



SUPPLEMENT

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THE BATTLE OF SIRTE OF 22ND MARCH, 1942.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 2nd June, 1942, by Admiral Sir Henry H. Harwood, K.C.B., O.B.E., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

*Mediterranean,
2nd June, 1942.*

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached reports of proceedings during Operation M.G. One between 19th March and 28th March, 1942.* This operation was carried out with the object of passing a convoy (M.W.10) of four ships to Malta, where it was most urgently required. In the course of the operation a greatly superior Italian surface force which attempted to intercept the convoy was driven off.

Plan.

2. When running the previous Malta convoy (M.W.9) in February, 1942, an attempt was made to escape detection during the first and second days out from Alexandria by splitting the convoy and simulating two normal Tobruk convoys. In the event this proved a failure. Further, an attempt to keep clear of JU.87s from Cyrenaica during the passage of the central basin by keeping well to the northward had little effect owing to the weight of attack from aerodromes in Greece and Crete.

3. It was therefore decided to keep convoy M.W.10 together throughout, and to use all

* *Admiralty footnote:* Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., was Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Station at the time when this operation was carried out.

available forces to fight the convoy through, and to reinforce this escort at dawn D.3 by Force K* from Malta. The route was chosen with a view to:—

- (a) arriving at Malta at dawn,
- (b) being as far to the westward by darkness on D.2 as was possible consistent with remaining within range of long-range fighter protection during daylight,
- (c) taking advantage of a suspected weakness in the enemy's air reconnaissance of the area between Crete and Cyrenaica, and at the same time avoiding suspected U-boat areas,
- (d) keeping well south during the passage of the central basin to increase the distance to be covered by surface forces attempting to intercept.

4. To reduce the scale of air attack on the convoy, the Eighth Army were to carry out a feint advance (Operation "Fullsize") on D.2. It was hoped that this would focus the attention of the enemy air forces on the land, and so draw off some of the attack from the convoy. In the event this feint achieved its object very successfully.

5. Simultaneously the Royal Air Force were to undertake as heavy attacks as possible on enemy aerodromes in Cyrenaica and Crete. Anti-ship striking forces were to be held in readiness on D.3, when interception by surface forces was a possibility.

6. Covering submarine patrols were established by two submarines in the southern approaches to Messina and four in the Gulf of Taranto.

* *Admiralty footnote:* Force K—H.M. Ships PENELOPE (Cruiser) and LEGION (Destroyer).

The Operation.

7. As no adequate escort was available in Malta, it was necessary for part of the escort force from Alexandria to remain with the convoy until arrival at Malta. H.M.S. CARLISLE and five Hunts were selected for this duty.

8. The Fifth Destroyer Flotilla* left Alexandria at 1130 19th March to carry out A/S sweeps between Alexandria and Tobruk. In the course of these operations H.M.S. HEYTHROP (Lieutenant-Commander R. S. Stafford, R.N.) was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat.

9. The Flotilla arrived at Tobruk at 1830 20th March, fuelled, and sailed during the night to rendezvous with M.W.10 at dawn 21st March. H.M.S. BEAUFORT was delayed through fouling her starboard screw with a berthing wire, but rejoined the Flotilla by dawn 22nd March.

10. At 0700 20th March, convoy M.W.10 consisting of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, and S.S.s CLAN CAMPBELL, PAMPAS and TALABOT (Norwegian) left Alexandria, escorted by H.M.S. CARLISLE and six destroyers. The Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron† and four destroyers followed at 1800 the same day. All these forces were in company by 0600 22nd March, H.M. Ships PENELOPE and LEGION from Malta two hours later.

11. It was hoped that the enemy had so far failed to locate the convoy, but at 0131 22nd March, H.M.S. P.36‡ reported a force, including heavy ships, leaving Taranto. It was evident that the convoy had been reported, probably by U-boat on the afternoon of 21st March. A flight of five JU.52s had been sighted at 1705 the same day, and it seems certain that these also reported the force.

12. Air attacks began at 0930 22nd, and continued all day at intervals. At 1410 H.M.S. EURYALUS reported smoke to the northward, which by 1434 had resolved itself into enemy surface forces.

Attempted Interception by Enemy Surface Forces.

13. The ensuing action is graphically described in the report of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron and individual ships. The battle plan which the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, had evolved and practised for this eventuality was, in brief, to lay smoke between the enemy and the convoy, and to attack with torpedoes under cover of the smoke should the enemy attempt to break through in pursuit of the convoy.

14. The strong south-easterly wind was favourable to the execution of this plan, which was brilliantly executed, and the enemy was driven off. The weather had also caused the enemy to dispense with his destroyer screen in

order to maintain the speed necessary to intercept the convoy before dark. As had been anticipated, the enemy was unwilling to risk coming through the smoke, and further played into the hands of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, by attempting to work round to leeward of the smoke area.

15. Nevertheless a critical period ensued at about 1640, when the enemy which by now included a Littorio battleship, again made contact to the northward of the convoy. The Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron was at the time in search of two enemy ships unaccounted for and thought to be working round to windward of the smoke. It thus fell to H.M.S. SIKH (Captain St. J. A. Micklethwait, D.S.O., R.N.) with H.M. Ships HAVOCK, LIVELY and HERO, to hold off the enemy for half an hour until the return of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron. During this remarkable and determinedly fought action, H.M.S. HAVOCK was hit and stopped, but was later able to proceed to Malta.

16. The situation, relieved, but not saved, was finally turned to our advantage by a most determined torpedo attack carried out by the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla* supported by H.M.S. CLEOPATRA and H.M.S. EURYALUS. In the face of this attack, the enemy turned away. It is almost certain that the battleship sustained one torpedo hit, and hits from the cruisers' gunfire. H.M.S. LIVELY sustained damage from a 15-inch salvo which straddled and hit her, but she was able to return to Alexandria.

