

M.T.B. 77 was now crossing the centre of the convoy and by some miracle remained unobserved until the range of the target had closed to 400 yards, and the port torpedo was fired. The torpedo was seen to run correctly, and we decided to alter course 100 degrees to starboard to attack the rear ship of the port column. The columns were about 5 cables apart. Having turned 100 degrees to starboard, fire commenced on M.T.B. 77, at first from the second merchant vessel of the starboard column, but very soon every ship was firing with machine-guns varying from 40-m.m. to .303-inch, and the destroyers were firing 4-inch H.E. that burst about 50 feet in the air.

An explosion was felt shortly after M.T.B. 77 had altered round.

5. M.T.B. 77 got into position between 300 and 400 yards on the starboard bow of the second merchant vessel of the port column and the starboard torpedo firing lever was pulled.

Unfortunately the firing mechanism failed, and owing to the heat of the battle it was not noticed that the torpedo had not left the tube. At about this time a burst of about ten heavy calibre cannon shells aimed at M.T.B. 77 struck the bridge of the merchant vessel.

6. It was then decided to attack the leading merchant vessel of the port column with depth-charges before disengaging. Speed was increased to 27 knots and M.T.B. 77 steered so as to pass close under the stem of the target, Lieutenant D. M. W. Napier, R.N.V.R. went aft to the port depth-charge to release it when in position, but was killed when abreast of it.

M.T.B. 77 passed right under the stem of the target, and a tray of twelve 20-m.m. S.A.P. incendiary from the Breda gun was fired into the merchant vessel hitting her just above the water line.

We then decided to disengage to the southward as quickly as possible as the enemy gunfire was intense and becoming very accurate; an attempt to lay smoke was unsuccessful as the C.S.A. apparatus had been hit. After about ten minutes, firing on M.T.B. 77 ceased and course was set to the south-east, M.T.B. 82 having joined us. The escort continued to fire, at times in the air, for some time after our withdrawal.

7. M.T.B. 82 (Lieutenant P. R. A. Taylor, R.N.R.), when the order was received to proceed on one engine, followed close behind M.T.B. 77 and assumed by the course that M.T.B. 77 was steering that she intended to attack the port column, and consequently altered course to the westward to attack from the convoy's starboard bow.

On altering course to port to cross over to the starboard column, M.T.B. 82 sighted the destroyer ahead of the column and decided to steer down between the lines and attack the first merchant vessel of the port column. By this time M.T.B. 77 was crossing between the columns and M.T.B. 82 decided to attack the leading ship of the starboard column. M.T.B. 82 then came under very heavy fire from many directions, and fired one torpedo at the leading ship of the starboard column.

M.T.B. 82 altered course to the southward, being engaged by a destroyer and an E-boat.

8. A cloud of black smoke was observed alongside the leading merchant vessel of the starboard column, preceded by a flash. This was certainly caused by M.T.B. 77's torpedo hitting.

During her withdrawal, M.T.B. 82 engaged an E-boat that was keeping station on her starboard beam; this action drew accurate fire from the destroyer. M.T.B. 82 increased to maximum speed and withdrew to the south-east, joining up with M.T.B. 77.

9. M.T.B. 61 (*Gun Boat*) (Lieutenant T. J. Bligh, R.N.V.R.) sighted the enemy at 2328, and on receiving the order to proceed on one engine decided to proceed to the stern of the convoy to create a diversion in accordance with pre-arranged tactics.

On hearing M.T.B. 77 start all three engines, M.T.B. 61 did likewise and passed down the port side of the convoy engaging the merchant ships with 20-m.m. gunfire. Having observed the two M.T.B.s disengaging, and M.T.B. 61 being apparently mistaken for an E-boat (or unobserved) she stopped abeam of the stern destroyer. Calcium flares were then dropped in an endeavour to draw off an E-boat, but although a destroyer opened fire on the flares, the E-boats did not leave the convoy.

10. M.T.B. 61 then proceeded to the starboard beam of the convoy and opened fire with all bearing guns at a range of about 2,000 yards. As the E-boats still declined action and the merchant vessels showed no inclination to straggle, M.T.B. 61 proceeded to the port beam of the convoy and opened fire on an E-boat at a range of 2,000 yards. Fire was returned by the convoy. M.T.B. 61 then proceeded to the head of the convoy to investigate possibilities of a smoke screen, but as three destroyers were keeping close station there, and the wind and sea were increasing, it was decided to discontinue the engagement at 0100/16.

A course of south 48 degrees east was steered and M.T.B. 61 joined M.T.B.s 77 and 82 at the rendezvous at 0210.

During the whole of the time that M.T.B. 61 was in contact with the enemy she was on hand steering, which made manoeuvring very difficult, and turning at high speed almost impossible.

At 0220/16, M.T.B.s 77, 82 and 61 proceeded on a course of south 48 degrees east for Malta, arriving at 0830/16.

11. It is considered that the following damage was sustained by the convoy:—

One merchant vessel damaged and possibly sunk by torpedo from M.T.B. 77;

One merchant vessel damaged by gunfire from escort;

One merchant vessel damaged by gunfire from M.T.B. 77;

E-boats possibly damaged by our gunfire.

12. Damage sustained by our own forces:—

M.T.B. 77—shrapnel holes in engine-room, tank-space and crew space, slight damage on deck;

M.T.B. 82—one cannon-shell hit on the stern;

M.T.B. 61—no damage.