

51. The damage to FIREDRAKE was doubly unfortunate in that it deprived the port column of the convoy of T.S.D.S. protection. FEARLESS and NESTOR had been detailed as spare T.S.D.S. ships. FEARLESS having been sunk, NESTOR only remained. The delay which would have resulted while NESTOR streamed her sweep could not be accepted. Furthermore, in the absence of FEARLESS, FIREDRAKE, AVON VALE and ERIDGE, the screen was already undesirably thin. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, therefore, decided to accept the increased risk of damage by mines and to press on without further delay, retaining NESTOR on the convoy screen.

Enemy Aircraft Search for Convoy.

52. At 2000 Force X and the convoy altered course to the northward in accordance with the pre-arranged route. The latter had been selected solely from the point of view of safety from enemy mines, but the alteration to the northward at this time had another and unexpected advantage, for just over an hour later enemy aircraft were reported on the starboard bow. These split into two groups and made an abortive attempt lasting half an hour to locate the convoy.

53. There is no doubt that the enemy expected the convoy to take a more or less direct route from the Skerki Channel to Pantellaria. In fact, they must have felt certain of this since they made no attempt to keep the convoy under air observation during the critical period before and just after sunset, and in consequence the alteration of course to 075° at 2000 was unobserved, and the anticipated attack at dusk, which was most to be feared, never materialised.

54. At 2250 Force X altered course to 105° and a quarter of an hour later to 133° . From this time until midnight aircraft were observed searching with flares to the southward of the convoy. The flares appeared to be towed, but no opinion could be formed of the effectiveness of this method of search.

55. The period between 2250 and 0013/24, when the convoy entered the Italian convoy route, was probably the most dangerous from the point of view of mines, and in view of the absence of the T.S.D.S. destroyer ahead of the port column and of two M.T. ships being without paravanes, it was with considerable relief that C.S.18 turned to 160° at 0013/24 into the Italian convoy route.

56. At 0046, FOXHOUND, 5 cables ahead of the starboard column, reported a mine in her sweep and moved over to port to clear it. Except for a distinct bump felt earlier at 2017 on the bridge and in the engine room of NESTOR, followed by a report of an object like a mine in the wake, this was the only evidence of the presence of mines throughout the passage.

E-Boat Attack on Force X, 0300 24th July (D.4).

57. The convoy passed through Position K ($36^{\circ} 57' N.$, $12^{\circ} E.$) at 0230. A quarter of an hour later three unidentified objects were detected by COSSACK, stationed 5 cables ahead of the port column, on her R.D.F.

58. At 0250, short flashes of light followed by the sound of motor engines starting up indicated to COSSACK and EDINBURGH (leading the port column) the presence of E-Boats.* One was promptly illuminated by searchlight and heavily engaged by these two ships. MANXMAN found the target perfectly illuminated by cross searchlight beams and also opened fire. After firing torpedoes, one of which passed under the stern of COSSACK, the E-Boat retired at high speed but not before she had been repeatedly hit. Two torpedoes, either from the same or another E-Boat, passed down the port side of EDINBURGH.

59. Shortly afterwards, ARETHUSA, the rear ship of the port column, sighted another E-Boat, which had apparently passed down between the port column of the convoy and the destroyer screen. This boat was engaged by both ARETHUSA and FARNDAL (the rear ship of the port screen), and hits were observed. One officer in ARETHUSA was confident that the boat was stopped; there is no evidence, however, that she was sunk.

60. Shortly after these attacks, one ship of the convoy was observed by NESTOR (the rear ship of the starboard screen) to be dropping astern.

Subsequent action by NESTOR is referred to later in this narrative.

61. At 0305 the noise of an E-Boat was heard by EDINBURGH on the port side, and immediately afterwards its wake was seen. It was promptly illuminated, and raked with pom-pom, 0.5-inch and Oerlikon fire at 1,500 to 2,000 yards range, the target appearing to be enveloped in a hail of tracers. The E-Boat stopped out of control, and at this moment the main armament fired a broadside of 12 guns at fixed sight range. When the splashes subsided nothing was seen.

62. Meanwhile, COSSACK detected hydrophone effect by asdic in several positions ahead, and at 0315 sighted another E-Boat on the port bow. Speed was increased and endeavour made to ram, but the boat passed across COSSACK's bows too close for searchlight to follow. Fire was opened and sounds like splintering of wood heard. A torpedo was fired by this boat, and it is estimated to have passed immediately under the stern of COSSACK, who was only 100 yards from the enemy at the time.

63. For the next 20 minutes further sounds of motor engines were heard by COSSACK and EDINBURGH, but no further contacts were made, other than a fleeting glimpse from COSSACK of a boat withdrawing under cover of smoke. Discretion on the part of the surviving E-Boat Commanders was apparently allowed to suppress their valour.

64. The result of these encounters was that of the 6 to 12 E-Boats present, one was sunk, one possibly sunk, and two others damaged.

65. This meeting with E-Boats might have had different results had their attacks been carried out more resolutely. It seemed that they were not expecting surface forces, and the surprise discounted their tactical advantage.

Admiralty footnote

* E-Boats—similar to British Motor Torpedo Boats