17. This ended the enemy's attempts to intercept, and he was last seen on a northerly course at 1900. It is noteworthy that no attempt was, apparently, made to intercept the convoy after dark. The actual damage to the enemy cannot be accurately assessed but in addition to the damage to the battleship it is known that one cruiser was seriously damaged.

18. Meanwhile the convoy, making the best of its way westward, had been subjected to heavy and continuous air attack, from which it emerged unscathed. The credit for this must go to the fine gunnery of H.M.S. CARLISLE and the Hunt class destroyers,† and to the admirable handling of the merchant ships in the convoy. Without in any way wishing to detract from the fine work of the masters, there is little doubt that the presence of naval liaison officers in the merchant ships contributed largely to the defeat of these attacks.

Return of Force B to Alexandria

19. Owing to heavy weather during the night 22nd-23rd March, Force B was faced with a long passage through "Bomb Alley"‡ in daylight. Shadowing started early, but no attacks developed until the afternoon, when H.M.S. LIVELY, who had dropped astern, was the target. (Beaufighters of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group provided cover from 0800

* Admiralty footnote: Fifth Destroyer Flotilla—SOUTHWOLD (Commander C. T. Jellicoe, D.S.C.), BEAUFORT, DULVERTON, HURWORTH, AVON VALE, ERIDGE and HEYTHROP.

† Admiralty footnote: Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron—CLEOPATRA (flying the flag of Rear-Admiral P. L. Vian, D.S.O.), DIDO, EURYALUS and CARLISLE.

‡ Admiralty footnote: H.M.S. P.36—a submarine.

* Admiralty footnote: Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla—Captain A. L. Poland, D.S.O., D.S.C.

† Admiralty footnote: Destroyers of the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla.

‡ Admiralty footnote: "Bomb Alley"—the waters between Cyrenaica and Crete.

onwards. They had, on the previous day, also provided cover until 0900; a notable achievement at a distance of over 300 miles from their base.

20. Force B arrived at Alexandria at 1230 24th March without further incident of note, and received a deservedly great welcome.

Arrival of the Convoy at Malta

21. At 1900 on 22nd March the convoy was dispersed by order of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, and made for Malta in an attempt to reach harbour by daylight. H.M. Ships PENELOPE, CARLISLE, HAVOCK, LEGION, KINGSTON and the whole of the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla were either escorting or covering.

22. All ships were subjected to heavy air attack shortly after daylight on 23rd March, though under fighter protection from Malta Spitfires and Hurricanes. Several German aircraft were destroyed or damaged by the fighters who also forced other enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs. S.S. TALABOT and S.S. PAMPAS had made good time, and passed the breakwater at 0915 and 0930 respectively. H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, having completed all but the last eight miles of this hazardous journey, was, at 0920, hit and stopped. H.M. Ships CARLISLE and PENELOPE both made unavailing attempts to take her in tow, and she eventually anchored off Zonkor Beacon.

23. S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, who had, all through, been the slowest ship, found herself some 50 miles south of Malta at daylight, escorted by H.M.S. ERIDGE. Attacks soon developed, and, at 1030, S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL was hit. Her engine room flooded and she sank shortly afterwards. H.M.S. ERIDGE picked up 112 of S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL's people; a difficult operation which, in the heavy weather prevailing, took 2½ hours. H.M.S. LEGION had been ordered to join H.M.S. ERIDGE and S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, but herself sustained damage from a near miss and had to be beached in Marsa Xlokk.

24. H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE was eventually got into Marsa Xlokk during the night 24th/25th after a fine piece of towing under most difficult circumstances by H.M. Tug ANCIENT, under the direction of Captain A. D. Nicholl (H.M.S. PENELOPE) and Mr. Murphy, Senior Pilot. Unfortunately during the operations to screen H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE while she was at anchor, H.M.S. SOUTHWOLD was mined. She sank after the most determined efforts to save her had been defeated by the weather. Finally, H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE was again bombed, and sank on her side.

25. Thus two out of the original four ships in the convoy actually arrived in the Grand Harbour.

Dispersal of H.M. Ships from Malta.

26. An extremely heavy scale of air attack was developed on ships in harbour, and it became imperative to get as many ships as possible away before they sustained further damage. Accordingly ships were sailed as follows:—

25th March—CARLISLE, HURWORTH, DULVERTON, ERIDGE and BEAUFORT for Alexandria.

29th March—AURORA and AVON VALE for Gibraltar.

5th April—HAVOCK for Gibraltar.

8th April—PENELOPE for Gibraltar.

27. The sailing of these ships from Malta represents a series of the most determined efforts on the part of both the ships themselves and the dockyard authorities in the face of continuous and heavy attack. H.M.S. PENELOPE actually expended her outfit of A.A. ammunition and had to re-ammunition before she could sail. With the exception of H.M.S. HAVOCK, all ships reached their destinations without further damage. H.M.S. HAVOCK grounded at high speed near Kelibia.* She was destroyed by her own ship's company, who were interned by the French authorities.

Unloading of Convoy.

28. In the face of the heavy and relentless air attack which was maintained after the arrival of the convoy, unloading and berthing arrangements proved unsatisfactory. Both the ships which reached Grand Harbour were damaged and eventually sunk. As a result only 5,000 tons of the 25,900 tons of cargo which had been carried to Malta at such risk and price was safely unloaded.

29. It is evident that before another Malta convoy is run, air superiority in the island must be assured. In addition, ships will be berthed in shallow water or beached, and steps are being taken to ensure that there shall be no delay in starting to unload, and that the highest possible rate of unloading is maintained.

