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BATTLE OF MATAPAN.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 11th November, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

Mediterranean,
11th November, 1941.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached reports of the Battle of Matapan, 27th-30th March, 1941. Five ships of the enemy fleet were sunk, burned or destroyed as per margin.* Except for the loss of one aircraft in action, our fleet suffered no damage or casualties.

2. The events and information prior to the action, on which my appreciation was based, are already known to Their Lordships. Long and anxious consideration had been given to the disposition of available forces, important factors being the necessity to maintain the flow of "Lustre"† convoys to Greece, and the difficulty of finding sufficient destroyers for a fleet operation when demands for convoy escorts were so heavy.

The disablement of H.M.S. YORK at Suda Bay at the outset of these deliberations was a serious blow.

3. The disposition described in paragraph 7 of the Commander-in-Chief's narrative was adopted with the intention of countering a possible cruiser raid into the Aegean. It was designed to give flexibility and allowed for a quick change of plan if more intelligence came to hand to clarify the situation.

I was concerned to avoid any movement which might alarm the enemy and cause him to defer any operation he might have in mind. To allow a state of suspense to continue, with Operation "Lustre" in full swing, would have imposed an increased strain on the light forces of the fleet.

Note:—UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED REFERENCES ARE TO PARAGRAPHS IN THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION'S NARRATIVE.

* 10,000 ton cruisers:—ZARA, POLA, FIUME. 1,500 ton destroyers, two, probably:—GIOBERTI, MAESTRALE.

† *Admiralty footnote:—*Operation "Lustre" was the transport of British troops and supplies to Greece.

4. The disposition originally ordered left the cruisers without support. The battlefleet could if necessary have put to sea, but very inadequately screened. Further consideration led to the retention of sufficient destroyers to screen the battlefleet. The moment was a lucky one when more destroyers than usual were at Alexandria having just returned from or just awaiting escort duty.

5. It had already been decided to take the battlefleet to sea under cover of night on the evening of the 27th, when air reconnaissance from Malta reported enemy cruisers steaming eastward p.m./27th. The battlefleet accordingly proceeded with all possible secrecy. It was well that it did so, for the forenoon of the 28th found the enemy south of Gavdo and the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces (Vice-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell), with Force "B"* in an awkward situation which might have been serious had the support of the battlefleet been lacking.

6. The situation at 0812 (Diagram No. 1), when surface contact was first made did not appear unsatisfactory although in fact at this time Force "B" was very uncomfortably placed with a second and powerful enemy cruiser squadron out of sight to the north-east and well placed to cut Force "B" off from the battlefleet. This squadron had actually been sighted and reported by H.M.S. GLOUCESTER'S spotting aircraft (see paragraph 10 and Report of V.A.L.F., paragraph 11) but fortunately for everybody's peace of mind this report did not get beyond H.M.S. GLOUCESTER'S T.S.† (see diagrams 1 and 2).

7. Aircraft from H.M.S. FORMIDABLE had sighted and reported a further force to the northward of the cruisers and in one case had reported battleships, but the situation was not very clear. The aircraft were not at this time using duty letters which made for confusion: previous experience had taught us how often cruisers of the Italian Navy are reported as

* *Admiralty footnote:—*Force "B" consisted of H.M. Ships ORION (Flag of V.A.L.F.), AJAX, PERTH and GLOUCESTER, the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla comprising ILEX (Captain D.12), HASTY, HEReward and VENDETTA.

† *Admiralty footnote:—*T.S. Transmitting Station.

battleships from the air. The situation did not, therefore, appear unduly alarming, but the air striking force was made ready and H.M.S. VALIANT ordered ahead to join V.A.L.F.

8. The sighting by Force "B" of a battleship at 1058 (see diagram No. 3) put a very different complexion on affairs. The enemy was known to be fast and H.M.S. GLOUCESTER had been reported only capable of 24 knots. Force "B" looked like being sandwiched between the VITTORIO VENETO and the 8 inch cruisers they had already engaged. It was with great relief that it was realised that Force "B" was able to make 30 knots and that the range was not closing.

V.A.L.F. handled the squadron with great skill, holding the range open and taking every advantage of his smoke screen as he worked round to south-east to close the battlefleet; but there were some unpleasant minutes with 15 inch salvos straddling the cruisers before the intervention of the Torpedo/Bomber striking force which gained a hit on the VITTORIO had caused her to turn away (see paragraph 15 and diagram No. 4).

9. It had always previously been my intention, if contact were made with the enemy's fleet, to hold back the torpedo air striking force until the battlefleets had closed within about 50 miles of each other, or until the enemy had definitely turned away. On this occasion owing to the exposed position of the cruisers it was necessary to launch the striking force unduly early. Few things could have been more timely than their intervention but it had the effect I had always feared, that the damaged enemy turned for home with a lead which could not be closed to gun range in daylight.

10. Meanwhile the battlefleet was pressing on fast to close the enemy. V.A.L.F.'s signal timed 1210 reporting he had lost touch actually reached me as Force "B" hove in sight at 1230. It might be argued that Force "B" should have followed and maintained touch when the enemy turned westward, but with the considerable chance which then existed of being cut off by superior force, and adequate air reconnaissance being available, it is considered that the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was correct in his decision to gain visual contact with the battlefleet and check respective positions before resuming the chase. His force had been outranged and outgunned by all enemy vessels with which he had so far made contact.

11. The attacks carried out by Royal Air Force Blenheim bombers from Greece were most welcome as giving the enemy a taste of his own medicine, this being the first time that our bombing aircraft had co-operated with the fleet at sea. In actual fact it is not thought that any hits were scored, certainly no appreciable damage was done, but the attacks must have worried the enemy and made him even more chary of approaching our coasts. The work of 230 Fighter/Bomber Squadron was, as ever, invaluable.

12. It cannot be said for certain how many, if any, further hits were obtained on VITTORIO by the successive Fleet Air Arm attacks during the afternoon (diagram No. 5) and evening. All that is certain is that the POLA was hit and stopped in a dusk attack, but, whatever the result, the gallantry and perseverance of the aircraft crews and the

smooth efficiency of deck and ground crews in H.M.S. FORMIDABLE and at Maleme are deserving of high praise.

An example of the spirit of these young officers is the case of Lieutenant F. M. A. Torrens Spence, Royal Navy, who, rather than be left out, flew with the only available aircraft and torpedo from Eleusis to Maleme and in spite of reconnaissance difficulties and bad communications arranged his own reconnaissance and finally took off with a second aircraft in company and took part in the dusk attack.

13. In spite of continual air sighting reports the situation towards the end of the afternoon had become rather confused. This was due to the presence of both ship borne and shore based reconnaissance aircraft, a considerable change of wind, the presence of several separate enemy squadrons and finally the ever present difficulty of distinguishing the silhouettes of enemy warships. It was difficult to decide the tactics for the night.

The situation was however rapidly cleared up by about 1800. V.A.L.F.'s cruisers were just gaining touch ahead and two aircraft, Duty V of H.M.S. FORMIDABLE and Duty Q from H.M.S. WARSPITE had made contact. Mention must here be made of the excellent work of H.M.S. WARSPITE'S catapult aircraft (Lieutenant-Commander A. S. Bolt, D.S.C., Royal Navy, Observer). This aircraft had, by a fortunate mistake, returned to the ship instead of going to Suda Bay as ordered. It was recovered, refuelled and catapulted as Duty Q at 1745. Within an hour and a half this experienced observer had presented me with an accurate picture of the situation which was of the utmost value at this time (diagram No. 6).

14. The last report, however, showed that a difficult problem was before us. The enemy had concentrated in a mass which presented a most formidable obstacle to attack by cruisers and destroyers. By morning he would be drawing under cover of dive bombing aircraft from Sicily. The question was whether to send the destroyers in now to attack this difficult target or wait until morning in the hope of engaging at dawn, but with the certainty of exposing the fleet to a heavy scale of air attack. Decision was taken to attack with destroyers and to follow up with the battlefleet.

15. Meanwhile the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was also faced with difficult decisions. As dusk fell he was drawing up on the enemy with his cruisers spread, to maintain contact. In the last of the afterglow it appeared that an enemy squadron was turning back towards him which obliged him to concentrate his force. This was undoubtedly a right decision, but from then onward every time he wished to spread his cruisers to resume the search he was foiled by some circumstances, not least of which was the decision of Captain (D) 14th Destroyer Flotilla to lead the destroyer flotillas round the northern flank of the enemy before attacking. This decision of Captain D.14 was most unfortunate, as it cramped the cruiser squadron and left the southern flank of the enemy open for escape (diagram No. 6). It is thought that the enemy did in fact "jink" to the south about this time and thus get away.

16. The battleship night action (diagram Nos. 7 and 8) presented no novel aspect, apart from the employment of Radar and the outstanding success of the indirect illumination provided by

H.M.S. GREYHOUND, but a curious contrast of opinion has arisen over the actual targets engaged. The technical records of the action show that H.M.S. WARSPITE engaged the rear-most ship first and subsequently shifted target *left* to the second ship in the enemy line (the leading ship is now thought to have been a destroyer).

*My own opinion supported by the Chief of Staff, the Captain of the Fleet and several Staff Officers, is that H.M.S. WARSPITE engaged the leading 8 inch cruiser (2nd in the line) and subsequently shifted fire *right* to the rear ship. It is a point which cannot be absolutely decided until the full story of this action from both sides is known, but it appears that the Gunnery Records must be wrong.

