

20. Force "Y" was sighted again at 1515 when FORMIDABLE's aircraft 4 N N reported one battleship and four destroyers steering 270 degs. in a position 290 degs. 65 miles from the Commander-in-Chief. The second air striking force which had been in the air since 1235 attacked the battleship with torpedoes; they reported three hits and that her speed was reduced to 8 knots. The Commander-in-Chief altered course to 300 degs.

21. Shortly afterwards aircraft 4 N N reported Force "X" consisting of three cruisers and four destroyers stationed 25 miles 250 degs. from the LITTORIO battleship which was steering 280 degs. about 10 knots. Duty "V" also reported three 6 inch cruisers and two destroyers bearing 155 degs. from Force "Z" both steering 300 degs. at 30 knots.

22. At this time Maleme Fleet Air Arm reported that three Swordfish had attacked the cruisers of Force "X" with torpedoes at 1205 scoring one possible hit and that another striking force was being despatched. YORK was instructed to arrange with Maleme for a dusk attack to be carried out in conjunction with the flying boat reports.

23. At 1600 the two CAVOUR battleships with Force "Z" were estimated to bear 305 degs. 120 miles from the Commander-in-Chief still steering north-westward at 30 knots. The damaged LITTORIO with Force "X" was estimated at 60 miles 289 degs. from the Commander-in-Chief; it soon became apparent that she must be making good 12 to 15 knots and would not be overhauled by the battlefleet before dark. So at 1644 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was ordered to press on and gain contact. NUBIAN and MOHAWK were also sent ahead to form a *V/S link with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces. Soon afterwards a third air striking force was flown off to attack the LITTORIO at dusk.

Night Intentions.

24. Duty "V's" admirable reports of Force "Z" still showed it to be in two groups, each making 30 knots, the battleships steering 310 degs. and the cruisers about 60 miles to the south-east of them, steering 325. It was always possible, however, that this second force of cruisers was in reality Force "X" which at 1727 was seen to turn back and take station five miles south of the LITTORIO. The situation was still, therefore, somewhat confused when at 1810 the Commander-in-Chief signalled his night intentions; if the cruisers gained touch with the damaged battleship the destroyers would be sent in to attack, followed if necessary by the battlefleet; if the cruisers failed to make contact then the Commander-in-Chief intended to work round to the north and west and regain touch in the morning.

Situation at dusk.

25. At 1745 WARSPITE's aircraft was catapulted for the second time and at 1831 made the first of a series of reports which rapidly cleared up the position. By 1915 it was clear that the damaged battleship was about 45 miles from the Commander-in-Chief, steering 290 degs. at 15 knots. Another cruiser force had joined it from the north-westward and the enemy fleet was now in five columns. The LITTORIO was in the centre with four destroyers screening ahead and two astern; to port of her there were three 6-inch cruisers in

the inner column and three NAVIGATORI class destroyers in the outer column, to starboard there were three 8-inch cruisers in the inner column and two 6-inch cruisers (later found to have been large destroyers) in the outer column. In addition Force "Z" was still to the north-westward and apparently consisted of two CAVOURS, the three ZARAs and five destroyers. The second force reported by Duty "V" of two SAVOIAS, one DIAZ and two destroyers, was probably that which had just joined the LITTORIO.

26. At 1925 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, reported two unknown ships and concentrated his cruisers. Almost immediately afterwards he reported enemy ships 9 miles to the north-west of him engaging aircraft and making smoke. Duty 4 N N reported that the enemy's centre bore 310 degs. 14 miles from four destroyers in the van (probably the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' four cruisers). At the same time WARSPITE's aircraft reported the enemy altering course to 230 degs. 15 knots, but no indication was given that this was a compass turn of the whole fleet.

Decision to engage at night.

27. At 1935 the air striking force reported "probable hits" but no definite information of damage, and the Commander-in-Chief considered whether he would be justified in taking the fleet at night through a screening force of at least six cruisers and 11 destroyers, with another force of two battleships, three cruisers and five destroyers, in the vicinity. On the other hand if the enemy were able to continue at 14 or 15 knots during the night they would be well under cover of the JU.87 dive bombers at daylight being already only 320 miles from their base; if they were intercepted at dawn, our forces would almost certainly be subjected to a very heavy scale of air attack throughout the day. The Commander-in-Chief decided to accept a night action and at 2040 ordered the destroyers to attack.

28. The attacking force was formed of eight destroyers under Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla, organised into two divisions (the second under the Captain (D), Second Destroyer Flotilla), while the remaining four destroyers under Captain (D), Tenth Destroyer Flotilla formed the battlefleet screen. The enemy fleet was estimated to bear 286 degs. 33 miles from the Commander-in-Chief, steering 295 degs. at 13 knots. Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla decided to pass to the northward of the enemy and attack from the van and signalled his intentions at 2115.

29. At 2111 a Radar report was received from the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, of an unknown ship stopped about five miles to port of him; the Commander-in-Chief at once altered course to 280 degs. to pass nearer to the position. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, continued to the north-westward without investigating this report and at 2215 reported that he was steering 340 degs. with his cruisers concentrated and would keep clear to the northward of the destroyers. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, did not again make contact with the enemy and no further reports were received from him.

Night action.

30. At 2210 what was apparently the same ship was detected by VALIANT's Radar six miles on the port bow. The Commander-in-Chief decided to investigate and at 2213 the battlefleet altered course together to 240 degs.,

* Admiralty footnote:—V/S signifies Visual Signal.