Personnel.

30. The behaviour of all personnel throughout the many phases of this hazardous and testing operation was worthy of the highest traditions of the service. In addition to the many outstanding acts already referred to, particular mention must be made of the gallant and devoted endeavours made by the officers and men of the damaged destroyers to save their ships. It is noteworthy that all these efforts were successful except for H.M.S. SOUTHWOLD, and in this case the weather completed the enemy's unfinished handiwork.

31. The loss of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, after a long and arduous career running stores to Malta, was particularly galling, occurring as it did, so near the end of the journey. The gallant fight put up by H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE before finally being sunk is typical of the stalwart determination of her Commanding Officer, Captain C. A. G. Hutchison, Royal Navy.

32. The good handling of the merchant ships and the excellent work done by the naval liaison officers has already been remarked on. There can be no doubt that the defeat of the heavy air attacks on the convoy on 22nd March was due in no small measure to the excellent seamanship and discipline displayed by the merchant ships.

33. During the action on 22nd March, the determination and team-work of all ships more than fulfilled the high standard that had been expected. This, combined with the resolute

* Admiralty footnote: Kelibia—on N.E. coast of Tunis, south of Cape Bon.

leadership and masterly handling of the force by Rear Admiral Philip L. Vian, K.B.E., D.S.O., produced a heartening and thoroughly deserved victory from a situation in which, had the roles been reversed, it is unthinkable that the convoy or much of its escort could have survived.

(Signed) H. H. HARWOOD,
*Admiral,
Commander-in-Chief.*

ENCLOSURE

*Office of Rear Admiral Commanding,
Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron.
31st March, 1942.*

OPERATION M.G. ONE—REPORT.

(20th March to 24th March, 1942.)

Herewith is forwarded the report on Operation M.G. One, which includes an account of an action against Units of the Italian Fleet in the Gulf of Sirte on 22nd March, 1942.

(Signed) PHILIP VIAN,
*Rear Admiral Commanding,
Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron.*

PART I—NARRATIVE (GENERAL).

1. The Convoy and Escort arrived in position "N" (Lat. 034 degs. 10 mins. North, Long. 020 degs. 00 mins. East) at 0600, the appointed time, on 22nd March, 1942.

Westward Passage—Tactical Problems.

2. The problems presented on passage to this point had been:—

(a) To steer such courses, after being reported, which, while keeping the force within fighter range, avoided crossing the track of the last reported line of advance. The track used is shown on the strategical plot: it is known that one U-boat made contact.

(b) To afford protection to the A/S Screen from U-boat attack when, through the slow speed of S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, it became necessary to discontinue the convoy zig-zag.

Protection was afforded by a modified form of E.Y. (Conduct of the Fleet); the screen zig-zagged as a whole across the front of the units screened.

3. At 0800 on 22nd March, 1942, PENELOPE and LEGION having joined, course was set 250 degs. 13 knots.

The southerly course was chosen in view of P.36's 0131B of 22nd March, received at 0518, reporting that the enemy had left Taranto; it was my wish to delay contact until evening, if practicable.

Strategical Background.

4. In the action to follow, the strategical considerations governing the courses of action open to me were:—

(i) The convoy, if it were to reach Malta at all, must arrive within a very few hours of daylight.

(ii) Force B could not be oiled at Malta.

(iii) Air reconnaissance from Malta could not be expected on Day 3.

Tactical Plan.

5. The tactical plan evolved on 4 (i) above is contained in the Operation Orders, and was based on the consideration that the convoy

must steer west, not south, for the greater part of the engagement.

6. From 4 (ii) above it was clear that the enemy must be driven off by dark since, if involved in night operations to the westward, the oil situation for the return passage to Alexandria would be most difficult.

7. The probable absence of air reconnaissance rendered it imperative that Cruisers and Fleet Destroyers should be able to move out from a Cruising Disposition designed to meet air attack into a disposition suitable for surface action with the least possible delay.

8. The tactical plan was exercised off Alexandria by the cruisers and some of the fleet destroyers about a month before the action.

Air—22nd March.

9. No air reconnaissance from Malta proved practicable. The enemy commenced shadowing at 0930; air attack began a few minutes later and was continued, with increasing intensity, until dusk.

It is estimated that for shadowing, high-level bombing, torpedo-bombing, and spotting, the enemy employed 150 aircraft during the day.

First Contact.

10. H.M.S. EURYALUS, as in 1805, first sighted the enemy. Contact was made with 4 ships, range 12 miles, first thought to be 3 battleships, at 1427—much earlier than was expected. Cruisers and Fleet Destroyers concentrated on their leaders in 5 divisions on a northerly course, and when at a suitable distance from the convoy turned east and laid smoke in accordance with the plan. The gun action commenced at 1436. By 1444 it was clear that the composition of the enemy was in fact one eight-inch and three six-inch cruisers: our force was ordered to steer towards the enemy, who broke off the engagement at 1515 and were lost to sight to the northward.

Second Contact.

11. At 1637, four enemy ships made contact: at 1640, three more. The composition of this force was the battleship LITTORIO, two eight-inch, three six-inch cruisers and one vessel never identified.

The same tactics were pursued as before, our cruisers and destroyers steering easterly and westerly courses to lay smoke, the enemy working round to the southwest to cut off the convoy from Malta.

In view of the weight of the air attack on the convoy, I was forced to order the smoke-laying division—CARLISLE and two Hunts—to rejoin the convoy and join in its air defence.

This meant that Cruisers and Fleet Destroyers had to lay smoke, not only to cover themselves, but also to cover the convoy.

