



**SUPPLEMENT**

TO

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**MEDITERRANEAN CONVOY OPERATIONS.**

**OPERATION " EXCESS "**

*The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 19th March, 1941 by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.*

*Mediterranean,  
19th March, 1941.*

**OPERATIONS M.C.4 AND M.C.6**

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the enclosed reports on Operation M.C.4 (which included Operation " Excess ") and Operation M.C.6,\* carried out between 6th and 18th January, 1941.

2. These operations marked the advent of the German Air Force in strength in the Mediterranean, and included the damaging of H.M.S. ILLUSTRIOUS on 10th January and the loss of H.M.S. SOUTHAMPTON on 11th January.

3. The incident reported in paragraph 7 of Enclosure No. 6† illustrates the difficulty of passage through the Narrows during periods of bright moon when, in order to avoid the known minefields, it is necessary to pass within gun and visibility range of Pantellaria.

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* Operations M.C.4 and M.C.6—see paragraph 1 of Commander-in-Chief's narrative

† This enclosure is not included. The incident referred to was the apparent detection of GLOUCESTER and SOUTHAMPTON by the defences of Pantellaria on the night of 8th/9th January

4. With regard to the dawn action reported in Enclosures Nos. 6 and 9,\* it is thought that this must have been a chance encounter, as so small an Italian force would hardly have been sent unsupported to attack a heavily defended convoy. The heavy expenditure of ammunition by BONAVENTURE, largely incurred in an effort to sink a crippled ship, serves to emphasise the importance of using the torpedo at close range on such occasions.

5. I fully concur with the remarks of the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces† concerning the towing of GALLANT by MOHAWK (Enclosure No. 11‡), and consider that this was a most ably conducted operation.

It cannot be satisfactorily determined whether GALLANT was mined or torpedoed, but the absence of tracks and failure by the enemy to claim her sinking lend probability to the supposition that it was a mine.

6. The dive bombing attacks by German aircraft were most efficiently performed and came as an unpleasant surprise. The results of short range A.A. fire were disappointing, though it has been subsequently learned that this fire was in fact more effective than it appeared, and the Germans suffered considerable loss.

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* These enclosures are not included. The action referred to was a brief encounter at dawn on 10th January by ships escorting Convoy " Excess " with two unidentified enemy vessels which delivered a torpedo attack on them

† Vice-Admiral, Light Forces—Vice-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell, C.B., C.V.O.

‡ This enclosure is not included. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces remarked that he considered that the Commanding Officer of MOHAWK " showed determination and good judgment in continuing the tow "

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM,

*Admiral,*

*Commander-in-Chief.*

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

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

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

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

*Tuesday, 7th January, 1941.*

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

4. Force A, consisting of WARSPITE, VALIANT, ILLUSTRIOUS, JERVIS, NUBIAN, MOHAWK, DAINY, GREY-HOUND, GALLANT and GRIFFIN, sailed at 0500.

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

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

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

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

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

9. Convoy M.W.5‡, consisting of BRECONSHIRE, CLAN MACAULAY escorted by CALCUTTA, DIAMOND and DEFENDER, sailed from Alexandria for Malta at 1400.

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

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

*Admiralty footnotes.*

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

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

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

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

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* F.A.A.—Fleet Air Arm

† R.D.F.—radar

at 2200 in position  $34^{\circ} 30' N.$ ,  $14^{\circ} 50' E.$ , and the mean line of advance was altered to  $320^{\circ}$ .

*Wednesday, 8th January, 1941.*

12. The Commander-in-Chief's position at 0800 was  $35^{\circ} 30' N.$ ,  $23^{\circ} 12' E.$ , and the Anti-Kithera Channel was entered at 0900. Force D and the corvettes were met leaving Suda Bay, which was entered at 1230. After fuelling destroyers Force A sailed again at 1400, passing through the Anti-Kithera Channel at 1800. The Commander-in-Chief's position at midnight was  $35^{\circ} 54' N.$ ,  $21^{\circ} 44' E.$ , on a mean line of advance of  $280^{\circ}$ .

13. Force B arrived at Malta a.m., fuelled, and sailed again p.m. to rendezvous with Force H, JANUS remaining at Malta to dock. SYDNEY and STUART sailed from Malta p.m. to join Force A, routed south of the Medina Bank through position  $34^{\circ} 56' N.$ ,  $17^{\circ} 20' E.$

14. Force C. BRAMBLELEAF arrived Suda a.m., the corvettes fuelling and proceeding to Malta independently.

15. Force D. AJAX and PERTH joined Vice-Admiral, Light Forces at Suda Bay at 0800, and the force then sailed to cover the passage of the corvettes.

16. Air reconnaissance.

Taranto—1 Cavour, 4 cruisers and 2 destroyers. (The dry dock was not visible.)

Naples—1 Littorio and 2 Cavours (indicating that the enemy again have 3 battleships in commission).

Messina—3 cruisers and 3 destroyers.

Cagliari—2 destroyers.

Trapani—4 destroyers.

17. At 1537 a flying-boat of 201 Group located a convoy of 4 merchant ships and 1 hospital ship in position  $33^{\circ} 06' N.$ ,  $22^{\circ} 04' E.$ , steering  $270^{\circ}$ . These were unfortunately out of range of ILLUSTRIOUS's striking force.

18. There were no incidents during the night. Course was altered to  $260^{\circ}$  at 0300, and at 0730 aircraft were flown off to search a sector  $280^{\circ}$ - $310^{\circ}$ . The Commander-in-Chief's position at 0800/9th was  $35^{\circ} 51' N.$ ,  $19^{\circ} 05' E.$

*Thursday, 9th January, 1941*

19. At 1030, Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, with Force D, and SYDNEY and STUART from Malta, joined the Commander-in-Chief. At about this time a reconnaissance aircraft was detected by R.D.F. and also sighted from the fleet. The Fulmars unfortunately failed to intercept owing to low cloud, and at 1140 the aircraft made a sighting report.

20. On the return of the first air search, which sighted nothing, an armed reconnaissance consisting of 6 Swordfish was flown off at 1130 to search the Tripoli-Benghazi route from a position 50 miles east of Tripoli to 60 miles east of Ras Misurata. The Commander-in-Chief's noon position was  $35^{\circ} 40' N.$ ,  $17^{\circ} 45' E.$ , on a course of  $230^{\circ}$ . SYDNEY and STUART were detached to Alexandria at 1240 and Vice-Admiral, Light Forces with Force D at 1330 to cover the convoys and to provide A.A. support for Convoy M.E.6 on the 10th January.

*Friday, 10th January, 1941.*

21. At 0430, when in position  $35^{\circ} 56' N.$ ,  $13^{\circ} 20' E.$ , course was altered to  $290^{\circ}$  to rendezvous with Convoy "Excess". At 0741 a report was received from BONAVENTURE, who was in position  $36^{\circ} 29' N.$ ,  $12^{\circ} 10' E.$ , that she had sighted two enemy destroyers bearing  $010^{\circ}$ , 3 miles, and at 0756 the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 3rd Cruiser Squadron\* reported that SOUTHAMPTON, BONAVENTURE, JAGUAR and HEReward were engaging.

22. The gun flashes at the commencement of this action were seen from WARSPITE, and Force A continued westward to close the scene of the action, passing close to the southward of Convoy "Excess" at 0800. By this time, BONAVENTURE and HEReward were in sight against Pantellaria, still firing heavily at close range into the crippled and burning Italian.

SOUTHAMPTON and JAGUAR were rejoining the convoy.

23. At 0810 one enemy destroyer blew up, having been torpedoed by HEReward, the second having escaped to the north-west at high speed. The destroyer sunk is believed to have been the VEGA.

24. In the meantime a rendezvous had been made with Convoy "Excess" in position  $36^{\circ} 28' N.$ ,  $12^{\circ} 11' E.$  A fighter patrol of 6 and an air search in sector  $280^{\circ}$ - $310^{\circ}$  was flown off at 0815, and the mean line of advance altered to  $140^{\circ}$  at 0820 in the wake of the convoy.

25. At 0834 when in position  $36^{\circ} 27' N.$ ,  $12^{\circ} 11' E.$ , GALLANT was torpedoed or mined, her bows being blown off. She was taken in tow by MOHAWK, and BONAVENTURE and GRIFFIN were detached to stand by her, HEReward and JAGUAR joining the fleet screen. GLOUCESTER and SOUTHAMPTON were also detached to stand by GALLANT at 1000, the fleet remaining close to the convoy for the remainder of the forenoon.

26. One of the A/S† patrol aircraft sighted a Spica class destroyer about 5 miles from Pantellaria and attacked with A/S bombs, reporting a near miss. Two enemy aircraft unsuccessfully attacked BONAVENTURE with torpedoes.

27. The movements of Malta convoys were as follows:—

M.W.5 arrived Malta at 0800.

M.E.6 escorted by PEONY, SALVIA and HYACINTH, sailed at 0700.

M.E.5½ escorted by DIAMOND, sailed at 1130 to join Convoy "Excess".

JANUS left Malta at 1200 and joined the fleet screen, and CALCUTTA joined M.E.6.

28. In the meantime the fleet had been located by enemy aircraft at 0930 and reported at 1015, and at 1127 a shadower was shot down over Linosa Island by Fulmars. At 1223, two S.79s dropped two torpedoes which missed

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* Rear-Admiral Commanding, 3rd Cruiser Squadron—Rear-Admiral E. de F. Renouf, C.V.O.

† A/S—anti-submarine.

astern of VALIANT. These aircraft were engaged in good time by the close range weapons of the battlefleet, without effect.

29. At 1235 large formations of aircraft were sighted approaching from the north. These were identified as JU.87 and 88 aircraft with German markings

A very heavy, determined and skilful dive bombing attack developed on the fleet, mainly directed on ILLUSTRIOUS, and lasting for some ten minutes.

ILLUSTRIOUS was hit by six heavy bombs, and hauled out of line heavily on fire and with her steering gear out of action, but with her armament still in lively action.

WARSPITE sustained slight damage to her starboard bower anchor and hawsepipe.

At least two enemy aircraft were seen to be shot down by gunfire.

30. ILLUSTRIOUS reported that she was "badly hit" and making for Malta; but it was not until 1530 that she was got under control and steering steadily for Malta at 17 knots. In the meantime she was turning circles while the battlefleet was manoeuvred to maintain supporting distance from her. HASTY and JAGUAR were detached to screen her.

31. ILLUSTRIOUS's aircraft in the air (8 Swordfish and 5 Fulmars) had in the meantime been ordered to Malta and all arrived with the exception of one Swordfish and one Fulmar, the crew of the Swordfish and pilot of the Fulmar being picked up. The air gunner of the Fulmar was killed.

32. Between 1600 and 1700, a second attack developed on ILLUSTRIOUS and the battlefleet by about 20 aircraft. ILLUSTRIOUS's Fulmars, who had been refuelled at Malta, were able to intervene and shot down 6 or 7 JU.87s, damaging others. The attack on the battlefleet was mostly concentrated on VALIANT who had one killed and two wounded from splinters.

33. ILLUSTRIOUS passed Filfla at 1730, making good 17 knots, though the fire was still burning at this time.

34. ILLUSTRIOUS was met in the swept channel by a tug from Malta and arrived safely at 2145.

35. In the meantime, GALLANT and escorting forces were making good  $6\frac{1}{2}$  knots, their position at 1600 being  $36^{\circ} 11' N.$ ,  $12^{\circ} 56' E.$  The convoy movements proceeded according to plan, and ESSEX escorted by HERO arrived safely at Malta at 2045. Owing to the delays to the battlefleet, Vice-Admiral, Light Forces was ordered to remain to the northward of Convoy "Excess" in position  $34^{\circ} 35' N.$ ,  $14^{\circ} 52' E.$  Convoy M.E.6 was at this time making good  $9\frac{1}{2}$  knots.

36. The Commander-in-Chief with Force A then proceeded to the eastward without further incident, passing through position  $33^{\circ} 40' N.$ ,  $14^{\circ} 10' E.$  at 1800, and  $35^{\circ} 18' N.$ ,  $13^{\circ} 35' E.$  at 2200, on a mean line of advance of  $090^{\circ}$ .

*Saturday, 11th January, 1941.*

37. The Commander-in-Chief's position at 0001 was  $35^{\circ} 20' N.$ ,  $15^{\circ} 26' E.$ , steering  $080^{\circ}$ , and at 0800 was  $35^{\circ} 52' N.$ ,  $18^{\circ} 09' E.$  Convoy "Excess" was in position  $35^{\circ} 28' N.$ ,  $18^{\circ} 00' E.$  at 0800.

38. The fleet remained close to "Excess" for the remainder of the day, passing through position  $36^{\circ} 06' N.$ ,  $19^{\circ} 27' E.$  at noon.

39. At 1500, C.S.3,\* who had left GALLANT off Malta at 0500, reported that SOUTHAMPTON and GLOUCESTER had been attacked in position  $34^{\circ} 54' N.$ ,  $18^{\circ} 24' E.$  by 12 dive bombers who achieved a surprise attack down sun, and both ships had been hit. SOUTHAMPTON was making good a course of  $105^{\circ}$  at 22 knots.

At 1605, C.S.3 reported that SOUTHAMPTON was stopped in position  $34^{\circ} 54' N.$ ,  $18^{\circ} 24' E.$

40. Course was therefore altered to  $210^{\circ}$  at 1630 to close C.S.3, and at 1645 ORION, PERTH, JERVIS and JANUS were detached to his assistance. Owing to lack of fuel, JUNO and NUBIAN were detached to join the convoy and HERO joined the fleet screen. MOHAWK and GRIFFIN, who had seen GALLANT safely into Malta, were sailed by Vice-Admiral, Malta, at 1700, to close C.S.3 at high speed.

41. At 1819, however, C.S.3 reported that SOUTHAMPTON saw little prospect of getting the fires over the engine room and "X" magazine under control, and at 1906 that he was forced to abandon ship and would sink her. The Commander-in-Chief approved this action and at 2100, when in position  $35^{\circ} 12' N.$ ,  $19^{\circ} 44' E.$ , course was altered to  $100^{\circ}$  to reach rendezvous for all forces at sea in position  $34^{\circ} 40' N.$ ,  $23^{\circ} 10' E.$  at 0800/12.

42. At about 1800, when in position  $36^{\circ} 08' N.$ ,  $20^{\circ} 50' E.$ , Convoy M.E.5 $\frac{1}{2}$  parted from Convoy "Excess" to pass south of Crete, "Excess" proceeding through the Elaphonisos Channel.

43. C.S.3 later reported that the first attack was carried out by 12 or more dive bombers and was a complete surprise from the sun in the clear blue sky. The speed of advance of the squadron at the time was 24 knots. The attack was well pressed home in spite of gunfire from both ships. High level bombing attacks continued intermittently until about 1630 and the squadron was shadowed until sunset.

GLOUCESTER's forward 6-inch director was damaged by an unexploded bomb through the roof of the director tower. One aircraft was unserviceable from machine-gun bullets; the other was in the air at the time and force-landed near DIAMOND. GLOUCESTER's casualties were 1 officer and 8 ratings killed and 1 officer and 13 ratings wounded.

SOUTHAMPTON survivors were embarked in GLOUCESTER and DIAMOND after abandoning ship, GLOUCESTER taking 33 officers and 678 ratings, of whom 4 officers and 58 ratings were wounded, and DIAMOND taking 16 wounded ratings.

*Sunday, 12th January, 1941.*

44. The Commander-in-Chief's position at 0001 was  $35^{\circ} 05' N.$ ,  $20^{\circ} 40' E.$ , and at 0800 all forces, including Force X, made a rendezvous in position  $34^{\circ} 40' N.$ ,  $23^{\circ} 10' E.$

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* C.S.3—Rear-Admiral Commanding, 3rd Cruiser Squadron

45. The Commander-in-Chief in WARSPITE, with VALIANT, GLOUCESTER, JERVIS, JANUS, GREYHOUND, DIAMOND VOYAGER, HERO and DEFENDER, proceeded to Alexandria.

46. Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, 7th Cruiser Squadron, YORK, MOHAWK, GRIFFIN and Force X then all proceeded to Suda Bay to fuel.

Convoy "Excess" arrived at Piraeus at 1200.

Monday, 13th January, 1941.

47. At 0230 ORION and PERTH arrived at Piraeus and embarked passengers from Convoy "Excess", sailing again for Malta at 0600. Vice-Admiral, Light Forces informed the Vice-Admiral, Malta that their route would be through the Kithera Channel, north of the Medina Bank, through position 33° 30' N., 14° 10' E., and requested fighter protection.

48. Air reconnaissance.

Naples—2 cruisers, 3 destroyers.

Two convoys in positions 37° 39' N., 11° 44' E., and 35° 02' N., 11° 46' E. No. 830 Squadron was not despatched from Malta to attack owing to an adverse weather report.

Tuesday, 14th January, 1941.

49. ORION and PERTH arrived at Malta a.m. Owing to machinery defects PERTH remained at Malta and ORION sailed with BONAVENTURE and JAGUAR. The latter two ships were brought to Alexandria to reduce the concentration of ships subject to air attack in Malta.

Wednesday, 15th January, 1941.

50. Rear-Admiral, 1st Battle Squadron, with Force X, made a rendezvous with Vice-Admiral, Light Forces in ORION, with BONAVENTURE and JAGUAR, and proceeded to Suda Bay.

### OPERATION "SUBSTANCE"

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 4th August, 1941 by Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O., Flag Officer Commanding, Force H.

H.M.S. NELSON,

4th August, 1941.

#### REPORT ON OPERATION "SUBSTANCE"

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the following report on Operation "Substance,"\* which includes the covering of Convoy M.G.1† from Malta to Gibraltar.

2. On the 3rd July, the Admiralty notified the authorities concerned the names of the ships taking part in the operation. These were: LEINSTER (personnel ship), MELBOURNE STAR, SYDNEY STAR, CITY OF PRETORIA, PORT CHALMERS, DURHAM and DEUCALION (M.T. ships‡). Ocean Escorts: NELSON, MANCHESTER,

#### Admiralty footnotes

\* "Substance"—a convoy from U.K. to Malta via Straits of Gibraltar.

† M.G.1—a convoy of 7 empty M.T. ships.

‡ M.T. ships—Military Transports

AURORA, ARETHUSA with 3 destroyers of the 4th Destroyer Flotilla and 3 destroyers\* from the Home Fleet. S.S. PASTEUR would convey to Gibraltar the personnel not already embarked in H.M. and M.T. ships, for subsequent transfer to H.M. Ships together with naval and military details for Gibraltar.

3. On the 8th July, the Admiralty issued certain decisions† and instructions. These were as follows:—

(a) M.G.1 was to proceed by the westward route.

(b) The order of importance of the three objects of the operation was to be taken as

(i) The safe arrival of Convoy "Substance" at Malta.

(ii) The subsequent safe return to Gibraltar of the warships forming the escorting forces.

(iii) The safe arrival at Gibraltar of M.G.1.

(c) In view of the above it would not be possible to provide close escort for M.G.1 and it was preferable for this convoy to leave Malta on D.3.‡

(d) The advantage claimed for sailing M.G.1 on D.3 with the subsequent dispersal was that the enemy would be presented with a multiplicity of targets.

(e) It was essential for warships to carry troops, and an additional carrier would not be available.

I was instructed, after consultation with Vice-Admiral, Malta, to issue detailed orders for the whole operation.

4. On the 9th July, the Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic Station asked for as many additional flying-boats as possible to be made available at Gibraltar from p.m. D.—4 to D.3 in order to provide cover for the operation.

5. Special instructions were issued by me on the 10th July to conceal the object of the operation.

6. On the 8th July, I had asked Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean if arrangements could be made for the following submarine dispositions:—

(a) 2 off Naples.

(b) 1 off Palermo.

(c) 2 in southern approaches to Messina.

(d) 1 off Marittimo.

(e) 1 off Cagliari.

Of these, (a) and (e) could be provided from the Western Mediterranean.

#### Admiralty footnotes.

\* Subsequently reduced by one destroyer

† The reference to "decisions" concerns previous discussions between the Admiralty, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Flag Officer Commanding, Force H and Vice-Admiral, Malta on the planning of this operation

‡ The calendar date on which an operation is to be carried out is often not fixed until the last moment. For this reason, as well as for reasons of security, it was at this time customary, in writing advance orders, to designate the day on which the operation was to start as "D 1", and the second and subsequent days as "D 2", "D 3", etc.

It is now more usual to refer to the starting day as "D. day", subsequent days "D + 1", "D. + 2" and the days preceding it as "D - 1", "D - 2", etc.

*Outline Plan of Operation.*

7. On the 13th July, I informed the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean and other authorities that in view of the priorities assigned by the Admiralty and the routes advocated by Vice-Admiral, Malta, I considered that M.G.1 should sail a.m. D.3, splitting into three groups after dark, each group proceeding at best speed. The route to be followed to be close inshore by Cape Bon and subsequently through the Galita Channel.

Subject to no enemy forces being present, cruisers and Hunts of Force X\* to part company from "Substance" at 0700 on D.4 and proceed to Malta so as to discharge and refuel before arrival of "Substance".

The destroyer escort of "Substance" to be refuelled by 2000 on D.4 at latest and sailed so as to reach the eastern end of Skerki Channel about 0430 on D.5, the remainder of Force X having passed this point about 0400.

Force H† to withdraw to the westward on reaching the entrance of the Skerki Channel on D.3 remaining if possible out of range of shore-based fighters during D.4 but with the object of distracting attention from M.G.1.

Forces H and X to rendezvous shortly after dawn on D.5. Providing no enemy surface forces were in the vicinity, 6 Swordfish to be flown off to Malta, early a.m. on D.5.

*Preliminary Movements.*

8. The first movement of destroyers from Gibraltar in connection with the operation took place on the 14th July. These movements, which it is unnecessary to describe in detail, were designed to enable all personnel to be transferred under cover of darkness, all destroyers to have the maximum amount of fuel on board after passing through the Straits, and for the cruiser escorts to arrive at Gibraltar in pairs relieving one another on successive nights in the hope that the change of ships would not be too noticeable.

9. All these movements were carried out according to plan and by 2000 on the 20th July, the situation was as follows:—

*(a) In harbour at Gibraltar—*

PASTEUR accommodating balance of troops for transfer to H.M. Ships. MANCHESTER, ARETHUSA, LEINSTER, COSSACK, MAORI, SIKH, waiting to embark troops after dark and then sail to eastward to join convoy.

Force H consisting of RENOWN, ARK ROYAL, HERMIONE, FAULKOR, FEARLESS, FOXHOUND, FIRE-DRAKE, DUNCAN.

*(b) Due in at Gibraltar at 2130—*

FORESIGHT, FURY, FORESTER to refuel and sail to the eastward.

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* Force X was composed of H.M. Ships EDINBURGH (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron), MANCHESTER, ARETHUSA, MANXMAN, COSSACK (Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla), MAORI, SIKH, NESTOR, FEARLESS, FOXHOUND, FIRE-DRAKE, FARNDAL, AVON VALE and ERIDGE

† Force H was composed of H.M. Ships RENOWN (Flag Officer Commanding, Force H), NELSON, ARK ROYAL, HERMIONE, FAULKOR (Captain (D), 8th Destroyer Flotilla), FORESIGHT, FURY, FORESTER, LIGHTNING, and DUNCAN.

(c) *Approaching the Straits from the westward and due to pass Europa at 0145/21—*

EDINBURGH (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron\*), NELSON, MANXMAN, NESTOR, LIGHTNING, FARNDAL, AVON VALE, ERIDGE with 6 M.T. ships forming the convoy.

*Departure from Gibraltar.*

10. At 0140 on 21st July just before ships in harbour were due to sail, heavy Levant squalls sprang up combined with dense fog. These conditions made departure difficult and the programme was considerably delayed. Force H destroyers should have slipped at 0240, but at this time MANCHESTER and LEINSTER were still at their berths, though ARETHUSA had slipped from the north end of the detached mole. Fog was very patchy and MANCHESTER at the south end of the detached mole was invisible from RENOWN at the north end of the south mole.

11. About 0320 the squalls decreased in intensity and the fog cleared sufficiently to allow MANCHESTER to sail, followed by LEINSTER. RENOWN, preceded by ARK ROYAL and destroyers, slipped at 0426, 1¼ hours late on the programme arranged. By this time the harbour and bay were clear of fog though it persisted south of Europa.

12. Owing to the fog, ships were ordered at 0412 to proceed independently to the eastward until daylight. The course and speed of advance of all ships were laid down in the Operation Orders, a copy of which had been supplied to the Naval Liaison Officer in LEINSTER. At 0530 a merchant ship passed two miles to starboard of RENOWN on opposite courses. Half an hour later all ships which were to form on RENOWN were in station and proceeding eastward at 20 knots to draw abreast of the convoy in order to exchange destroyer screens.

*Movements on 21st July (D.1).*

13. Three Swordfish from North Front arrived over ARK ROYAL at 0630, but before landing on were ordered to search ahead to a depth of 40 miles to locate and report the position of all ships taking part in the operation. These aircraft reported having sighted all units including LEINSTER.

