

the destroyer screen being ordered over to the starboard side.

31. At 2225 two large cruisers were unexpectedly sighted on the starboard bow, with a smaller vessel, thought at first to be a 6-inch cruiser, ahead of them. The battlefleet were turned back to 280 degs. into line ahead, and at 2228 when the enemy were on the port bow at a range of about 4,000 yards, GREYHOUND illuminated one of the enemy cruisers with her searchlight, and WARSPITE opened fire. FORMIDABLE hauled out of the line to starboard and the battlefleet engaged. The enemy were seen to be two cruisers of the ZARA Class on an opposite course; they were apparently completely taken by surprise and their turrets were fore and aft. WARSPITE'S first 15-inch broadside hit the rear cruiser with devastating effect, five out of six shells hitting. Both cruisers were thereafter repeatedly hit, set severely on fire and put out of action. A destroyer was seen passing behind the burning cruisers; this was probably the smaller vessel originally sighted ahead of them.

32. Except for flashing signals seen on the port quarter, nothing further was seen of the original damaged ship which the battlefleet had been closing to investigate. (BARHAM was unable to carry out searchlight sweeping procedure on the port quarter owing to damage to her searchlights by blast.)

33. At 2230 three enemy destroyers were sighted on the port bow closing from a position astern of their cruisers and were engaged. At 2232 they were seen to turn away making smoke and one at least fired torpedoes.

The battlefleet was turned 90 degs. to starboard together by Fixed Light Manœuvring Signal to avoid torpedoes and at 2233 steadied on course 010 degs. At this time FORMIDABLE was acting independently on the starboard bow.

34. During the engagement with enemy destroyers, the leading destroyers had been hit by 6-inch fire from WARSPITE, and some confusion was caused by HAVOCK being closely engaged with the enemy destroyers and failing to burn fighting lights. As a result WARSPITE fired two salvos at her. HAVOCK was not damaged although it was thought at the time that she had possibly been hit.

35. The battlefleet ceased fire at 2235 and was re-formed into line ahead on a course 010 degs.; FORMIDABLE was ordered to rejoin the line at 2310. The four screening destroyers (STUART, HAVOCK, GREYHOUND and GRIFFIN) were released at 2238 and ordered to finish off the two cruisers seen to be on fire and then bearing 150 degs. four miles.

36. At 2245, when the burning cruisers were still seen right astern (190 degs.), starshell and heavy firing with tracer ammunition could be seen bearing 230 degs., and this continued for 10 minutes or a quarter of an hour. Since none of our ships were on that bearing it was thought possible that the Italians were engaging their own forces. Firing was seen to continue in the vicinity of the damaged cruisers for some time and at 2300 a heavy explosion was seen and thought to be the torpedoing of one of them.

Withdrawal—Light Forces Engagement.

37. The Commander-in-Chief then decided to withdraw to the north-eastward in order to avoid the possibility of our own forces engaging

each other and to return to the battle area in the morning. He, therefore, ordered all forces not engaged in sinking the enemy to withdraw to the north-eastward, and at 2330 altered course to 070 degs., speed 18 knots. The Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla, was told not to withdraw until after the striking force had attacked. Firing and occasional heavy flashes were still seen intermittently until about 0100 on a bearing of 190 degs. to 200 degs.

38. At 0020 HAVOCK reported contact with a LITTORIO battleship in the position of the damaged cruisers. The Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla, with the striking force reported that he was joining HAVOCK, as did GREYHOUND and GRIFFIN, but at 0110 HAVOCK altered the report to that of an 8-inch cruiser. At 0036, the Captain (D), Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, had reported leaving three cruisers stopped and on fire and two other cruisers in the vicinity as well as two damaged destroyers. At 0314 HAVOCK reported being alongside POLA and asked whether "to board or blow her stern off with depth charges," the Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla then reported having sunk ZARA and being about to sink POLA.

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39. At 0006 the Commander-in-Chief had ordered the fleet to rendezvous at 0700 in position 35 degs. 54 mins. N., 21 degs. 38 mins. E., and requested air reconnaissance the following morning. JUNO, JAGUAR and DEFENDER were ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief, and also BONAVENTURE, who had left Alexandria the previous afternoon. A Greek flotilla of seven destroyers had been sent through the Corinth Canal to await orders on the first reports of the engagement, but owing to a cyphering error they were not ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief until 0350. *The Naval Attache, Athens, reported that 23 Blenheims had attacked the northern force of enemy ships between 1445 and 1655/28th March and had stopped one cruiser with two direct hits and a destroyer with one direct hit. Maleme also reported at least one torpedo hit on the LITTORIO battleship at 1940/28.

Fleet Re-formed.

40. At 0430 the Commander-in-Chief altered course to 250 degs. and informed the fleet that he was keeping W/T silence. At daylight an air search was flown off from FORMIDABLE and between 0600 and 0700 all units of the fleet rejoined the Commander-in-Chief. It was thought that at least one of our destroyers must have been seriously damaged in all the firing subsequent to the main action, but no ship reported either damage or casualties. One Swordfish was later reported missing.

41. At 0800 the Commander-in-Chief was in position 35 degs. 43 mins. N., 21 degs. 40 mins. E., and course was set 220 degs. to sweep the area of the action. Between 0950 and 1100 many boats and rafts with Italian survivors were seen and a large number of survivors were picked up by destroyers, but at 1100 enemy aircraft were sighted and as there was no report of enemy surface ships anywhere in the vicinity, course was set 120 degs. for Alexandria. A

* Admiralty footnote:—Subsequent information has established that the report of the Naval Attache, Athens, was incorrect in that no ship was hit in these attacks by R.A.F. aircraft although some near misses were scored.