Smoke laid for the latter purpose seriously hampered gunfire: while CLEOPATRA, normally at the head of the formation, fired 1,000 rounds in low angle.* PENELOPE, generally in the centre, fired 64, and ZULU, leading a division in the rear, none.

12. CLEOPATRA was hit on the after part of the bridge at 1644, but in turn a palpable hit on the bridge of a Bolzano was obtained, probably by DIDO.

* *Admiralty footnote: Low angle—i.e., at ship targets.*

Intervention by Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla.

13. By 1730, in search of two enemy ships not accounted for and which I thought might be working round in the rear, I got too far to the eastward: the situation was retrieved by Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla, in H.M.S. SIKH, who, with HAVOCK (detached after being hit shortly afterwards), LIVELY and HERO, held off the enemy without other support for nearly half an hour: a remarkable feat. It transpired subsequently that the two enemy ships the search for which had led me astray had been hit hard earlier and had withdrawn from the action.

14. At 1800, on my return, the situation appeared critical: CLEOPATRA fired torpedoes at the enemy line, which turned them away, and I ordered a general attack by torpedoes to be made on the enemy under cover of smoke.

Torpedo Attack.

15. Such an attack presented considerable difficulties owing to great pall of smoke, the falling visibility and the rising wind (force 6) and sea (44)* at this time.

Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla went in to the attack on a broad line of bearing, in the traditional manner at 1840: the attack was pushed home to a range of about 3 miles against very heavy fire and certainly obtained one hit on LITTORIO.

KINGSTON was stopped by a hit and set on fire but was later able to proceed and make Malta.

Gunfire from CLEOPATRA and EURYALUS following the destroyers in, started a fire in the after part of LITTORIO which was burning 20 minutes later, and obtained hits forward also.

16. The enemy turned from south to north-west in the face of Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla's attack: Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla, who had reached a good firing position was baulked by the turn and by smoke but in his division LIVELY, who had suffered flooded compartments from a 15-inch straddle, had a funnel on fire and her tubes jammed, so far recovered to fire 8 torpedoes with the right settings before retiring.

Enemy breaks off action and retires.

17. LITTORIO and cruisers were last sighted at 1900 steering north-northwest, the former still with a fire aft; the convoy was dispersed for Malta at this time, and at 1940 Force B shaped course for Alexandria.

Damage suffered by the enemy.

18. In addition to the damage suffered by LITTORIO, it is apparent from intelligence reports that one cruiser was seriously damaged and a second damaged.

Air Attack

19. During the 28 raids on the convoy made concurrently with the surface action, 4 aircraft were shot down and many damaged by

CARLISLE and the Hunts whilst no ship in the convoy or escort suffered damage—a remarkable result.

Concurrent attacks on Cruisers and Fleet Destroyers were less intense; EURYALUS shot down one torpedo-bomber.

Beaufort Striking Force

20. At 1800, I received your message informing me of the despatch of our air striking force: homing signals were made by EURYALUS, but aircraft did not arrive as the enemy fleet was beyond their range.

Force B—Passage Eastward

21. The return passage to Alexandria was made against an easterly gale: the scale of air attack developed was only a fraction of what was expected; LIVELY had to act the part when attacked by 6 Stukas.

The immunity from air on Day 2 and relative immunity on Day 4 must be due largely to the work of the fighters of 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, operating in a storm at great distance from their bases.

PART II—NARRATIVE

Convoy M.W.10, consisting of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE (Captain C. A. G. Hutchison, R.N.), S.S. CLAN CAMPBELL, S.S. PAMPAS and S.S. TALABOT escorted by the Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships SIKH (Captain St. J. A. Micklethwait, D.S.O., R.N.), ZULU, LIVELY, HERO, HAVOCK and HASTY), and H.M.S. CARLISLE (Captain D. M. L. Neame, D.S.O., R.N.), sailed from Alexandria at 0800 on 20th March, 1942.

2. In view of the uncertainty of weather and of fuel considerations, Force B consisting of H.M. Ships CLEOPATRA (Captain G. Grantham, D.S.O., R.N.) (Flag of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron), DIDO (Captain H. W. U. McCall, R.N.), EURYALUS (Captain E. W. Bush, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.), and the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships JERVIS (Captain A. L. Poland, D.S.O., D.S.C., R.N.), KIPLING, KELVIN and KINGSTON) sailed at 1800 on 20th March, 1942, by a northerly route to rendezvous with M.W.10 at 0800 21st March, 1942.

3. Rendezvous was made with M.W.10 at 0940 on 21st March in position 33 degs. 20 mins. N., 24 degs. 40 mins. E. The Fifth Destroyer Flotilla (H.M. Ships SOUTHWOLD (Commander C. T. Jellicoe, D.S.C., R.N.), DULVERTON, ERIDGE, AVON VALE and HURWORTH) had also joined the convoy by this time from Tobruk. Cruising Disposition No. 4 was formed slightly amended to meet existing conditions, and course 294 degs. shaped with the whole force, at 13 knots, carrying out zig-zag No. 12.

4. Owing to lack of facilities at Tobruk and late arrival there owing to the torpedoing of HEYTHROP the day before, DULVERTON, ERIDGE and HURWORTH had left Tobruk with 60 per cent. fuel. BEAUFORT was delayed at Tobruk by a fouled propeller.

5. CLAN CAMPBELL had difficulty in maintaining the speed of the convoy. At 1245 zig-zag No. 10 was started, CLAN CAMPBELL maintaining a steady course so as to keep up with the convoy.

* Admiralty footnote: Wind (force 6)—a reference to the Beaufort scale denoting "Strong Breeze—(21-26 knots)."

Sea (44)—a reference to the combined sea and swell scale, denoting "Rough sea and moderate swell."