14. Hereafter ships formed on RENOWN will be referred to as Group 4, and those formed on the M.T. ships as Group 5. The three Tribals, COSSACK, MAORI and SIKH, who should have escorted LEINSTER to join Group 5 overtook and joined Group 4. Having failed to locate LEINSTER in the fog they proceeded independently in accordance with the instructions referred to in paragraph 12. Speed was increased to 20 knots at 0830. Visibility improved and by noon was normal.

15. At 0915 information was received from the Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic that the personnel ship LEINSTER was ashore near Cape Tarifa. This seemed an improbable position and since LEINSTER had been reported by the air reconnaissance it was not

*Admiralty footnote:*

\* Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron—Rear-Admiral E. N. Syfret, the Senior Officer of Force X.

at first accepted. Further interrogation of Swordfish crews revealed that visibility from the air at the time was poor and the vessel reported as LEINSTER was probably BROWN RANGER. Subsequently Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic corrected the position to read Carnero Point and added that military ranks had been disembarked.

16. I considered it impracticable to take any steps to transfer the personnel from LEINSTER. HERMIONE was a possibility, but her return to Gibraltar at this stage would have inevitably compromised secrecy. In any case, she could not have taken more than 500 men without seriously affecting her fighting efficiency and I considered her presence with Force H on D.4 most necessary in view of possible eventualities. A signal to this effect was passed to Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic, by means of a returning Sunderland.

17. Clocks were advanced one hour at 1000 to Zone -2\*. By 1230 Group 4 was abeam and to the northward of Group 5 and the destroyer screens were readjusted leaving three Tribals, NESTOR, FOXHOUND and FIREDRAKE, all of whom were destined for and could refuel at Malta with Group 4, and the remainder with Group 5 so as to economise fuel.

18. At 1500 Group 4 altered course to 060° to open from Group 5 and at 1600 reduced speed to 18 knots. The two groups were then approximately 30 miles apart.

19. During the day ARK ROYAL kept a fighter section ranged on deck whilst Sunderlands operating from Gibraltar provided A/S patrols ahead of both groups to avoid the use of Swordfish which would have suggested the presence of ARK ROYAL. No hostile or unidentified aircraft were sighted or detected throughout the day but two merchant ships were sighted by Group 4. The first passed westbound at 1255 some 15 miles to the northward of RENOWN who was then 32 miles south-west of Almeria. The second was sighted at 1900 when 35 miles south of Cape Palos, this ship bore E.S.E., 10 miles, and appeared to be northbound from Oran.

*Movements during Daylight Hours, 22nd July (D.2).*

20. At 0400 Group 4 altered course to 070° when 36 miles S.E. of Formentera, and to 130° at 0700 when 75 miles east of Formentera with the object of covering Group 3 from air observation. Fighter and A/S patrols were flown off for Group 4 at 0715 and maintained during the day.

21. At 0810 aircraft reported a southbound ship 18 miles south-west of the group. It was estimated she would pass 13 miles ahead of Group 5 at 1230.

22. An unidentified floatplane was sighted at 0850 low down to the northward of Group 4 and about 10 miles away. Owing to low air to air visibility the fighters were unable to intercept and the aircraft disappeared to the eastward. A few minutes later an Italian signal was intercepted, timed 0850, which appeared to refer to Group 4.

23. At noon Group 4 reversed course to the westward for two hours to close the distance from Group 5 and turned east again at 1400. One or two aircraft were detected passing 25 miles north of RENOWN at 1430; ARK ROYAL flew off six fighters but these failed to intercept.

24. The Sunderland A/S aircraft was instructed by V/S\* at 1453 to locate Group 5 and to inform Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron that Group 4 would remain 20 miles to the eastward of the convoy during the night and close at daylight. This Sunderland returned at 1732 reporting Group 5 bearing 240°, 25 miles from RENOWN. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron reported via this aircraft that one French merchant ship had passed northbound 9 miles ahead of the convoy at 1300, that all destroyers had been fuelled during the day from BROWN RANGER and that Group 5 would pass through position 37° 40' N., 6° 25' E. at 0300/23.

25. During the day the sea was calm with fair surface visibility and a light easterly wind which enabled ARK ROYAL to operate independently for flying inside the screen.

26. Group 4 streamed paravanes at 1800 in position 37° 49' N., 05° 04' E., and at 2030 again turned west till 2200 to maintain a distance of about 20 miles to the eastward of the convoy during the night. As far as I am aware Group 5 had not yet been sighted by the enemy.

*Submarine Attack on Force H on Night 22nd/23rd July.*

27. At 2315 when in position 38° 03' N., 05° 45' E. proceeding at 15 knots on a course 085°, NESTOR, who was the starboard wing destroyer of the screen, reported a torpedo approaching from starboard. Immediate avoiding action was taken by means of a drastic turn to port. After a short period three heavy explosions were felt at regular intervals followed a little later by a fourth explosion about a cable ahead of RENOWN. Subsequent reports from NESTOR indicated that a submarine on the surface had fired a salvo of four torpedoes and that NESTOR had counter-attacked.

*Movements, early a.m. 23rd July (D.3).*

28. At 0648 ARK ROYAL flew off the first fighter patrol and Group 4 closed Group 5. At 0657 RENOWN reported a shadowing aircraft in sight ahead of Group 4. Fighters were sent out 10 miles but owing to the low sun and mist were unable to sight and the shadower made good her escape. A second shadowing aircraft was reported at 0729 ten miles to the northward but owing to low visibility and the fact that the aircraft was too low for R.D.F. reports, no contact was made by the fighters.

29. It became apparent that both groups had been sighted. At 0745 Group 4 was formed as a flexible port column of the convoy with the object of providing A.A. protection whilst still remaining free to manoeuvre for flying. This formation was maintained during the day. The sea was calm with a clear sky and good visibility but a very light and variable wind made

*Admiralty footnote*

\* Zone -2—two hours ahead of G M T.

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* V/S—visual signal



flying operations difficult since high speed had to be used on each occasion and the flying-off course could not be predetermined with any accuracy.

*Torpedo Bombing and High Level Bombing Attack on Fleet, a.m. 23rd July (D.3).*

30. The first group of enemy aircraft was detected at 0910 bearing 055°, 60 miles. This developed into a well synchronised torpedo bomber and high level bombing attack which commenced at 0942 and was completed in approximately four minutes. Six torpedo planes attacked from ahead and concentrated on the convoy while eight high level bombers crossed from south to north dropping their bombs amongst the convoy.

31. The torpedo bombers approaching low down from ahead were engaged with barrage fire by the destroyer screen. This fire appeared effective and on coming within range the enemy split into two groups of three, one group altering course to port, the other to starboard. One of the starboard group followed by one of the port group attacked FEARLESS who was stationed in the starboard bow position on the screen. The remaining two aircraft of the port group pressed home their attack on the port bow of the convoy which took avoiding action. There is no clear record of any torpedoes having been dropped by the remaining two aircraft of the starboard group, but MANCHESTER observed two tracks from port and one from starboard before a final torpedo approaching from port hit her.

*Loss of FEARLESS.*

32. The two aircraft which attacked FEARLESS released their torpedoes from a height of 70 feet at a range of about 1,500 and 800 yards respectively. Avoiding action was taken and the first torpedo passed about 90 yards ahead. The torpedo from the second aircraft ran shallow. Course was shaped to comb the track but when abreast the stem on the port side, at a distance of about 30 feet, the torpedo broke surface, altered course to port, and hit the ship abreast the 3-inch gun.

33. Both engines were put out of action, the rudder was jammed at hard-a-port, all electric power failed due to the switchboard being demolished and an extensive fuel fire was started aft. One officer and 24 ratings were killed outright or died later. FEARLESS reported she was entirely disabled. As she was badly on fire and I did not consider the detachment of a second destroyer to attempt towing was justified under the circumstances, I ordered FORESTER to take off survivors and then sink the ship. This was effected by one torpedo at 1055.

*Damage to, and Detachment of, MANCHESTER.*

34. Meanwhile, MANCHESTER, who was to starboard of the convoy, sighted torpedoes approaching and turned to port to comb the tracks. Two torpedoes were seen to pass down the port side and another one passed astern from starboard. In order to avoid collision with PORT CHALMERS a turn to starboard was then commenced. At this time another aircraft released a torpedo from a position between the first and second M.T. ships of the port column.

Wheel was immediately reversed in an endeavour to avoid this torpedo, but it struck MANCHESTER aft on the port side.

35. The immediate effects of the torpedo hit were to cause a list of 12° to port with large reduction of speed and steering gear out of action. Steering was changed over to the after position and a reasonable degree of control was obtained. Subsequently the steering motors failed and hand steering had to be used. The explosion had travelled upwards through the decks to the upper deck, driving large quantities of oil fuel upwards into all the compartments affected. Water and oil fuel flooded the after engine room, after 4-inch magazine, main W/T office, 'X' magazine and various other compartments between 179 and 209 bulkheads. Many ratings were overcome by fumes from the oil fuel but most of these recovered after treatment and were able to resume their duties. Only the starboard outer shaft remained serviceable. A speed of 8 knots was at first obtained which very gradually increased to 12 knots. Emergency leads were run to the steering motors and mechanical steering was again in use by 1315.

36. MANCHESTER's initial signal informed me that she could steam 8 knots so I ordered her to return to Gibraltar escorted by AVON VALE. Her casualties were 3 naval officers, 5 military officers, 20 naval ratings and 7 other ranks killed, 3 naval ratings missing, and 1 military officer, 1 naval rating and 4 other ranks wounded.

37. MANCHESTER had approximately 750 military personnel on board but as the sea was calm I decided to limit her escort to one destroyer in the hope that a single cruiser and destroyer might either escape detection by enemy aircraft or else avoid attack in view of the better targets offered by the convoy and its escort.

*High Level Bombing Attacks on Fleet, a.m. 23rd July (D.3).*

38. The high level bombing attack carried out simultaneously with the T/B\* attack was ineffective. The approach was made clear of the sun, and the aircraft were heavily engaged by all ships. Fire appeared to be accurate although no aircraft were seen to be hit. Bombs fell harmlessly amongst the convoy.

39. At 1011 a second wave of 5 high level bombers (probably B.R.20s) approached from north to south and dropped two groups of bombs, the first of which fell clear of the screen to port and the second close to SIKH and FOXHOUND on the port bow of the screen. This was rather a half-hearted attack and the aircraft which were at a height of over 17,000 feet were not engaged by the fleet until after the first bombs had fallen. The presence of 5 Fulmars 1,000 feet below and astern, endeavouring to overtake the bombers, may have induced them to get rid of their bomb loads as soon as possible.

40. In the first high level attack, Fulmars shot down two S.79s and two more probably failed to return. Three T/B aircraft (S.79s) were shot down by gunfire, AVON VALE

*Admiralty footnote.*

\* T/B—torpedo bomber



picking up six Italians (2 officers, 1 warrant officer and 3 ratings) from one of these in a rubber dinghy. Three Fulmars were lost, all of which force-landed in the sea, but all crews were picked up, uninjured, by destroyers.

41. These attacks, which took place 105 miles S.S.W. of Cagliari, appeared to be unsupported by enemy fighters, none of which was seen throughout the day.

*Torpedo Bomber Attack on MANCHESTER and AVON VALE, p.m. 23rd July (D.3).*

42. At 1805 MANCHESTER and AVON VALE were attacked by three torpedo bombers. These approached from astern and proceeded well inside territorial waters to reach a position up sun. AVON VALE, anticipating an attack from out of the sun, moved in that direction to a distance of about two miles from MANCHESTER. The aircraft then approached low down on the starboard bow and were subjected to a heavy flanking fire from AVON VALE and to a barrage from 'A' and 'B' turrets backed up by the starboard 4-inch battery in MANCHESTER. The enemy appeared so deterred by the volume of fire that they did not press home the attack. One torpedo was dropped at AVON VALE and the other two were dropped at such long range that MANCHESTER had no difficulty in taking avoiding action. One torpedo was seen to surface at the end of its run and detonated shortly afterwards.

*Abortive Torpedo Bomber Attack on Fleet, p.m. 23rd July (D.3).*

43. At 1643 a group of aircraft was detected bearing 338°, 43 miles, closing the convoy. Fifteen minutes later five S.79s led by a Cant were sighted low down on the port quarter. Fighters intercepted this group which consisted of torpedo planes and shot down two S.79s and damaged the Cant. The remainder retired without attacking.

*Detachment of Force X.*

44. By 1713 the convoy and escort had reached the entrance to the Skerki Channel and HERMIONE was ordered to take MANCHESTER's place in Force X. Group 4 parted company and withdrew westward with the intention of covering MANCHESTER and affording such protection to M.G.1 on D.4 as was practicable. A section of fighters remained with the convoy until 1830, when they were relieved by Beaufighters from Malta. The Fulmars returned to ARK ROYAL at 1922. At 1833 Force H encountered the wreckage of one of the S. 79s shot down by the fighters at 1658. FORESIGHT picked up four survivors including one officer from a rubber dinghy. The officer thought they had been shot down by a Hurricane.

*Passage of Force X through the Narrows on the Night of 23rd/24th July (D.3/D.4).*

45. While Force H returned to the west, Force X and the convoy continued through the Skerki Channel towards Malta, one destroyer with T.S.D.S.\* streamed and locked in the low speed setting being stationed ahead of each column of the convoy. They were

attacked at 1900 by four T/Bs which approached from the starboard beam and were heavily engaged. One aircraft was seen by FARNDALE to crash. Avoiding action was taken but two torpedoes passed close to EDINBURGH and one close to HERMIONE. The Beaufighters failed to intercept this raid.

*High Level Bombing Attack on Force X, 1945 on 23rd July (D.3).*

46. At 1945 a high level bombing attack developed from 12,000 feet. Two Beaufighters at 8,000 failed to intercept. They had been instructed by R/T\* from EDINBURGH to circle at 10,000 feet, 5 miles, 070° from the convoy, in a position to intercept the incoming aircraft. They failed to do this and approached from the same direction as the enemy without identifying themselves and were engaged by the gunfire of the fleet. They then withdrew as the enemy approached, 3,000 feet above them. About 20 heavy bombs fell and one either hit or very near missed FIRE Drake who was towing T.S.D.S. ahead of the port column. At the same time one torpedo passed astern of EDINBURGH but as no T/B aircraft were seen this torpedo may have come from a U-Boat.

*Damage to, and Withdrawal of, FIRE Drake.*

47. FIRE Drake was holed in Nos. 1 and 2 boiler rooms and temporarily immobilised, but suffered no serious casualties. ERIDGE having been ordered by the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron to stand by and escort her to Gibraltar, FIRE Drake reported that she hoped to have steam in one boiler shortly. In the meantime ERIDGE took her in tow, this being successfully accomplished by 2038. FIRE Drake's steering gear being out of action, considerable difficulty was experienced in turning to the course for the Galita Channel, and equal difficulty in maintaining that course. Fortunately the steering gear was repaired by midnight, and no further difficulties arose; speed being slowly worked up to 10 knots. The hopes that had been raised regarding the possibility of steaming the one remaining boiler proved false, for this boiler primed so badly that FIRE Drake reported she would be unable to steam for some considerable time.

48. The two ships were shadowed by aircraft almost continuously throughout the next day. Air attack was expected at any moment, but for some reason or another, no attack developed. Possibly the shadowers failed to observe the tow, or it may be that the aircraft preferred to attack the merchant ships of Convoy M.G.1.

49. At dark on the 24th, the third degree of readiness was assumed, both ships having then been at action stations for 37 hours. ERIDGE reports that there seemed to be a feeling of genuine regret when darkness fell without any offensive action having been taken against them.

50. At 0930/25 FIRE Drake slipped, after being in tow for 37 hours. ERIDGE then towed her alongside for 2 hours, during which 10½ tons of feed water and 2 tons of drinking water were transferred. FIRE Drake then cast off and proceeded at 9 knots under her own power

*Admiralty footnote.*

\* T S D S—two speed destroyer minesweep

*Admiralty footnote*

\* R/T—radio telephony.

51. The damage to FIRE Drake was doubly unfortunate in that it deprived the port column of the convoy of T.S.D.S. protection. FEARLESS and NESTOR had been detailed as spare T.S.D.S. ships. FEARLESS having been sunk, NESTOR only remained. The delay which would have resulted while NESTOR streamed her sweep could not be accepted. Furthermore, in the absence of FEARLESS, FIRE Drake, AVON VALE and ERIDGE, the screen was already undesirably thin. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, therefore, decided to accept the increased risk of damage by mines and to press on without further delay, retaining NESTOR on the convoy screen.

*Enemy Aircraft Search for Convoy.*

52. At 2000 Force X and the convoy altered course to the northward in accordance with the pre-arranged route. The latter had been selected solely from the point of view of safety from enemy mines, but the alteration to the northward at this time had another and unexpected advantage, for just over an hour later enemy aircraft were reported on the starboard bow. These split into two groups and made an abortive attempt lasting half an hour to locate the convoy.

53. There is no doubt that the enemy expected the convoy to take a more or less direct route from the Skerki Channel to Pantellaria. In fact, they must have felt certain of this since they made no attempt to keep the convoy under air observation during the critical period before and just after sunset, and in consequence the alteration of course to 075° at 2000 was unobserved, and the anticipated attack at dusk, which was most to be feared, never materialised.

54. At 2250 Force X altered course to 105° and a quarter of an hour later to 133°. From this time until midnight aircraft were observed searching with flares to the southward of the convoy. The flares appeared to be towed, but no opinion could be formed of the effectiveness of this method of search.

55. The period between 2250 and 0013/24, when the convoy entered the Italian convoy route, was probably the most dangerous from the point of view of mines, and in view of the absence of the T.S.D.S. destroyer ahead of the port column and of two M.T. ships being without paravanes, it was with considerable relief that C.S.18 turned to 160° at 0013/24 into the Italian convoy route.

56. At 0046, FOXHOUND, 5 cables ahead of the starboard column, reported a mine in her sweep and moved over to port to clear it. Except for a distinct bump felt earlier at 2017 on the bridge and in the engine room of NESTOR, followed by a report of an object like a mine in the wake, this was the only evidence of the presence of mines throughout the passage.

*E-Boat Attack on Force X, 0300 24th July (D.4).*

57. The convoy passed through Position K (36° 57' N., 12° E.) at 0230. A quarter of an hour later three unidentified objects were detected by COSSACK, stationed 5 cables ahead of the port column, on her R.D.F.

58. At 0250, short flashes of light followed by the sound of motor engines starting up indicated to COSSACK and EDINBURGH (leading the port column) the presence of E-Boats.\* One was promptly illuminated by searchlight and heavily engaged by these two ships. MANXMAN found the target perfectly illuminated by cross searchlight beams and also opened fire. After firing torpedoes, one of which passed under the stern of COSSACK, the E-Boat retired at high speed but not before she had been repeatedly hit. Two torpedoes, either from the same or another E-Boat, passed down the port side of EDINBURGH.

59. Shortly afterwards, ARETHUSA, the rear ship of the port column, sighted another E-Boat, which had apparently passed down between the port column of the convoy and the destroyer screen. This boat was engaged by both ARETHUSA and FARNDAL (the rear ship of the port screen), and hits were observed. One officer in ARETHUSA was confident that the boat was stopped; there is no evidence, however, that she was sunk.

60. Shortly after these attacks, one ship of the convoy was observed by NESTOR (the rear ship of the starboard screen) to be dropping astern.

Subsequent action by NESTOR is referred to later in this narrative.

61. At 0305 the noise of an E-Boat was heard by EDINBURGH on the port side, and immediately afterwards its wake was seen. It was promptly illuminated, and raked with pom-pom, 0.5-inch and Oerlikon fire at 1,500 to 2,000 yards range, the target appearing to be enveloped in a hail of tracers. The E-Boat stopped out of control, and at this moment the main armament fired a broadside of 12 guns at fixed sight range. When the splashes subsided nothing was seen.

62. Meanwhile, COSSACK detected hydrophone effect by asdic in several positions ahead, and at 0315 sighted another E-Boat on the port bow. Speed was increased and endeavour made to ram, but the boat passed across COSSACK's bows too close for searchlight to follow. Fire was opened and sounds like splintering of wood heard. A torpedo was fired by this boat, and it is estimated to have passed immediately under the stem of COSSACK, who was only 100 yards from the enemy at the time.

63. For the next 20 minutes further sounds of motor engines were heard by COSSACK and EDINBURGH, but no further contacts were made, other than a fleeting glimpse from COSSACK of a boat withdrawing under cover of smoke. Discretion on the part of the surviving E-Boat Commanders was apparently allowed to suppress their valour.

64. The result of these encounters was that of the 6 to 12 E-Boats present, one was sunk, one possibly sunk, and two others damaged.

65. This meeting with E-Boats might have had different results had their attacks been carried out more resolutely. It seemed that they were not expecting surface forces, and the surprise discounted their tactical advantage.

*Admiralty footnote*

\* E-Boats—similar to British Motor Torpedo Boats

The E-Boats were difficult to see and their presence was not disclosed until they went ahead on their engines at high speed. Possibly they would have achieved more success and suffered less damage had they kept quiet during and after the firing of their torpedoes. The handicap of not having a flashless propellant for star-shell was again keenly felt.

*Torpedoing and Escorting of SYDNEY STAR.*

66. NESTOR, who at 0255 had observed one ship of the convoy dropping astern, proceeded to investigate, and on closing, it was seen that the ship, identified as S.S. SYDNEY STAR, was moving slowly through the water on an opposite course to that of the convoy. On closer approach, it was observed that the starboard boats were being lowered; the ship however appeared undamaged, with no list and at normal trim.

67. Some time elapsed before NESTOR could obtain a reply to repeated requests for information, but eventually SYDNEY STAR reported that she had been torpedoed in No. 3 hold, and that she had 30 feet of water in that hold and appeared to be sinking.

68. NESTOR therefore decided to embark the troops numbering 470, and proceeded alongside for this purpose. Planks were rigged from SYDNEY STAR's gunwale to NESTOR's forecastle, and Jacob's ladders employed aft. Transfer occupied 50 minutes, and was completed by 0405.

69. Throughout this operation both ships were lying stopped in a position 4 miles from Pantellaria. Three E-Boats were observed whilst the transfer of troops was proceeding, but no attacks developed. On completion of the transfer, personnel on board NESTOR numbered 774 (231 ship's company, 56 army passengers, 487 ex SYDNEY STAR).

70. Whilst alongside, NESTOR impressed on the Master of the SYDNEY STAR the absolute necessity of keeping his ship afloat and getting her under way again. At 0410 NESTOR cast off and SYDNEY STAR was able to follow her at 12 knots. It subsequently transpired that her No. 1 and No. 2 holds had also made water, and that the damage was caused by a projectile from one of the escort during the E-boat *mêlée*.

71. At 0615 two T/B aircraft were sighted by NESTOR on the port quarter. Barrage fire was opened and the aircraft crossed astern making off in the general direction of the convoy. At 0650 two more T/Bs were sighted, this time on the port bow. Barrage fire was again opened and the aircraft crossed ahead and made off towards the convoy. Thinking that SYDNEY STAR was about to be attacked, NESTOR made a "Help" signal, in consequence of which HERMIONE was detached by Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron at 0700 to join NESTOR and SYDNEY STAR.

*Approach to, and Arrival at Malta, 24th July (D.4).*

72. At 0705 when some 60 miles west of Gozo, a half-hearted attack was carried out by 3 T/B aircraft on the main convoy and

escort. Torpedoes were released at long range when the destroyer screen opened fire. Ships took avoiding action, but no tracks were seen.

73. In order to afford time for the cruisers and destroyers of Force X to discharge personnel and stores and refuel, it had been arranged that Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron should proceed ahead with the cruisers and Hunts at high speed at about 0700, provided the situation as regards enemy surface forces was considered satisfactory. At this time, although all enemy surface units had been reported in their respective harbours on the previous day, no morning reconnaissance report had been received from Vice-Admiral, Malta.

74. There appeared to be little likelihood of enemy surface forces making contact with the main convoy, a greater source of worry being the SYDNEY STAR. At 0730 the situation appeared easier, and realising that any further delay might jeopardise the arrangements for getting the convoy into Grand Harbour and for sailing Force X to rejoin Force H, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron, with ARETHUSA and MANXMAN, parted company from the convoy and proceeded at 25 knots to Malta. At 0830 a reconnaissance report was received from Vice-Admiral, Malta, stating that no enemy surface forces were in the vicinity. This removed what little fears yet remained of an attack by surface forces.

75. At 1000, SYDNEY STAR, HERMIONE and NESTOR were attacked by 8 JU.87 dive bombers with German markings and 2 high level bombers. The attacks were well synchronised, and in the case of the dive bombing attack, well pressed home. One bomb fell 20 yards to port, and another 20 yards to starboard of NESTOR; others fell close to HERMIONE—but no ship was hit. One JU.87 was shot down by A.A. fire. One Beaufighter was in company but failed to make an interception.

76. EDINBURGH, ARETHUSA and MANXMAN entered Grand Harbour at 1130 with ships' companies fallen in and bands playing. A great reception was accorded them by the people of Malta.

77. HERMIONE, NESTOR and SYDNEY STAR, having taken the route north of Malta, arrived at 1400. The safe arrival of SYDNEY STAR reflects great credit on the Commanding Officer of NESTOR, Commander A. S. Rosenthal, R.A.N., who showed judgment, initiative and good seamanship in handling a delicate situation so close to the enemy's coast and in the presence of enemy E-Boats. It was appropriate that the Commanding Officer and most of his crew should be Australians.