17. On conclusion of the battlefleet action, the signal was made "All forces not engaged in sinking the enemy, retire north-east". The order was intended to ensure withdrawal on parallel tracks clear of the destroyer melee, and was made under the impression that cruisers and striking force were in contact with the enemy. Heavy fighting had been observed to the south westward which supported this belief. Unfortunately the cruisers were not in fact engaged and the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, accordingly withdrew to the north-east. He had sighted a red pyrotechnic signal some distance to the north-west 40 minutes earlier and was at this time about to spread to investigate (see report of V.A.L.F., paragraph 35). This red light signal was sighted simultaneously by Captain D.14 bearing 010 degrees, who seeing it in the direction of the 7th Cruiser Squadron and knowing from their †G.A.B. signal they had seen it, forebore to investigate.

There seems little doubt, from subsequent analysis, that this must have been the remainder of the Italian Fleet withdrawing to the north-west (see diagram No. 9).

I am of the opinion that the course I selected for withdrawal led the fleet too far to the eastward, and that a more northerly course should have been steered.

18. I hoped when ordering the eight destroyers of the striking force to attack that the cruisers would regain touch to assist Captain D.14 to launch his attack. The bearing and distance of the enemy given to the striking force when detached (286 degrees 35 miles from H.M.S. WARSPITE) was based on the plot and was in fact approximately correct but the enemy's course appears to have been 45 degrees further to the north-westward than that estimated. In spite, therefore, of Captain D.14's intention to pass to the northward of the enemy, the striking force apparently passed under the stern of the enemy to his southern flank whilst the cruisers were steering on an approximately parallel course on the enemy's northern flank (see diagram No. 7). The red pyrotechnic was shown between these two British forces.

19. The mistake made by H.M.S. HAVOCK (paragraph 38) in reporting the POLA as a LITTORIO class did not actually bring about any ill effect, since the flotillas had by then missed the VITTORIO and did useful work in polishing off the damaged cruisers (diagram No. 10). The movements and the results

*Admiralty footnote.—Subsequent analysis tends to show that WARSPITE first engaged FIUME, the second cruiser, and that she then shifted target and with VALIANT fired at ZARA the leading cruiser.

†Admiralty footnote.—G.A.B. signifies General Alarm Bearing.

achieved by H.M.A.S. STUART's division during the night remain most obscure. H.M.S. HAVOCK certainly sank an enemy destroyer.

They had an exciting night and did considerable execution, but the presence of undamaged enemy cruisers in the area at that time seems unlikely and it is not improbable that the ships so reported by H.M.A.S. STUART were in fact some of the others of his own division.

20. It seems that the enemy must have been able to increase speed again during the night, since although extensive reconnaissance was flown next morning, he remained unsighted and must by then have been nearing the Italian coast. The search for survivors was interrupted by the appearance of German aircraft and it was decided to withdraw the fleet before the expected heavy air attacks developed, as no more useful work appeared to remain to be done.

The fleet was in fact subjected to a fairly severe dive bombing attack by Ju 88s at 1530, when H.M.S. FORMIDABLE was narrowly missed by several bombs.

21. The mistake which prevented the Greek destroyer flotilla taking part in the action was perhaps not unfortunate (see paragraph 39). These destroyers had been sent through the Corinth Canal to Argostoli with admirable promptitude to a position where they were well placed to intercept the retreating enemy fleet, a task which they would certainly have undertaken with characteristic gallantry. Nevertheless the presence of yet another detached force in the area, and that force one with which I could not readily communicate, would have seriously added to the complexity of the situation. It was, however, disappointing for the Greeks.

22. The results of the action cannot be viewed with entire satisfaction, since the damaged VITTORIO VENETO was allowed to escape. The failure of the cruisers and destroyers to make contact with her during the night was unlucky and is much to be regretted. Nevertheless substantial results were achieved in the destruction of the three ZARA Class cruisers. These fast well armed and armoured ships had always been a source of anxiety as a threat to our own less well armed cruisers and I was well content to see them disposed of in this summary fashion. There is little doubt that the rough handling given the enemy on this occasion served us in good stead during the subsequent evacuations of Greece and Crete. Much of these later operations may be said to have been conducted under the cover of the Battle of Matapan.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM,
Admiral.

NARRATIVE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN.

Preliminary Intelligence.

From the 25th March onwards various indications were noticed of increasing activity on the part of German and Italian forces. Features of the activity noticed were an increasingly active sea reconnaissance by aircraft to the south and west of Greece and Crete and daily attempts to reconnoitre Alexandria harbour.

2. These activities together with the obvious imminence of the German attack on Greece and Yugo Slavia led to belief that some important step by the enemy was impending. The unusual keenness with which the enemy was

watching the movements of the Mediterranean Fleet made it appear possible that an operation by enemy surface forces was intended.

The most probable actions by enemy surface forces appeared to be:—

(a) An attack on our convoy routes in the Aegean.

(b) The escorting of a convoy to the Dodecanese.

(c) A diversion to cover a landing either in Cyrenaica or in Greece.

(d) The possibility of an attack on Malta could not be excluded.

3. The Commander-in-Chief was therefore faced with the problem of meeting a threat which he knew to exist, but whose nature he could not foretell. Our most vulnerable point at this time lay undoubtedly in the convoys carrying troops and material to Greece. They were moving, at the time, comparatively lightly escorted, under the rather inadequate cover of the Seventh Cruiser Squadron in the Aegean.

It was important to avoid interruption in the passage of these convoys if possible.

4. The obvious course to prevent enemy surface action against the convoys would have been to move the battlefleet into the area west of Crete. It was, however, almost certain that, had this been done, the fleet would have been sighted on its way, in which case the enemy would have only deferred his operation until the fleet was obliged to return to harbour to fuel.

5. After consideration it appeared most undesirable to defer this unknown threat which was impending. It was accordingly decided that the best course would be to clear the threatened area of convoys and merchant shipping so that the enemy's blow would be struck in a vacuum, at the same time making such disposition of available forces as would enable us to engage enemy surface forces should they appear.

6. At the same time it was important to maintain an appearance of normality in the area concerned, lest the enemy should "smell a rat". It was lucky that only one convoy was actually at sea, A.G.9 bound for Piraeus with troops, which was then south of Crete. This convoy was ordered to maintain its course until nightfall 27th and then turn back in its tracks. A southbound convoy from Piraeus was ordered not to sail.

In the meantime authorities in the Aegean were warned at the last possible moment to clear the area of shipping.

Dispositions.

7. The following dispositions were then ordered:—

(a) Force B, consisting of Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, with four cruisers and four destroyers to be south-west of Gavdo Island at daylight 28th March.

(b) Force C, consisting of five destroyers to join him at that time.

(c) *T.S.R. Squadrons in Crete and Cyrenaica to be reinforced.

(d) Royal Air Force requested to exert maximum effort of reconnaissance and bomber aircraft in Aegean and to west of Crete on 28th March.

(e) H.M. Submarines ROVER and TRIUMPH ordered to patrol off Suda Bay and Milo respectively.

(f) Force D, consisting of H.M. Ships JUNO, JAGUAR, and DEFENDER, who were at Piraeus, to be at short notice.

(g) H.M.S. CARLISLE ordered to Suda Bay to augment A.A. defences.

(h) Greek Naval forces warned to be at short notice.

Air Reconnaissance Report.

8. This plan was adhered to in the main but at noon/27th three enemy cruisers and one destroyer were sighted by air reconnaissance in position 36 degs. 30 mins. N., 16 degs. 40 mins. E., steering 120 degs. This position was later amended to 36 degs. 54 mins. N., 17 degs. 10 mins. E. Visibility was bad and the flying boat could not shadow. The Commander-in-Chief decided to take the battlefleet to sea, cancelled the move to Cyrenaica of the T.S.R. aircraft, and made the following re-dispositions:—

Force "B," consisting of the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces in ORION, AJAX, PERTH, GLOUCESTER, the Captain (D), Second Destroyer Flotilla in ILEX, HASTY, HEReward and VENDETTA (all from operations in the Aegean) were to rendezvous and be in position 34 degs. 20 mins. N., 24 degs. 10 mins. E., at 0630/28th. GLOUCESTER'S speed was reported down to 24 knots due to trouble with a plumper block.

Force "C" was to remain with the battlefleet.

Royal Air Force reconnaissance was arranged for 28th over the southern Ionian Sea, the south-west Aegean, and south of Crete.

Fleet Sailing from Alexandria.

9. Enemy reconnaissance planes were over the fleet at Alexandria at noon and again p.m. 27th. At dusk, 1900/27th, the Commander-in-Chief sailed the Fleet from Alexandria. WARSPITE, BARHAM, VALIANT and FORMIDABLE were in company, the Rear-Admiral, First Battle Squadron, being in BARHAM, and the Rear-Admiral, Mediterranean Aircraft Carriers, in FORMIDABLE. The fleet was screened by Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla in JERVIS, JANUS, NUBIAN, MOHAWK, the Captain (D), Tenth Destroyer Flotilla in STUART, GREYHOUND, GRIFFIN, HOTSPUR and HAVOCK. Course was set 300 degs. at 20 knots.

28th March, 1941—First Sight and Contact with the Enemy—Forenoon Action.

10. A dawn air search was flown off from FORMIDABLE and at 0739 an aircraft reported four cruisers and six destroyers (to be known as Force "X") about 30 miles south of Gavdo Island steering 160 degs. This was at first thought to be an inaccurate report of Force "B" which was known to be in that area, but at 0827 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' first sighting report of three cruisers and destroyers was received. The Commander-in-Chief increased speed to 22 knots maintaining course 300 degs. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was estimated to bear 267 degs. 90 miles from the battlefleet and the enemy were reported 009 degs. 18 miles from him steering first 100 degs. and then 160 degs. At 0900 the enemy were reported turning back to 300 degs. with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, also turning to the north-westward. The Commander-in-Chief detached VALIANT to proceed

* Admiralty footnote:—T.S.R.—Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance.

ahead at maximum speed with NUBIAN and MOHAWK; WARSPITE (who was having slight condenser trouble) and BARHAM remained in company with FORMIDABLE.