6. At 1600, as an intercept had shown that the force might have been reported by enemy aircraft, course was altered to 320 degs. and at 1700 back to 290 degs.

7. At 1705, the force was sighted by 6 JU.52s escorted by one ME.110 on passage from Libya to Crete, by whom the force was reported. At 1745 course was altered to 270 degs. and at 1900 to 320 degs. and at 2000 to 285 degs. and thence by evasive steering, which avoided crossing the last reported mean line of advance to position "N".

8. At 1900 BEAUFORT closed the convoy from astern having arrived from Tobruk.

9. A speed of 12 knots was made good during the period 0930 on 21st March to 0800 on 22nd March.

10. Fighters were present from 0740 to 1715.

11. The force passed 3 miles south of position "N" at 0600 on 23rd March, steering 290 degs. to make contact with H.M. Ships PENELOPE and LEGION.

12. H.M. Ships PENELOPE (Captain A. D. Nicholl, D.S.O., R.N.) and LEGION were sighted at 0742 bearing 343 degs., and at 0750 course was altered to 250 degs. in view of P.36's report of 3 destroyers and heavy ships south of Taranto.

13. Shadowing by enemy aircraft commenced at 0935 at which time the first torpedo-bombing attack commenced. Raids continued from this time.

14. Own fighters were present from 0810 to 0900.

15. Two groups of enemy aircraft failed to locate the convoy and were searching for it 30 or 40 miles astern.

16. No zig-zag was carried out by the convoy after 0650 as it was considered essential to make the best speed. The escort carried out independent zig-zags.

17. At 0920 course was altered to 270 degs. to make more westing, and at 1220 to 250 degs. to make the probable enemy surface contact as late as possible.

18. At 1332 a JU.88 dropped 4 red flares ahead of the convoy—a probable indication that enemy surface forces were in the vicinity—though it was not thought that they should make contact before 1630 or 1700.

19. At 1410 EURYALUS reported smoke bearing 353 degs. This was not seen from CLEOPATRA. A further signal at 1417 said report was uncertain.

20. At 1230 Organisation No. 4* was assumed as it was decided that the convoy would not turn back but proceed to Malta even if enemy surface forces made contact. Destroyers had been ordered to raise steam for

* *Admiralty footnote:* Organisation No. 4 was as follows:—

1st Div.—JERVIS, KIPLING, KELVIN, KINGSTON (Destroyers).

2nd Div.—DIDO, PENELOPE (Cruisers), LEGION (Destroyer).

3rd Div.—ZULU, HASTY (Destroyers).

4th Div.—CLEOPATRA (flag of C.S.15), EURYALUS (Cruisers).

5th Div.—SIKH, LIVELY, HERO, HAVOCK (Destroyers).

6th Div.—CARLISLE (Cruiser), AVON VALE (Destroyer).

* The 6th Div. to be employed on smoke laying.

Full Speed at 1400 (they had been at $\frac{1}{2}$ hour's notice for Full Speed).

A signal was made ordering Divisions to form up on a northerly course in the event of a contact being made.

PHASE I.

21. Reports

1427 "4 suspicious vessels bearing 040 degs." received from EURYALUS.

1427 "1 unknown bearing 010 degs. 12 miles" received from LEGION.

1429 Signal "ZLG" transmitted from CLEOPATRA (C.S.15).

1432 "4 unknown bearing 015 degs. 15 miles" received from LEGION.

1434 "3 battleships bearing 010 degs. 12 miles" transmitted from CLEOPATRA (C.S.15).

1506 "Enemy previously reported as battleships now believed to be cruisers" transmitted from C.S.15.

22. As soon as the enemy were reported the signal "ZLG" was made and carried out exactly as detailed in the operation orders.

The convoy turned away from the enemy to 210 degs. while all Divisional Leaders led out to the northward to concentrate by divisions.

During this phase of the action, LEGION joined the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla with the First Division at 1507 and remained with them for the rest of the day.

23. As soon as divisions were clear of the convoy to the northward, an easterly smoke-laying course was shaped—about 1435. The enemy opened fire at this time and the first splashes were seen well short about 1436.

Enemy disposition

24. The enemy are believed to have consisted of one eight-inch and three six-inch cruisers disposed abeam about 2 miles apart on a course of 200 degrees.

They turned beam on on a southeasterly course about 1436 and away about 1442 and then to the northwest, finally retiring on approximate course 010 degs. about 1501.

25. CLEOPATRA led the Fourth Division towards the enemy at 1444 and the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron's signal "Turn towards the enemy" was made at 1445.

26. CLEOPATRA and EURYALUS engaged one cruiser from 1456 to 1509 when the enemy passed out of range. The remaining divisions were fouled by smoke which was made continuously by all ships from 1433 until 1516. At 1507 a signal was made to Mediterranean Fleet in company "Enemy's course 010 degs."

27. One enemy cruiser turned to the west-northwestward about 1509 and engaged the Fourth Division from 1511 to 1515, straddling several times even after the division had retired into smoke. This was probably due to aircraft spotting. A few salvos were fired at this ship from 1511 to 1513 and she turned away at the same time as CLEOPATRA at 1515.

At 1535 the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, reported to the Commander-in-Chief: "Enemy driven off".

28. Course was then shaped 235 degs. and Guides of Divisions disposed on a line of bearing 310 degs.—130 degs. $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles apart

The convoy bore 222 degs., 7 miles at 1605, steering 270 degs. with CLAN CAMPBELL lagging and being supported by CARLISLE and AVON VALE. At 1607 the striking force altered to 270 degs. at 20 knots and were 5 miles abeam of the convoy by 1640.

At 1450, the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, ordered the convoy to steer west, and they had altered to that course at 1500.