78. The main convoy escorted by COSSACK, MAORI, SIKH, FOXHOUND and FARNDALE continued without further incident and, proceeding by the route south of Malta, entered harbour at 1530.

*Movements of Force H, 24th July (D.4).*

79. Meanwhile Force H had reached position 37° 35' N, 5° 15' E. at 0615, when two Swordfish were flown off to locate MANCHESTER

and three more Swordfish to carry out a search between 000° and 100° to a depth of 50 miles to locate any enemy surface forces that might be in a position to attack MANCHESTER. None was sighted. MANCHESTER was reported to be in position 37° 19' N., 3° 44' E. at 0710 leaving a large oil track, slightly down by the stern and with a slight list to port.

80. At 0816 a Cant was sighted 10 miles to the eastward and was shot down by the fighter patrol.

81. The situation at 1000 was as follows. Force H in position 37° 18' N., 04° 30' E. steering 290° at 18 knots. FIREDRAKE and ERIDGE south of Galita making 8 knots to the westward, having been reported by a shadower at 0710. Convoy M.G.1 in three groups ranging between 40 miles west to 20 miles east of Galita with one ship, the SVENOR, just outside Malta. MANCHESTER and AVON VALE about 65 miles to the westward of Force H proceeding at 11 knots and possibly reported by a reconnaissance aircraft at 0700.

82. I decided that Force H should continue to the westward till about 1330 by which time MANCHESTER would be reasonably clear of enemy air attack, and would have three destroyers in company, Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic having ordered VIMY and VIDETTE to rendezvous with her. About 1330 I intended to turn east in order to fly off 6 Swordfish for Malta during the night, and then rendezvous with Force X in the vicinity of Galita Island about 0730.

83. During the day calls for help were intercepted from all three groups of the M.G. Convoy. The first came at 1230 from ENCOUNTER, who was escorting Group 2. She reported a threatening aircraft in the vicinity and later reported an attack by four T/Bs, but all torpedoes missed. The attack was followed about 20 minutes later by high level bombing when some 30 bombs fell between AMERIKA and THERMOPYLAE. At 1345 ENCOUNTER reported 2 unknown ships bearing 283°, 12 miles from position 37° 18' N., 8° 35' E. These were later identified as FIRE-DRAKE and ERIDGE.

84. At 1342 Group 1 called for help in position 37° 19' N., 8° 00' E. A high level attack resulted in bombs dropping between TALABOT and BRECONSHIRE and half an hour later BRECONSHIRE was near missed by some small bombs from a Caproni. Group 3 called for help at 1711 when in the same position and again at 1815.

85. ENCOUNTER left Group 2 at 1430 and proceeded ahead at 28 knots to join and escort Group 1. At 1740 she was attacked unsuccessfully by 3 high level bombers. ENCOUNTER joined Group 1 at 2140 and thereafter had an uneventful passage. No further signals were received from any of these ships during the day. Their estimated E.T.A.\* at Gibraltar as signalled by Vice-Admiral, Malta, was:—

Group 1 Dawn/26th.  
Group 2 1800/26th.  
Group 3 0100/27th.  
Group 4 0100/28th.

*Admiralty footnote*

\* E T A —expected time of arrival

86. Force H turned to the eastward at 1345 and an hour later a reconnaissance of 5 Swordfish was flown off from position 37° 45' N., 3° 47' E. to search for enemy forces between 000° and 100° to a depth of 90 miles. Nothing was sighted.

87. VIMY and AVON VALE, who with VIDETTE were escorting MANCHESTER, obtained an asdic contact at 1500 and carried out several attacks with depth charges but there was no evidence of success.

*Despatch of 6 Swordfish to Malta.*

88. At 0100 ARK ROYAL flew off 6 Swordfish fitted with long range tanks for Malta from position 37° 42' N., 7° 17' E. These all arrived safely.

*Movements of Force H, early a.m. 25th July (D.5).*

89. Force H turned back to the westward at 0130 for two hours and then proceeded east to meet Force X.

90. At 0512 a flashing light was seen to the north-east and ARK ROYAL was ordered to fly off a Swordfish armed with depth charges to investigate. It was thought this might possibly be a U-Boat homing aircraft. It turned out, however, to be the Italian Hospital Ship SORRENTO searching for survivors, presumably after the air attack on the fleet on the 23rd.

91. A reconnaissance of 3 Swordfish was flown off at 0556 in position 37° 37' N., 07° 32' E. to make certain there were no enemy forces between Force H and Force X. These aircraft found nothing. The visibility was 10-15 miles. A fighter patrol was flown off at 0615.

*Departure of Force X from Malta, 24th July (D.4).*

92. The cruisers of Force X left Grand Harbour at 1800/24 followed by the destroyers at 1845. All ships received a fine send-off from the Maltese and in particular from the crews of the M.T. ships and the troops who had taken passage. FARNDALE who had developed condenser trouble remained at Malta.

93. Force X had a few air alarms during the evening of the 24th but no attacks developed, probably due to better support from the Malta Beaufighters which, largely due to inexperience, had given me cause for anxiety by their performance on 23rd July during the approach to Malta.\*

94. The force followed the same route as that taken the previous day by Convoy M.G.1 and had an uneventful passage. This route ran from 20 miles south of Pantellaria to Kilibia light and subsequently in French territorial waters round Cape Bon and south of Zembra Island, thence to a position 030°, ten miles from Cani Rocks.

*Footnote*

\* On D 3 the Beaufighters sank an E-Boat and damaged an S 79, and on D 4 they shot down two JU.87s when covering the convoy

The disappointing initial performance of the Beaufighters from Malta was due to shortage of equipment and to inexperience in co-operation with the Royal Navy. The Beaufighters rendered an important contribution to the safety of the convoy by operating over Sardinia, where they destroyed 52 enemy twin-engined aircraft on the ground and damaged a further 34

95. At 0748 the cruisers of Force X were reported by aircraft as bearing  $110^{\circ}$ , 22 miles from RENOWN with the destroyers six miles astern.

96. Force X joined Force H 26 miles N.W. of Galita Island at 0815 and course was shaped to the westward at NELSON's best speed.

*Movements of Force H and Force X, a.m. 25th July (D.5)*

97. There was a light breeze from  $150^{\circ}$  and considerable ground was lost each time the fleet turned to enable ARK ROYAL to fly on or off.

98. A Cant was sighted at 0715 but fighters failed to intercept due to poor air to air visibility especially up sun. The first combat of the day took place at 0822 when Fulmars shot down a Cant shadower in full view of the fleet. Unfortunately one of the attacking Fulmars was shot down in the encounter and crashed heavily leaving no survivors. Four Italians out of a crew of six were rescued from the Cant by FOXHOUND.

*High Level Bombing Attack on the Fleet, a.m. 25th July (D.5)*

99. At 1035 a large group of aircraft was detected bearing  $080^{\circ}$ , 69 miles closing. As the group continued to close fighters were ordered to an intercepting position  $095^{\circ}$ , 15 miles and at 1100 the first "Tally Ho" was received from the fighters. At 1103 another section of fighters got in touch and reported 8 high level bombers. A few minutes later the fighters also reported T/Bs.

100. The Fulmars attacked with great dash and bombs could be seen being jettisoned far away on the port quarter of the fleet between 1107 and 1110. Three S.79 high level bombers were shot down for certain, one was probably destroyed and two others were damaged.

101. In this encounter we lost two Fulmars. One crew was recovered unhurt by NESTOR. The other aircraft was seen by SIKH to crash vertically into the sea at high velocity. There were no survivors. No further attacks were attempted by the enemy.

*Movements of Various Units, p.m. 25th July (D.5).*

102. At 1610 a signal was intercepted from FIRE Drake giving her position, course and speed at 1315 as  $37^{\circ} 10' N.$ ,  $4^{\circ} 00' E.$ ,  $270^{\circ}$ , 9 knots, proceeding under her own steam escorted by ERIDGE and AVON VALE. The latter had joined her after relief by WISHART as escort to MANCHESTER. FIRE Drake's expected time of arrival at Gibraltar was 1700/27.

103. FORESTER was detached at 1720 to proceed at her best speed to Gibraltar to land the wounded and other survivors from FEARLESS.

104. As it now appeared that no ships would require fuel before arrival in harbour I requested Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic Station at 1922 to recall BROWN RANGER who had been sailed, escorted by BEVERLEY, in case she should have been required.

*Movements of Units, 26th July (D.6).*

105. MANCHESTER and Groups 1 and 2 of Convoy M.G.1 arrived safely at Gibraltar at 0239, 0800 and 1530 respectively.

106. ARK ROYAL maintained an A/S patrol of 2 aircraft throughout the day.

*Arrival at Gibraltar, 27th July (D.7).*

107. Ships of Group 3 of M.G.1 arrived at Gibraltar at 0215 and 0915. The remaining ships of Forces H and X, including the damaged FIRE Drake and her escort, arrived during the day. S.S. SVENOR (Group 4 of M.G.1) arrived at 0500 on 28th.

*General.*

108. Outstanding points in this operation were:—

(a) *Effective work of Fulmars.*—The Fulmars of ARK ROYAL contributed in no small measure to the safe arrival of the convoy at its destination. On 23rd July formations of enemy aircraft were intercepted on three occasions. On the first occasion, two were shot down for certain and another two probably destroyed, whilst the survivors which reached the fleet were in no state to carry out an accurate attack. On the second occasion, as the Fulmars were about to intercept, the bombers released their bombs on the destroyer screen and immediately withdrew. Finally an attempted T/B attack was completely broken up and driven off, leaving two aircraft shot down with another damaged and possibly lost.

On 25th July the only enemy formations to approach the fleet were once again thoroughly routed. A force of torpedo bombers withdrew before the fighters could reach it and the only high level bombing attack was intercepted about 15 miles from the fleet, when four enemy planes were destroyed for certain with one probably destroyed and two more damaged. All bombs were jettisoned.

One Italian officer survivor stated he had been shot down by a Hurricane. It is evident that the enemy hold our Fleet Air Arm fighters in higher esteem than do our own Fulmar pilots.

(b) *Towing of FIRE Drake by ERIDGE.*—Excellent seamanship and determination were displayed by ERIDGE whilst taking FIRE Drake in tow in spite of difficulties caused by the latter's steering gear being out of action. The tow was maintained for 37 hours, during the whole of which period the ships were in close proximity to enemy air and surface ship bases and subjected to continuous air observation. The resolution and fine spirit displayed by both ships' companies was most creditable.

(c) *Prompt action and initiative displayed by NESTOR on two occasions.*—The successful avoiding action taken by the heavy ships at 2315/22 was only rendered possible by the prompt action taken, and quick and accurate report made, by NESTOR.

The initiative and resolution shown in bringing SYDNEY STAR safely into port after she had been torpedoed on the night of the 23rd/24th and stopped 4 miles from the enemy's base was a noteworthy achievement.

(d) *Work of the submarines.*—Information has not yet been received of the results obtained by the submarine patrols co-operating in this operation. There is good ground to believe that the marked inactivity of the Italian surface forces may have been due to the marked activity of our submarines.

(e) *Tactical and fighting efficiency.*—Although a great number of the ships taking part had not operated in company previously and some were newly commissioned, it was satisfactory to note the good standard of efficiency displayed. Nevertheless it must be appreciated that the highest standard cannot be achieved unless ships have opportunity to work together in company and to exercise the movements and action required to deal with the situations which arise during operations of this nature.

(f) *Behaviour of M.T. ships.*—The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron reports "that the operation was successfully carried out is due in no small measure to the behaviour of the merchant ships in convoy. Their manoeuvring and general conduct was excellent and caused me no anxiety whatever. I had complete confidence that orders given to them by me would be understood and promptly carried out. Their steadfast and resolute behaviour during air and E-Boat attacks was most impressive and encouraging to us all. Particular credit is due to S.S. MELBOURNE STAR, Commodore of the convoy,\* who set a high standard and never failed to appreciate directly what he should do. S.S. DURHAM experienced piston trouble in her port engine and it was evident that her engines required careful nursing. Nevertheless, she was able to maintain a speed of 14 knots throughout the critical period on D.3 and D.4, which was only 1 knot less than her accredited maximum speed."

109. The Air Officer Commanding, Mediterranean and Officer Commanding, 200 Group, R.A.F. afforded most valuable air co-operation which contributed in no mean measure to the success of the operation.

110. It was with considerable surprise that I learned on arrival at Gibraltar that a number of women and children had been embarked in the ships of Convoy M.G.1. Had I known this earlier, I should certainly have sent a destroyer to escort each group.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE,  
Vice-Admiral,  
Flag Officer Commanding,  
Force H.

#### OPERATION "HALBERD"

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 9th October, 1941 by the Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O., Flag Officer Commanding, Force H

H.M.S. RODNEY.

9th October, 1941.

#### REPORT ON OPERATION "HALBERD"

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the following report on Operation "Halberd".

*Admiralty footnote.*

\* Commodore of Convoy "Substance" was the Master of S.S. MELBOURNE STAR, Captain D R MacFarlane

The preliminary discussions, arrangements and movements in connection with the operation, which was designed to secure the passage of H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE\* and 8 M.T. ships to Malta, have been dealt with in previous reports of proceedings. This report deals with the period from 1800A on 24th September (D.-1) until the completion of the operation.

*Situation at 1800A on 24th September (D.-1).*

2. The situation at 1800 on 24th September was as follows:—

(a) Convoy W.S.11X, consisting of H.M. Ships BRECONSHIRE (Commodore), QUEEN EMMA, PRINCESS BEATRIX, ULSTER MONARCH, ROYAL SCOTSMAN, and S.S. IMPERIAL STAR (Vice-Commodore), ROWALLAN CASTLE (Rear-Commodore), CLAN MACDONALD, CLAN FERGUSON, AJAX, LEINSTER, CITY OF LINCOLN, DUNEDIN STAR and CITY OF CALCUTTA, with PRINCE OF WALES (Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet), EDINBURGH (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron), KENYA (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron), † EURYALUS, SHEFFIELD, and the destroyers LAFOREY (Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla), LIGHTNING, ORIBI, COSSACK (Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla), FURY, FARNDALE and HEYTHROP in company, were to the westward of the Straits of Gibraltar, steering east, to pass south of Europa Point at 0130A on 25th September.

(b) At Gibraltar:—NELSON, RODNEY, ARK ROYAL, HERMIONE, the destroyers ISAAC SWEERS, PIORUN, GARLAND, DUNCAN (Captain (D), 13th Destroyer Flotilla), FORESIGHT, FORESTER, LIVELY, LEGION and the oiler BROWN RANGER with her escort FLEUR DE LYS.

(c) Approaching Gibraltar Bay from the westward:—ZULU, GURKHA and LANCE.

3. NELSON, screened by ISAAC SWEERS, PIORUN and GARLAND, sailed to the westward at 1815. The Flag of the Flag Officer Commanding, Force H, had been hoisted in RODNEY as a ruse to give the impression that NELSON, on relief by RODNEY, was sailing to the westward for the United Kingdom. Farewell messages were passed between NELSON and RODNEY to assist the deception. This ruse appears to have created the desired impression.

4. After NELSON had cleared the entrance, GURKHA, ZULU and LANCE, who had been detached by the Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to proceed ahead of the convoy to fuel at Gibraltar, entered harbour.

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE—Ammunition and Store Carrier

† Commodore of Convoy—Captain C A G Hutchinson, R N (Retd), Vice-Commodore of Convoy—R Miller (Master), Rear-Commodore of Convoy—C. Harvey (Master), Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet—Vice-Admiral A T B Curteis, C B.; Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron—Rear-Admiral E N Syfret, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron—Rear-Admiral H M Burrough, C B.

*Movements of Forces on the Night 24th/25th September (D. - I/D 1).*

5. NELSON with her screen proceeded to the westward until 2130, when course was reversed to 090°. After passing south of Tarifa at 1930, several small fishing vessels with bright lights were encountered.

6. BROWN RANGER, escorted by FLEUR DE LYS, sailed from Gibraltar to the eastward at 2030, so as to be in position for oiling destroyers on D.2.

7. RODNEY, ARK ROYAL, HERMIONE, DUNCAN (Captain (D), 13th Destroyer Flotilla), FORESIGHT, FORESTER, LIVELY, ZULU, GURKHA, LEGION and LANCE sailed from Gibraltar at 2300 to simulate a normal sortie of Force H and to rendezvous with the convoy at 0800 the following morning.

8. Force Z, consisting of QUEEN EMMA, PRINCESS BEATRIX, ULSTER MONARCH, ROYAL SCOTSMAN (whose ultimate destination was Freetown) and LEINSTER, escorted by JONQUIL, SPIREA and AZALEA, had been stationed astern of the main convoy at dusk and ordered to proceed into Gibraltar Bay. It was hoped that the presence of these ships in the Bay would allay suspicion, in the event of the convoy having been sighted and reported whilst passing through the Straits.

9. The remainder of Convoy W.S.11X and escort, organised in two groups one mile apart, and led by the Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet in PRINCE OF WALES, and the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron in EDINBURGH respectively, passed south of Europa Point at 0130.

This disposition was adopted to reduce the frontage of the convoy during its passage through the Straits.

10. At 0730 RODNEY, ARK ROYAL and their screening destroyers were sighted from NELSON at about 10 miles, the limit of visibility at that time. Half an hour later the convoy and its escort were sighted, a few minutes after a Hudson aircraft which was carrying out an A/S patrol had reported them in sight to the westward.

11. NELSON shaped an easterly course while exchanges of destroyers took place in accordance with HAL (short title for Operation Orders), paragraph 21. These exchanges were designed so that destroyers required to accompany the heavy ships after parting company from the convoy on D.3 should be used to screen the convoy on D.1 and D.2 and thus economise fuel.

12. The forces then formed two groups, as follows:—

*Group I.*

NELSON (Flag Officer Commanding, Force H), ARK ROYAL, HERMIONE, COSSACK (Captain (D), 4th Destroyer Flotilla), ZULU, FORESIGHT, FORESTER, LAFOREY (Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla), and LIGHTNING.

*Group II.*

PRINCE OF WALES (Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet), RODNEY, KENYA

(Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron), EDINBURGH (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron), SHEFFIELD, EURYALUS, DUNCAN (Captain (D), 13th Destroyer Flotilla), GURKHA, LEGION, LANCE, LIVELY, ORIBI, ISAAC SWEERS, PIORUN, GARLAND, FURY, FARNDALE and HEYTHROP, and the convoy, H.M.S. BRECONSHIRE, CLAN MACDONALD, CLAN FERGUSON, AJAX, IMPERIAL STAR, CITY OF LINCOLN, ROWALLAN CASTLE, DUNEDIN STAR and CITY OF CALCUTTA.

13. While in V/S touch, Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet reported that the convoy might have been sighted by a Portuguese merchant ship west of Cape Spartel, but that only fishing boats were seen in the Straits. SHEFFIELD reported that the convoy had not been sighted either by surface vessels or aircraft, whilst in company with her.

*Movements of Group I on 25th September (D.1).*

14. In order to give the impression to any shadowing aircraft approaching from the eastward that only the usual Force H was at sea, Group I parted company with Group II, and proceeded to the eastward at 18 knots, with the intention of keeping along the African coast.

15. Clocks were advanced 1 hour to Zone -2 at 1000A/25 and hereafter times are Zone -2.

16. ARK ROYAL maintained one A/S patrol aircraft in the air from 1105 until dusk. During the day 24 out of the 27 Fulmars carried were flown for exercise, two providing targets for a height-finding exercise. Six Fulmars flew round both groups for recognition purposes.

17. FLEUR DE LYS and BROWN RANGER were sighted at 1115. FLEUR DE LYS reported speed made good was 11 knots, and she was ordered to make good 12½ knots. It was ascertained after return to harbour that BROWN RANGER intended to convey she was unable to make good more than 11 knots, due apparently to a foul bottom. This was not appreciated at the time the signal was received.

18. At 1700, when in position 36° 36' N., 01° 58' W., DUNCAN, in position N in Screening Diagram No. 10, obtained a contact bearing 120°, 1,500 yards. She attacked with four charges, the starboard thrower failing to fire. GURKHA co-operated and attacked with a fourteen-charge pattern at 1716. At 1750 DUNCAN fired a second pattern. No further contacts were obtained, and both ships proceeded at 1758 to rejoin the screen. Both ships observed bubbles rising to the surface, possibly from a damaged U-Boat, after DUNCAN's first attack.

Two French merchant ships, MERS EL KEBIR and SIDI ORSA, were sighted about 1800. Several other unidentified ships were reported by aircraft, but did not come in sight of Group I.



*Movements of Group II on 25th September (D.1).*

19. Group II continued along the track ordered without incident. This track lay to the south of the Balearics through an area which experience suggested was reasonably clear of merchant ships and civil aircraft.

*Movements of Group I on 26th September (D.2).*

20. One A/S patrol aircraft and 3 or 4 fighters were maintained in the air from daylight until dusk. Speed was reduced to 17 knots at 0920.

21. At 0932 air look-outs in NELSON sighted a shadowing aircraft (probably Cant 506), bearing  $150^{\circ}$ , 10 miles, and flying very low. This machine was not detected by R.D.F.

Owing to a complete failure of R/T in the fighter leader's aircraft delay occurred in vectoring the fighters, and no interception took place.

22. A Swiss merchant ship, S.S. TUNISIAN, was sighted at 1048.

23. Group I reversed course at 1300, in order to close the distance on Group II. HERMIONE was stationed astern for R.D.F. purposes, and to give A.A. protection to ARK ROYAL.

24. At 1537 two aircraft were sighted low down to the eastward by ZULU, NELSON and HERMIONE. ZULU reported them as probably S.79s, but they appeared to be showing I.F.F.\* and were thought to be Hudsons by the other two sighting ships and fighters were not vectored. This was an error on my part since there was no information of Hudsons being on passage from Malta to Gibraltar, and the slight I.F.F. reported might well have been due to the proximity of aircraft to one another.

25. To avoid altering course to the eastward before dark, Group I turned to  $225^{\circ}$  at 1745, paravanes were streamed at 1835, and at dusk a further turn was made to  $090^{\circ}$ . HERMIONE rejoined the screen for the night.

26. R.D.F. reports at 2030 indicated an aircraft passed 5 miles to starboard of Group I.

A ship burning navigation lights was sighted at 2135, steering  $140^{\circ}$ . Course was altered to port to avoid.

27. After dark, T.S.R.† aircraft in ARK ROYAL were drained down in order to reduce fire risks during the anticipated enemy air attacks on D.3.

*Movements of Group II on 26th September (D.2).*

28. Group II proceeded to the north-east until 0700, then to the eastward, and altered course to  $107^{\circ}$  on passing through  $38^{\circ} 31' N.$ ,  $02^{\circ} 32' E.$  at noon.

29. The first two destroyers were detached to oil at 0650. Delay occurred owing to BROWN RANGER being 22 miles west of the position ordered and on the quarter of the convoy instead of on the bow. This was due to the unexpected reduction in BROWN RANGER's speed referred to in paragraph 17.

*Admiralty footnotes*

\* IFF—a recognition device to identify own craft

† T S R—Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance

30. During the afternoon an aircraft with Spanish colours and the letters FARM along the fuselage appeared out of the clouds over the destroyer screen and then disappeared in clouds. No other aircraft was sighted or detected. There is reason to believe that this aircraft, or its passengers, reported the presence of the convoy. A merchant ship wearing French colours was passed at 1830.

31. Oiling of the 12 destroyers in company was not completed until dusk. FURY and HEYTHROP rejoined after dark; ORIBI failed to find Group II in the dark and joined up with Group I screen until daylight.

*Convoy M.G.2\*—Departure of First Ship from Malta.*

32. A signal was received from the Vice-Admiral, Malta at 1141, stating that a few Army and R.A.F. personnel with their wives had been embarked on the three ships of M.G.2 at their own risk, and at the request of H.E. the Governor of Malta. I feel that I should have been consulted about this, since a moral obligation arose to give these ships some degree of close protection. It was my intention, however, not to depart substantially from the priorities laid down by the Admiralty for Operation "Substance", viz., that the safe return of the escorting forces was of more importance than the safe arrival of empty shipping.

33. S.S. MELBOURNE STAR sailed from Malta at noon on 26th September.

*Movements, a.m. 27th September (D.3).*

34. Group I, which had been steering east during the night, reversed course to  $290^{\circ}$  at 0710, sighting Group II right ahead ten minutes later ARK ROYAL with EURYALUS ahead and HERMIONE astern as close escort operated as requisite for flying off and on inside the screen.

35. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron took charge of the convoy proper and the whole force continued on an easterly course.

36. Four Fulmars were flown off at 0800. This number was increased to ten at 1000, to twelve at 1100 and again to sixteen at noon, when air attack was expected to follow reports made by enemy shadowers

37. Indications by R.D.F. suggested that enemy reconnaissance aircraft were in the vicinity of the fleet from 0720, but the first report made by enemy aircraft was not intercepted until 0810. A second report was intercepted at 1056.

A few minutes earlier fighters had been vectored to the southward on an R.D.F. report, but there was some delay due to atmospheric interference with R/T and no contact was made

38. R.D.F. detected a single aircraft bearing  $210^{\circ}$ , distant 14 miles at 1158 and two minutes later it was reported by LEGION as a B R.20. Fighters made contact, but the enemy escaped in cloud. An enemy report was subsequently intercepted, which had probably been made by this aircraft.

