

35. 2230 to 2350.—Force W was searched for by two flare-dropping aircraft.

36. At about 2315 I received a signal from Vice-Admiral, Malta reporting 2 enemy cruisers and 4 destroyers leaving Palermo at 2125. This report necessitated an immediate decision whether to reinforce Force X by sending one or both of the cruisers in Force W. My reasons for not doing so were:—

(i) I did not consider the Italian force would go west and attack the convoy by night, or that

(ii) they would go into the area in which the convoy would be by the following dawn, as I have always understood the Italians avoid this area owing to the danger of air attack from Malta.

(iii) Judging from past encounters with the Italians, the convoy escort was large enough to deter them from doing any harm to the convoy, and, with the added danger of air attack, they would keep clear. The original intention was that Force X should consist only of destroyers. I had the CAIRO added.

(iv) Force W would, by dawn on 15th June, still be only 130 miles from the air base in Sardinia, which is within easy striking distance. Also, torpedo bomber attack during the night was quite probable. EAGLE and ARGUS would be extremely vulnerable without the gun support of the cruisers.

(v) By midnight Force W was 162 miles from where the convoy would be by daylight and cruisers would, to be of any use, have to average about 24 knots on courses which included a stretch of quite tricky navigation, in itself a hazardous undertaking.

With the force available, a decision either way was a gamble. If the LIVERPOOL had been present there would have been no doubt in my mind.

Monday, 15th June.

37. Force W was shadowed continuously but only two very half-hearted approaches by torpedo bombing aircraft were made. One SM.79 was shot down by Hurricanes and other aircraft were chased away.

38. 1600 to 1700.—Reports indicated that the Italian surface ships were retiring northwards and at 0130/16 these ships were reported near Marittimo still going north.

Tuesday, 16th June.

39. 0800.—Having taken Force W clear of air attack, I ordered MALAYA, ARGUS, WISHART, WRESTLER, VIDETTE and ESCAPADE at 0850 to Gibraltar and remained in KENYA with EAGLE, CHARYBDIS, ONSLOW and ICARUS in a position from which I could cover the oiling of Force X from BROWN RANGER if required further east on the 17th or 18th. EAGLE's escort was short of fuel and at 1710 I decided to send her to Gibraltar with ONSLOW and ICARUS to complete with fuel and be ready to sail again if required.

Wednesday, 17th June.

40. Force X, still being intermittently bombed, was met at 2017, and I returned to Gibraltar with them.

41. Reports of the proceedings of Force X while detached are being forwarded direct to Admiralty by CAIRO.*

Remarks.

42. *Merchant ships.*—The ships in convoy behaved in an exemplary manner during periods of attack, but the fact that the convoy could not be relied on to keep station at more than 12½ knots added to the difficulties of keeping up to time. With the limitations imposed by darkness on the last 36 hours' run every revolution counted.

43. *Motor Launches.*—I consider the determination of the Captains and crews of these boats worthy of high praise. They had ample excuse for turning back, yet not one of them did so and all arrived safely. They had a few very close shaves with bombs and one torpedo when dropped very nearly landed on one of them.

44. *Fighters.*—The number of fighters in the air never exceeded 6 Hurricanes and 2 Fulmars. This number is quite inadequate and the Hurricane is not sufficiently strongly armed to deal with types such as the JU.88. Twenty fighters armed with cannon in the air would have made a vast difference.

The achievements of the pilots of EAGLE were magnificent while the ground staff deserve high praise for the way in which they managed to keep aircraft in the air in excess of the numbers it had been thought possible to operate.†

45. *Forces employed.*—If further operations of this nature are undertaken, interference by surface craft must now be considered as probable between the time of the main force parting company and the arrival of the convoy at Malta.

On this assumption there should be sufficient ships in Force X to deal with surface attack, leaving the Fighter Directing Ship and some A.A. screen with the convoy.

Further it is essential to have only really reliable fast ships in the convoy. This will very materially increase the chances of success.

46. I cannot speak too highly of the conduct of all ships under my command. Many were sorely tried and none found wanting. CAIRO and the destroyers of Force X, and EAGLE and LIVERPOOL were outstanding. I saw as many of the ships of my force as I could at Gibraltar before sailing, and greatly admired the spirit and enthusiasm I found. I know how pleased they must have been to receive Their Lordships' signal of congratulations.

(Signed) A. T. B. CURTEIS,

Vice Admiral,

Senior Officer, Force T.

Admiralty footnotes :

* Report of Senior Officer, Force X is attached as an appendix to this despatch

† The 16 Hurricanes and 6 Fulmars operated by H.M. Ships EAGLE and ARGUS shot down 13 and damaged at least 11 Italian and German aircraft on the 13th, 14th and 15th June, 1942. This was no mean achievement, especially in view of the persistence of the enemy air attacks and the fact that it was not possible to maintain more than four Hurricanes (six for short periods) and two Fulmars in the air at a time. Our total fighter losses from all causes were three Hurricanes and four Fulmars, few of which were lost in air combat.