

Nevertheless, it is a potent new factor in Mediterranean war and will undoubtedly deny us that free access to the waters immediately surrounding Malta and Sicily which we have previously enjoyed, until our own air forces have been built up to a scale adequate to meet it.

7. The dive bombing attacks on the 3rd Cruiser Squadron on the afternoon of 11th January—resulting in the loss of SOUTHAMPTON—were a complete surprise, delivered at a time when the ships concerned believed themselves to have drawn clear of the threat of air attack, and when officers and men were doubtless relaxing their vigilance to some extent after a very strenuous four days.

This damaging attack served to emphasise the importance of including an R.D.F. ship* in detached units whenever possible.

8. The remarks of the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. JAGUAR are of considerable interest, in particular his practice of firing 4.7-inch barrage over the stern of a ship attacked by dive bombers. The idea is now under development in the Mediterranean Fleet with a view to the destroyer screen putting an "umbrella barrage" over the fleet.

9. Force X† had originally put to sea to take part in the offensive operations intended in Operation M.C.6, which had to be abandoned. It was most unfortunate that persistent bad weather prevented the Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron‡ from delivering any of the attacks which he intended, and which would have been a most useful counter to the undoubted set back which the fleet as a whole had received.

10. It is satisfactory to record that Convoy "Excess" whose safe passage had been the main object of the operation, reached its destination safely.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM,
Admiral,
Commander-in-Chief.

OPERATIONS M.C.4 AND M.C.6. NARRATIVE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN.

Operation M.C.4 was devised, in co-operation with the Flag Officer Commanding, Force H,§ to cover the passage of the much delayed Convoy "Excess." It was intended to continue at sea in the Central Mediterranean after the passage of the convoy and to conduct a further operation (M.C.6), which was to have consisted of offensive operations against shipping on the Italian coasts.

2. Operation M.C.6 was brought into force by the Commander-in-Chief's message 1039/9th January, but the offensive operations in the Central Mediterranean had to be cancelled after the damage to ILLUSTRIOUS described in

paragraphs 29 and 30, and although the Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron remained at sea with Force X intending to deliver F.A.A.* attacks against the Dodecanese and the Cyrenaican coast traffic, the weather prevented these operations.

Tuesday, 7th January, 1941.

3. Force H, consisting of RENOWN, MALAYA, ARK ROYAL, SHEFFIELD, BONAVENTURE and destroyers, left Gibraltar, Convoy "Excess," consisting of ESSEX for Malta, and CLAN CUMMING, CLAN MACDONALD and EMPIRE SONG for Piraeus, having sailed the previous evening.

4. Force A, consisting of WARSPITE, VALIANT, ILLUSTRIOUS, JERVIS, NUBIAN, MOHAWK, DAINITY, GREYHOUND, GALLANT and GRIFFIN, sailed at 0500.

5. The Commander-in-Chief's position at 0800 was 31° 33' N., 29° 16' E., on a mean line of advance of 345° at 17 knots. There were no incidents until 1640 when an enemy aircraft was located by R.D.F.† bearing 037°, 32 miles. The aircraft itself was sighted, and ILLUSTRIOUS's fighters which were standing by on deck were flown off but were too late, and Force A was reported. The aircraft then sighted BRAMBLELEAF and the corvettes. In view of this sighting the Commander-in-Chief sent an aircraft to PEONY to order her to make a drastic alteration of course so as to throw off torpedo bombers. Two groups of aircraft approached the fleet during the afternoon but retired on sighting the Fulmars. The second group sighted and reported the fleet at 1720.

6. The Commander-in-Chief's position at 1800 was 33° 33' N., 27° 25' E., steering 290° at 19 knots.

Shortly after dark, at 1828, enemy aircraft were reported bearing 130° by R.D.F. This aircraft, however, crossed astern and never got nearer than 15 miles to the fleet. There were no further incidents and the Commander-in-Chief's position at midnight was 34° 13' N., 25° 26' E.

7. Force B, consisting of GLOUCESTER, SOUTHAMPTON, ILEX and JANUS, left the Aegean for Malta.

8. Force C. BRAMBLELEAF and corvettes passed the Kaso Strait without incident. Several floating mines were sighted south of the Kaso Strait, two being sunk by PEONY.

9. Convoy M.W.5½, consisting of BRECONSHIRE, CLAN MACAULAY escorted by CALCUTTA, DIAMOND and DEFENDER, sailed from Alexandria for Malta at 1400.

10. Force D. ORION and YORK left Alexandria at 0300 to cover the passage of BRAMBLELEAF through the Kaso Strait. AJAX and PERTH left Piraeus to rendezvous with Vice-Admiral, Light Forces at Suda Bay at 0800/8th.

11. Five floating mines were sighted during the day. There were no further incidents and course was set to pass south of the Medina Bank.

Admiralty footnotes.

* R.D.F. ship—ship fitted with radar equipment

† Force X at Alexandria—BARHAM and EAGLE, screened by 5 destroyers

‡ Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron—Rear-Admiral H. B. Rawlings, C.B., O.B.E.

§ Flag Officer Commanding, Force H—Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O.

Admiralty footnotes

* F.A.A.—Fleet Air Arm

† R.D.F.—radar