*Admiralty footnote*

\* Convoy M G 2—a Malta to Gibraltar convoy

*Air Attacks on the Fleet, p.m. 27th September (D.3).**(a) First Attack (1255-1310).*

39. R.D.F. reports at 1255 indicated that two formations were approaching the fleet, one from the north and one from the east, both 30 miles distant. These formations were reported as diving.

Fighters were vectored towards the formations, but as they made contact with the enemy, R.D.F. plots became too confused to be used for fighter direction. One enemy T/B (probably Cant 1007) was shot down by Fulmars at 1300.

40. Six T/Bs (B.R.20) approached from the port bow and beam, and were engaged by the port wing of the screen and the ships on the port side of the fleet. Two T/B aircraft were shot down at 1302, probably by barrage fire from RODNEY and PRINCE OF WALES.

41. An unknown number of torpedoes was dropped about 5,000 yards on the port beam of the convoy, which altered course to 040° at 1304, turning to 075° three minutes later.

Three of the six attackers tried to approach over the port wing of the screen, but unable to face the barrage put up by the destroyers they dropped their torpedoes at the port wing ship, LANCE, who had considerable difficulty in avoiding them, two torpedoes passing very close.

The torpedoes were released from about 300 feet height, and appeared to take up their depth very quickly, the tracks showing up plainly. ISAAC SWEERS, next in the screen to LANCE, reported one torpedo passed within 30 yards; RODNEY was swung 60° to port to avoid a torpedo which passed 100 yards to starboard.

42. One of these three aircraft was shot down by the destroyers, and crashed in flames close to LIVELY. Another T/B aircraft was shot down by fighters north of the fleet at about this time.

43. At 1310, a Fulmar which had been among the fighters sent to intercept this attack and which was probably returning damaged from a combat with enemy fighters (C.R.42s), was shot down by barrage fire from PRINCE OF WALES, and the crew were killed. This unfortunate accident occurred through a phonetic misunderstanding between the A.D.P.\* and Group Control Officer, and is deeply regretted.

44. On this occasion, and again twenty minutes later when another Fulmar was shot down, both fighters approached low down straight towards the convoy during a T/B attack, and appeared menacing. The considerable amount of smoke from bursting shell added to the difficulties of identification.

45. Three heavy underwater explosions were heard at 1312; these were probably torpedoes exploding at the end of their run.

46. *Result of First Attack.*—The enemy had lost 5 out of the 12 T/Bs which were subsequently reported by Fulmars to have approached in this attack; several others were

probably damaged. No ships had been hit, but one Fulmar had been accidentally shot down by the fleet.

*(b) Second Attack (1327-1337).*

47. A group of aircraft splitting into two formations was reported by R.D.F. closing from the eastward at 1327. Destroyers on the starboard wing of the screen opened fire at 1329, when 6 or 7 T/Bs (B.R.20) were seen approaching very low from the starboard bow and beam.

48. Three of the aircraft pressed on through the barrage of the starboard wing destroyers, and carried out a most determined attack on NELSON, who was swinging to starboard to comb the tracks. One aircraft dropped its torpedo about 450 yards 20° on NELSON's starboard bow, passing over the ship at about 200 feet height. This aircraft was almost certainly shot down astern of NELSON by SHEFFIELD and PRINCE OF WALES.

49. The track of the torpedo was not seen until about 150 yards dead ahead of the ship, which had been steadied on a course which proved to be the exact reciprocal of the torpedo. No avoiding action was possible and a second or two after the bubbles disappeared from sight there was a large "crump," the ship whipped considerably and a column of water rose approximately 15-20 feet above the fore-castle deck port side. The torpedo had hit on the port bow abreast 60 station, 10 feet below the water-line. NELSON's speed was reduced to 18 knots, pending a report on the damage sustained.

50. A few seconds later another T/B of this formation dropped a torpedo from about 500 feet 1,000 yards fine on the starboard bow of NELSON. This torpedo passed about 100 yards to starboard. The third of this enemy formation was shot down by destroyers just ahead of the screen at 1333. This aircraft was claimed by LAFOREY. FORESTER picked up the W/T operator, the only member of the crew alive. He had a badly broken leg.

51. Meanwhile, 3 or 4 T/Bs who had split up from this group attacked from the starboard quarter without result.

52. One enemy T/B was shot down by fighters, on the port quarter of the convoy at 1336.

A Fulmar was unfortunately shot down by RODNEY's pom-pom, but the crew were rescued by DUNCAN.

53. *Result of Second Attack.*—Three enemy T/Bs out of the 6 or 7 who attacked were shot down. NELSON's speed was reduced by a torpedo hit, but the gun armament remained unimpaired. One Fulmar was shot down but the crew were saved.

*(c) Third Attack (1345-1405).*

54. Six minutes after the end of the second attack, R.D.F. reported a group closing from the S.E. and diving. At 1345 a formation of 10 or 11 S.79s were sighted very low about 10 miles to the southward. These split up into two groups when they came under fire from the escorting ships on the starboard side of the convoy, and 7 or 8 retired to the south-west and disappeared.

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* A.D.P.—Air Defence Position.

Three others tried to work round the starboard bow, and the convoy was turned away 60° to port. These aircraft were turned away by the gunfire of the screening destroyers, having dropped their torpedoes well outside the screen. One torpedo narrowly missed LIGHTNING, but they dropped at too great a range to be a danger to the convoy. One of these aircraft was shot down by fighters as it retired.

55. Of the 7 or 8 aircraft who turned away when first fired at, 3 returned from astern of the convoy at 1354, two of which retired again on being fired at. The third pressed on to attack ARK ROYAL, but was shot down by the combined fire of that ship and NELSON, while still 1,000 yards from ARK ROYAL and before he had dropped a torpedo.

56. At 1358 one aircraft, seen right ahead of NELSON, dropped a torpedo outside the screen. COSSACK was able to avoid this torpedo by the warning given by hydrophone effect on her A/S set.

57. At this time (1359) one C.R.42 was seen to be diving on the starboard wing destroyers, and performing aerobatics over them, evidently to make a diversion for the T/Bs. In so far as the destroyers expended a large amount of ammunition he succeeded, but after six minutes was either shot down or failed to pull out from a dive. None of the destroyers reported being machine-gunned.

58. *Result of Third Attack.*—Two more enemy T/Bs and one C.R.42 fighter were shot down, and no further damage inflicted on H.M. Ships or convoy.

It was most noticeable that this attack was not pressed home with the same determination as the first two attacks. Of the 10 or 11 S.79s which originally approached, only four fired torpedoes, and these were dropped at too great a distance to endanger the convoy. The only aircraft of this group to close within effective range was destroyed before its torpedo was dropped.

59. No further actual attacks developed before dark, though on several occasions R.D.F. indicated that enemy aircraft were closing the fleet. Generally by the time they were within 15 miles of the fleet, R.D.F. reported our fighters among them and they were driven off.

An attack threatened from the port bow at 1409 and the convoy made an emergency turn towards to 060° but as no attack developed course 096° was resumed a few minutes later.

#### *General Remarks on Day Attacks.*

60. So far as can be ascertained 30 T/B aircraft attempted to attack, but not more than 18 came within torpedo range.

#### *Aircraft Destroyed:*

6 T/Bs and 1 fighter certainly destroyed by gunfire.

4 T/Bs and 1 shadower certainly destroyed by fighters.

1 T/B probably destroyed (cause unknown).

Total: Certain 10 T/Bs, 1 fighter, 1 Cant 506 float plane.

We lost 3 Fulmars, two crews being saved.

One torpedo hit was inflicted on NELSON.

61. H.L.B.\* attacks had been expected, synchronised with T/B attacks, but none developed at the time and no bombs were dropped.

#### *Attempt to Intercept Enemy Battlefleet, p.m. 27th September (D.3).*

62. Reports of air reconnaissance from Malta carried out on D.2 (26th September), indicated that main units of the Italian fleet were located as follows:—

Taranto—1 Cavour in floating dock,  
2 Littorios and 1 Cavour,  
6 Cruisers,  
5 Destroyers.

Naples—2 Cavours,  
1 Cruiser,  
12 Destroyers or Torpedo-Boats.

Messina—Bolzano.

Palermo—Nil.

63. While the third T/B attack was still in progress at 1404, an emergency report was received from aircraft B (R.A.F. Malta) of 2 battleships and 8 destroyers in position 38° 20' N., 10° 40' E., steering 190° at 20 knots at 1340.

64. NELSON's position when this report was received was 37° 46' N., 09° 04' E.; the enemy unit was therefore 74 miles, 076° from NELSON assuming it had continued at the same course and speed. At this time NELSON, with gun armament unimpaired, was thought to be capable of 18 knots or possibly more.

65. My appreciation of the enemy's intentions was that either he did not realise I had more than one battleship with the convoy and that he would attempt to intercept the convoy near the western entrance to the Skerki Channel, or that he wished to draw away my escorting force to the north-eastwards, thus leaving the convoy open to attack by light surface forces in the Skerki Channel at dusk.

66. I therefore decided:—

(i) To proceed towards the enemy at best speed with NELSON, PRINCE OF WALES, RODNEY and 6 destroyers, leaving KENYA, EDINBURGH, SHEFFIELD and 10 destroyers with the convoy; ARK ROYAL escorted by EURYALUS, HERMIONE, PIORUN and LEGION to continue operating in the vicinity of the convoy.

(ii) To fly off two Swordfish from ARK ROYAL to take over shadowing duties and keep the enemy under observation until the striking force could attack.

(iii) To fuel, arm, range and fly off an air striking force as soon as possible.

67. These dispositions would place the battleships between the enemy and the convoy and enable the enemy to be brought to action should he persist in attempting to intercept the convoy.

68. At 1408 I ordered ARK ROYAL to prepare an air striking force. This involved a delay of at least an hour before the striking force could be flown off since as stated previously the Swordfish had been drained of fuel to reduce fire risks during air attacks. Two

#### *Admiralty footnote:*

\* H.L.B.—high level bombing

minutes later I ordered ARK ROYAL to fly off two shadowers and at 1427 to fly off the striking force as soon as ready. The shadowers took off at 1448, being delayed by ARK ROYAL's main armament being in action and two Fulmars having to land on short of fuel.

69. At 1425 a further signal (timed 1350) was received from aircraft B reporting 4 cruisers and 8 destroyers some 15 miles W.S.W. of the enemy battlefleet and steering the same course and speed. Ten minutes later a signal was received (timed 1425) that the total enemy force consisted of 2 battleships, 4 cruisers and 16 destroyers.

70. Meanwhile the battleships had been ordered at 1417 to form on NELSON who had increased speed to proceed ahead of the convoy. At 1433, however, it became necessary for NELSON to reduce to 15 knots to avoid further flooding due to the damage sustained.

71. I therefore modified my previous instructions, informed Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet that NELSON's speed was reduced to 15 knots and ordered him to proceed with PRINCE OF WALES, RODNEY, EDINBURGH, SHEFFIELD and 6 destroyers at best speed to close and drive off the enemy. The cruisers were ordered to rejoin the convoy before dark if possible. NELSON took station astern of the convoy, as she was becoming sluggish under helm.

72. While these instructions were in transit, a signal from aircraft (timed 1445 and received at 1506) reported that the enemy fleet had reversed course to 360°. This was followed by a further signal (timed 1503 and received at 1543) that the enemy was steering 060°. A report was also received from Vice-Admiral, Malta, that the two enemy battleships were Littorio class and not Cavours as was originally believed.

73. It was now clear that the enemy intended to avoid contact. I still hoped, however, that the air striking force might be able to materially reduce his speed and allow the Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to overtake him before dark.

74. At 1445 an aircraft was seen to fall in flames on the starboard quarter of the fleet. As no combat took place at that time, this must have been one damaged earlier in the action, probably by fighters.

A Fulmar, short of petrol, force-landed astern of ARK ROYAL at 1530. The crew was picked up by PIORUN.

75. About 1525, while ARK ROYAL was ranging her torpedo striking force, she sighted 4 S.79s pass right over the fleet at 17,000 feet, but could not engage because of her aircraft on deck. COSSACK reported them as dive bombers, but they were thought later to be Fulmars and were not engaged. No attack was made by these aircraft. The striking force of 12 Swordfish escorted by 4 Fulmars took departure at 1540.

76. Between 1620 and 1645, Fulmars drove off an attack threatening from the port side of the convoy, and at the later time another section of Fulmars shot down a shadower 10 miles astern.

77. By 1650 there had been no sighting reports from the shadowing aircraft which had taken departure two hours earlier. The last report made by R.A.F. aircraft was timed 1503 and "no change reports" had not been received.

78. With the position of the enemy force in doubt, and since available evidence suggested he was probably retiring at speed to the north-east, I signalled to Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet at 1658 to rejoin. My appreciation at this time was that even if the striking force succeeded in reducing the speed of the enemy radically it would not be possible for Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to make contact until after dark and consequently a successful issue was highly problematical. On the other hand it was essential for the cruisers to return to the convoy before dark, and the destroyers were also required to furnish a screen for NELSON and ARK ROYAL. Any further reduction of Force X destroyers for this purpose was, in my opinion, unacceptable.

*Movements of the Force under Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet while Detached.*

79. Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet's appreciation at 1530 was that it was possible for the enemy:—

(a) To continue on his course;

(b) To attempt to cut in to the eastward between Marittimo and Skerki Bank, with a view to attacking the convoy under the cover of darkness;

(c) To draw the British force northwards in order to cut in to the westward and attack the convoy from rear.

80. Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet decided to try and close the passage between Skerki and Marittimo, while keeping well placed to fall back on the convoy. Course 080° was therefore set to pass north of Skerki Bank.

81. When recalled at 1659, Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet was just reaching a position from which he considered a movement either to the eastward or westward feasible without fear of the enemy achieving his object.

82. The air striking force reported to ARK ROYAL at 1740 that they were unable to find the enemy, and I ordered ARK ROYAL to recall them. The cause of this failure to locate the enemy is explained in paragraph 97.

83. At 1800 Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet's force came in sight to the north-eastward. Two formations of enemy aircraft were detected by R.D.F. at 1820, but they did not approach nearer than 24 miles.

*Detachment of Force X.*

84. Force A, consisting of the battleships and carrier, with destroyer screen, parted company from the convoy and Force X (cruisers and destroyers) at 1855 on reaching the entrance to the Skerki Channel.

Force A turned to 285°, while Force X and the convoy continued to the eastward under the command of the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron.

85. Between 1915 and 1930 some enemy aircraft approached the convoy, but twice turned away when fire was opened. They were probably C.R.42 fighters.

86. Course was altered to 156° at 1915 for flying-on, course 285° being resumed at 1930.

*Flying Operations from ARK ROYAL, p.m.  
27th September (D.3).*

87. At 1200, 16 Fulmars were in the air. It was necessary to land on 4 at 1230, but the number in the air was increased to 15 between 1315 and 1330 when T/B attacks were in progress.

88. At about 1250, one fighter section was vectored to the north of the fleet towards a suspected shadower. They made contact with 12 T/B aircraft (B.R.20 and Cant 1007B) and three more fighter sections were sent to assist.

In the ensuing fight at sea-level, one T/B was shot down, and three others were engaged. An escort of 6 C.R.42 fighters flying at 7,000 feet did not interfere.

One Fulmar section encountered a number of C.R.42s in the clouds, and ARK ROYAL reports that one Fulmar of this section is presumed to have fallen to the enemy fighters. Later information indicates that this Fulmar was probably damaged by the C.R.42s and whilst attempting to reach the protection of the fleet, was shot down by gunfire from the ships (*vide* paragraph 43).

89. Seven Fulmars were flown off at 1315. The wind was very light from the west and flying-off was carried out down wind, to avoid ARK ROYAL becoming detached. Six out of eight fighters already in the air landed on.

90. Fighters were sent to intercept a raid coming from the south-eastward, and one B.R.20 was shot down.

During the subsequent attack, one Fulmar section which was over the convoy, shot down a T/B which had crossed the convoy from south to north without dropping his torpedoes.

Another section attacked and damaged one other B.R.20, and about this time one Fulmar attacked 3 C.R.42s from astern, but with no visible result.

91. Between 1330 and 1430, the few remaining fighters in the air were moved from one danger point to another so far as extremely heavy atmospheric interference with R/T would allow. There were continued R.D.F. reports of enemy aircraft on widely different bearings during this period, but no interceptions were made although several potential attacks were turned away.

92. At 1410, ARK ROYAL was ordered to range the striking force and fly off two shadowers to shadow the enemy battlefleet which had been reported by R.A.F. reconnaissance aircraft 74 miles, 076° from NELSON.

The shadowers were ranged as soon as gunfire ceased and two Fulmars who were short of petrol had been landed on; they took off at 1448.

93. When the shadowers took departure, they were informed that the position of the enemy battlefleet was 078°, 60 miles, steering

190°. A report that the enemy had reversed his course to 360° at 1445 was received by ARK ROYAL at 1510, but owing to W/T congestion and bad W/T conditions considerable difficulty was experienced in passing this report to the aircraft.

94. Shadower A, who had not fully received the signal reporting the enemy's course as 360°, turned at 1539 to sight the fleet in order to take a new departure whilst waiting to receive the signal correctly. Subsequently he was attacked and badly damaged by seven C.R.42s and was obliged to return and land on.

Shadower B proceeded initially to the north-eastward, with the object of approaching the enemy on the most suitable bearing for A.S.V.\* search (*i.e.*, with the enemy bearing between bow and beam). Having reached the anticipated position of the enemy at about 1600, and sighted nothing, he commenced a square search. The report of the enemy's alteration of course to 360° had not been received by this aircraft before ARK ROYAL received and passed on an amended position and new course of 060° of the enemy's battlefleet (R.A.F. aircraft B's signal timed 1503). On receiving this report at about 1630, course was set for the new position, and height increased to 9,000 feet to increase A.S.V. range to fifty miles. When thirty miles short of the enemy's estimated position, A.S.V. failed; a visual search to twelve miles beyond failed to locate the enemy. This aircraft eventually landed on after five hours five minutes in the air.

95. Twelve Swordfish aircraft with torpedoes, escorted by four Fulmars, were flown off at 1540. When they took departure, the enemy fleet were estimated to be 056°, 54 miles from the carrier, steering 360°.

A few minutes later an enemy report timed 1503 was received, giving a position 14 miles north of the previous ones, M.L.A.† 060°. This was passed to the striking force by W/T.

96. Having reached the enemy's estimated position, and seen nothing nor obtained any echoes on the ten A.S.V. sets in the formation, the striking force searched to the southward, and were able to obtain a fix by A.S.V. bearing and distance of Marittimo Island. They then proceeded for 40 miles to the north and carried out two complete circles at 5,000 feet, during which the A.S.V. sets should have discovered any large ships within 45 miles. The striking force then reported they were unable to locate the enemy, and were recalled.

97. This failure to locate the enemy is attributed to the fact that no report of the enemy battlefleet timed later than 1503 was received, nor was any report that shadowing had been broken off. Subsequent investigation by the Vice-Admiral, Malta has established that a signal timed 1515 was sent by the shadowing aircraft reporting that the enemy had altered course to the north. This signal was not received by Malta W/T Station, nor by any of H.M. Ships. This alteration resulted in the enemy passing at the extreme limit of the A.S.V. search.

*Admiralty footnotes :*

\* A.S.V.—a radar equipment.

† M.L.A.—mean line of advance.

98. While on passage, two formations of enemy fighters were sighted, but did not attack.

The Fulmar escort landed on at 1845, six Swordfish just after sunset, and six after dark; all were very short of petrol.

99. It was not until 1540 that the last of the fighters flown off at 1314 could be landed on; one ran out of petrol and force-landed at 1535.

The fighter situation became acute at 1520 when only three fighters, short of ammunition and fuel, were over the fleet. There were none from 1550 until four were flown off at 1605.

100. Two sections of fighters were vectored on to a Cante 506 shadower at 1630, which they shot down.

Between 1820 and 1920 a formation of 7 C.R.42s twice approached the fleet, but withdrew on the approach of the Fulmars and no combat took place.

101. During the day Fulmars destroyed five enemy aircraft, *viz.*, 4 T/Bs and one Cant 506, without loss by enemy action. Two Fulmars were shot down by the fleet, and one force-landed short of fuel. Two crews were picked up.

*Night T/B Attack on Force X and Convoy, 27th September (D.3).*

102. After Force A (battleships, ARK ROYAL and 9 destroyers) had parted company at 1855, the convoy and escort were formed in Cruising Disposition No. 17.

103. Between 2000 and 2040, four T/B attacks were made from the port beam, two or three aircraft taking part in each attack.

The moon was bright and on the starboard quarter of the convoy.

SHEFFIELD reports that before and during the early stages of these attacks a considerable amount of signalling with unnecessarily bright lights was taking place in the convoy; this presumably refers to the signals mentioned in paragraph 107 below.

*(a) First Attack.*

104. At 1955, when the convoy was steering 114°, COSSACK, stationed on the port bow of the convoy, detected aircraft on R.D.F., and about five minutes later sighted an aircraft on the port side. COSSACK thereupon fired a white and green Very light, the signal for T/B attack.

105. The Rear-Admiral, 10th Cruiser Squadron ordered an emergency turn of 40° to port together by rapid manoeuvring procedure. KENYA sounded two short blasts and turned, followed belatedly by the port column of the convoy.

This signal was incorrectly transmitted as 45° to starboard and EDINBURGH and the starboard column turned to starboard.

106. The port screen and the convoy opened fire to port, but only HERMIONE and COSSACK actually saw aircraft.

COSSACK observed the aircraft making white flashes before turning in to attack.

As far as is known, no torpedo tracks were observed.

107. As position V was reached at 2010, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron made the executive signal by V/S to EDINBURGH for the pre-arranged white pendant turn to 071° and himself altered to the course. At this time the port column was formed on an approximate line of bearing 114°/294°; ships were not ordered to follow in the wake of their guide.

Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron first turned the starboard column to the original course (114°) and then led round to 071°.

*(b) Second Attack.*

108. Aircraft were reported bearing 090°, 3 miles at 2010 and others were detected on the starboard bow. Both these formations crossed from starboard to port, and attacked from the port beam. Two aircraft were seen by LAFOREY, flying from starboard to port about 2 miles ahead.

ZULU heard 4 separate aircraft distinctly, but only saw one, which passed so close that her guns could not train fast enough to get on.

Again, as far as is known, no torpedo attacks were observed.

*(c) Third Attack.*

109. Three T/Bs attacked from the port beam at 2022. HERMIONE saw a torpedo explode at the end of its run on the starboard quarter of the convoy. Aircraft were sighted and engaged by the port screen and convoy.

110. At about this time, ROWALLAN CASTLE and CITY OF CALCUTTA, the two rear ships of the port column, were in collision; no serious damage occurred, and both ships proceeded.

*(d) Fourth Attack.*

111. COSSACK sighted aircraft on the port side at 2027. A torpedo was dropped on SHEFFIELD's port bow at 2029, and five minutes later she had to turn to starboard under full rudder to avoid another dropped on her port beam.

112. At 2032 in position 37° 31' N., 10° 46' E., IMPERIAL STAR was struck port side aft by a torpedo. The subsequent proceedings of IMPERIAL STAR and the ships which proceeded to her assistance are included later in this report.

HEYTHROP, the rear destroyer of the port screen, sighted and engaged an aircraft at this time, possibly that which torpedoed IMPERIAL STAR.

113. ORIBI was attacked at 2036, a torpedo being dropped 800 yards just abaft her port beam, which she avoided by turning stern-on and increasing to full speed. This aircraft was shot down with pom-pom and Oerlikon guns by ORIBI.

114. No further attacks were made, but at 2312 and again at 2340 R.D.F. detected formations closing to within 10 miles, then subsequently retiring, having failed to find the convoy.

*Remarks on Night T/B Attacks.*

115. *Enemy tactics.*—All attacks appear to have been made from the port beam, although this was not directly up-moon, which was on the starboard quarter.

Torpedoes were observed to be dropped from a greater height than that in most of the day attacks.

116. *Gunfire*.—On several occasions the cruisers leading the columns were prevented from firing a barrage by the destroyers adjacent to them.

Gun flashes probably showed the convoy up to aircraft manœuvring to attack. Flashless charges would be most useful for barrage fire at night.

ZULU sustained superficial damage from splinters, but no casualties.

#### *Loss of M.V. IMPERIAL STAR.*

117. When IMPERIAL STAR was torpedoed at 1932 it is probable that the explosion blew away both propellers and her rudder; in addition No. 6 hold and the after engine room were both flooded.

118. HEYTHROP, the rear ship of the port screen, proceeded alongside, but did not attempt to take IMPERIAL STAR in tow as she did not consider she was a suitable vessel to do so.

119. About 2045 EURALYUS ordered ORIBI to go to the assistance of IMPERIAL STAR. When ORIBI closed, HEYTHROP was already standing by, and while HEYTHROP took off IMPERIAL STAR's passengers, ORIBI proceeded close alongside to obtain reports from the Master and the N.L.O.†

They were first insistent that an attempt should be made to tow the vessel back to Gibraltar, but the Commanding Officer of ORIBI (Lieutenant-Commander J. E. H. McBeath, D.S.O., R.N.) realised that the only chance of saving the ship was to tow her the 220 miles to Malta, and prepared to do so.