29. CARLISLE and AVON VALE (the special smoke-laying division) had hauled out to the northeast and laid smoke between the enemy and the convoy, keeping in V/S touch with the Striking Force. When CARLISLE saw the striking force returning towards the convoy she rejoined it but was ordered to keep closer to it by signal from the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, at 1610.

Air Attack.

30. Heavy air attack was made throughout the whole of this period mostly on the convoy but also on the striking force. Whilst the striking force was rejoining the sound of the 4 in. fire from the Hunts and CARLISLE was most impressive, resembling continuous pom-pom fire even though heard at a distance of 8-10 miles.

31. In view of this intensive attack CARLISLE was asked at 1605 if she had enough ships to cover the convoy from air attack.

CARLISLE replied "No, we have used 1/3 of our outfit" at 1611 and SOUTHWOLD reported at 1633 "Nine attacks so far. Forty per cent. 4 inch ammunition remaining".

Accordingly, at 1631, the Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla (forming the 1st Division) were ordered to cover the convoy from air and surface attack from the southward in order to back up the H.A. fire.

PHASE II.

32. Reports

1637 "4 unknown 042 degs. 9 miles course unknown" received from ZULU.

1640 "3 cruisers 035 degs. 15 miles" received from EURYALUS.

1648 C.S.15 reported "1 battleship and 4 cruisers bearing 035 degs. 15 miles. Course 215 degs."

1708 C.S.15 reported that enemy battleship was accompanied by cruisers and destroyers.

(NOTE.—There is no confirmation that any destroyers were present nor is it considered now at all likely that they were.)

33. At 1640, when the second sighting reports were received, Divisional Leaders at once led out to the northward as for carrying out "ZLG" although on this occasion no signal was made except that, at 1655, the Convoy was ordered to steer south, which they did.

34. The 4th Division led out on a course 010 degs. sighting an 8-inch cruiser ahead which was engaged at 1643, opening fire at the same time as 2 enemy cruisers (one 8-inch and one 6-inch) opened fire on 4th Division.

The enemy disposition at that time was 4 cruisers (probably two 8-inch and two 6-inch) on a line of bearing about 110 degs., 1 mile apart, steering about 230 degs. The battleship

and 2 cruisers were farther to the eastward also steering about 220 degs.-230 degs.

CLEOPATRA Hit.

35. At 1644 the second salvo from the 6-inch enemy cruiser scored one hit on the starboard after end of CLEOPATRA'S bridge, wrecking the Air Defence Position and starshell sights, bringing down all except one aerial and one set of halyards and killing 1 officer and 14 men, and wounding 1 officer and 4 men. CLEOPATRA continued firing until 1648, but turned away into smoke to the westward. Straddles continued for a few minutes after this. About this time, the battleship was also firing at the 4th and 2nd Divisions, but was out of range from cruisers' armament. No other hits were obtained on our ships at this time, but one casualty resulted in CLEOPATRA from a near miss.

36. DIDO leading the 2nd Division opened fire at 1644 at an enemy cruiser, but results could not be observed owing to smoke and spray. The 2nd Division conformed to the movements of the Flagship.

Smoke.

37. All ships continued to make smoke from 1642 until the end of the action about 1913. There was therefore an enormous area of smoke which lay well in the existing weather conditions of a 25-knot wind from southeast. The enemy tried after this contact to make touch with the convoy by passing round the western end of the smoke (to leeward) and was therefore effectually held away from the convoy as he would not approach the smoke, which was drifting towards him at 25 knots.

38. Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla with the 1st Division receiving at 1640 an incomplete V/S signal* from the Rear-Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron, "Feint at . . ." gave up proceeding towards the convoy and made smoke between the convoy and the enemy gradually working to the southwestward. Owing to the lack of enemy reports at this time, he did not know the exact position of the enemy from 1645 to 1745 when he saw gun flashes.

39. ZULU and HASTY (3rd Division) after sighting and reporting the enemy at long range at 1637, made smoke and conformed generally to the movements of the Admiral. No opportunity to fire guns or torpedoes was found during this phase.

40. Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla with the 5th Division, sighted what was thought to be two destroyers, but is now believed to have been one cruiser at 1640 and engaged the enemy with gunfire. The enemy was apparently hit, turned away to the northward and was not seen again.

At 1649, he sighted 2 cruisers and the battleship and the 5th Division continued to the westward in the hopes of achieving a favourable torpedo firing position.

41. At 1659, Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla, had three cruisers in sight and the 5th Division engaged them on a north-westerly course until the battleship was sighted at 1705, when course was altered away to avoid

* Admiralty footnote: V/S signal—Visual Signal, in this case by light.

punishment. At 1720, however, HAVOCK suffered damage, her speed was reduced to 16 knots and she was detached to join the convoy. Shortly afterwards, a further attempt to attain a position of torpedo advantage was made but conditions were unfavourable and a southerly course was continued.

42. Between 1701 and 1712 the 4th Division engaged dimly-seen enemy ships at a range of about 14,000 yards. Enemy gun flashes were seen in this direction (010 degs. to 000 degs.) at this time and splashes were seen round the 4th Division. No results could be observed of this action.

43. Between 1703 and 1710 the 2nd Division engaged the westward of the three cruisers being engaged by the 4th Division, and this ship was identified as Gorizia type. Nine controlled broadsides were fired from DIDO and hits were seen during the 6th and 7th broadsides. This was also seen by ZULU.

At 1705, the battleship opened fire on the 2nd Division who retired under smoke at 1707.

44. The 4th Division opened fire on an enemy ship at extreme range at 1727 for a few salvos. It appears probable that the enemy was at that time out of range. The 4th, 2nd and 3rd Divisions continued to steer alternate easterly and westerly courses until 1740, covering the convoy with smoke.