11. FORMIDABLE'S aircraft were not using "Duty Letters" so that it was difficult to follow the series of reports. Their positions were also being omitted from reports as in the case of aircraft 5H report timed 0905. An enemy force was being reported to the northward of the cruisers, but it was not clear to the Commander-in-Chief whether this was in fact another force or either of those already in contact. The term "battleships" was used on one occasion. On balance it seemed probable that there was another enemy force containing battleships, on which the cruisers were retiring; the Commander-in-Chief, therefore, decided to keep the air striking force back until the doubt about this had been cleared up. The aircraft, however, lost touch with the enemy and at 0939 the Commander-in-Chief ordered the air striking force to attack the cruisers in contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces; if another squadron was sighted first, it was to be attacked instead.

12. At this time Force "X" was estimated to be 75 miles 300 degs. from the Commander-in-Chief, being reported 16 miles 320 degs. from the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces. In order to increase the speed of the fleet, BARHAM was ordered to follow in the wake of the screen independently of flying operations. VENDETTA was sighted ahead having been detached by the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces to join the battlefleet on account of engine trouble. The Commander-in-Chief ordered her to proceed independently to Alexandria.

13. By 1030 there was still no further news of the enemy to the northward and it seemed possible that Force "X" in contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was after all the only enemy squadron in the vicinity; but at 1058 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces reported two battleships bearing 002 degs. 16 miles from him and steering 160 degs. The Vice-Admiral Light Forces turned away to the south-eastward making smoke, but was evidently placed in a most uncomfortable position with the cruisers on his starboard quarter and the battleships (to be known as Force "Y") to port. The Commander-in-Chief ordered FORMIDABLE to put the air striking force on to the battleships and decided to close the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces as quickly as possible rather than work round between the battleships and their base. The doubt as to whether GLOUCESTER would be able to maintain the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' reported speed of 30 knots weighed in favour of this decision, but the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' 1123 showed that he was still keeping the battleships at a range of 16 miles.

14. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces was estimated to bear 280 degs. 65 miles from the Commander-in-Chief at 1135 steering 120 degs. but there was some doubt as to the accuracy of this owing to possible difference in reference positions. In order, therefore, to be certain of making contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces as early as possible, the Commander-in-Chief altered course to 290 degs. at 1135 and to 270 degs. at 1200. FORMIDABLE was detached with two destroyers to operate aircraft independently, VALIANT was still in company and BARHAM had been keeping up well.

Surface contact lost—First air attack.

15. At 1200 Force "Y", which was now reported to consist of only one LITTORIO class battleship with destroyers, was estimated to bear 290 degs. 45 miles from the Commander-in-Chief; the destroyer screen was detached ahead to join the Captains (D), but at 1210 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces reported having lost touch with the enemy battlefleet and five minutes later the air striking force returned with the news that the battleship had last been seen at 1145, steering 270 degs. with cruisers 20 miles to the south-east. The striking force reported one probable hit on the battleship. A JU. 88 had been shot down by a Fulmar.

Second heavy Enemy Force reported.

16. A new force (to be known as Force "Z") was now sighted to the northward by Flying Boat Duty V. It was reported to consist of two CAVOUR class battleships, one POLA and two ZARA cruisers and five destroyers in position 35 miles west of Gavdo Island steering 315 degs. 25 knots.

Contact made with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces.

17. At 1230 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces was sighted bearing 220 degs. 12 miles with all his force undamaged. The Commander-in-Chief altered course to 290 degs. and ordered the second air striking force to attack the LITTORIO battleship. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' signal timed 1245 was the first intimation to the Commander-in-Chief that the enemy had turned northward, but this was later assumed to be a signal error and the enemy to have turned westward as reported by the striking force.

By 1250 it was evident that Forces "X" and "Y" had turned back and there was no prospect of overtaking them unless the speed of the LITTORIO was reduced by air attack. The destroyers were, therefore, ordered to reform a battlefleet screen, the Captain (D), Second Destroyer Flotilla and two destroyers being sent to the assistance of FORMIDABLE who was now a long way astern and seen to be engaging two Torpedo-Bomber aircraft. Speed was reduced at 1306 to 22 knots and at 1325 to 21 knots to allow FORMIDABLE and BARHAM to keep up. Force B was now in position 230 degs. 6 miles from the battlefleet.

The Chase.

18. At 1350 course was altered to 310 degs. as it was thought probable that Forces "Y" and "Z" were trying to make contact with each other. An air search was also ordered to the north-westward since no further reports had been received of Forces "X" and "Y". Doubts whether Duty "V" might in reality be reporting Force "Y" were cleared up when his position was checked by a landfall and at 1342 the Commander-in-Chief signalled the positions of the three forces to the fleet. 201 Group were instructed to concentrate all flying boats in the area south and west of Crete to maintain touch with the enemy. JUNO and Force D were ordered to patrol the Kithera Straits.

19. During the forenoon a strong breeze from the north-east had made flying operations delay the fleet, but in the afternoon the wind dropped altogether and the heavy cloud dispersed. This change in the wind probably also affected the accuracy of the reported positions of the shore based aircraft.

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.

the destroyer screen being ordered over to the starboard side.

31. At 2225 two large cruisers were unexpectedly sighted on the starboard bow, with a smaller vessel, thought at first to be a 6-inch cruiser, ahead of them. The battlefleet were turned back to 280 degs. into line ahead, and at 2228 when the enemy were on the port bow at a range of about 4,000 yards, GREY-HOUND illuminated one of the enemy cruisers with her searchlight, and WARSPITE opened fire. FORMIDABLE hauled out of the line to starboard and the battlefleet engaged. The enemy were seen to be two cruisers of the ZARA Class on an opposite course; they were apparently completely taken by surprise and their turrets were fore and aft. WARSPITE'S first 15-inch broadside hit the rear cruiser with devastating effect, five out of six shells hitting. Both cruisers were thereafter repeatedly hit, set severely on fire and put out of action. A destroyer was seen passing behind the burning cruisers; this was probably the smaller vessel originally sighted ahead of them.

32. Except for flashing signals seen on the port quarter, nothing further was seen of the original damaged ship which the battlefleet had been closing to investigate. (BARHAM was unable to carry out searchlight sweeping procedure on the port quarter owing to damage to her searchlights by blast.)

33. At 2230 three enemy destroyers were sighted on the port bow closing from a position astern of their cruisers and were engaged. At 2232 they were seen to turn away making smoke and one at least fired torpedoes.

The battlefleet was turned 90 degs. to starboard together by Fixed Light Manœuvring Signal to avoid torpedoes and at 2233 steadied on course 010 degs. At this time FORMIDABLE was acting independently on the starboard bow.

34. During the engagement with enemy destroyers, the leading destroyers had been hit by 6-inch fire from WARSPITE, and some confusion was caused by HAVOCK being closely engaged with the enemy destroyers and failing to burn fighting lights. As a result WARSPITE fired two salvos at her. HAVOCK was not damaged although it was thought at the time that she had possibly been hit.

35. The battlefleet ceased fire at 2235 and was re-formed into line ahead on a course 010 degs.; FORMIDABLE was ordered to rejoin the line at 2310. The four screening destroyers (STUART, HAVOCK, GREY-HOUND and GRIFFIN) were released at 2238 and ordered to finish off the two cruisers seen to be on fire and then bearing 150 degs. four miles.

36. At 2245, when the burning cruisers were still seen right astern (190 degs.), starshell and heavy firing with tracer ammunition could be seen bearing 230 degs., and this continued for 10 minutes or a quarter of an hour. Since none of our ships were on that bearing it was thought possible that the Italians were engaging their own forces. Firing was seen to continue in the vicinity of the damaged cruisers for some time and at 2300 a heavy explosion was seen and thought to be the torpedoing of one of them.

Withdrawal—Light Forces Engagement.

37. The Commander-in-Chief then decided to withdraw to the north-eastward in order to avoid the possibility of our own forces engaging

each other and to return to the battle area in the morning. He, therefore, ordered all forces not engaged in sinking the enemy to withdraw to the north-eastward, and at 2330 altered course to 070 degs., speed 18 knots. The Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla, was told not to withdraw until after the striking force had attacked. Firing and occasional heavy flashes were still seen intermittently until about 0100 on a bearing of 190 degs. to 200 degs.

38. At 0020 HAVOCK reported contact with a LITTORIO battleship in the position of the damaged cruisers. The Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla, with the striking force reported that he was joining HAVOCK, as did GREYHOUND and GRIFFIN, but at 0110 HAVOCK altered the report to that of an 8-inch cruiser. At 0036, the Captain (D), Tenth Destroyer Flotilla, had reported leaving three cruisers stopped and on fire and two other cruisers in the vicinity as well as two damaged destroyers. At 0314 HAVOCK reported being alongside POLA and asked whether "to board or blow her stern off with depth charges," the Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla then reported having sunk ZARA and being about to sink POLA.

29th March, 1941.

39. At 0006 the Commander-in-Chief had ordered the fleet to rendezvous at 0700 in position 35 degs. 54 mins. N., 21 degs. 38 mins. E., and requested air reconnaissance the following morning. JUNO, JAGUAR and DEFENDER were ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief, and also BONAVENTURE, who had left Alexandria the previous afternoon. A Greek flotilla of seven destroyers had been sent through the Corinth Canal to await orders on the first reports of the engagement, but owing to a cyphering error they were not ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief until 0350. *The Naval Attache, Athens, reported that 23 Blenheims had attacked the northern force of enemy ships between 1445 and 1655/28th March and had stopped one cruiser with two direct hits and a destroyer with one direct hit. Maleme also reported at least one torpedo hit on the LITTORIO battleship at 1940/28.