120. HEYTHROP parted company at 2200 to rejoin the convoy. By 2235 ORIBI had IMPERIAL STAR in tow with 90 fathoms of special 5-inch wire hawser provided by IMPERIAL STAR.

121. For two hours the most determined attempts were made by ORIBI to tow IMPERIAL STAR towards Malta. Although a speed of 8 knots through the water was made nothing would prevent her steering in circles.

IMPERIAL STAR's normal displacement was 17,000 tons; in her damaged condition she was drawing 38 feet aft, and it is possible that her damaged stern was acting as a rudder.

122. Eventually, at 0120, ORIBI found herself being dragged stern first by her tow sheering off, and was forced to slip the tow.

ORIBI then went alongside to consult again with the Master and N.L.O. It was reluctantly decided that it was impracticable to tow the ship without tugs, which were not available at Malta, and that the remaining 141 persons aboard should be taken off by ORIBI and the ship scuttled.

Scuttling arrangements were not in place, and most of the flooding valves were jammed by the torpedo explosion; ORIBI therefore placed 3 depth charges lashed together just

below the waterline abreast a bulkhead, and these were fired by a safety fuse.

123. ORIBI cast off at 0340 and the charges fired 11 minutes later, starting a large fire aft. As this did not spread quickly, ORIBI shelled IMPERIAL STAR with 4.7-inch S.A.P. shell\*, and left her at 0452, heavily on fire fore and aft and listing badly.

Aircraft from Malta sent to search for IMPERIAL STAR the next day failed to find any trace, and there can be no doubt that she sank or blew up.

124. ORIBI proceeded along the convoy route at 32 knots, and came up with them off Malta at 1215, having passed unmolested within 7 miles of the Sicilian coast in daylight.

#### *Passage of Force X and Convoy through the Narrows.*

125. Meanwhile Force X proceeded through the Narrows by the route previously arranged, i.e., along the south coast of Sicily. During the afternoon I had suggested to Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron the advisability of taking the Tunisian route owing to the presence of enemy forces in the vicinity. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron replied that he preferred the Sicilian route, and in view of the enemy's hurried withdrawal to the north-east I agreed.

126. HERMIONE parted company from the convoy at 2030 to carry out a bombardment of Pantellaria harbour. A detailed account of this operation, which was very skilfully planned and executed by HERMIONE (Captain G. N. Oliver, R.N.) is contained in HERMIONE's report. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron reports that the bombardment caused a most spectacular diversion which was clearly visible from the convoy and escort, then distant 50 miles.

127. No opposition was encountered by the convoy after the conclusion of the T/B attacks at 2040. The following lights on the Sicilian coast were seen to be exhibiting normal characteristics:—Admiralty List of Lights No. 1928 Cape San Marco, No. 1930 Cape Granitola, No. 1962 Cape Grosso.

128. At some time between 2000/27 and 0030/28, HERMIONE lost her port paravane. From the state of the end of the wire recovered there is little doubt that it was cut by an explosive cutter or other anti-sweep device. The route followed was identical with that taken by HERMIONE during Operation "Substance", on which occasion the starboard paravane towing wire when recovered at Malta was severely crippled and showed signs of having fouled a mine mooring. It therefore appears possible that a minefield exists on the Talbot Bank, the depth there being considerably less than 100 fathoms. This occurrence was reported in my message 0931 of 6th October.

129. HERMIONE rejoined at 0615/28. At daylight HEYTHROP and FARNDALE were detached to proceed ahead to fuel at Malta.

130. Although several formations of enemy aircraft were detected between dawn and the arrival of the convoy at Malta, the excellent protection given by shore-based fighters from Malta, prevented any attack from developing.

*Admiralty footnote*

† N.L.O.—Naval Liaison Officer

*Admiralty footnote*

\* S A P shell—an armour piercing shell



Two Fulmars arrived over the convoy at 0615, followed at 0700 by 6 Beaufighters, and subsequently Hurricanes. Fighter direction was carried out by EDINBURGH and the co-operation of the fighters left nothing to be desired.

131. At 0800 a report that no enemy surface forces were to northward or southward of the convoy's track was received from the Vice-Admiral, Malta. The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron consequently detached KENYA, SHEFFIELD, EURALYUS and HERMIONE to proceed ahead to Malta to fuel. The four cruisers were sighted from Gozo at 0845 and entered Grand Harbour at 1130 with guards and bands paraded. They were accorded a great welcome by the people of Malta.

132. The whole convoy, with the exception of IMPERIAL STAR, entered harbour undamaged early in the afternoon of 28th September (D.4).

*Movements of Force A from Dusk 27th September (D.3) to p.m. 28th September (D.4).*

133. After landing on all aircraft (*vide* paragraph 86), Force A proceeded to the westward at 14 knots, this being NELSON's best speed at the time. LEGION reported an A/S contact at 0010/28 (D.4), but this was not confirmed.

134. In view of the low speed of NELSON I did not consider that action to afford close support of the ships of M.G.2 was justified, since this would have involved an unacceptable reduction in the destroyer screen then available. I wished also to convey the impression that a general withdrawal of forces to the westward was in progress and would be continued.

135. ARK ROYAL flew off 1 A/S patrol and 3 fighters at 0725. The latter carried out a search to a depth of 40 miles astern, but nothing was sighted. At 0812 an enemy shadower was sighted, but escaped into cloud.

136. An enemy report made by an R.A.F. aircraft received at 0958 indicated that 2 enemy battleships, 5 cruisers and 13 destroyers were 70 miles, 105° from Cagliari at 0940, steering 195°. These ships, which were not in a position to menace the convoy, manoeuvred in this area throughout the day.

137. NELSON sighted a Cant 506 very low down at 1025, and fighters were vectored. After a chase to the south-east he was shot down 55 miles from the fleet and only 200 yards from the Algerian shore, near Cape de Fer. This was a fine example of fighter control and relentless pursuit which reflects the greatest credit on those concerned. Although there were no survivors from the Cant, the occurrence may have been witnessed by occupants of the lighthouse at Cape de Fer, a small house in the vicinity and from a small vessel also in the vicinity.

138. Showers were again reported at 1640, and yet again an hour later, but due to a failure of ARK ROYAL's R/T transmitter, it was not possible to vector fighters in time to intercept. An enemy report made by Italian aircraft was intercepted at 1720.

139. DUNCAN in position M in Screening Diagram No. 7 reported a contact on the port bow at 1942, in position 37° 30' N., 3° 45' E. She reported "definitely submarine" and carried out two attacks with no apparent result. LEGION closed to co-operate but did not gain contact. Both ships left the area at 2012 to rejoin the screen.

140. Speed was reduced to 12 knots at 2010 to reduce the strain on bulkheads and decks in the wake of flooded compartments in NELSON. At this time NELSON was approximately 8 feet down by the bows, and it was estimated that 3,500 tons of water had entered the ship.

141. At 2100, Group 2 of Force A, consisting of PRINCE OF WALES (Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet), RODNEY, ARK ROYAL and 6 destroyers were detached to proceed to the eastward and rendezvous with Force X a.m. on D.5. Group 1, consisting of NELSON and 3 destroyers, continued towards Gibraltar.

142. By keeping the battleships concentrated until dark, I hoped to have concealed damage to NELSON, and that consequently enemy surface vessels would keep clear while Force X made the passage westward from Malta.

*Submarine Attacks on Force A, a.m. 29th September (D.5).*

143. At 0555, in position 37° 30' N., 06° 25' E., PRINCE OF WALES obtained an R.D.F. surface echo ahead, and an emergency turn of 40° to port together to 050° was carried out at 0609. Three minutes after the turn, GURKHA (in position A, Screening Diagram No. 6) sighted a torpedo track approaching from an approximate bearing of 330°, and at a speed estimated at 40 knots. It was too late to alter course to avoid, and a second track followed a few seconds later; both appeared to pass under the ship.

GURKHA turned to port in the direction from which the torpedoes had approached, and ISAAC SWEERS joined in hunting for the submarine. No A/S contact was obtained and no depth charges were dropped.

At 0622, ten minutes after the tracks had been sighted, a double explosion was heard and felt.

GURKHA and ISAAC SWEERS rejoined the screen at 0700. Owing to the absence of these ships from Gibraltar it has not yet been possible to ascertain why no depth charges were dropped, but this will be investigated on their return.

144. GURKHA obtained an A/S contact, classified as a submarine, bearing 102°, in position 37° 26' N., 07° 14' E. at 0810, two hours after the previous attack. The contact was nearly ahead and a deliberate attack with a 14-charge pattern was carried out at 0815. Six minutes later a heavy underwater explosion was heard and felt—this was similar to that felt after the successful attack on a U-Boat next day.

GURKHA was ordered by the Vice-Admiral to rejoin the screen at 0841, and the hunt was abandoned. No torpedo tracks were seen.

*Westward Passage of Force X from Malta, 28th/29th September (D.4/5).*

145. After fuelling, FARNDALE and HEYTHROP sailed from the Grand Harbour at 1500, followed at 1615 by KENYA, EDINBURGH and ORIBI. The remainder of Force X sailed at 1830.

146. At 1745, the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron was detached in EDINBURGH with ORIBI in company, to search for two enemy destroyers reported north-west of Gozo, steering 180°.

Nothing was seen, and at 2035 these ships joined the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron in KENYA. It is probable that these two destroyers were FARNDALE and HEYTHROP.

147. Force X proceeded on a course to make the Tunisian coast, and thence to Cape Bon, keeping close to the coast.

The night was uneventful.

148. FARNDALE and HEYTHROP joined the Vice-Admiral, 2nd-in-Command at 0835/29, and by 1030 the remainder of Force X had rejoined.

*Passage of NELSON to Gibraltar, 29th/30th September (D.5/6).*

149. At 0700/29 I informed the Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic Station of NELSON's position, course and speed, and requested additional A/S vessels and escort. This message was purposely delayed until this time, in order to give no indication that NELSON was proceeding independently.

150. A Catalina flying-boat joined at 0730 and a Hudson as fighter escort at 1000. Later in the day a second Catalina joined, and this air escort was maintained until dusk.

151. PIORUN obtained a doubtful A/S contact at 1110 and dropped one depth charge.

A French merchant vessel was sighted at 1415, and observed to alter course away to the south.

152. During the day NELSON ranged hower and sheet cables aft and flooded certain after compartments in order to reduce the draught forward to the 39 feet required for entering harbour.

Clocks were put back one hour to Z-1 at 1800; times in paragraphs 153 to 156 are Zone-1.

153. DUNCAN obtained a doubtful contact at 1809 and dropped one depth charge.

154. The first additional A/S vessel, ROCKINGHAM, joined at 1845; she was followed by SAMPHIRE at 2020, JONQUIL at 2040, FLEUR DE LYS ten minutes later, and ARBUTUS at 2240. NELSON's screen now consisted of 4 destroyers and 4 corvettes.

155. SAMPHIRE and ARBUTUS obtained an A/S contact and dropped depth charges at 0030/30 without result; the contact was probably non-sub. Air escort of one Hudson and one Catalina joined at daylight.

156. At 1100/30 NELSON entered Gibraltar harbour. Tugs were used ahead and astern as the ship was sluggish under helm especially at low speed.

*Passage of Forces A and X to the Westward, 29th September (D.5).*

157. After Force X had joined Force A at 1030/29 (*vide* paragraph 148), course was shaped to the westward, keeping 40 miles clear of the African coast.

158. At 1645, LIVELY, in position D, Screening Diagram No. 9, sighted an object, resembling a ship's lifeboat with mast stepped well forward, bearing 281°, distant about 1,000 yards. LIVELY identified this as a submarine periscope and conning tower, momentarily breaking surface, and estimated the course of the submarine as 220°. LIVELY, already under wheel to alter course to 281° in accordance with the zig-zag, increased speed to 24 knots and altered course to 260°. Two torpedo tracks, course 010°, were sighted soon afterwards which confirmed the course of the submarine. The tracks indicated that the submarine was moving at speed, so course was altered to 250° and a counter-attacking 14-charge pattern set to shallow depth was fired at 1650. LEGION on the starboard beam of LIVELY and on a parallel course fired a 5-charge shallow pattern about a minute and a half earlier. Action to avoid the torpedoes was taken by the fleet. LEGION then stationed LIVELY on her starboard beam and both ships hunted the submarine.

LIVELY obtained a definite A/S contact on a submarine at 1700, and attacked with a 14-charge pattern set medium five minutes later. After opening to 1,000 yards, LIVELY turned towards the point at which charges had been fired, and regained contact at 1715, the plot showing the submarine's speed was about 1 knot.

Contact was lost at 400 yards, and not regained. The hunt was abandoned at 1745 in order to rejoin the screen at 1900 as ordered by the Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron.

159. PRINCE OF WALES, KENYA, SHEFFIELD, LAFOREY, LIGHTNING, ORIBI, FORESIGHT, FORESTER and FURY parted company from the remainder of the force at 1930 and proceeded ahead in order to arrive at Gibraltar p.m. 30th September.

The Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron took charge of the remainder of the ships of Force X and proceeded towards Gibraltar at 17 knots.

*Return of Units under Vice-Admiral Commanding, 2nd-in-Command, Home Fleet to Gibraltar, 30th September (D.6).*

160. During the night 29th/30th September, between 0325 and 0408, R.D.F. gave echoes suggesting a U-Boat, and several explosions, assumed to have been torpedoes exploding at the end of run, were heard.

161. No further incidents occurred, and the force arrived at Gibraltar at 1800.

*Return of Units under Rear-Admiral Commanding, 18th Cruiser Squadron to Gibraltar, 30th September/1st October (D.6/7).*

162. At 0928/30 in position 37° 10' N., 00° 56' E., GURKHA obtained an echo bearing

240°, 2,000 yards, which was confirmed as a submarine.

She immediately attacked, held contact up to 100 yards, and fired a 14-charge shallow pattern at 0933.

A black circular buoy with electric cable attached came to the surface after this attack; at 0945 a loud underwater explosion was heard and felt, and oil started to come to the surface. GURKHA was unable to regain contact.

LEGION, who was hunting with GURKHA, obtained contact, and attacked with a 14-charge pattern set to medium depth at 0955, regaining contact at 1001, and attacking with another 14-charge pattern set deep at 1009.

During LEGION's second attack, wreckage and oil appeared close to where her first pattern was dropped.

Among the wreckage picked up were an Italian dictionary, a mattress pillow, numerous pieces of wood, some with bright screws, and a piece of human scalp attached to a piece of wood by a splinter of metal. The interiors of the dictionary, pillow and mattress were dry.

There appears to be no reasonable cause to doubt that an Italian U-Boat was destroyed by GURKHA and LEGION.\*

163. The force entered harbour between 0700 and 0900/1.

*Convoy M.G.2.—Passage from Malta to Gibraltar.*

164. As stated earlier (paragraph 33) the first ship, S.S. MELBOURNE STAR, sailed from Malta at noon on 26th September (D.2).

The remaining two ships, S.S. PORT CHALMERS and S.S. CITY OF PRETORIA, left Malta at 1030 on 27th September (D.3), escorted until 1930 by GLOXINIA.

165. After an uneventful passage MELBOURNE STAR arrived at Gibraltar at 0700 on 29th September (D.5).

166. PORT CHALMERS and CITY OF PRETORIA were reported by Italian aircraft at 1200/27, shortly after leaving Malta. No enemy surface craft or aircraft were seen until 2320, when what was believed to be an E-Boat was sighted by PORT CHALMERS, who was following in the wake of CITY OF PRETORIA. The enemy craft when first sighted by PORT CHALMERS was lying stopped 3-400 yards on the port beam of CITY OF PRETORIA, who saw nothing except gunfire from her consort.

PORT CHALMERS sheered off to starboard, and 10 minutes after first sighting heard E-Boat engines approaching from the port quarter; she turned to starboard to bring the enemy astern, and opened fire with her 4-inch gun at the enemy's bow wave.

The enemy opened fire at PORT CHALMERS with her machine-gun, but scored no hits, and after PORT CHALMERS had fired six rounds of 4-inch, the enemy crossed astern and made off. PORT

CHALMERS then resumed her station astern of CITY OF PRETORIA.

This action took place 15 miles S.S.W. of Pantellaria.

167. At 0535/28 (D.4) the Commodore of the Convoy ordered PORT CHALMERS to part company. The latter then proceeded at full speed, wearing French colours.

168. An Italian reconnaissance seaplane (Cant 506) approached from the direction of the French coast and circled CITY OF PRETORIA at 0915/28, subsequently making off to the westward and paying PORT CHALMERS the same attention. Both ships were wearing French colours and had taken care to keep all service personnel out of sight. They were fully ready for action, but did not open fire as the aircraft took no offensive action.

169. At 1015/28 CITY OF PRETORIA was circled several times by a large 3-engined seaplane, with distinct French markings, which approached from Bizerta. An hour and a half later, when approaching the Galita Channel, CITY OF PRETORIA sighted an Italian twin-engined seaplane stopped on the water, five miles to the north. She lost sight of this aircraft at 1215.

170. PORT CHALMERS sighted neither of these aircraft and was left alone until 1555, when she was circled by an Italian Breda 20, which did not attack, although the Master considers she could not have been deceived by the French colours.

171. CITY OF PRETORIA was attacked at 1725/28 by three T/B aircraft. As these approached with obviously hostile intentions, British colours were hoisted and fire opened as soon as the leader came in range. There is good reason to suppose the leading aircraft was damaged.

By skilful handling, all three torpedoes were avoided. While one aircraft was machine-gunning the ship at long range, a submarine periscope was reported on the starboard quarter by two independent lookouts.

Three smoke floats and a depth charge set to 150 feet were dropped, and under cover of smoke CITY OF PRETORIA turned away.

She signalled "Help Major" at 1730, and "Major now all right" three quarters of an hour later.

172. As CITY OF PRETORIA was approaching Cape de Gata at 0200/30 (D.6) an unidentified vessel, possibly a submarine, was seen to be following. Two or three rapid shots, followed by a dull explosion, were heard. CITY OF PRETORIA made smoke and dropped smoke floats and then made close in to Almeria Bay, into territorial waters, thus shaking off her pursuer.

173. PORT CHALMERS arrived at Gibraltar at 0900/30, followed during the afternoon by CITY OF PRETORIA.

174. The able and resolute handling of both PORT CHALMERS and CITY OF PRETORIA in successfully driving off enemy attacks deserves high praise.

*Admiralty footnote.*

\* The destruction of this submarine, the Italian submarine ADUA, on this occasion has since been confirmed.

Both Masters showed excellent restraint in withholding fire at enemy aircraft while there was a chance of their false colours being effective, and also in keeping W/T silence when attacked, except on the one occasion when CITY OF PRÉTORIA was attacked by T/B aircraft, and her report might possibly have brought fighter assistance if ARK ROYAL had been in the vicinity.

#### *Submarine Dispositions.*

175. Nine submarines were disposed in suitable areas throughout the operation—2 south of Messina, 6 to the northward of Sicily, and one off the south-east corner of Sardinia. In some cases submarines were moved by the Vice-Admiral, Malta to new areas in an attempt to intercept enemy warships.

176. A full report of the operation of these submarines has not yet been received, but as far as is known no successful attacks were made on enemy warships.

#### *General Remarks.*

177. *Failure to locate enemy battlefleet.*—The operation orders stated clearly that the primary object of the operation was the safe arrival of the convoy at its destination, and any action taken to deal with enemy surface forces in the vicinity must be related to the achievement of this object.

At no time did the enemy surface forces constitute a serious threat. On the other hand enemy air forces remained a potential and serious threat throughout the day and well after moonset. Under these circumstances the maintenance of fighter patrols assumed an importance which could not be ignored. Light variable winds added to the difficulties with which ARK ROYAL was confronted, and I consider that her Commanding Officer acted throughout with great judgment and a well balanced appreciation of the situation.

Had the shadowing aircraft from Malta been able to maintain observation on the enemy battlefleet for a longer period the two reconnaissance Swordfish should have experienced no serious difficulty in making contact. Unfortunately, communications, due to atmospheric and congestion, were difficult. Congestion was due in part to the damage sustained by NELSON involving a last minute alteration of the pre-arranged plan to deal with the situation. With a force occupying a front of 12 miles the delay caused by V/S communication was unacceptable.

I consider that shadower B acted incorrectly in not approaching the estimated position of the enemy by the shortest route and then carrying out a circular search in order to obtain the full range of his A.S.V. Admittedly it is easier to detect and hold a target at long range if the aircraft is on a steady course and the target is on a bearing which gives maximum range. But against this is the fact that to dispose of errors in position or unknown alterations of course, it is necessary to approach the position of the enemy, as estimated by available data, by the shortest route.

Failure of Malta and H.M. Ships to receive the all important signal timed 1515 on 27th September, referred to in paragraph 97,

undoubtedly contributed largely to the failure of the striking force to locate. It appears now that whilst the enemy was at pains to withdraw as quickly as possible he was probably concerned to keep under a C.R.42 umbrella furnished from Cagliari.

178. *Added hazards due to the operation taking place during moonlight.*—It cannot be emphasised too strongly that if operations of this character are carried out during moonlight the hazards are increased to a very considerable extent. Had the enemy concentrated his T/B aircraft in attacking from dusk onwards he might well have succeeded in torpedoing a large proportion of the convoy.

179. *U-Boat activity.*—Once the nature of the operation was disclosed the enemy took vigorous action to station submarines on the expected course of the fleet; not a difficult matter in view of the relatively narrow waters of the Western Mediterranean.

Of the contacts obtained it is considered that there is sufficient evidence to assume the following were submarines:—

D.4.

(i) DUNCAN contact. No visible result.

D.5.

(ii) PRINCE OF WALES's A.S.V. and torpedo track sighted by GURKHA. No visible result; no A/S contact.

(iii) GURKHA's contact. No visible result; heavy underwater explosion felt six minutes after depth charge attack.

(iv) Periscope and conning tower sighted by LIVELY, also torpedo track. A/S contact but no visible result.

D.6.

(v) A.S.V. gave indications. Explosions heard as from torpedoes at end of run. No contact.

(vi) Contact of GURKHA and LEGION. Submarine destroyed.

It is possible that (iii) in addition to (vi) may have become a casualty.

The failures to obtain any contact during (ii) or to obtain results in (iv) are disappointing and cannot be explained. On the whole it is considered that the luck was certainly with us on this occasion.

180. *R.A.F. air co-operation.*—I wish to place on record my high appreciation of the excellent co-operation furnished by the R.A.F. throughout this operation.

The bombing and machine-gunning of enemy aerodromes in Sicily and Sardinia undoubtedly reduced to a considerable extent the scale of air attack which the enemy intended to launch. Apart from the circumstances attending the sighting and reporting of the enemy battlefleet which may well have been due to circumstances beyond the control of the aircraft in question, the reconnaissance of enemy bases and in particular of the approaches to Malta on D.4 were adequate and most valuable.

Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron has stated that the co-operation of the R.A.F. fighters on D.4 left nothing to be desired.

181. I attribute the immunity from attack experienced by Force X and the convoy after passing Skerki Channel to using the route proposed by the Vice-Admiral, Malta. This well-judged move coupled with HERMIONE's bombardment appears to have deceived the enemy completely.

(Signed) J. F. SOMERVILLE,  
Vice Admiral,  
Flag Officer Commanding,  
Force H.

#### OPERATION "HARPOON"

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 24th June, 1942 by Vice-Admiral Sir Alban T. B. Curteis, K.C.B., Senior Officer, Force T.

H.M.S. KENYA,  
24th June, 1942.

#### REPORT ON OPERATION "HARPOON"

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the following report on Operation "Harpoon"—the passage of a convoy of six merchant ships through the Western Mediterranean to Malta.

Passage from Clyde as far as the Straits of Gibraltar. Thursday, 4th June to Friday, 12th June.

(Times Zone - 2 (suffix B))

2. Having hoisted my flag in KENYA at 0900 on 4th June and having that afternoon held conferences with the Commanding Officers of H.M. Ships of Force T present in the Clyde and other officers concerned, Convoy W.S.19Z and escort sailed as required to comply with Admiralty messages, forming up a.m. Friday, 5th June as follows:—

#### Convoy W.S. 19Z—

TROILUS (Senior Liaison Officer acting as Commodore), BURDWAN, CHANT, ORARI, TANIMBAR.

#### Ocean Escort—

KENYA (Senior Officer, Force T), LIVERPOOL.

#### A/S Escort—

ONSLOW (Captain (D), 17th Destroyer Flotilla), BEDOUIN, ICARUS, MARNE, MATCHLESS, ESCAPADE, BLANKNEY, MIDDLETON, BADSWORTH, KUJAWIAK.

3. It early became clear that the merchant ships would not live up to the name of a 14-knot convoy, for BURDWAN claimed to be able to do only 13 knots and CHANT failed to produce much more, while TANIMBAR, a diesel ship, was unable to steam in the range of her critical revolutions, approximately 12.5 to 13.5 knots. However, favourable weather and a route selected short in anticipation of delay enabled the force to keep to timetable.