ZULU reports sighting 2 Trento class cruisers and 3 destroyers (which were certainly 6-inch cruisers) from the eastern end when clear of smoke, and the battleship and one cruiser from the western end during this period. The enemy were always at long range (outside 4.7" range) and well clear of the smoke.

Convoy.

45. During this phase, the convoy had turned south at 1655 but BRECONSHIRE turned them back to west at 1720. The Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron's 1716 signal to SOUTHWOLD ordering convoy to steer south was transmitted at 1719 and by 1730 they had again been shepherded on to a southerly course.

BRECONSHIRE turned the convoy to 225 at 1745 but SOUTHWOLD repeated Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron's order to steer south and the convoy turned back to south at 1800. This complied also with Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla's signal timed 1758.

Air Attack.

46. Continued heavy air attack was made on the convoy throughout phases 2 and 3; and CARLISLE and the Hunts did fine work in keeping up their high rate of accurate fire in the heavy sea then running. Some enemy aircraft were shot down and no damage was sustained by convoy or close escort.

Numerous attacks by single aircraft were also made on the various divisions of the striking force but were hardly noticed in the general melee. Close range weapons combated these attacks whenever they developed and the larger H.A. guns were used when not employed in low angle.* No damage resulted.

* Admiralty footnote: Low angle—i.e., at ship targets.

PHASE III.

The enemy endeavouring to work round to Leeward of the smoke. 1740-1820.

47. During this phase of the action, Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla in SIKH with the 5th Division bore the brunt of the enemy's fire.

At 1740 SIKH sighted the enemy battleship bearing 330 degs. 16,000 yards, and continued to engage it by gunfire until about 1820. Neither HERO nor LIVELY (the remaining ships in the Division) could know what was happening as SIKH's smoke effectively hid the enemy from them. SIKH was straddled at 1748 and, in Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla's words, "in order to avoid sinking with all torpedoes on board" 2 torpedoes were fired at 1750. No result was observed. SIKH broke off this action at 1820 by turning to a northerly smoke laying course.

48. At 1800 Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla ordered the convoy to steer south. This confirmed earlier instructions, and the convoy continued to be effectually covered by smoke. The convoy turned to the westward between 1825 and 1840 on receipt of the Rear Admiral Commanding, Fifteenth Cruiser Squadron's signal timed 1819—but then resumed a southerly course until 1900 when BRECONSHIRE ordered "Carry out Operation "B" *"

49. During this phase the 5th Division's smoke hid the enemy almost continuously from the rest of the striking force. Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla in JERVIS with the 1st Division maintained a southwesterly course between the enemy and the convoy, making smoke.

The 2nd, 4th and 3rd Divisions also made ground generally to the southwestward, making smoke. The smoke was drifting at over 25 knots to the northwestward and several attempts to cut through it in west-northwesterly direction (towards the enemy) failed. The smoke continued to lie extremely well and for a long time.

At 1759 the general signal was made "Prepare to fire torpedoes under cover of smoke".

50. At 1802, however, CLEOPATRA had worked through the smoke to get a view of the battleship bearing 310 degs. at about 13,000 yards with a slightly closing inclination. Fire was opened and at 1806 she turned to port and fired 3 torpedoes, as the battleship disappeared again behind drifting smoke. No results were therefore observed, but from the later positions of the enemy it is evident that she observed and turned away from this attack, further delaying the moment at which she might sight the convoy and slightly relieving the pressure on the 5th Division.

DIDO leading the 2nd Division found, when she emerged from smoke that the enemy had in fact turned away under cover of smoke and so the 2nd Division was unable to fire torpedoes. ZULU sighted at too long a range and in a disadvantageous position, so the 3rd Division was also unable to fire.

* Admiralty footnote: Operation "B"—Dispersal of convoy to proceed independently to Malta during dark hours.

51. Throughout this period, many 15 in. splashes were seen in and around the smoke, mostly near the 5th Division, but also more widely amongst all other ships.

52. After firing torpedoes, course was continued to the eastward until 1817 to obtain a clear view of the weather end of the smoke and if necessary to cover the convoy from the northeastward. While it was evident that the battleship and some cruisers were attempting to pass to leeward of the smoke, it was equally evident that the enemy's most effective course of action was to pass to windward (east) of it and that all his force was not with the battleship so that some cruisers might be taking this course of action.

53. Between 1816 and 1818 when a clear view was obtained to the northeast and north no enemy ships were seen. It is now evident that by this time 2 or 3 of the enemy 6-inch cruisers must have retired from the battle.

54. At 1817 course was altered to west, still making smoke and to rejoin the 1st and 5th Divisions in beating off the enemy to the west-northwestward.

PHASE IV.

The enemy driven off by Gun and Torpedo.

55. This phase started with all divisions attempting to carry out the torpedo attack ordered at 1759, and all converging on the all important point between the battleship and the convoy about 15 miles southeast of her.

56. Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla in JERVIS with the 1st Division and LEGION avoided 4 torpedo-bombers at 1823 by a turn to the southward but resumed a northwesterly and then a northerly course 4 minutes later. At 1834 he sighted a large enemy ship bearing 292 degs. about 6 miles, and at 1835 turned his division together to 270 degs. at 28 knots. He identified the enemy as one Littorio class battleship and 3 cruisers widely spaced in line ahead on approximate course 180 degs.