Fleet Re-formed.

40. At 0430 the Commander-in-Chief altered course to 250 degs. and informed the fleet that he was keeping W/T silence. At daylight an air search was flown off from FORMIDABLE and between 0600 and 0700 all units of the fleet rejoined the Commander-in-Chief. It was thought that at least one of our destroyers must have been seriously damaged in all the firing subsequent to the main action, but no ship reported either damage or casualties. One Swordfish was later reported missing.

41. At 0800 the Commander-in-Chief was in position 35 degs. 43 mins. N., 21 degs. 40 mins. E., and course was set 220 degs. to sweep the area of the action. Between 0950 and 1100 many boats and rafts with Italian survivors were seen and a large number of survivors were picked up by destroyers, but at 1100 enemy aircraft were sighted and as there was no report of enemy surface ships anywhere in the vicinity, course was set 120 degs. for Alexandria. A

* *Admiralty footnote*:—Subsequent information has established that the report of the Naval Attache, Athens, was incorrect in that no ship was hit in these attacks by R.A.F. aircraft although some near misses were scored.

signal was broadcast to the Chief of the Italian Naval Staff giving the position of the remaining survivors. The Greek flotilla was ordered to return to Athens.

42. The fleet was shadowed during the forenoon and at 1530 a dive-bombing attack was made by about 12 JU.88s, the main attack being directed on FORMIDABLE. There was no damage, however, the fleet "umbrella barrage" proving effective. One JU.88 was shot down and one Fulmar crashed in the sea just before landing on. There were shadowers during the rest of the day but no further attack developed. STUART, GRIFFIN and HEReward were detached at 0920 to Piraeus as escort for Convoy G.A.8, and AJAX, PERTH, DEFENDER and HASTY at 1930 to Suda Bay in order to cover Aegean convoys. BONAVENTURE was also detached at this time to join convoy G.A.8 at daylight 30th March.

Damage Inflicted on the Enemy.

43. It was not at all clear to the Commander-in-Chief what ships had been sunk, and the fate of the LITTORIO battleship was in doubt. But it seemed certain from the 900 survivors on board ships of the fleet that POLA was the damaged cruiser that had been detected stopped and that she had been sunk; that the two 8-inch cruisers engaged by the battlefleet were ZARA and FIUME and that they were both sunk; that HAVOCK had sunk one destroyer and the battlefleet possibly another; in addition there might be further losses due to the Royal Air Force bombing attacks. It was also a possibility that the enemy had suffered damage in an encounter between their own forces.

30th March, 1941—Fleet Return to Alexandria.

44. The fleet continued to Alexandria and arrived there at 1730. An S.79 shadower was shot down by fleet fighters at 0834. A submarine was reported just as the fleet entered the Great Pass and the destroyer screen were ordered to clear the area ahead of the fleet with depth charges. This operation had no result apart from creating a marked impression on the Italian survivors.

From: THE VICE ADMIRAL, LIGHT FORCES,
MEDITERRANEAN, H.M.S. ORION.

To: THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
MEDITERRANEAN.

Date: 10th April, 1941.

ORION, AJAX, PERTH, GLOUCESTER, VENDETTA and HEReward, having fuelled, left Piraeus at 1300 on 27th March, 1941.

2. GLOUCESTER had, on the previous day, run a plumper block bearing and had replaced it with a spare while in Piraeus, but at the same time divers had found excessive slackness in one "A" bracket and her maximum safe speed had to be regarded as 24 knots.

3. ILEX and HASTY were ordered to leave Suda Bay so as to join the cruisers thirty miles south of Gavdo Island (in position 34 20 N., 24 10 E.) at 0630 on 28th March.

4. On the way HEReward examined an A/S contact in approximate position 012 degs. Phalconera 15 miles. This may have been the wreck of the U-Boat attacked by VENDETTA on 18th March in this position. Light oil was still to be seen on the surface in the vicinity.

5. The passage to the rendezvous was made without incident and at 0607 on 28th March two

destroyers were sighted to the northward which proved to be ILEX and HASTY.

6. The course of 200 degs. at 0645 was selected to take the squadron further from the likely area of enemy air reconnaissance, while remaining in a position suitable for any eventuality.

PHASE I (0630-1230).

7. As soon as the enemy aircraft shadowing was identified, at 0633, as a type that is sometimes carried in catapult ships, it was realised that enemy surface forces might be in the vicinity. But when the first enemy report from one of FORMIDABLE'S aircraft reported four cruisers and four destroyers (a force identical in composition with my own), some 35 miles to the north-east of my position, steering a course similar to my own, I was in some doubt whether it was not, in fact, my own force that was being reported. Enemy warships were sighted astern before any further aircraft reports had been received and decoded.

8. The enemy sighted were at once suspected of being ZARA class, since cruisers of this class had been reported at sea on the previous day by flying boats. This suspicion soon proved correct. Knowing that vessels of that class could outrange my squadron and that, having superior speed, they could choose the range I decided to try to draw them towards our own battlefleet and carrier.

9. The enemy followed and opened fire at 25,500 yards at 0812. At the same time one of the enemy cruisers was seen to catapult one aircraft. The fire was accurate to begin with and the enemy appeared to be concentrating on GLOUCESTER. She snaked the line to avoid hits.

10. At 0829, when the range had closed to 23,500 yards, GLOUCESTER opened fire with three salvos, but they all fell short. The enemy made an alteration of some 35 degs. away after the first salvo and put himself outside our gun range. After this time, although the enemy resumed a course similar to my own and continued to fire till 0855, all his salvos fell short.

11. GLOUCESTER flew off her aircraft at 0830 and it carried out action observation, but her reports were not received in ORION owing to her not using the frequency ordered.

12. During this action VENDETTA soon began to lag behind and caused some embarrassment. By 0834 she was about three miles astern and I ordered her to steer to the southward clear of the action.

13. At 0855 the enemy turned away to port and ceased fire. He eventually steadied on a course of about 300 degs. I decided to follow and endeavour to keep touch. VENDETTA, by cutting off corners, rejoined at 0925. She was ordered to join the battlefleet.

14. At 0854 a signal from aircraft 5F had been received, reporting 3 enemy battleships at 0805 in a position which was seven miles from my own position at 0805. Though this report was manifestly incorrect as regards position, it prepared me for a meeting with enemy battleships at any moment.

15. H.M.S. FORMIDABLE reported that at about 1045 or 1100, her striking force was fired at by my squadron. This may have been so. Fire was opened on various unidentified single aircraft at long range about this time.

16. A battleship was sighted to the northward at 1058. Half a minute later she opened an accurate fire from about 32,000 yards and no time was lost in altering to the southward, increasing to full speed and making smoke. ORION was the target for the first ten minutes and the first salvos fell over. ORION was straddled and suffered minor damage from a near miss.

17. When the smoke began to take effect, GLOUCESTER, being to windward, was the only ship in view to the enemy battleship and she became the target. She was repeatedly straddled. The destroyers could hardly keep up at the speed of about 31 knots which the cruiser was maintaining. Only one destroyer, HASTY, succeeded eventually in reaching a position from which her smoke was of any benefit to GLOUCESTER.

18. At 1127 our own aircraft attacked the enemy with torpedoes and she turned away and ceased fire, though owing to the smoke, I did not know this until GLOUCESTER'S signal reporting this fact got through the smoke at 1138.

19. Information for the enemy's movements during this 28-minute action is very scanty, as the battleship was only occasionally sighted from GLOUCESTER and PERTH. She appears to have steered a course approximately 160 degs. at 31 knots or more. Nothing could be seen to the north and west on account of smoke and I felt sure that the enemy cruisers which I had been following would now be closing my force from the north-west.

20. When certain that the enemy had ceased fire, I ordered ships to stop making smoke. This took some time to clear, and when the horizon could be seen (at 1148) there was nothing in sight. The enemy cruisers evidently proceeded to join the battleship.

21. Course was now steered to make contact with our own battlefleet. When touch was gained at 1230, it was found that my position, which had been confirmed within one mile by a fix at noon, was 10 miles 342 degs. from that which the battlefleet had been using.

PHASE II (1230-1800).

22. ILEX, HASTY and HEReward were detached to join the battlefleet, and the cruisers drew ahead on a bearing of 290 degs. from the battlefleet to maximum V/S distance, as ordered in your 1305.

23. At 1651 I received your 1644 ordering me to press on and gain touch with the damaged enemy battleship. Speed was increased to 30 knots.

PHASE III (1800/28-0700/29).

24. I decided to spread the cruisers by 2000 in order to locate the damaged enemy battleship. Orders to start spreading were given at 1907, but when, seven minutes later, three or four ships were sighted ahead against the afterglow, these were taken to be enemy cruisers dropping back to drive off shadows and I concentrated my squadron to deal with them.

25. At 1935 and 1945 the enemy's retaliation to the dusk torpedo attack by our own aircraft could be distinctly seen from my squadron some 12 miles away. The sky was filled with streams of tracer ammunition of various colours and they must have been very

gallant men who went through it to get their torpedoes home.

26. As it was evident that a large number of ships was in close company I decided to close concentrate. Speed was kept down to reduce bow waves.

27. At 2015 ORION obtained a deflection by Radar of a vessel six miles ahead. At the same time GLOUCESTER saw a dark object low in the water on the port bow about a mile away. This was not seen from ORION and was not reported by GLOUCESTER at the time. Speed was reduced to 15 knots, and over a period of eighteen minutes, Radar ranges were plotted, proving that the vessel was stopped or moving very slowly. She was thought to be a large vessel, bigger than any cruiser, and without other vessels in the vicinity unless they were alongside her. AJAX reported the same object by W/T.