4. The passage was uneventful except for

(a) heavy oil consumption by KUJAWIAK necessitating detaching her at 0800/9 to refuel;

(b) identifying Portuguese VILLA FRANCA—Greenland to Lisbon with cod at 2100/8;

(c) several A/S contacts and attacks all of which were considered to be "non-sub."

5. To allow for refuelling, KENYA, BEDOUIN and KUJAWIAK approached Gibraltar without being visible on the night of the 10th June. KENYA only sailed to be clear of land by dawn 11th June.

Seven destroyers of the Gibraltar force sailed by day on the 11th June and the eight remaining destroyers from Home Waters reached Gibraltar after dark 11th June, though probably sighted from the African coast approaching Spartel. LIVERPOOL should have entered sufficiently late not to be sighted from the shore on the night of 11th June.

Passage from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Point of Separation of Forces W and X.

(Times Zone - 3 (suffix C))

Friday, 12th June.

6. The convoy having passed through the Straits during darkness 11th/12th June was joined by the following units:—

#### Convoy—

S.S. KENTUCKY (Tanker).

#### Force T—

MALAYA, EAGLE, ARGUS, CAIRO, CHARYBDIS, Destroyers (who sailed 11th June) WISHART, WESTCOTT, WRESTLER, VIDETTE, ANTELOPE, ITHURIEL, PARTRIDGE.

#### Minesweepers—

HEBE, SPEEDY, RYE, HYTHE.

#### Motor Launches—

121, 134, 135, 168, 459, 462.

#### Temporarily Attached—

WELSHMAN.

#### Separately Routed—

Force Y—BROWN RANGER, GERANIUM, COLTSFOOT.

7. 1703.—The Spanish M.V. CABO PRIOR must have seen the convoy.

Saturday, 13th June.

8. Delay in starting the refuelling programme was caused by navigational errors. The same happened on Operation "Halberd" and it is recommended that if possible the refuelling force should be sailed with the remainder. Nevertheless, by using LIVERPOOL and continuing till well after dark CAIRO and 14 destroyers were refuelled.

9. In spite of maintaining a section of Hurricanes in the air from 0845 till dark, and an A/S patrol of Swordfish, the convoy was kept under observation by enemy aircraft and reported at 1045, 1151, 1405 and at 1202 by a U-Boat bearing 090°. Hurricanes made contact with one JU.88, probably killing the rear gunner, and destroyed one Cant Z.1007.

10. 2245.—Report of cruisers and destroyers leaving Cagliari was received.

Sunday, 14th June

11. 0242.—The convoy was probably reported by an Italian U-boat.

12. 0650.—Snoopers were again in company, reporting Force T at 0650 and 0750. Force Y was also reported at 1810.

13. 0730.—Paravanes were streamed.

14. 0830.—One JU.88 was badly damaged by Hurricanes who expended all ammunition.

15. 0930.—A BR.88 shadower was badly damaged in air combat with a Hurricane.

16. 1009.—A group of aircraft was detected by radar and it became apparent that the enemy were gathering for an attack. All ships assumed the first degree of air readiness.

The wind was still from the west causing me considerable anxiety over the carriers, particularly ARGUS with her small margin of speed.

17. 1020.—A column of white smoke was reported about 20 miles away and some reports suggest that this may have been a homing mark deliberately laid. It is thought more probable that this was from a bomber shot down by EAGLE's Hurricanes at about that time, though why the smoke should have been such an unusual colour cannot be explained.

18. 1028 to 1032.—Two and possibly three formations each of 5 or 6 high level bombers in V formation reached the convoy, the bombs falling astern of the convoy and in the neighbourhood of ARGUS. Gunfire was ineffective but ARGUS's Fulmars shot down 2 of the enemy while they were retiring.

19. 1108 to 1135.—Torpedo bombing aircraft were seen low over the horizon and the main attack developed. The timing was not very good and resulted in an attack being delivered at about 1112 by 15 torpedo bombers from the port beam and at 1116-1125 by three small groups of torpedo bombers totalling 13 torpedo bombers from the starboard side. An unknown number of formations of bombers attacked between 1115 and 1126, scoring no hits. The convoy lines, EAGLE, ARGUS and BADSWORTH appeared to be the target for bombing.

20. The port torpedo bomber attack was severely dealt with by gunfire and it is thought that not more than six aircraft got within 4,000 yards. A turn of 45° to port was made and no torpedo damage resulted.

21. On the starboard side it was difficult to see what was happening as the wind was holding the cordite smoke on the line of sight. It appears that the three groups forced their attack well home from the bow, beam and quarter obtaining hits on LIVERPOOL and TANIMBAR, setting on fire and sinking the latter.

22. It has been difficult to fix the total enemy losses accurately but it is certain that 6 aircraft were shot down during this period. Aircraft claimed 2 fighters and 3 torpedo bombers certainly and 2 torpedo bombers probably brought down, while one Fulmar was shot down by our own gunfire.

23. 1157 to 1202.—Several half-hearted attacks were carried out by ones and twos, presumably aircraft which had been turned away by gunfire earlier. None approached within 6,000 yards or endangered the convoy.

24. ANTELOPE followed by WESTCOTT were detached to stand by LIVERPOOL who was retiring on a course 270° at 3 knots\*.

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* LIVERPOOL in tow of the destroyer ANTELOPE reached Gibraltar safely p.m. 17th June, in spite of further air attacks on her

WELSHMAN took over guide of the starboard column.

25. 1215 to 1815.—Peace reigned during the afternoon, the radar screen showing snoopers and some formations which steered clear of us and, from subsequent information, attacked LIVERPOOL.

26. 1815 to 1835.—High level bombers and dive bombers attacked. As is usual in the Mediterranean it was very difficult to see these till they had reached the bombing position and gunfire was ineffective. At least two formations attacked. Our aircraft formed two JU.88s to jettison their bombs and severely damaged two more who also jettisoned bomb loads. The remainder failed to achieve more than near misses one of which was very near EAGLE, pitching on her port side but going under the ship and bursting on the starboard side.

27. 2000 to 2005.—WELSHMAN was detached to proceed to Malta, being herself attacked at about 2020. KUJAWIAK took her place leading the starboard column.

28. At the same time it was evident that further air attacks were imminent.

2006 to 2032.—About 17 torpedo bombers, 14 high level bombers and 20 single-engined fighters in addition to dive bombers were involved in attacks which began at 2006.

29. During this period no less than four of the screen were out of position either investigating or attacking submarine contacts.

30. During the attacks our fighters met considerable fighter opposition and were therefore unable to assist in breaking up the attacks.

However, in spite of a number of near misses, the attacks were unsuccessful. The majority of the bombs from high level bombers and some of those from dive bombers fell round destroyers on the screen, ICARUS being particularly lucky to escape.

31. A well-delivered attack was made by about 9 of the torpedo bombers who circled round astern out of range and then tried to come in from the starboard beam. Three emergency turns away were made to port to keep the sterns of the convoy towards the enemy, and the aircraft were forced to release their torpedoes at a very poor track angle, though from very close range, and failed to achieve any success.

The gunnery of the force failed to obtain any known kills, but did much in breaking up attacks. I regret that one Fulmar was shot down during these attacks, the crew being picked up by HYTHE. Our fighters claim 2 certain and 3 probables during these attacks.

32. 2055.—SPEEDY attacked with depth charges and claimed to have sunk a U-Boat\*.

33. 2056.—Friendly aircraft appeared on the screen. These proved to be Beaufighters from Malta.

34. 2130.—The air being clear at 2037, I formed KENYA as escort to EAGLE and turned the convoy over to CAIRO, and at 2130 Force W turned to the westwards at 16 knots.

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* The final assessment of sinking of enemy submarines does not allow this claim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Monday, 15th June.*

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

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

*Tuesday, 16th June.*

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

*Wednesday, 17th June.*

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

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

*Remarks.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Signed) A. T. B. CURTEIS,

*Vice Admiral,*

*Senior Officer, Force T.*

*Admiralty footnotes :*

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

† The 16 Hurricanes and 6 Fulmars operated by HM Ships EAGLE and ARGUS shot down 13 and damaged at least 11 Italian and German aircraft on the 13th, 14th and 15th June, 1942. This was no mean achievement, especially in view of the persistence of the enemy air attacks and the fact that it was not possible to maintain more than four Hurricanes (six for short periods) and two Fulmars in the air at a time.

Our total fighter losses from all causes were three Hurricanes and four Fulmars, few of which were lost in air combat



## APPENDIX

## H.M.S. CAIRO,

21st June, 1942.

## OPERATION "HARPOON"

## REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF PASSAGE OF FORCE X AND CONVOY TO MALTA ON 14TH AND 15TH JUNE, 1942.

*Sunday, 14th June.*

At 2115 Force X was detached from Force T in position 37° 38' N., 10° 13' E. Merchant ships in convoy formed single line, escort took up screening positions and course was set for Zembra thence to follow the coastal route detailed in the Senior Officer, Force T's orders for Operation "Harpoon".

2. At 2205 a medium dive bombing attack was carried out by about 8 JU.88s. The attack developed during dusk coming from the dark sector ahead of the convoy. One enemy machine was destroyed by gunfire, another was seen to be going away on fire, and a third is known to have been destroyed by a Beaufighter of the escort from Malta.

*Monday, 15th June.*

3. Dispositions for the coastal passage were formed as detailed in my signal timed 1644 on 11th June.

4. During the night a number of parachute flares were observed to be dropped to seaward and it appeared that the enemy was attempting to locate the convoy thinking it had passed to the north of Zembra Island.

Alternatively, his object may have been to indicate to surface forces the relative position of the convoy.

5. While rounding Cape Bon, BLANKNEY reports that he observed signals made from the shore which may have been intended for the enemy. These signals had the appearance of tracer bullets fired into the sky.

6. At 0212, in the vicinity of Ras-el-Mirh, about two miles north-east of Kelibia Road Light (36° 50' N., 11° 08' E.), the 11th Division of destroyers (Fleets) engaged an object to starboard close inshore. BEDOUIN ordered "Cease fire" and it is thought that the object may possibly have been the wreck of H.M.S. HAVOCK which is understood to be in this approximate position. MARNE, however, reports having seen fall of shot ahead of his ship at this time.

7. At 0620 an R/T report was received from a Beaufighter that two Italian cruisers and four Italian destroyers were in a position 15 miles on the port beam of the convoy. Almost immediately these ships were sighted by CAIRO and destroyers on the port wing of the screen, silhouetted against the eastern sky. The position of the convoy then was 36° 25' N., 11° 43' E., course 130°, speed 12 knots. The enemy bore 075°, distance 10 miles, approximate course 150°. CAIRO's first sighting report at 0631 described the enemy as consisting of two cruisers and four destroyers but I am now satisfied that there were two cruisers and five destroyers. The cruisers are believed to

have been of the Condottieri class,\* "C" type, but it is not certain whether they were "C" or "B" type. The class of the destroyers is not known. The distance of the enemy given in CAIRO's first sighting report was given as 6 miles and this was considerably in error.

8. On sighting the enemy, BEDOUIN was ordered to act independently with the fleet destroyers. I had previously discussed with the Commanding Officer, BEDOUIN, the action to be taken in such an eventuality which was for BEDOUIN's division to attack while CAIRO and the Hunt destroyers screened the convoy with smoke. BEDOUIN led his division towards the enemy while CAIRO turned to port to cover the left flank of the convoy with smoke, at the same time ordering BLANKNEY's division to make smoke and close.

9. The enemy opened fire at 0640, his first salvo falling short, and the second straddling CAIRO. A number of salvos fell near the convoy until smoke had been laid.

10. CAIRO opened fire at 0650 and fired intermittently throughout the subsequent action but largely for moral effect as the enemy was never within effective range of the four-inch guns.

11. At 0645, anticipating that the enemy would immediately press home his attack with the full force at his command, my immediate intention was to gain time and to fight a delaying action in the hope that an air striking force could be sent from Malta. I therefore ordered the Commodore to turn away and make for territorial waters and later at 0650 ordered him to steer 240°.

12. Meanwhile, having covered the port flank of the convoy with smoke, CAIRO turned 16 points and then steered on an approximately parallel course to the enemy, making smoke to cover the convoy from the southward as the enemy cruisers appeared to be working round in that direction.

13. Meanwhile, BLANKNEY's division of destroyers, on emerging from the smoke, observed two enemy destroyers working round to the northward; these were engaged and driven off turning away under smoke.

14. By 0700 BEDOUIN's division was hotly engaged with the enemy cruisers and destroyers and about this time BEDOUIN and PART-RIDGE in the van were observed to have been hit and to have had their speed reduced. MARNE, MATCHLESS and ITHURIEL pressed on the attack past these two disabled destroyers engaging the enemy cruisers and destroyers. The Commanding Officer, MARNE reports that fire from MARNE and MATCHLESS was observed to take effect on two enemy destroyers who turned away under smoke. ITHURIEL was at this time engaging the near enemy cruiser. There is little doubt that fire from the 11th Division of destroyers was effective and caused the enemy to keep the range open and continually alter course.

15. Shortly after 0700 the two Italian destroyers originally engaged by BLANKNEY's

*Admiralty footnote:*

\* Condottieri class were 6-inch gun cruisers.

division made a further threat but turned away again as BLANKNEY manoeuvred his division to engage.

16. During this time CAIRO was on a course roughly parallel to the enemy but kept continuously under wheel to avoid enemy salvos. The enemy's gunnery was good and he appeared at this stage to have split the armament of his cruisers, each cruiser firing four-gun salvos at CAIRO while the remainder of the armament engaged our attacking destroyers. At this stage one hit by a six-inch projectile was made on CAIRO but did little damage. The shell hit on the fore superstructure.

17. By 0715 BEDOUIN and PARTRIDGE were out of the action lying stopped and I decided to concentrate the remaining fleet destroyers on CAIRO.

18. At 0745 the enemy was observed to turn away and open the range; I then turned to port to effect the concentration with the destroyers.

19. By 0822 both Fleet and Hunt classes of destroyer were concentrated on CAIRO; meanwhile the enemy had turned to the northward and was closing the range. At this stage the convoy appeared to be steering on a south-easterly course and I signalled to the Commodore to turn 180° to port at 0834. CAIRO and the destroyers circled between the enemy and the convoy making smoke.

20. The enemy turned on a north-easterly course at about 0840, CAIRO and destroyers steering on an approximately parallel course. At this stage CAIRO received a hit from a six-inch projectile on the starboard side which penetrated an oil tank and the inner bottom. The engine room started to flood but it was possible to keep the water down by using the 790-ton pump working to full capacity. The shell failed to explode and remained lodged in the oil tank where it was discovered later. Had this shell exploded it is more than likely that the ship would have been disabled. At 0848 I detached the 12th Division to return to protect the convoy against air attack and the possibility of enemy destroyers working round from the north or south.

21. By 0930 the enemy had opened the range and had disappeared to the eastward. I therefore altered to a north-westerly course to rejoin the convoy.

22. At about 1000 I had decided to turn the convoy towards Malta as the enemy was no longer barring this route, and made a signal to BLANKNEY to turn but he had already anticipated my wishes and had turned the convoy to 180° soon after 1000. A course of 130° was resumed at 1030.

23. At 0930, BEDOUIN then in tow of PARTRIDGE, had informed me that he intended steering to the westward but I ordered him to make for the convoy as I considered that this gave me the best chance of giving him protection.

24. I rejoined the convoy at about 1030 and re-formed the screen. The position then was as follows:—TROIUS, ORARI, and BURDWAN undamaged. KENTUCKY disabled in tow of HEBE screened by RYE and HYTHE. CHANT had been sunk.

25. These casualties to CHANT and KENTUCKY had occurred in an air attack on the convoy at about 0710, which is believed to have been made by 8 JU.87s. CHANT had received three direct hits and KENTUCKY had been near missed. One enemy plane had been brought down by ships' gunfire.

26. Previous reference has been made (paragraph 7) to an enemy report made at 0620 by a Beaufighter escorting the convoy. This aircraft is understood to have returned to its base to make a full report seeing that surface action was imminent. Contact with the other aircraft of this flight, and also the relief flight, was not made and it is not known whether they were in the vicinity. It was not until 0930 that communication was established with a flight of night-flying Beaufighters.

27. From 0930 onwards fighters from Malta provided continuous escort except for two short periods of about 10 minutes when escorting sections, having been in combat, had used up their ammunition and were short of fuel and had had to return to their base before the reliefs arrived. It is unfortunate and probably more than a coincidence that enemy air attacks were made during these two periods.

28. The speed of the convoy was reduced while I considered what to do in regard to KENTUCKY. I had ordered ITHURIEL to take this ship in tow at 1033 hoping it might be possible to obtain a speed of 10 or 11 knots, while the best that could be hoped for with HEBE towing was about 6 knots. I reconsidered and cancelled this order as I came to the conclusion that I could not afford to immobilise one of the three remaining fleet destroyers for this purpose while the threat from enemy surface vessels was considerable.

29. A dive bombing attack by 3 JU.88s developed at 1040 but the enemy were driven off by fighters and gunfire before dropping their bombs. One enemy aircraft was shot down by fighters.

30. At 1120 a heavy high level and dive bombing attack by JU.88s and JU.87s was made. This attack had been detected coming in by radar, but unfortunately the escorting aircraft, having been engaged previously, were short of fuel and ammunition and had had to return to base before being relieved. The relieving section of Spitfires arrived in time to take their toll of the enemy but were too late to enable the fighter directing officers in CAIRO to intercept the attack. In this attack BURDWAN was near missed and reported she was disabled. I ordered BADSWORTH to take her in tow and shortly received reports through BADSWORTH that the merchant ship intended to scuttle. I believe Masters had received instructions regarding scuttling in the event of damage, but I do not know what these orders were.

31. The position then was as follows:—Two ships of the convoy intact, TROIUS and ORARI. KENTUCKY in tow some distance astern making from 4 to 6 knots. BURDWAN disabled and preparing to scuttle with BADSWORTH standing by. BEDOUIN disabled in tow of PARTRIDGE making about 8 knots and approaching the convoy from the east.

32. The convoy was then about 150 miles from Malta and I had to decide whether to continue at a speed of about 6 knots and try and bring in the disabled ships, KENTUCKY, BURDWAN, and BEDOUIN, or whether to accept the loss of the two disabled merchant ships and to proceed at maximum speed with the two undamaged ships both of which had a speed of about 14 knots.

33. In making my decision I considered the following points:—

(a) That until reaching a position 50 or 60 miles from Malta the air escort would be limited to long-range Spitfires and Beau- fighters and I understood that the numbers of the long-range fighters available at Malta was limited.

(b) I had to keep the convoy concentrated owing to the continual threat from enemy surface forces which would undoubtedly have taken action against ships separated from the main force.

I decided to cut my losses and at 1142 ordered BADSWORTH and HEBE to scuttle BURDWAN and KENTUCKY at the same time ordering the remaining merchant ships to proceed at their utmost speed. I informed the Vice-Admiral, Malta of the action I had taken.

34. At about this time PARTRIDGE with BEDOUIN in tow rejoined the convoy and I ordered ITHURIEL to take BEDOUIN in tow as I considered she could make 14 knots and so enable BEDOUIN and PARTRIDGE to remain with the convoy.

35. At 1154 I received a signal from BEDOUIN reporting that she expected to steam on one engine shortly and suggesting that to avoid delay PARTRIDGE should continue to tow. I therefore recalled ITHURIEL to join the convoy which was then opening.\*

36. At 1315 a dive bombing attack was carried out by 12 JU.87s. Once again the attack developed at a most inopportune moment while escorting Spitfires had been forced to return to their base before being relieved. The attack was detected by radar and the relieving section of Spitfires arrived in time to shoot down two of the enemy.

37. During this time HEBE and BADSWORTH appeared to be having difficulty in sinking KENTUCKY and BURDWAN. PARTRIDGE and BEDOUIN were now out of sight astern and I have since learned from the Commanding Officer, PARTRIDGE, that BEDOUIN, failing to get one engine under way as he had hoped, considered the circumstances changed and made off to the westward with PARTRIDGE.

38. At 1341, heavy gunfire was heard astern and HEBE, then rejoining from astern, reported two enemy cruisers and two enemy destroyers in sight astern.

39. I therefore concentrated the three remaining fleet destroyers and turned back towards the enemy to cover HEBE, HYTHE, and BADSWORTH who were returning after attempting to sink KENTUCKY and BURDWAN, and PARTRIDGE and BEDOUIN who I then believed to be following me.

40. The enemy were observed approaching on the starboard bow soon after I had turned and appeared to be firing at HEBE and the abandoned merchant ships. The enemy turned to the westward engaging a target enveloped in a pall of smoke which I believed to be PARTRIDGE and BEDOUIN. Shortly the enemy turned directly away.

41. By 1400, having covered BADSWORTH, HEBE, and HYTHE, I decided I could no longer afford to steam away from the convoy which was then about fifteen miles distant. I therefore with great reluctance turned to rejoin the convoy though it meant leaving BEDOUIN and PARTRIDGE.

42. I have since learned that about this time enemy torpedo bombers most conveniently attacked and sank BURDWAN and KENTUCKY, a task which HEBE and BADSWORTH had been striving to accomplish for some time. I understand that both BURDWAN and KENTUCKY were fitted with scuttling charges but I do not at present know why these charges were not used.

43. At 1430 PARTRIDGE reported that BEDOUIN had been torpedoed and sunk by enemy aircraft in position 36° 12' N., 11° 37' E., and at 1515 that enemy destroyers appeared to be picking up BEDOUIN's survivors. From this time until 1645, although unable to steam more than 18 knots, PARTRIDGE with great gallantry continued to shadow the enemy and report this greatly superior force.

44. At 1535 I was informed by the Vice-Admiral, Malta that an air striking force of 3 Albacores had left Malta to attack the enemy. This information was very heartening as I felt that we should see no more of the enemy cruisers and destroyers if he considered himself threatened by air attack.

45. At 1640 an enemy float-plane observed shadowing was shot down by fighters visually directed from CAIRO and about the same time two shadowing JU.88s were detected by radar, intercepted, and destroyed by escorting aircraft directed from CAIRO.

46. At 1700 PARTRIDGE was ordered to return to Gibraltar by the Vice-Admiral, Malta, and at 1730 WELSHMAN joined and ordered me to continue as Senior Officer.

47. At 1910 a heavy dive bombing attack by about 12 JU.88s was made. At this time a large number of Spitfires was patrolling overhead and the radar scan was saturated by I.F.F. signals both from our own fighters and from friendly fighters over Malta. Consequently the enemy's approach was not detected and neither the fleet nor the escorting fighters were given any warning. WELSHMAN and TROILUS were narrowly missed. Escorting fighters were able to intercept and are believed to have destroyed a number of the enemy after the attack had been delivered.

48. At 2040 a light dive bombing attack developed carried out by 3 JU.88s. These were driven off by escorting Spitfires and gunfire, without dropping their bombs.

49. At 2035 I received orders from the Vice-Admiral, Malta that all ships of the convoy and the escort were to enter harbour. Ships

*Admiralty footnote.*

\* Opening, i.e., increasing its distance.

were ordered to enter harbour in the order motor launches, minesweepers, CAIRO, merchant ships, and destroyers and at 2006 I ordered the Senior Officer, Minesweepers (SPEEDY) to take the minesweepers and motor launches under his orders and to proceed ahead.

50. By the time CAIRO reached the entrance to the swept channel it was dark and minesweepers except for one of the Hythe class were out of sight. This minesweeper proceeded ahead of CAIRO and appeared to be steering somewhat to starboard of the proper course. On sighting the first mark boat flashing "V", CAIRO hauled round and led the merchant ships up the marked channel until reaching the last mark.

51. TROILUS was then ordered to proceed ahead to comply with the Vice-Admiral, Malta's berthing signal and CAIRO stopped off the entrance. ORARI following closely behind TROILUS also proceeded into harbour ahead of me and was mined about 2 cables from the breakwater. She was able to proceed up harbour.

#### *Air Co-operation.*

52. From 0930 on 15th June, long-range fighters from Malta gave continuous cover to the convoy, except for two short periods when fighters had been heavily engaged and had used up their petrol and ammunition and had had to return to base early. To have maintained this escort at such a considerable distance from base, must have entailed a very heavy strain on the resources at Malta. The timing of the relieving flights was excellent. The pilots showed great dash in attacking the enemy, never hesitating to follow through anti-aircraft fire to prevent deliberate attacks being delivered.

#### *Remarks on the Passage of a Convoy to Malta from the Westward.*

53. The passage entails a period of two days and one night when the convoy is within range of heavy scale air attacks. I do not propose to remark on the problem as it affects the protection from surface forces.

54. During Operation "Harpoon" Force T and the convoy were subjected to a series of heavy air attacks on the 14th June. Fighters from the carriers and gunfire from the fleet prevented the enemy scoring more than one success against the convoy (TANIMBAR) but it is emphasised that during this period the force of the enemy attacks was directed more against the carriers than the merchant ships.

55. The most critical period of the passage is likely to be from daylight on the final day until the convoy has reached a position where short-range fighters based on Malta can give it cover. It is important therefore that as many long-range fighters as possible should be provided to protect the convoy during this time.

56. With the heavy scale of air attack which the enemy is capable of launching in this area I do not consider we can rely on fighters, however numerous, being able to prevent a proportion of the enemy's dive bombers delivering attacks. The enemy tactics appear to be to break his formations some distance away and for individual aircraft or small groups to attack from different sectors.