57. During the run in, the 1st Division carried out a concentration shoot on the battleship and two hits were seen. At the same time CLEOPATRA (the only ship of the 4th, 2nd or 3rd Divisions to get a clear view because of smoke) engaged the battleship when visible and the leading 8-inch cruiser at other times. CLEOPATRA was firing almost continuously from 1831 to 1856 closing to just under 10,000 yards at 1847. Two hits were seen by 1845, one of which started a considerable fire on the battleship's quarterdeck, and appeared to put her after turret out of action and further hits observed after she had turned away at 1845.

58. The enemy returned fire with 15-inch, 8-inch, 6-inch and smaller calibres. The battleship appeared to be in divided control, the forward 15-inch firing at the 1st Division and the after group towards our cruisers. All their fire was erratic and it was hard to say who was the target.

59. At 1841, at a range of about 6,000 yards, the 1st Division turned to starboard to fire

torpedoes. It appeared that LEGION (the southernmost ship) actually turned to port, and she was seen to be almost completely covered by a 15-inch salvo as she turned. She emerged from the splashes with speed unimpaired and apparently unharmed.

60. KINGSTON was hit by gunfire during the turn and suffered a fire in a boiler room and the engine room. She stopped but got the fire under control and reported at 1907 that she was able to proceed on one boiler at 16 knots. KELVIN stood by her whilst she was stopped. KINGSTON was accordingly ordered to join the convoy, or, if she could not find it, to proceed independently at her best speed to Malta. This latter in fact she did.

61. At 1840, the leading 8-inch cruiser had altered away, and at 1845 the battleship and the other two cruisers also altered away and to a course of about 340 degs.

62. At 1850, Captain (D), Twenty-Second Destroyer Flotilla in SIKH, who was steering northwest in an endeavour to get into a torpedo-firing position, observed a certain torpedo hit amidships on the battleship.

The 5th Division turned to fire torpedoes from the enemy's quarter at 1855, but smoke interfered with the aim and only LIVELY fired. She fired a full outfit (8 torpedoes) but no result was observed.

LIVELY had been damaged by a 15-inch near miss at 1852 and had her fore lower mess-deck flooded.

63. The enemy was now retiring rapidly to the northward. No further opportunities for torpedo or gunfire presented themselves, but smoke was continued until 1913—on a course to close the convoy.

64. At 1911, course was altered to the northward to concentrate the striking force and all ships joined company by 1920 when a southerly course was shaped again to close the convoy. KINGSTON was detached.

Air Attack

65. During this phase several torpedo-bomber attacks were made on the striking force, all ineffective, though they might well have used our smoke to their advantage. There were also a number of T/B attacks on the convoy, some combined with high-level bombing attacks. These also were beaten off without damage. No aircraft were seen after 1925.

Dispersal of the Force

66. At 1940, the convoy not being in sight and dark fast approaching, it was decided to turn Force B for Alexandria. Accordingly course was shaped 050 degs. at 22 knots, altering to 080 degs. at 2040. At 1949, BRECONSHIRE was ordered to carry out Operation "B". In fact she had already done so at 1900 and the convoy was already dispersed.

At this time (1940) it was known that the enemy was retiring to the northward. He had failed to make contact with the convoy by day, being driven off, and it was thought unlikely that he would attempt a night attack after having his battleship damaged by torpedo.

The weather was strong south-easterly to east-southeasterly gale, with a rising sea and swell. Fuel in the "K" class and Hunt class destroyers was insufficient to allow an extra day to be spent in the central basin west of Benghazi, so it was necessary to get as far east as possible through bomb alley by daylight.

The Return Passage

67. At 2004, *PENELOPE* and *LEGION* were ordered to join the convoy.

AVON VALE had been ordered to proceed to Malta with the convoy, as, in the prevailing weather, it was considered she would hold the rest of Force B back. In accordance with the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station's message timed 1302 of 22nd March, 1942, *CARLISLE* was also ordered to remain with the convoy.

68. At 2130, owing to the strong easterly gale speed had to be reduced to 18 knots, and at 0325 on 23rd March, to 15 knots.

Even so, only one destroyer (*SIKH*) had not lagged by daylight, *ZULU* had to reduce to 10 knots for half an hour at 0530. At 0630 the cruisers turned to 180 degs. to collect destroyers, and at 0700 proceeded at 14 knots.

At 0800 force was in position 34 degs. 23 mins. N., 20 degs. 14 mins. E., course 080 degs.; course was altered at 0900 to 100 degs.

69. During 23rd March speed was gradually increased as the weather slowly improved. By 1300, 20 knots was achieved, but at 1535 speed had to be reduced for an hour to enable *LIVELY* to repair weather and action damage.

Air Attack and Fighter Protection

70. Two Beaufighters arrived at 0756 and from this time on with a few intervals fighters were present. Fighter Direction was not good because of bad communications.

Shadowing by the enemy aircraft commenced in the forenoon but no attack developed until 1610 when 8 *JU.87s* attacked. Six of these aircraft attacked *LIVELY* who was then astern of the cruisers. No damage was sustained.

From this time until dusk, sporadic attacks were made by *JU.88s* and torpedo-bombers.

71. At 2200 the weather having moderated considerably, speed was increased to 22 knots. An evasive course well north of the normal track was used during the night.

At 2248 *LIVELY* reported that she was unable to maintain more than 17 knots and she was detached to Tobruk where it was considered she could repair damage before proceeding to Alexandria.

72. At daylight on 24th March speed was increased to 26 knots.

Air—on 24th March

73. At 0730 on 24th March an A.S.V.* *Sunderland* arrived, and at 0735 two more aircraft, thought at first to be Beaufighters, made an almost unopposed torpedo attack. No damage resulted and no further attacks developed. Fighter escort was provided from 0800.

74. The Force arrived at Alexandria at 1230 where they were honoured to receive the great demonstration which then ensued.

* *Admiralty footnote*: A.S.V.—radar equipment.

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