28. By 2033 ORION was within three and a half miles of this vessel, which I thought at the time to be the damaged battleship because of her size. She still could not be seen.

29. At this juncture I decided to lead the squadron clear to the northward and then continue in search of the remaining ships. If this ship was the battleship she was "fixed," and, if not, it was necessary to regain touch.

30. The Commander-in-Chief, acting presumably on AJAX'S report, ordered the 14th and 2nd Destroyer Flotillas to attack the battleship, giving her position exactly as reported by AJAX, but giving her speed as 13 knots on a course of 295 degs.

31. At 2040, I reported the same vessel as stopped, and supposed that Captain (D), 14th Destroyer Flotilla, would attack her in that position.

32. I was considering spreading the cruisers to find the remainder, when I realised that, if Captain (D), 14th Destroyer Flotilla, went further west on the assumption that the enemy was moving at 13 knots, he would almost certainly encounter our cruisers. Furthermore, the enemy had been reported as having altered course to 230 degs. during the dusk torpedo attack and it seemed that he might now be steering, if anything, to the northward of 295 degs., if, as I suspected, he was making for Messina.

33. At 2155 AJAX reported deflection by Radar of three vessels, five miles to the southward of us. This would be rather farther west than our flotillas were likely to have reached at the time but I decided to keep concentrated and steer more to the north so as to keep clear of them, and later to alter course and increase speed so as to intercept any part of the enemy force that might have continued towards Messina, on a course of about 300 degs.

34. I kept on to the north-west so as not to be silhouetted against the star shell that were being used during the night action then in progress astern.

35. During this time a red pyrotechnic signal was sighted to the north-west at what seemed a long range, though it was difficult to judge its distance. I was about to spread when your signal was received ordering all forces not actually engaged to withdraw to the north-east.

(Signed) H. D. PRIDHAM-WIPPELL,
Vice-Admiral.

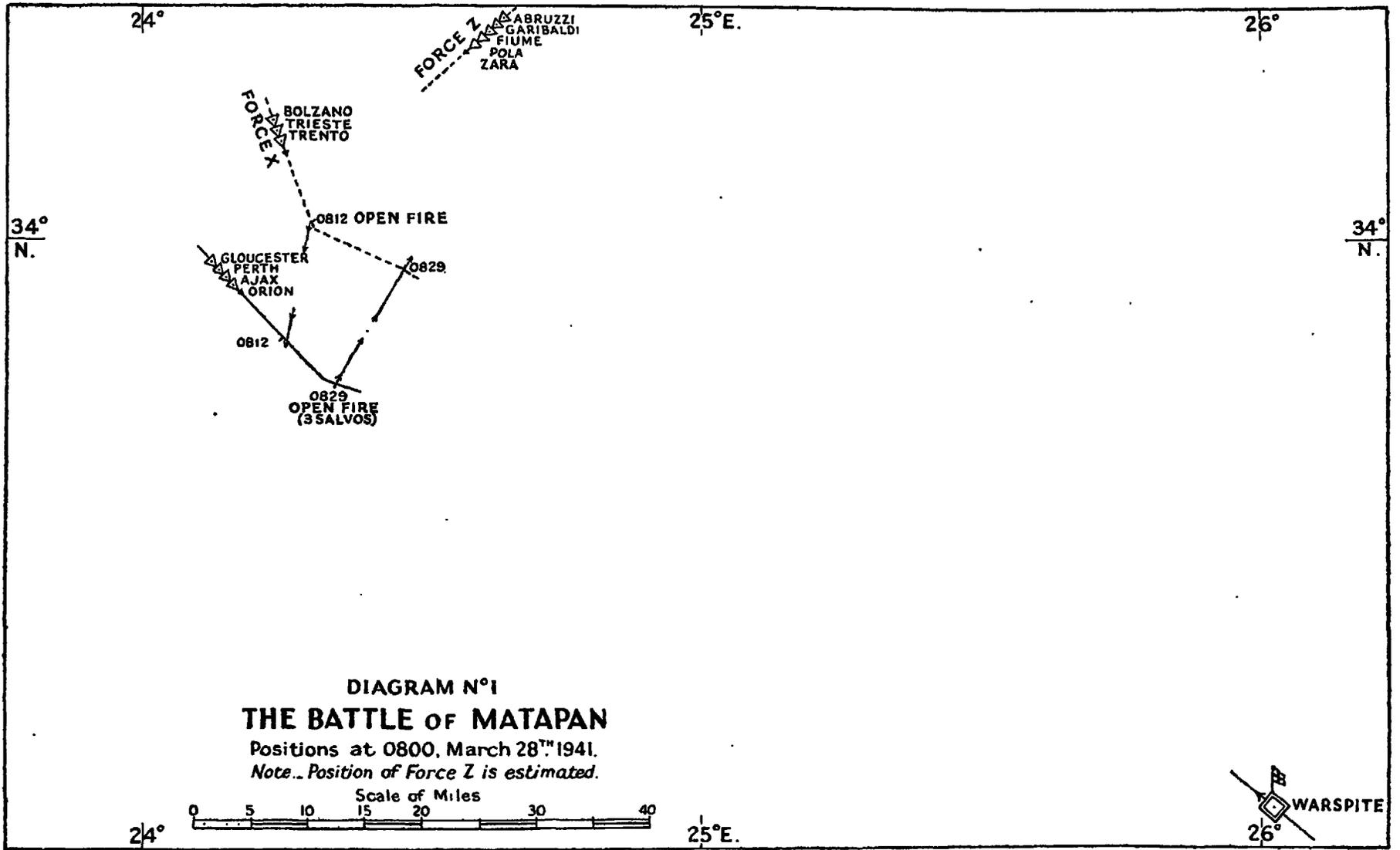
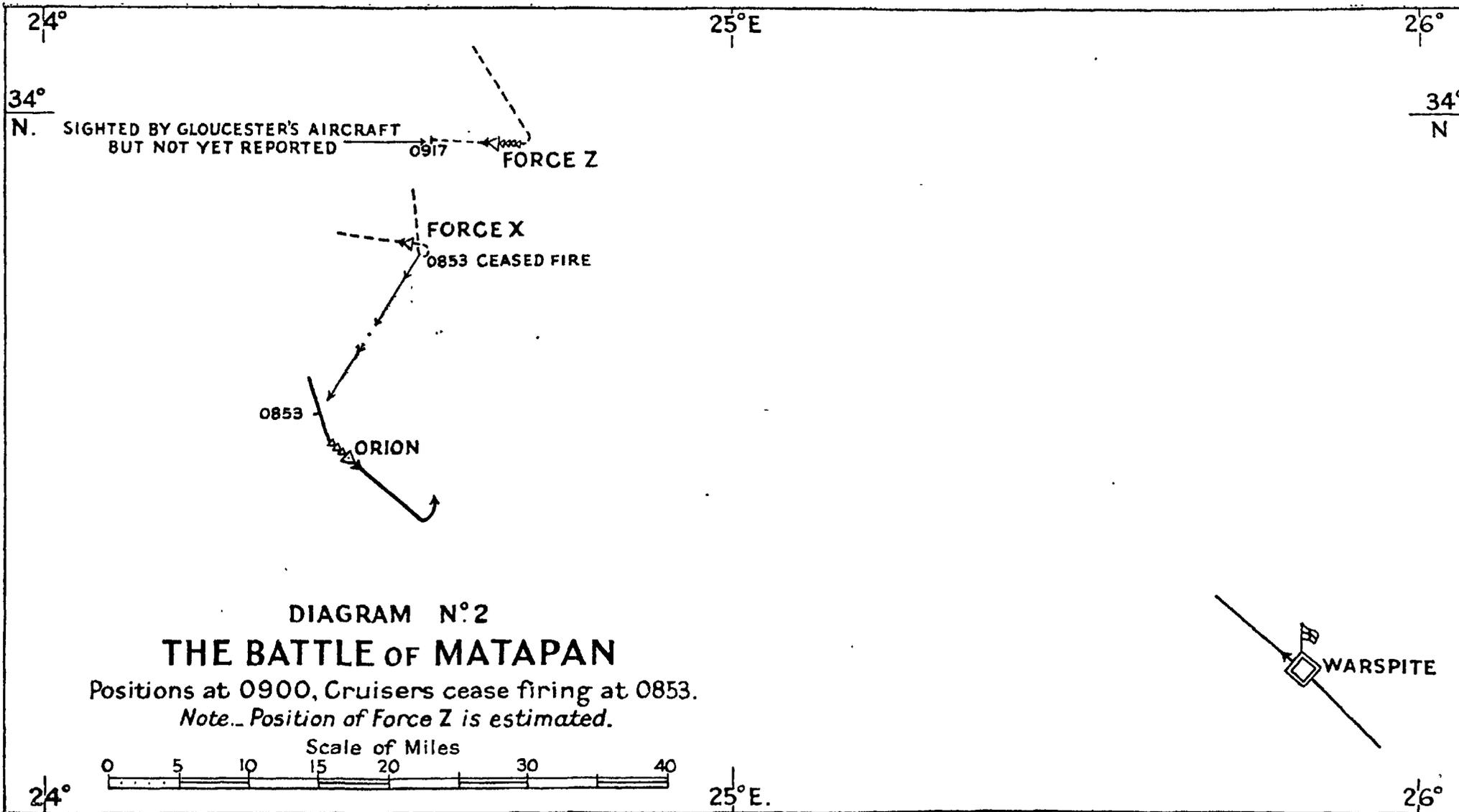


DIAGRAM N°1
THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN
 Positions at 0800, March 28th 1941.
Note.. Position of Force Z is estimated.