57. It is apparent therefore that merchant ships in convoy must rely on their own close range armament for protection against dive bombing. The enemy evidently has a healthy respect for our fire for he seldom appeared to press home his attacks to a close enough range to ensure hitting, but the danger from near misses is very considerable.

58. During the final day of "Harpoon" three merchant ships in convoy were lost due to enemy air action. Of these, CHANT received three direct hits, but BURDWAN and KENTUCKY were, I believe, not touched but disabled by near misses. But for the enemy surface force, both of these ships might have been brought in.

(Signed) C. C. HARDY,

*Captain, R.N.,  
Senior Officer, Force X.*

### OPERATION "PEDESTAL"

*The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 25th August, 1942 by Vice-Admiral E. N. Syfret, C.B., Flag Officer Commanding, Force F.*

*H.M.S. NELSON,*

*25th August, 1942.*

#### REPORT ON OPERATION "PEDESTAL"

Be pleased to lay before the Board the following report on Operation "Pedestal" which included Operations "Berserk," "Bellows" and "Ascendant."\*

2. In compliance with Admiralty instructions I disembarked from H.M.S. CANTON at Takoradi on 7th July, and accompanied by my Staff Officer (Operations), Commander A. H. Thorold, O.B.E., R.N., proceeded by air to the United Kingdom, arriving on 13th July.

3. On arrival at the Admiralty, discussions regarding the planning of the Operations "Pedestal," "Berserk" and "Ascendant" were held with Rear-Admiral A. L. St. G. Lyster, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O., Rear-Admiral H. M. Burrough, C.B., D.S.O., and the Naval Staff.

4. On the return of NELSON and RODNEY from Freetown my flag was transferred to NELSON and I joined that ship at Scapa on 27th July. This enabled me to convene a conference on 29th July of Flag and Commanding Officers of those naval forces† destined for "Pedestal" which were then assembled at Scapa, at which the orders for the operation were gone through in detail.

5. On 31st July the Rear-Admiral, Aircraft Carriers, Home Fleet sailed from Scapa in VICTORIOUS with ARGUS, SIRIUS and destroyers to rendezvous with EAGLE and

#### *Admiralty footnotes:*

\* Operation "Berserk"—an aircraft carrier co-operation exercise (*vide* paragraph 5).

Operation "Bellows"—a reinforcement of R A F. at Malta by Spitfires (*vide* paragraph 9)

Operation "Ascendant"—the sailing of a small convoy from Malta to Gibraltar under the cover of Operation "Pedestal" (*vide* paragraph 43)

† For composition of these forces see Appendix 'A'.

C H A R Y B D I S from Gibraltar and INDOMITABLE and PHOEBE from Free-town, for Operation "Berserk." "Berserk" was subsequently carried out according to plan and was of the utmost benefit in exercising fighter direction and co-operation between the three carriers.

6. The convoy under a bogus W.S.\* name escorted by NIGERIA (flag of Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron†), KENYA and destroyers sailed from the Clyde during the night 2nd/3rd August and joined my flag the following morning.

7. Just prior to sailing, but after the "normal" convoy conference, Rear-Admiral Burrough held a meeting with the Masters of the M.T. ships on board his flagship at which the whole plan was explained to them in detail. A meeting with radio operators of the M.T. ships was also held when all details regarding fleet communications and procedure were fully explained. These two meetings were invaluable.

8. Personal messages signed by the First Lord of the Admiralty wishing the Masters "God Speed" and contained in envelopes marked "Not to be opened until 0800/10th August" were handed to the Masters. This act of courtesy and encouragement was very highly appreciated.

9. Shortly before leaving Scapa the Admiralty decided that FURIOUS should carry out Operation "Bellows," to reinforce Malta with Spitfires, concurrently with "Pedestal." The necessary additions and amendments to the Operation Orders were made and subsequently distributed to all ships and authorities concerned.

10. Owing to technical difficulties connected with the aircraft's propellers, and FURIOUS's humped flying deck, FURIOUS was unable to sail with the main body. She later proceeded at high speed with MANCHESTER and joined my flag on D minus 3.

11. The passage of the convoy from the United Kingdom to the rendezvous with the aircraft carriers west of the Straits was wholly successful, though there were many alarms over U-Boat contacts en route.

12. The convoy was repeatedly exercised in anti-aircraft gunnery, in emergency turns and in changing from one cruising disposition to another, using both flags and short range W/T. The risk to security in breaking W/T silence was accepted and as a result of these exercises the convoy attained an efficiency in manoeuvring comparable to that of a fleet unit.

13. Unfavourable weather conditions coupled with unsuitable equipment and an inexperienced crew in ABBEYDALE, an inexperienced ships taking part in "Berserk" completing with fuel at sea. This entailed sending additional large and small ships into Gibraltar on the night of D minus 2 and D minus 1, thus throwing further heavy commitments on the already complicated organisation required from

the Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic.

14. It gives me great pleasure to record the excellent way in which these heavy commitments were met by the Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic, and all concerned at Gibraltar.

15. During the afternoon of D minus 1, the dummy air attacks on the force, followed by a fly past for identification purposes, were carried out and proved to be of the utmost benefit, for exercising the radar reporting and fighter direction organisation and for giving everyone an opportunity for studying the characteristics and markings of our own aircraft. They did, of course, entail a great volume of W/T and R/T traffic which must have been very apparent to enemy or enemy-controlled listening stations. This risk to security was considered acceptable when balanced against the benefit to be derived from the practices.

16. At 1330 when INDOMITABLE joined my flag it is believed to have been the first occasion when five of H.M. aircraft carriers have ever operated in company at sea simultaneously.

17. The passage of the Straits and D.1 (10th August) were uneventful. Fishing boats and one merchant vessel were passed at close quarters, but aided by a moonless night and indifferent visibility it is improbable that the force was sighted from the shore. Reports received later showed, however, that the enemy was fully cognisant of our passage of the Straits.

18. D.2 (11th August) was marked by the following important occurrences:—

(a) The successful completion of the large fuelling programme, thanks very largely to the extreme efficiency shown by DINGLEDALE and BROWN RANGER. In previous similar operations it has not been necessary to provide for so large an oiling programme since ships going to Malta have been able to fuel there. In this case Malta had no oil to spare. The problem of oiling 3 cruisers and 26 destroyers at sea, under enemy observation and in U-Boat infested waters, was an anxious one, failure of which could have seriously upset the whole plan.

(b) The tragic sinking of EAGLE, which quite apart from the loss to the fleet of a well tried and valuable carrier, at once bereft the force of 25 per cent. of its fighter strength.

(c) The large number of sightings and reportings of torpedoes and U-Boats, a proportion of which may well have been actualities.

(d) The successful execution of Operation "Bellows" whereby 37 much needed Spitfires reached Malta safely.\*

(e) The continuous snooping throughout the day despite all our fighters could do to prevent it; and the heavy, but fortunately unsuccessful, air attack at dusk. Our fighters competed manfully at great height against the snoopers but the speed and the height

*Admiralty footnotes.*

\* W.S. convoys were normally those from U.K. to Suez via Cape of Good Hope

† Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron  
—Rear-Admiral H. M. Burrough, C.B., D.S.O.

*Admiralty footnote:*

\* The distance from Malta at which these Spitfires were flown off from FURIOUS was 584 to 555 miles.

of the JU.88s made the fighters' task a hopeless one. It will be a happy day when the fleet is equipped with modern fighter aircraft.

### D.3 (12th August).

19. As the force moved east it was to be expected that the U-Boat and air threat would progressively increase. Additional anti-submarine measures were taken to counter the U-Boat concentration which was believed to have been disposed in an area near Galita and our vigilant A/S screen had the satisfaction of achieving a "kill" of one Italian submarine.\* H.M.S. ITHURIEL delivered the *coup de grace* to this submarine by ramming it and in doing so badly damaged herself and put her asdic gear out of action. The submarine when it came to the surface after being depth charged was obviously "all in" and I thought the expensive method chosen by the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. ITHURIEL, to sink it quite unnecessary. Moreover, I was disturbed at the resulting absence of ITHURIEL from the screen when an air attack was impending.

20. Throughout the day the force was under continual observation by aircraft which were protected, progressively more strongly, by fighters. During the day the force was subjected to three very heavy air attacks; whilst Force X, after parting company, was attacked at dusk by bombers and torpedo bombers.

21. During daylight hours our fighters, though frequently greatly outnumbered, continued their magnificent work both in reporting approaching raids and in shooting down enemy aircraft. Success also attended our A.A. guns though more from their deterrent effect than from the accuracy of their fire.

22. In their daylight attacks, the enemy employed every form of air attack, including minelaying ahead of the fleet, which, so far as I know, has not been used before by the enemy.

23. Despite the great numbers of aircraft employed in the four heavy attacks on the fleet up to 1900 on D.3, it is gratifying to record that the only casualties were one M.T. ship with her speed reduced by a near miss, one destroyer torpedoed but afloat (though later sunk by own forces), and the INDOMITABLE put out of flying action but capable of steaming at 28½ knots.

24. I had intended that Force Z should turn to the westward on reaching the entrance to the Skerki Channel at 1915 and had warned the fleet accordingly. The damaged INDOMITABLE, on fire forward and aft, caused me, however, to advance this time by twenty minutes, and at 1855 I ordered Force Z to turn and Force X to proceed to Malta. The withdrawal of Force Z was apparently unnoticed by the enemy and its separation from Force X not discovered by him until about 2030.

25. In view of the magnitude of the enemy's air attack at 1830 to 1850 it seemed improbable that a further attack on Force X on any great

scale would be forthcoming before dark, and having reached the Skerki Banks, it was hoped that the submarine menace was mostly over. The dangers ahead of Force X seemed to lie principally in attacks by E-Boats during the night and by aircraft the following morning.

26. Thus the enemy's successful submarine attack at 2000 when NIGERIA, CAIRO and OHIO were torpedoed was unexpected and its effect far reaching. The time was a critical one, for the change from four columns to two columns was being made and for this manoeuvre the cruisers were much needed as leaders of columns. The torpedoing of H.M. Ships NIGERIA and CAIRO, the temporary non-effectiveness of H.M.S. ASHANTI (Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla) while embarking Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron, and the detachment of 4 Hunt destroyers to stand by the damaged cruisers, deprived (a) Force X temporarily of its Commander, (b) two columns of their leaders, (c) the convoy of nearly half its escort, and (d) the force of its two Fighter Direction ships. On hearing that NIGERIA and CAIRO had been torpedoed I ordered CHARYBDIS, ESKIMO and SOMALI to reinforce Force X. From about 2035 to 2100, the convoy was subjected to a very severe dusk air attack by dive bombers and torpedo bombers. ASHANTI and PENN laid a smoke screen to cover the light western horizon, but this did not prevent the attack being effective. EMPIRE HOPE and GLENORCHY were both bombed and sunk, the latter blowing up with no survivors.

A separate torpedo bomber attack sank DEUCALION at 2130 near the Cani Rocks when under escort of BRAMHAM.

The Commanding Officer, H.M.S. KENYA describes the state of the convoy subsequent to these misfortunes as chaotic. I think this may be an exaggeration for though necessarily the convoy was in a confused state there is no evidence to show that any ship of the convoy was steaming other than in the correct direction. Furthermore we know that 11 of the convoy got safely, though some not undamaged, as far as Kelibia,\* by early morning.

### D.4 (13th August).

27. The attenuated line of merchant ships and the reduced number of escort ships provided easy opportunities for attacks by the E-Boats which were lying in wait off Kelibia. Here three of the merchant ships which failed to reach Malta were torpedoed. Of these the WAIRANGI, it is believed, was hit in the engine room and was permanently disabled, but the ALMERIA LYKES was hit before the bulkhead of No. 1 hold and could well have continued steaming to Malta.

28. In the early morning MANCHESTER was torpedoed, supposedly by an E-Boat or possibly mined, and after the ship's company had abandoned her in the ship's boats and Carley rafts she was scuttled by order of her Commanding Officer.

29. The E-Boat attacks during the night added further to the disorganisation of the convoy and at daylight the scattered ships were

#### Admiralty footnote

\* This was the Italian submarine COBALTO. Her destruction on this occasion has been confirmed.

#### Admiralty footnote

\* Kelibia—some 20 miles south of Cape Bon in Tunis.



comparatively easy prey for enemy aircraft. Three M.T. ships were hit by bombs and sunk. The remaining five M.T. ships reached Malta.

30. That these five ships did make their goal is a magnificent tribute to the resolution shown by all concerned, and a special word of praise is due to the gallant Master of the OHIO (Captain D. W. Masson), to PENN (Lieutenant-Commander J. H. Swain, R.N.), LEDBURY (Lieutenant-Commander R. P. Hill, R.N.) and BRAMHAM (Lieutenant E. F. Baines, R.N.), to the Malta Local Forces, and to the Royal Air Force based on Malta.

31. Having turned over his charges to the Malta Escort Force, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron with Force X less H.M. Ships PENN, LEDBURY and BRAMHAM withdrew at 1600/D.4.

32. H.M.S. NIGERIA and three Hunts had already started back, as had H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI who had been sent by Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron to help H.M.S. MANCHESTER. H.M.S. TARTAR, who had sunk H.M.S. FORESIGHT at 0955/D.4, was also on her way back to Gibraltar.

33. Throughout D.4 Force Z continued to the westward, apparently unobserved by the enemy, turning to the eastward at 2300/D.4, when H.M. Ships RODNEY and INDOMITABLE with 5 destroyers were detached to Gibraltar.

#### D.5 (14th August).

34. During D.5 I was uncertain of the position of Force X and how it was faring, though from intercepted manoeuvring and radar reporting signals, it was clear that they were being subjected to air attacks to the west of Galita Island. In fact they were undergoing severe attention from the enemy's air forces but fortunately they came through unharmed.

35. With the object of being near at hand if support was required, Force Z cruised to the northward of Algiers until about 1500/D.5, when I was relieved to receive a signal from Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron, giving his noon position, course and speed as  $37^{\circ} 21' N.$ ,  $06^{\circ} 27' E.$ , 27.2°, 20 knots. Course of Force Z was then set to make contact.

36. An Albacore was sent to establish a visual link with Force X and at 1800/D.5 Force Z and Force X met and the combined forces withdrew to Gibraltar, arriving at 1800/D.6.

37. Of the remainder of the forces at sea, H.M.S. FURIOUS and screen arrived Gibraltar at 1900/D.3, H.M. Ships NIGERIA, TARTAR and 3 Hunts at 0010/D.6, and H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI at 0530/D.6.

38. Force R cruised in the western basin until it was certain that they would not be required to fuel Force X, when they were ordered to return to Gibraltar, arriving a.m./D.7.

39. H.M. Ships PENN, LEDBURY and BRAMHAM arrived at Malta with S.S. OHIO at 0755/D.6. They sailed for Gibraltar at 2030/D.9 and arrived there at 0715 on 21st August.

40. During the return passage of H.M.S. FURIOUS from Operation "Bellows," H.M.S. WOLVERINE, one of her escort, detected, rammed and sank a U-Boat\* in position  $37^{\circ} 18' N.$ ,  $01^{\circ} 55' E.$  at 0050/D.3. There were no survivors. H.M.S. WOLVERINE severely damaged her bows and was escorted part of the way back to Gibraltar by H.M.S. MALCOLM, who later reinforced H.M.S. NIGERIA's screen.

41. H.M.S. NIGERIA was shadowed continuously on D.4 and was attacked by three torpedo bomber aircraft at 1515. She successfully combed the tracks and was not further molested by aircraft.

When 5 miles south of Alboran, at 1644/D.5, she avoided torpedoes fired by a U-Boat. Prior to this attack her screen had been reinforced by four Western Approaches destroyers despatched by Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic.

42. H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI were attacked by a JU.88 and a torpedo bomber aircraft when west of Galita p.m. on D.4, and a near miss on H.M.S. SOMALI caused her to lose steam and stop for five minutes.

43. Force Y sailed from Malta at 2030/D.1. Though aircraft flew over them on D.2, their Italian deck markings seemed to nonplus the enemy's observers. Off Cape Bon on the night of D.2, Force Y encountered and was fired on by a darkened Vichy minesweeper and on D.3 was shadowed occasionally by single aircraft who remained mystified. No incident occurred subsequent to noon on D.3 and the force arrived safely at Gibraltar at 1000/D.5.

#### General Remarks.

44. *Planning and assembly.*—It was a great advantage that the planning could be done at the Admiralty for the following reasons:—

(a) Early decisions could be obtained and questions answered, thus saving signals.

(b) Communications were better and there was less chance of loss of security.

(c) General views on policy could be obtained.

(d) Experts in all branches were readily available.

(e) The advice and help of the Naval Staff was always at hand.

45. Assembling and sailing of ships at Scapa Flow not only enabled me to discuss the operation with the majority of Commanding Officers of ships taking part, but also gave many advantages from the security point of view. The use of a telephone, fitted with a scrambler, was invaluable as it enabled many points of detail to be cleared up, up to the moment of sailing. I am sure that the decision to bring NELSON and RODNEY from Freetown to Scapa was fully justified.

It was some disadvantage from the co-operation point of view that INDOMITABLE and EAGLE and their attendant ships should have had to start from Freetown and Gibraltar respectively; from the security point of view, however, this was probably advantageous.

#### Admiralty footnote :

\* This was the Italian submarine DAGABUR. Her destruction on this occasion has been confirmed.



46. *Surprise.*—Our attempt to pass the convoy into the Mediterranean without the enemy's knowledge resulted in a very complicated fuelling programme during dark hours at Gibraltar in the days preceding D.1. Operation "Berserk," invaluable in itself, was a further source of embarrassment from the fuelling point of view. With the efficient intelligence service which it appears the enemy now has in the Gibraltar area it may be argued that the small chance of effecting any surprise is not worth the complications and difficulties of attempting to do so. I think, however, it would be wrong to take this line. Until the enemy's reconnaissance forces actually see us in the Mediterranean he cannot be sure his intelligence is correct, and any uncertainty we can create in his mind must be all to our benefit.

47. It would, however, be better, if circumstances permitted, to carry out the necessary and invaluable aircraft carrier co-operation exercise further away, preferably north of Ireland, on another occasion.

48. *Re-fuelling destroyers on D.2.*—The re-fuelling of CAIRO and 24 destroyers between 0600 and 2030 on D.2 was an accomplishment redounding very greatly to the credit of BROWN RANGER and DINGLEDALE. But the Masters of these ships would be the first to admit that fortune favoured us. The weather was good and a light easterly wind enabled the desired course to be maintained whilst fuelling was in progress.

Such fortune cannot be expected on all occasions, more particularly in winter months, and the failure or partial failure of fuelling plans must be provided for.

49. Furthermore one must always have in mind the possibility of the oiler(s) being damaged or sunk by enemy action. Hitherto the oilers have borne a charmed life, though on this occasion they experienced alarms on account of both enemy aircraft and submarines.

50. *Co-operation by other Commands.*—Information I received showed that part of the enemy's air forces which attacked the fleet on D.2 and D.3 were operating from Trapani and recently had been based at Heraklion. It seems probable, therefore, that the enemy moved some air squadrons from Greece, and possibly also from Crete, for the occasion.

51. The diversionary convoy from Haifa and Port Said was planned by Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, with a view to dissuading the enemy from any such re-disposition of his air forces, and I had hoped that the Army would have helped to further this end by staging an attack in Egypt. In this hope I was disappointed.

52. The attacks on Sardinian and Sicilian aerodromes by bomber forces from Malta and Egypt were valuable contributions to our plan and it is believed they achieved effective results.

53. The losses suffered by Force F were regrettably heavy and the number of merchant ships which reached Malta disappointingly

small. But I have no fault to find with the personnel of the fleet because better results were not achieved. On the contrary, Commanding Officers, generally, have praised the fine bearing and spirit shown by their ships' companies, many of whom were very young and to whom battle was a new experience. I am proud to associate myself with these tributes, and in particular give credit to those whose duties kept them below decks during submarine, air and E-Boat attacks.

54. The constant A/S vigilance shown by the destroyers under the leadership of Captain R. M. J. Hutton (Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla) and Acting Captain R. J. Onslow (Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla) for a period extending over 14 days is deserving of much praise. It is true that the submarine which sank H.M.S. EAGLE was undetected but I am very sure that their watchfulness foiled many another attack.

55. That 27 emergency turns were made on passage to the Straits and 48 during D.1, D.2 and D.3, consequent on warnings given by the A/S screen, is an illustration of the value of their work. Besides this, their defence of the fleet against torpedo bomber attack was so successful that only one torpedo bomber aircraft managed to get past them.

56. The work of the aircraft carriers (H.M.S. INDOMITABLE, Captain T. H. Troubridge, and H.M.S. VICTORIOUS, Captain H. C. Bovell) under the command of Rear-Admiral Lyster, was excellently performed, while that of their fighters was magnificent. Flying at great heights, constantly chasing the faster JU. 88s, warning the fleet of approaching formations, breaking up the latter, and in the later stages doing their work in the face of superior enemy fighter forces, they were grand. The fact that 39 certainties were shot down by them and the probability that at least the same number were incapacitated is a remarkable measure of the success of the carriers, their teamwork and their fighters and of the able and inspiring leadership of Rear-Admiral A. L. St. G. Lyster, C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O.

57. Tribute has been paid to the personnel of H.M. Ships but both officers and men will desire to give first place to the conduct, courage and determination of the Masters, officers and men of the merchant ships. The steadfast manner in which these ships pressed on their way to Malta through all attacks, answering every manœuvring order like a well trained fleet unit, was a most inspiring sight. Many of these fine men and their ships were lost but the memory of their conduct will remain an inspiration to all who were privileged to sail with them.

58. The task of Force X was always difficult and hazardous. Unhappily a serious disaster befell them almost at once and heavily tipped the scales in favour of the enemy. Nevertheless they continued undaunted and determined, and fighting their way through many and heavy attacks by U-Boats, E-Boats and aircraft, they delivered five of their charges to Malta and then fought their way back to Gibraltar. In doing this they showed a display of fortitude and

determination of which all may be proud and particularly their courageous and resolute leader, Rear-Admiral H. M. Burrough, C.B., D.S.O.

59. In conclusion I think I am speaking for all in saying that we are disappointed at not doing better but we should like to try again.

(Signed) E. N. SYFRET,  
Vice-Admiral,  
Flag Officer Commanding,  
Force F.

## APPENDIX 'A'

## NOMENCLATURE OF FORCES TAKING PART.

Force as a whole	...	Force F.
Convoy and Escort. U.K.-rendezvous	...	Force P.
VICTORIOUS, ARGUS and Escort. U.K.-rendezvous	...	Force M.
EAGLE and Escort. Gibraltar-rendezvous	...	Force J.
INDOMITABLE and Escort. Freetown-rendezvous	...	Force K.
Aircraft Carriers and Escort (after rendezvous for Operation "Berserk")	...	Force G.
BROWN RANGER and DINGLEDALE (Fleet oil tankers) and Escort	...	Force R.
ABBEYDALE (Fleet oil tanker for Operation "Berserk") and Escort	...	Force W.
Naval forces escorting convoy to Malta	...	Force X.
Force F, less Force X	...	Force Z.
Convoy and Escort. Malta-Gibraltar	...	Force Y.

## COMPOSITION OF FORCES.

## Force Z.

Battleships. NELSON (Senior Officer, Force F) and RODNEY.

Aircraft Carriers. VICTORIOUS (Rear-Admiral, Aircraft Carriers, Home Fleet), INDOMITABLE and EAGLE. (Also FURIOUS for Operation "Bellows").

Cruisers. PHOEBE, SIRIUS and CHARYBDIS.

Destroyers. LAFOREY (Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla), LIGHTNING, LOOKOUT, QUENTIN, ESKIMO, TARTAR, ITHURIEL, ANTELOPE, WISHART, VANSITTART, WESTCOTT, WRESTLER, ZETLAND and WILTON.

## Force X.

Cruisers. NIGERIA (Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron), KENYA, MANCHESTER and CAIRO.

Destroyers. ASHANTI (Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla), INTREPID, ICARUS, FORESIGHT, FURY, PATHFINDER, PENN, DERWENT, BRAMHAM, BICESTER and LEDBURY.

## Convoy W.S.21S.

M.T. ships (15 knots):—

EMPIRE HOPE  
DORSET  
WAIRANGI  
ROCHESTER CASTLE  
WAIMARAMA  
BRISBANE STAR  
PORT CHALMERS  
ALMERIA LYKES  
SANTA ELISA  
CLAN FERGUSON  
GLENORCHY  
MELBOURNE STAR  
DEUCALION.

Oil tanker (15 knots):—OHIO

Additional escort for Convoy W.S.21S (U.K. to Straits of Gibraltar):—

Destroyers: KEPPEL, MALCOLM, AMAZON, VENOMOUS and WOLVERINE.

Force Y.

M.T. ships (14 knots):—TROILUS and ORARI.

Escort: Destroyers MATCHLESS and BADSWORTH.

Force R.

R.F.A. BROWN RANGER and DINGLEDALE (Fleet oil tankers).

H.M. Tugs: JAUNTY and SALVONIA.

Escort: Corvettes: JONQUIL, GERANIUM, SPIREA and COLTSFOOT.

