and possibly 7) were 8-inch, and 25 to 30 destroyers.

6. It will be noted that the whole action took place at very long range and that WARSPITE was the only capital ship which got within range of the enemy battleships. MALAYA fired a few salvos which fell some 3,000 yards short. ROYAL SOVEREIGN, owing to her lack of speed, never got into action at all.

7. WARSPITE's hit on one of the enemy battleships at 26,000 yards range might perhaps be described as a lucky one. Its tactical effect was to induce the enemy to turn away and break off the action, which was unfortunate, but strategically it probably has had an important effect on the Italian mentality.

8. The torpedo attacks by the Fleet Air Arm were disappointing, one hit on a cruiser being all that can be claimed, but in fairness it must be recorded that the pilots had had very little practice, and none at high speed targets, EAGLE having only recently joined the Fleet after having been employed on the Indian Ocean trade routes.

9. The enemy's gunnery seemed good at first and he straddled quickly, but accuracy soon fell off as his ships came under our fire.

10. Our cruisers—there were only four in action—were badly outnumbered and at times came under a very heavy fire. They were superbly handled by Vice-Admiral J. C. Tovey,

Admiralty footnote—

* Operation M A 5—an operation in the form of a sweep by the Fleet in the Central Mediterranean designed to give cover to two convoys on passage from Malta to Alexandria