24°

25° E

26°

34°

34°

N. SIGHTED BY GLOUCESTER'S AIRCRAFT BUT NOT YET REPORTED

0917

FORCE Z

FORCE X

0853 CEASED FIRE

0853

ORION

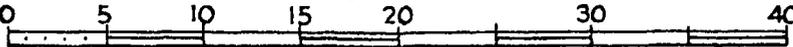
DIAGRAM N°2

THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN

Positions at 0900, Cruisers cease firing at 0853.

Note... Position of Force Z is estimated.

Scale of Miles



24°

25° E

26°

WARSPITE

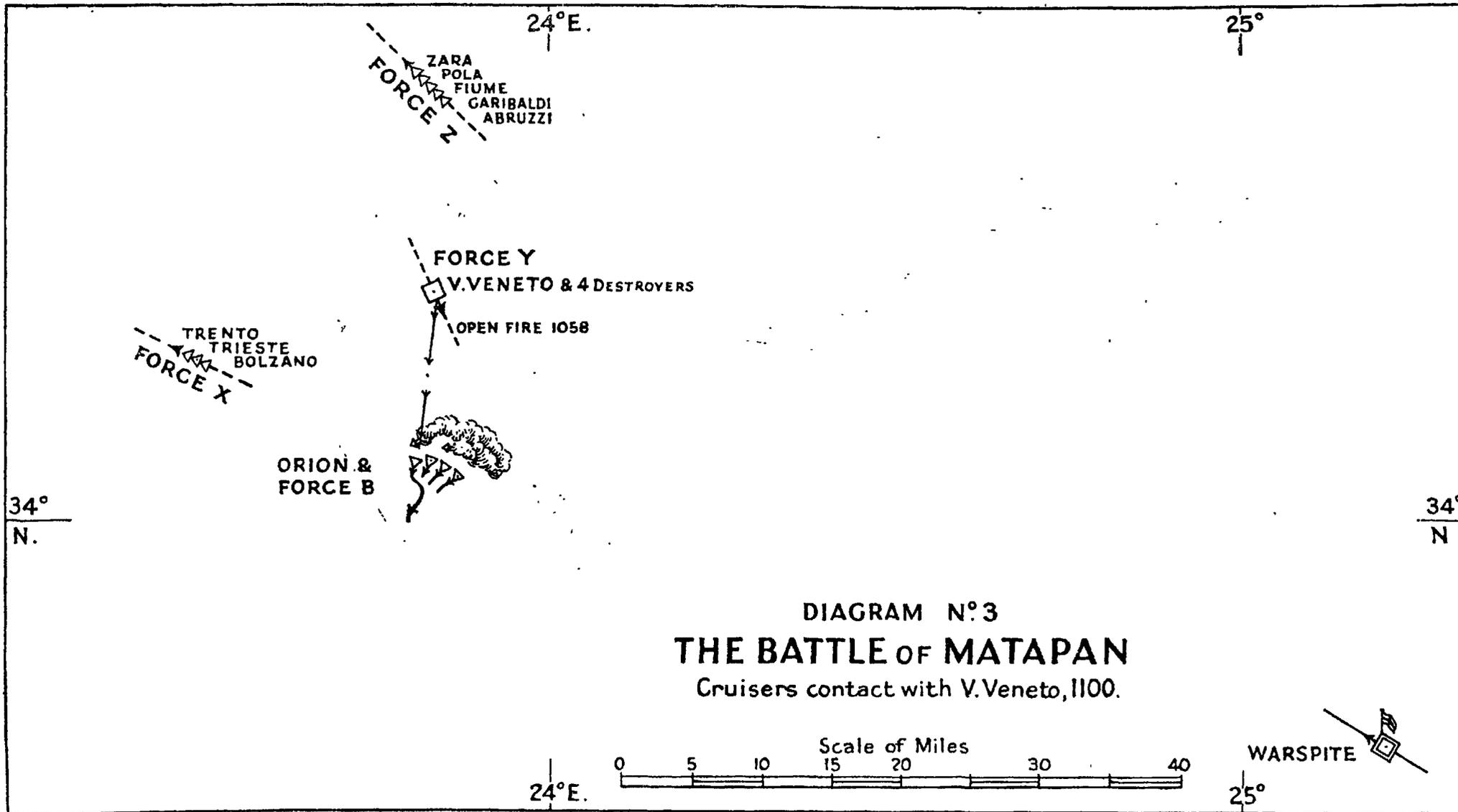
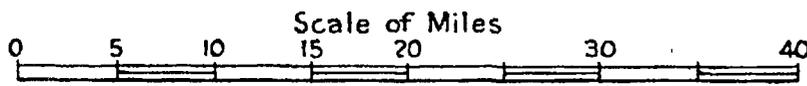


DIAGRAM N°3
THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN
 Cruisers contact with V.Veneto, 1100.



ZARA
POLA
FIUME
GARIBALDI
ABRUZZI
FORCE Z

24° E.

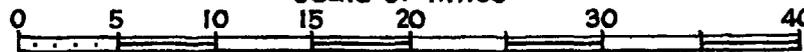
25°

DIAGRAM N°4

THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN

First T/B attack from Formidable, 1130.
Surface contact lost.

Scale of Miles



TRENTO
TRIESTE
BOLZANO
FORCE X

FORCE Y
V. VENETO
CEASE FIRE

T 1127

34°
N.

34°
N.

ORION
AJAX
PERTH
GLOUCESTER

24° E.

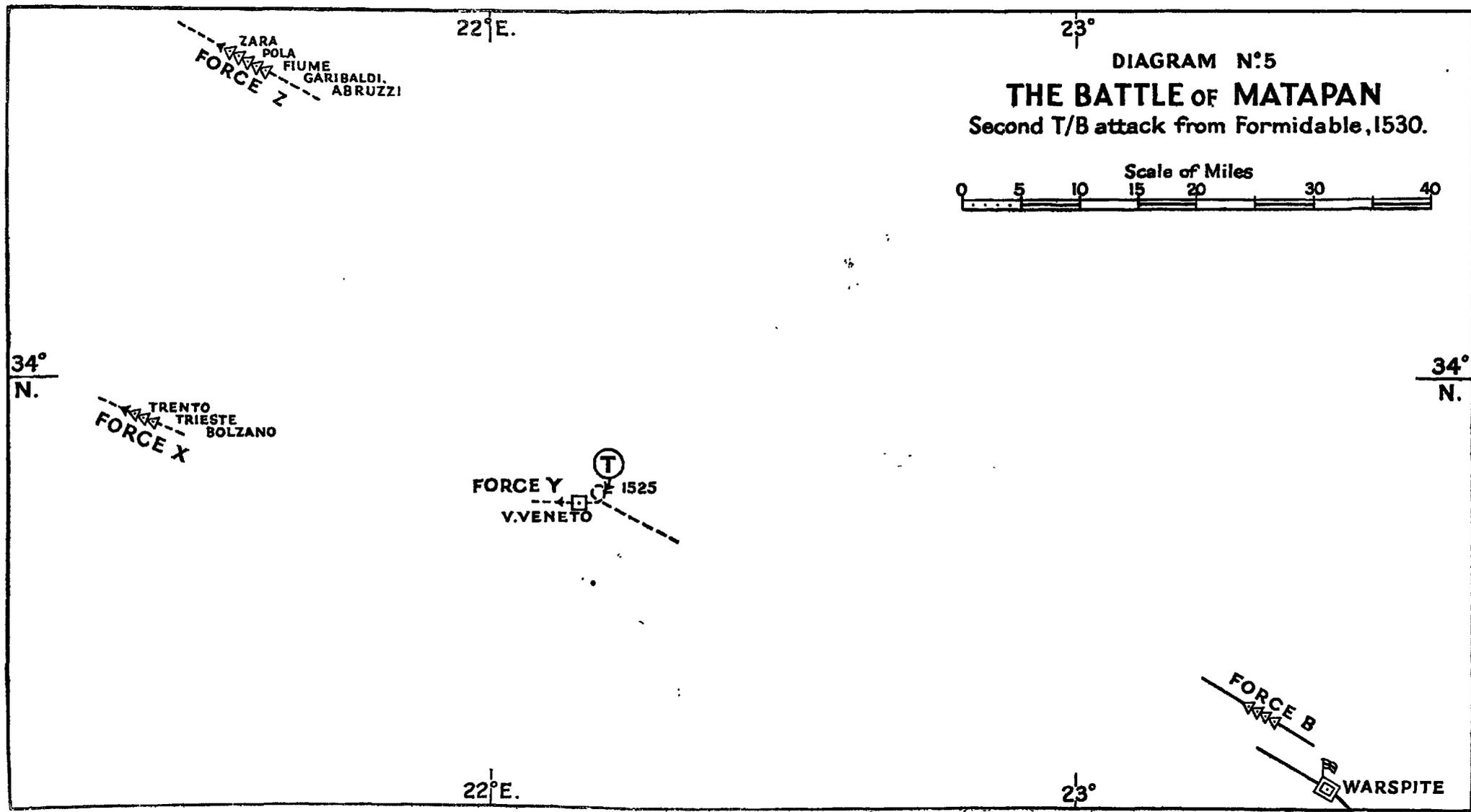
25°

WARSPITE

23°

DIAGRAM N°5
THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN
 Second T/B attack from Formidable, 1530.

Scale of Miles
 0 5 10 15 20 30 40



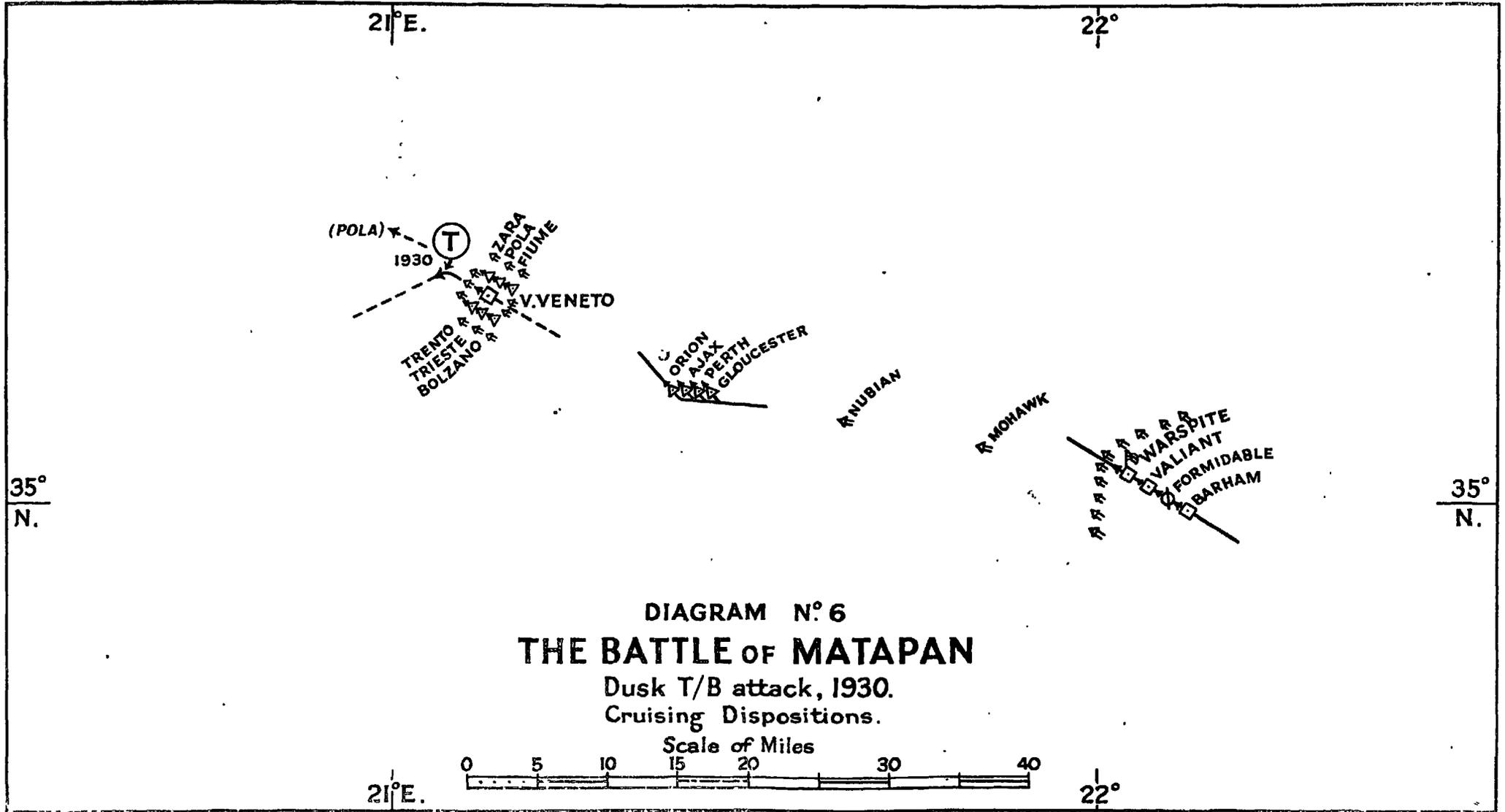
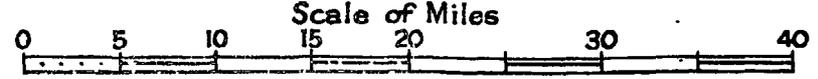


DIAGRAM N° 6
THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN
 Dusk T/B attack, 1930.
 Cruising Dispositions.



21°E. 22° 35° N. 21°E. 22°

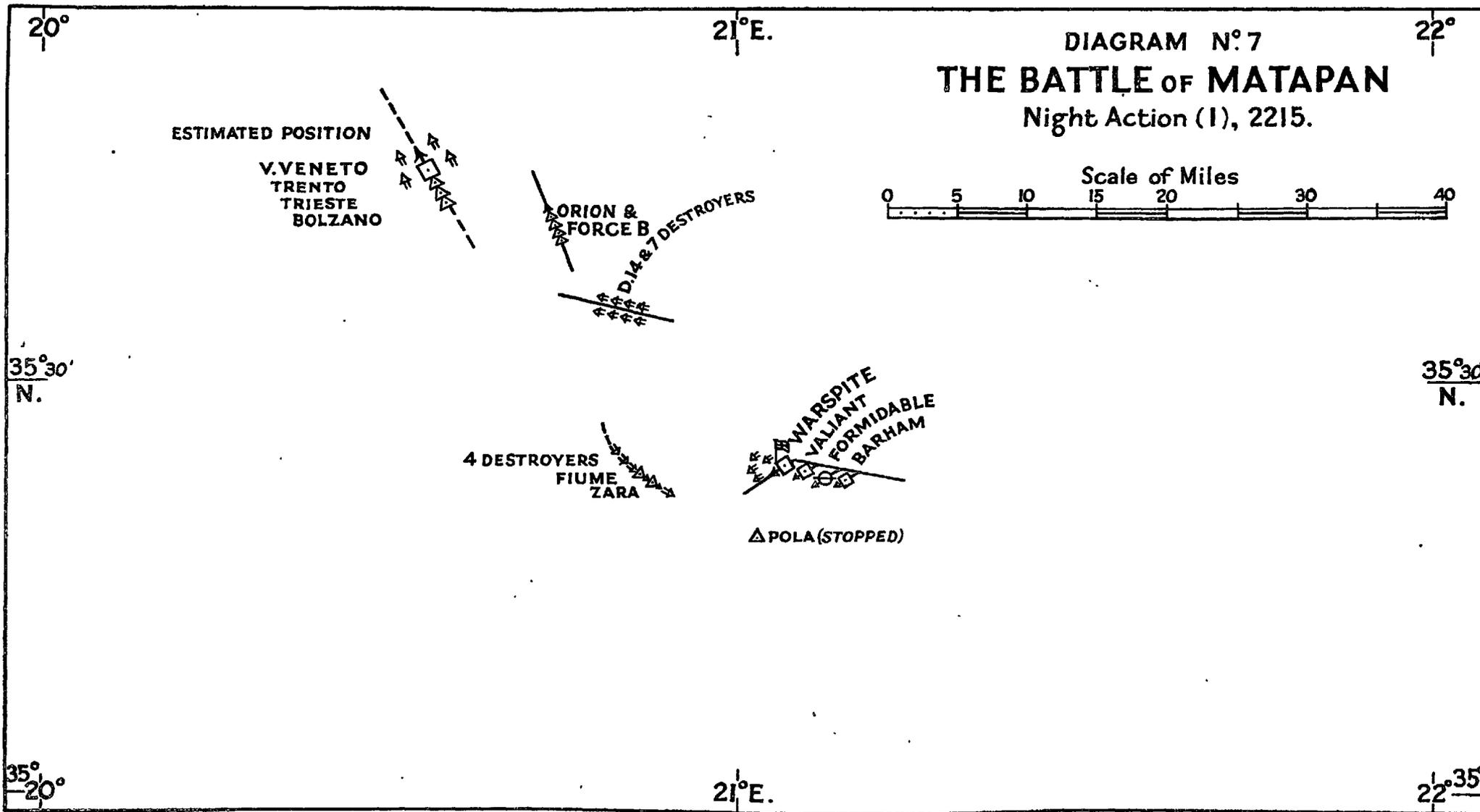
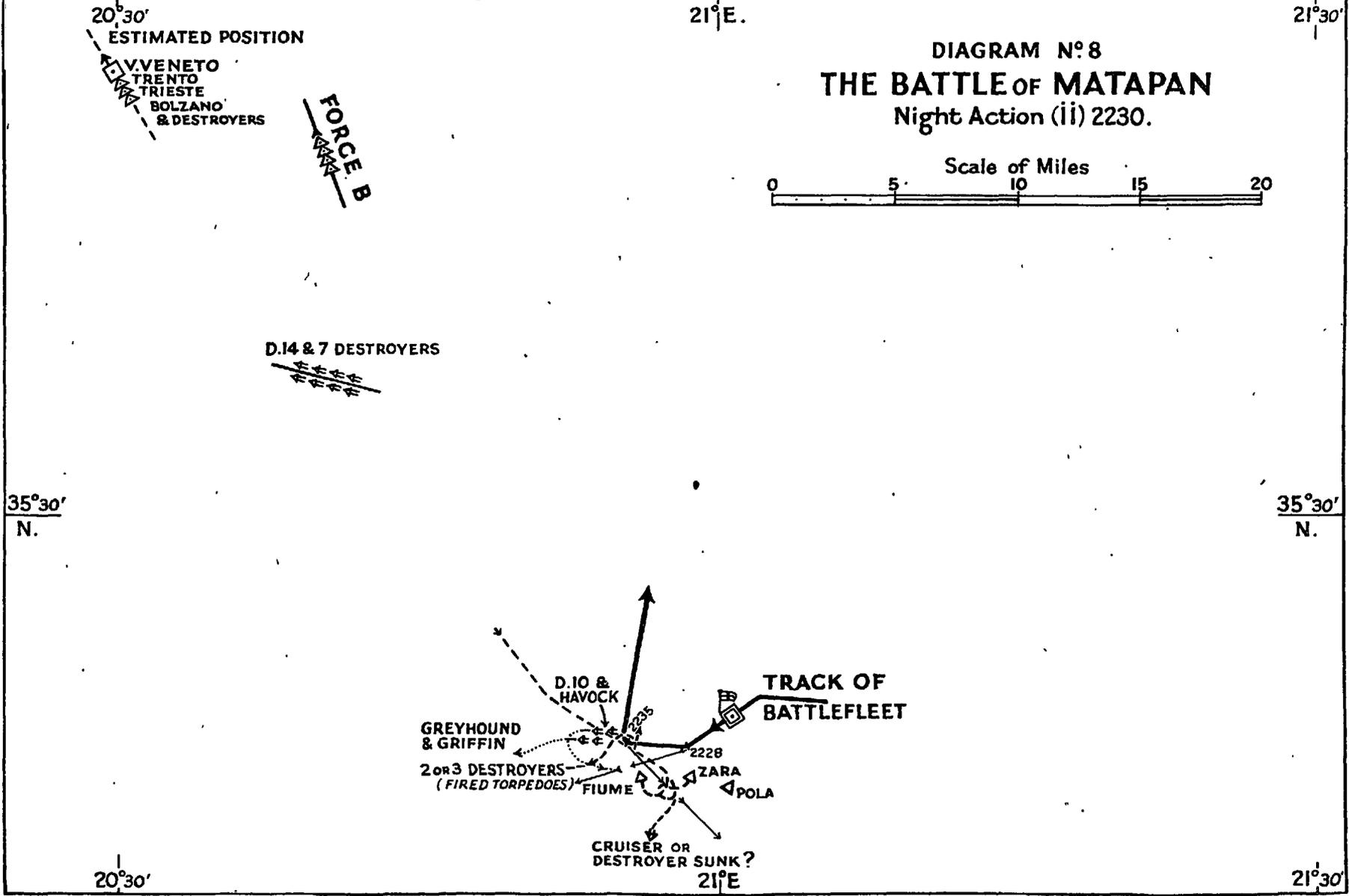
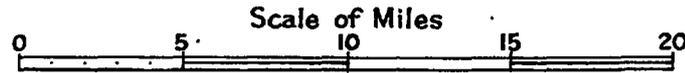
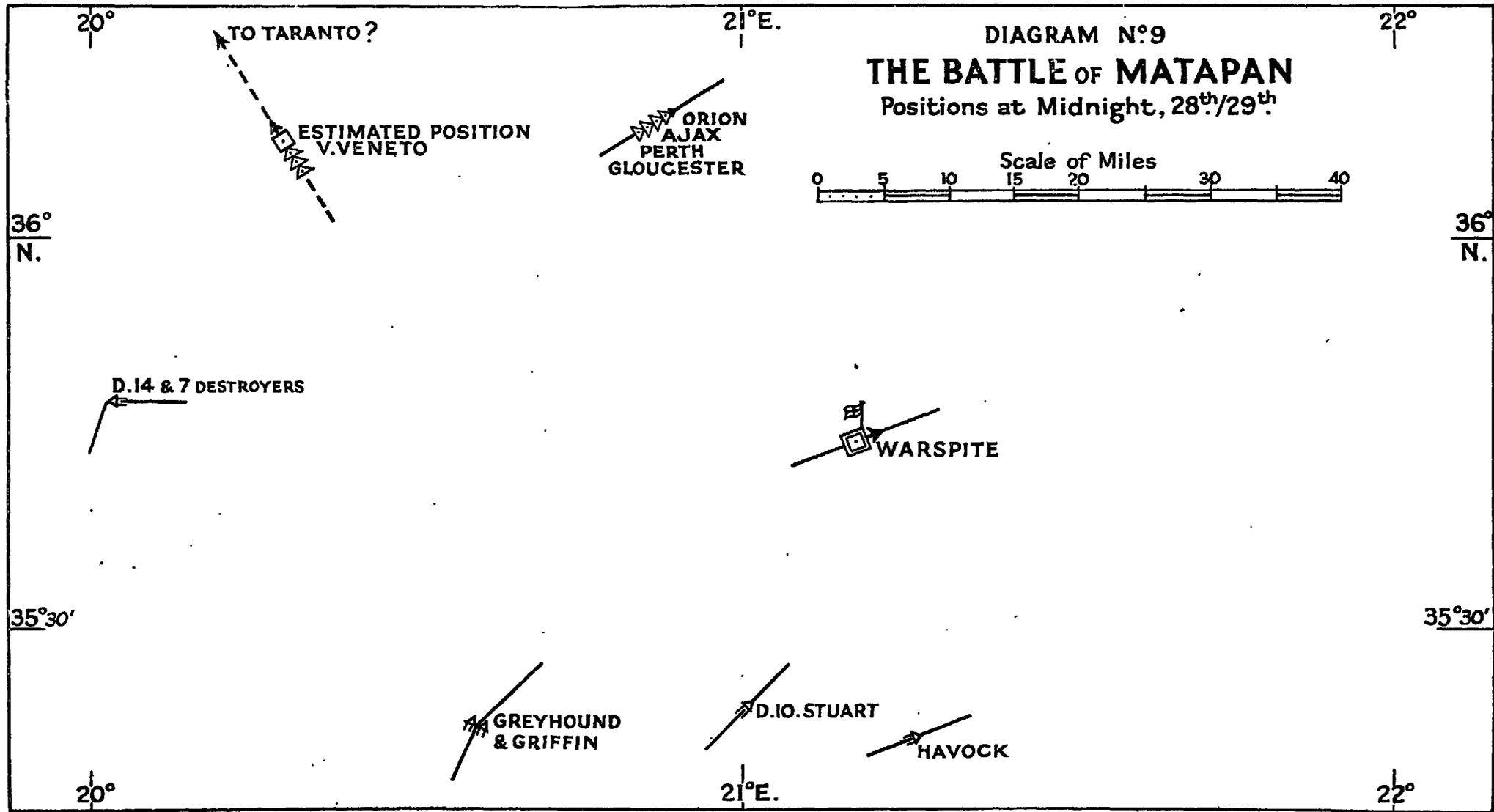
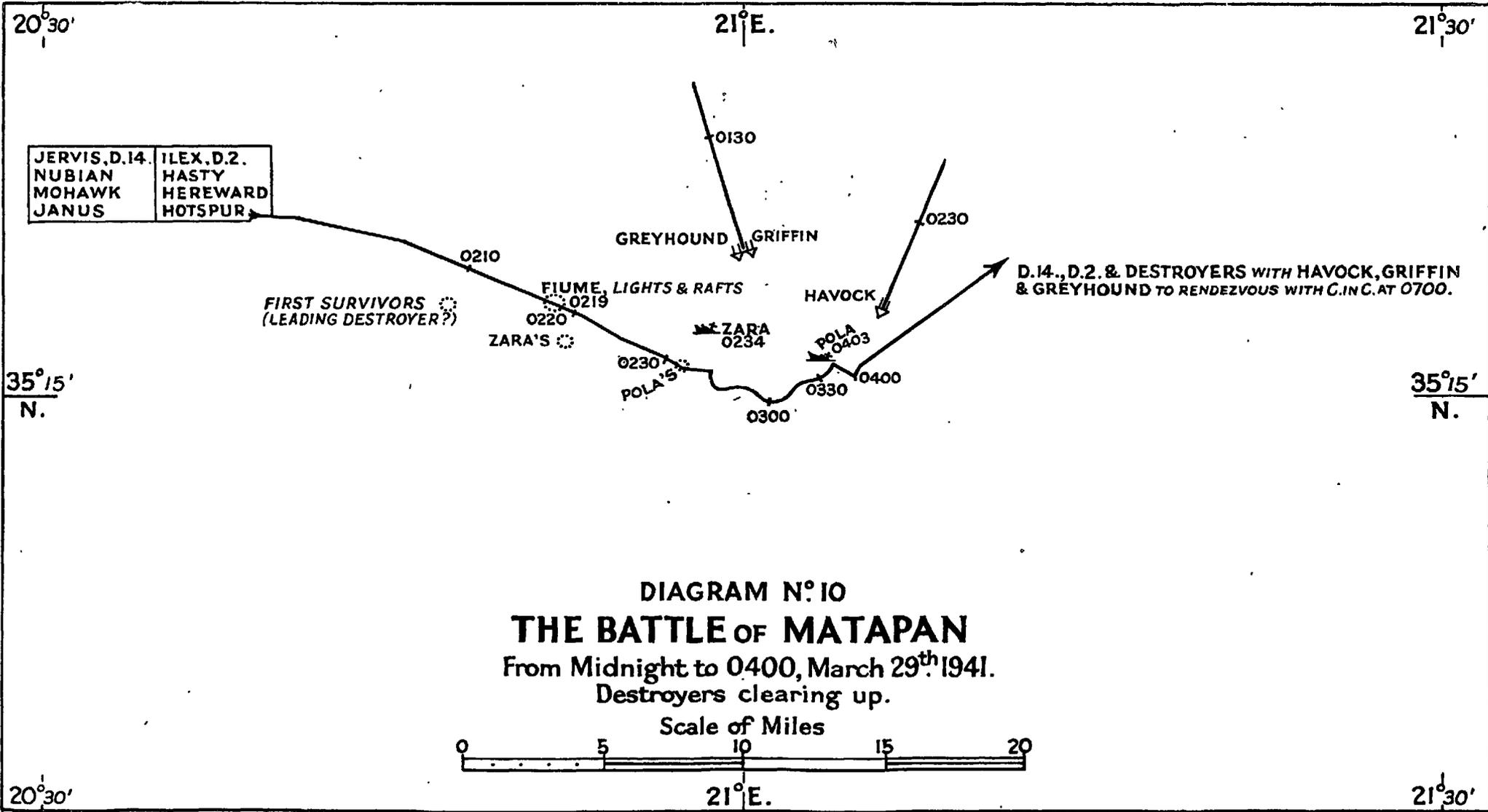


DIAGRAM N° 8 THE BATTLE OF MATAPAN Night Action (ii) 2230.



B





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