## DIARY OF EVENTS.

## PART I.

Passage of Straits of Gibraltar to detaching of Force X and commencement of Force Z's withdrawal.

Monday, 10th August (D.I).

Cape Spartel was passed at midnight 9th/10th. During the passage through the Straits of Gibraltar a large number of fishing boats was passed between Malabata and Tarifa and also two neutral steamers steaming to the westward.

2. At 0245 fog was encountered. The visibility was at times down to 1 cable. The fog cleared at 0500. At 0840 the force proceeded eastwards at 13½ knots in Cruising Disposition No. 16.

3. During the day, ships which had been detached to refuel at Gibraltar rejoined, and at 1600 the force was complete with the exception of WRESTLER, who, owing to a mechanical defect, was later replaced by AMAZON.

4. The day was uneventful except that alarms were caused through the I.F.F. of several of the Hudson aircraft provided by Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic, for A/S patrol, not showing. This on one occasion caused the "duty section" of 4 fighters to be flown off from VICTORIOUS to intercept and entailed the breaking of W/T silence on radar reporting and fighter direction waves.

5. At dusk a diversionary convoy was due to be sailed from Port Said to rendezvous at 0800/D.2 with a similar convoy which was to sail from Haifa at 0400/D.2. These convoys were to be escorted by cruisers and destroyers and were due to turn back at dark D.2.

It is believed that these movements took place as arranged though no information was received by me to that effect.

*Tuesday, 11th August (D.2).*

6. At 0645, ASHANTI (Captain D.6), LEDBURY, ZETLAND, WILTON, BRAMHAM, BICESTER, FORESIGHT and DERWENT made contact with Force R and commencing fuelling, having been detached at 2130 the previous night. SIRIUS, PHOEBE and Tug JAUNTY joined from Force R at 0845. JAUNTY reported his maximum speed as being  $12\frac{1}{2}$  knots. Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla remained with Force R in charge of the oiling until relieved by Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla at 1800. Thanks to the excellent arrangements on board the oilers, CAIRO and 24 destroyers had been fuelled by 2030.

By the end of the day, BROWN RANGER was down to 100 tons and 1,000 tons of oil were transferred from DINGLEDALE on the morning D.3.

7. At 0800/11, COLTSFOOT, one of the corvettes screening Force R, reported that 2 torpedoes had been observed to break surface in position  $37^{\circ} 56' N.$ ,  $01^{\circ} 40' E.$  There were indications that Force F may have been reported by Italian U-Boats at 0815 when south of Formentera Island.

8. At 1055 I received Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic's 0902A/11 informing me that an aircraft sighting report of Force F at 0620Z/11 had been broadcast by Rome to "all units and stations." This followed a previous warning from Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic (his 0732A/11) that German reconnaissance aircraft were active in the Western Mediterranean.

The first radar contact was obtained at 0815, and from then onwards there was continuous "snooping" of the force by enemy aircraft. Two sections of 4 fighters each were kept in the air throughout the day, being reinforced as necessary. The enemy machines (JU.88s) were flying at 20,000 feet or more and difficulty was experienced by our fighters in intercepting them. Five interceptions were made resulting in one JU.88 shot down and two damaged. One Hurricane and one Fulmar were lost but the crews of both were recovered.

9. At 1128 three distant disturbances on the surface of the sea, as of torpedo discharges, were seen in both NELSON and CHARYBDIS, bearing  $200^{\circ}$ , about 3 miles. They were described by a submarine officer in NELSON as exactly similar to the torpedo discharges of a carelessly handled submarine, and by CHARYBDIS as a torpedo "break surface". It seems probable that a U-Boat attempted to attack the convoy at this time.

*Operation "Bellows".*

10. At 1218, FURIOUS screened by LIGHTNING and LOOKOUT moved out to the port

quarter of the convoy for Operation "Bellows". The first Spitfire took off at 1229. Two flights of 8 Spitfires were flown off before delay was caused by emergency turns following the sinking of EAGLE.

The third, fourth and fifth flights were flown off between 1350 and 1450. In all 38 Spitfires were flown off of which one, with a defect, landed on INDOMITABLE. I was informed later in the day by Vice-Admiral, Malta that 37 had arrived at Malta.

*Sinking of EAGLE.*

11. At 1315 in position  $38^{\circ} 05' N.$ ,  $3^{\circ} 02' E.$ , EAGLE was hit on the port side by four torpedoes, all within an interval of about 10 seconds. At this time EAGLE was stationed on the quarter of the starboard wing column of the convoy, speed 13 knots, and on the starboard leg of zig-zag No. 10, mean line of advance  $090^{\circ}$ .

12. EAGLE heeled rapidly over to port and sank in about eight minutes. No torpedo tracks were seen and it seems probable that the attack was carried out by a German U-Boat which dived under the screen, passed between columns 3 and 4 and attacked EAGLE at very short range with electric torpedoes. There were thirteen destroyers on the screen at this time and none obtained a contact.

13. LOOKOUT, who was screening FURIOUS for "Bellows", and LAFOREY were ordered to stand by EAGLE. Tug JAUNTY also proceeded immediately towards EAGLE and joined LOOKOUT in picking up survivors. Neither LOOKOUT nor CHARYBDIS, who steamed over the probable position of the U-Boat, obtained a contact. Nine hundred and twenty-seven survivors, including the Commanding Officer, were picked up by LAFOREY, LOOKOUT and JAUNTY.

14. For about one hour and a half after the sinking of EAGLE numerous sightings of submarines and torpedoes and asdic contacts were reported but there is no conclusive proof of a second U-Boat being in the vicinity during this period.

15. At 1429, KEPPEL (Senior Officer), MALCOLM, AMAZON, VENOMOUS, WOLVERINE and WRESTLER were sighted by Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla, and ordered by him to carry out an A/S search of the area. After picking up survivors, LAFOREY (Captain D. 19) and LOOKOUT rejoined Force F. KEPPEL, MALCOLM, VENOMOUS, WOLVERINE and WRESTLER joined at 1545, AMAZON having been ordered to take JAUNTY under his orders and join Force R.

I then ordered survivors in LAFOREY to be transferred to KEPPEL, those in LOOKOUT to VENOMOUS, and those in JAUNTY to MALCOLM. This was completed by 1830 when the five destroyers formed screen on FURIOUS who parted company and returned to Gibraltar.

16. At 1420 enemy aircraft approaching from the starboard beam were detected by radar. They passed directly over the force at a great height at 1430; NELSON and RODNEY opening fire in barrage for a few minutes. These aircraft were not seen but it

seems possible that a photographic reconnaissance was being carried out by the enemy. This formation remained in the vicinity for some time but no attack developed.

17. At 1545 Rear-Admiral, Aircraft Carriers informed me that one of our aircraft had forced-landed, bearing 022°, 23 miles away. WESTCOTT was ordered to proceed to the pilot and join Force R before dark. The pilot was recovered and WESTCOTT then joined Force R as directed.

18. Paravanes were streamed by battleships, cruisers and M.T. ships at 1635.

*The Dusk Attack on the Force.*

19. From about 1700 until the attack developed at 2045, Force F was continuously snooped by three or more enemy aircraft and the fighters were kept extremely busy.

20. At 1634 I received Vice-Admiral Commanding, North Atlantic's 1446A/11 warning me that the enemy would probably make a JU.88 attack at dusk. The fleet was by now in the second degree of H.A. readiness and at 1854 I ordered Captain (D), 6th Destroyer Flotilla (then the Senior Officer of destroyers in the absence of Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla, who was oiling) to station Hunt class destroyers close to the flanks of the convoy as in Cruising Disposition No. 17 by sunset; also that the screen were to increase their distance from the convoy to 6,000 yards in the event of an attack.

21. Radar reports made it evident that a raid was coming in at 2030, and not many minutes later sighting reports of enemy aircraft were received from the screen. The last destroyers to oil, which included LAFOREY (Captain D.19), joined at this time, thus bringing the force up to full strength.

22. At 2056, 15 minutes after sunset, firing began from destroyers on the port bow followed almost immediately by the cruisers and battleships.

23. The attack was by a number of JU 88s which dived from about 8,000 feet to 2/300 feet and by some torpedo bombers; the latter did not press home their attack though some tracks were seen and avoided. The attack lasted until about 2130 and the barrage put up by the force was most spectacular. Three enemy aircraft were shot down for certain by ships' gunfire.

Force R to the south'ard also came in for attention, one JU.88 dropping two bombs, one of which fell between the oilers and the escort, another diving on JAUNTY who was about seven miles to the westward endeavouring to join. She claims to have damaged it with Oerlikon fire. No damage was done to any ship in these attacks.

A number of friendly fighters were in the area throughout but were unable to locate the enemy in the failing light. They had to be landed on after dark, and in doing so some were fired on by our own ships.

24. During the above air attack, QUENTIN in position A on the screen confirmed an asdic contact, carrying out three depth charge attacks before rejoining at 2140.

25. No further incident occurred during the night and the force proceeded to the eastward unmolested.

At dusk Beaufighters from Malta attacked Elmas and Decimomannu aerodromes with results reported by Vice-Admiral, Malta as having been highly satisfactory.

By night two Liberators from the Middle East, operating from Malta, bombed Decimomannu aerodrome.

*Wednesday, 12th August (D.3).*

26. Radar reports of enemy snoopers began to come in at first light and all ships went to the first degree of readiness for H.A. and L.A.\* at 0530. Twelve fighters were flown off at 0610, and this number was maintained in the air throughout the day, being reinforced as necessary. There were few moments when neither aircraft, submarines, torpedoes nor asdic contacts were being reported. Cruising Disposition No. 17 was formed at 0600.

27. Information having been received of a probable concentration of U-Boats in the area to the northward of Galita, I ordered Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla, as an additional A/S measure, to reduce the distance apart of destroyers in the ahead and wing positions on the screen while shortening the distance of the screen ahead of the convoy and lengthening the distance apart of destroyers in the beam and quarter positions.

28. The first raid of the day by about 20 high level bombers approached at 0907. They were engaged by 16 of our fighters who were observed to shoot down one. The aircraft came in over the fleet and went ahead at 0914, dropped their bombs and were away in about six minutes. Two JU.88s were observed to be shot down and a third retired to the south'ard on fire fore and aft and losing height. Our fighters shot down 8 certain, 3 probable and 2 damaged. No damage was done to any ship.

29. FURY on the starboard wing of the screen confirmed an asdic contact at 0935 and was joined in the hunt by FORESIGHT. This was about 12 minutes after LAFOREY in position B had counterattacked a confirmed contact and it is possible that a U-Boat having escaped from LAFOREY, by diving under the convoy, was detected by FURY.

Soon there were four destroyers investigating contacts on the starboard side and at 0940 all destroyers were ordered to rejoin by Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla, as the U-Boat, if there was one there, was no longer a danger to Force F.

30. In order to fill gaps in the screen due to destroyers falling out for asdic contacts two Hunts from the convoy close screen were stationed astern of positions B and P to act as reserve destroyers.

31. Meanwhile spasmodic firing by the screen at snoopers which came within range continued and, of course, the carriers and their "chickens" were, as always, extremely busy.

32. PATHFINDER in position C (port bow) confirmed an asdic contact and heavily attacked it. She was assisted in the hunt by ZETLAND who was in the spare position. The hunt lasted from 1135 until 1150 when both ships

*Admiralty footnote :*

\* H A —High Angle armament; L.A.—Low Angle armament

lost contact and rejoined. Seven minutes later the destroyer in position H (on the port quarter) investigated a contact and carried out an attack but reported non-sub. This sequence of events makes it appear possible that a U-Boat attempted to break through the port screen but was foiled by PATHFINDER.

33. At 1200 a raid was reported coming in from ahead. It was intercepted by fighters. One was shot down, the smoke of which could be seen from the fleet. The aircraft were sighted by ASHANTI at 1210 and cruisers and destroyers in the van opened fire one minute later. This formation was of at least nine aircraft which dropped parachute mines in the path of the fleet. An emergency turn of 90 degrees to port was executed to avoid these. Several explosions some distance to the south-eastward at about 1229 were probably these mines detonating. One minelayer was probably shot down by destroyer. No damage was sustained by any ships.

34. This attack was followed by a large number of torpedo bombers which came in in formation of 5 or 6 on the port bow, port beam and finally on the starboard quarter. None of these attacks were pressed home and no aircraft penetrated the destroyer screen.

35. All dropped their torpedoes well outside the screen and outside range of the convoy. Several destroyers on the port side were near missed by torpedoes. One torpedo bomber was probably shot down by ships' gunfire.

36. The torpedo attack was closely followed by attacks by a large number of JU.88s which dive bombed, and also dropped small canisters with small black parachutes. DEUCALION was near missed and had her speed reduced. BRAMHAM was detailed to stand by her. She reported that No. 1 hold was half flooded and No. 2 completely flooded, but later added that she could steam at 10 knots. I ordered BRAMHAM to escort her via the coastal route to Malta. NELSON, RODNEY, CAIRO and several M.T. ships were very near missed. One JU.88 was probably destroyed by gunfire and several damaged.

37. At 1345 two Italian Reggione fighter-bombers dived on VICTORIOUS. After releasing their bombs, one of which glanced off the flight deck without exploding, they flew low over the convoy. As VICTORIOUS was flying on at the time, these were taken for friendly fighters and they got away practically unfired at. The bombs were estimated at about 100 lbs.

38. Meanwhile TARTAR on the starboard quarter reported a submarine in sight and carried out a depth charge attack. No further report was received.

39. At 1417 ZETLAND was seen to alter course and steam to the southward at high speed. He reported "submarine on the surface on the horizon, bearing 200 degrees." This submarine was no danger to the force and ZETLAND was ordered back to her station. The information was passed to BRAMHAM, who, with DEUCALION, was near the bearing. The submarine was not seen in NELSON.

40. The following two hours, until the next air attack developed, brought innumerable

reports of submarine sightings and asdic contacts. As an additional A/S measure, at Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron's suggestion, I had ordered Captain (D), 19th Destroyer Flotilla to arrange for a depth charge to be dropped by a destroyer on each side of the screen every ten minutes between 1400 and 1900.

41. At 1616 PATHFINDER in position C (on port bow) reported a confirmed asdic contact which she heavily attacked with two patterns in quick succession. ZETLAND who had joined PATHFINDER remained until the contact was no longer a danger when she rejoined at 1641.

42. At 1649 ITHURIEL in position I (port quarter) sighted a periscope and part of a conning tower on her starboard bow and immediately attacked. She obtained contact at 900 yards and carried out a counter-attack by asdics. This attack brought the U-Boat to the surface and ITHURIEL opened fire, turned and finally rammed it. This U-Boat sank before anything of value could be removed from her, although the boarding party managed to reach the conning tower. The U-Boat was the Italian COBALTO: 3 officers (including the Captain) and 38 ratings were taken prisoner. It is probable that this submarine was the one which PATHFINDER so heavily attacked.

43. Meanwhile at 1640 TARTAR in position U (starboard quarter) reported "torpedo in sight starboard" and immediately counter-attacked. A few minutes later LOOKOUT in the next position astern of TARTAR (position V) reported submarine in sight. Both these ships obtained asdic contact and hunted until the U-Boat was no longer a menace, each ship having made two deliberate attacks.

44. At 1726 I ordered WILTON to join Force X as BRAMHAM was detached escorting DEUCALION and at 1813 I informed the force that Force Z would turn to the westward at 1915.

45. Reports of small formations of enemy aircraft were coming in and it became evident before long that the enemy might be expected to make an air attack on a considerable scale. Our fighters made contact with enemy formations at about 1736 and reported that they were heavily escorted by fighters.

46. At 1749, ITHURIEL, who had not yet rejoined after picking up prisoners and shoring up his foremost collision bulkhead after ramming COBALTO, was attacked by 4 JU.88s and 1 C.R.42 fighter-bomber. She sustained no further damage but her speed had been reduced to 20 knots by the ramming and her A/S had been put out of action.

47. Course was altered in succession to 121 degrees at 1800, this being the course to pass through the Skerki Channel.

48. At 1830 the first enemy formation was sighted. It is believed now that there were from 100 to 120 enemy aircraft in the vicinity, many of them fighters. Against them we had 22 fighters in the air, who continually harassed and broke up the enemy formations.

49. The first attack commenced at 1835 and comprised at least 13 torpedo bombers; simultaneously an unknown number of high level

bombers, dive bombers and minelaying aircraft attacked. An emergency turn was made to avoid the mines and torpedoes which had been dropped outside the starboard screen.

Very soon after this 40 torpedo bombers were reported ahead, followed immediately by a Stuka attack on INDOMITABLE who became obscured by splashes and smoke.

The net result of these series of severe attacks was FORESIGHT torpedoed aft, INDOMITABLE 3 hits by large bombs and several near misses, causing two large fires and putting the flight deck out of action. There were many near misses elsewhere in the force but no other ships suffered damage.

The casualties to enemy aircraft are uncertain but INDOMITABLE's fighters shot down 9 certain, 2 probable and 1 damaged, for the loss of 2 fighters, 1 pilot being saved. One JU.87 was probably shot down by ships' gunfire.

50. TARTAR proceeded to FORESIGHT's assistance and subsequently took her in tow.

51. INDOMITABLE reduced speed and turned to the west away from the wind. CHARYBDIS closed her and some of Force Z destroyers were ordered to form a screen on her. As the time was now 1855 and the attack apparently over, Force Z was turned to the westward and Force X was detached.

52. At 1914 LOOKOUT was ordered to close INDOMITABLE to pump water on the fires but soon INDOMITABLE reported "circles in hand" and at 1927 that she could steam 17 knots. Shortly afterwards her steering gear became temporarily disabled, but by 2030 she was in all respects ready to proceed at 20 knots and shortly after reported able to make 28½ knots.

53. Force Z withdrew to the westward at 18 knots, speed being restricted to this by boiler tube defects reported by RODNEY.

## PART II.

### *Detaching of Force X until their rejoining Force Z.*

The following account of proceedings of Force X from the time of their detachment at 1900/D.3 until rejoining my flag at 1800/D.5 has been compiled from the reports of Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron and Commanding Officers of ships concerned. In the circumstances prevailing, discrepancies, differences and uncertainties are bound to arise in the recording of incidents.

#### *Wednesday, 12th August (D.3).*

2. At about 1956, as Cruising Disposition No. 21 was being taken up, H.M.S. NIGERIA leading the port column was hit, supposedly by a torpedo, and within a few minutes H.M.S. CAIRO, S.S. OHIO and another M.T. ship (probably S.S. BRISBANE STAR) were also hit.

3. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron is of the opinion that all these casualties were from torpedoes fired by one or more U-Boats, though the possibility of the damage being caused by mines cannot be excluded.

4. No detection of U-Boats by visual, asdic or radar was made. The time intervals between the explosions were such as to make it improbable as being the work of one U-Boat.

5. Whatever the facts, however, H.M.S. NIGERIA at once assumed a list to port of 13° and circled to starboard. By 2010 the ship was under control and at 2015 was stopped to transfer Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron and his staff to H.M.S. ASHANTI. Very prompt damage control measures had by this time reduced the list to 5° and by 2030 the ship was able to proceed at 14 knots for Gibraltar, despite her being 11 feet down by the head. H.M. Ships BICESTER and WILTON proceeded as escort, later in the night to be joined by H.M.S. DERWENT.

6. S.S. OHIO and BRISBANE STAR were temporarily brought to a stop, but, soon after, gallantly proceeded on their way to the southward.

7. H.M.S. CAIRO, whose stern was blown off and engines disabled, was sunk by our own forces as soon as the survivors had been taken off.

8. The effect of this series of disasters was to cause the convoy to become scattered, though they continued on their course for Cape Bon.

9. Meanwhile, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron in H.M.S. ASHANTI proceeded to close and direct the convoy. Whilst doing so, H.M.S. ASHANTI with H.M.S. PENN endeavoured to protect the convoy from an impending air attack by laying a smoke screen against the light westerly horizon.

10. At 2038, some 25 minutes after sunset, a severe dive bomber and torpedo bomber air attack developed and lasted until 2100. In this attack several M.T. ships were hit and two, S.S. EMPIRE HOPE and GLENORCHY, blew up or were later sunk.

11. At 2112, H.M.S. KENYA was hit on the fore foot by a torpedo fired by a U-Boat which she saw. One other torpedo passed under her and two more narrowly missed her stern. She was able to proceed, however, and soon after rejoined H.M.S. MANCHESTER.

12. After these attacks, 11 merchant ships were proceeding on their way, of which, however, only three or four were in visual touch with H.M. Ships MANCHESTER, KENYA and ASHANTI in the van.

The three T.S.D.S. destroyers were ahead; H.M.S. PATHFINDER rejoining from H.M.S. CAIRO, and H.M.S. PENN from her rescue work, were overtaking astern.

13. At 2130, S.S. DEUCALION, who had been proceeding separately with H.M.S. BRAMHAM, sank after having been torpedoed by a torpedo bomber aircraft near the Cani Rocks. Having picked up survivors, H.M.S. BRAMHAM proceeded to overtake Force X.

#### *Thursday, 14th August (D.4).*

14. At 2354 the leading ships of Force X passed Cape Bon, and 40 minutes later two E-Boats were detected by radar on the port beam and engaged by all ships. Further running fights with E-Boats occurred until near Kelibia Light and again at 0330 when some twenty miles from position "R", and during these attacks, H.M.S. MANCHESTER at 0120 and 3 M.T. ships, SANTA ELIZA, ALMERIA LYKES and WAIRANGI, were hit. H.M.S. ASHANTI reports that near Kelibia Light two horned mines, possibly cut by the

T.S.D.S. destroyers ahead, were passed within 10 feet. The possibility exists, therefore, that one or more of the above casualties may have been caused by mines and not by torpedo.

15. These E-Boat attacks did not go unpunished, at least one and possibly two E-Boats being destroyed. V.H.F.\* conversations in Italian intercepted in H.M.S. ASHANTI confirmed this.

16. At about 0140, H.M.S. PATHFINDER went alongside H.M.S. MANCHESTER and after discussion with the Captain embarked about 150 of the ship's company and then proceeded to join Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron as he had been ordered to do.

17. Subsequently, the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. MANCHESTER decided to abandon and sink his ship. The last of the ship's company left the ship at about 0245 and at about 0550 the ship was seen to sink.

18. At 0245, H.M. Ships CHARYBDIS, ESKIMO and SOMALI joined Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron.

19. S.S. WAIRANGI was hit in the engine room and S.S. ALMERIA LYKES before No. 1 hold. Both ships were abandoned and their crews picked up some hours later by H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI. Neither ship was seen to sink though both are reported as left in a sinking condition. Commanding Officer, H.M.S. ESKIMO reports that he did not complete the sinking of the ships because he thought there might be an opportunity later for salvaging them. S.S. SANTA ELIZA was sunk later in a bombing attack.

20. At dawn D.4, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron in H.M.S. ASHANTI had in company with him H.M. Ships KENYA, CHARYBDIS, INTREPID, ICARUS, FURY, ESKIMO, SOMALI and the M.T. ships MELBOURNE STAR, CLAN FERGUSON and ROCHESTER CASTLE. H.M.S. LEDBURY with S.S. OHIO was 5 miles astern, H.M.S. PATHFINDER and H.M.S. BRAMHAM with S.S. PORT CHALMERS were 10 miles to the north-west, while H.M.S. PENN was observed beyond S.S. PORT CHALMERS standing by an M.T. ship—probably S.S. WAIMARAMA—which was on fire and shortly afterwards blew up. Later S.S. DORSET was sighted to the northward and ordered to join the convoy.

21. It was learned later that S.S. BRISBANE STAR spent the night and part of the day in the Gulf of Hammamet. Whilst in territorial waters his ship was boarded by the French authorities who, after protest, behaved well and took a seriously wounded man ashore to Susa. S.S. BRISBANE STAR eventually reached Malta at 1430 the following day, 14th August.

22. At 0712, Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron ordered H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI to return and stand by H.M.S. MANCHESTER. On their way to do so they picked up survivors of S.S. ALMERIA LYKES and WAIRANGI and at 1040 off Kelibia they recovered about 150 of the MANCHESTER's ship's company from Carley

floats. They were then only half a mile from the coast and were able to see several hundreds of, apparently, H.M.S. MANCHESTER's ship's company being marched away. Having recovered all survivors, H.M. Ships ESKIMO and SOMALI proceeded for Gibraltar.

23. At 0810, the first of a series of air attacks was experienced by Force X, JU.88s delivering a dive bombing attack, mostly directed at S.S. CLAN FERGUSON, second ship of H.M.S. CHARYBDIS's column. S.S. CLAN FERGUSON received a direct hit and blew up. Her next stern passed through the flames apparently unscathed. H.M.S. CHARYBDIS reports seeing two aircraft diving on S.S. CLAN FERGUSON and only one coming out of the dive, the other presumably being destroyed by the explosion.

24. Further attacks by Stuka dive bombers accompanied by Italian aircraft laying parachute mines ahead and on the flanks of the convoy occurred at 0925. The Stukas made a set at S.S. OHIO who sustained several near misses. One Stuka which was shot down by the combined efforts of H.M.S. ASHANTI and S.S. OHIO dived into S.S. OHIO's side.

25. The Malta Beaufighters and Spitfires were now in sight of Force X and seen to be making contact with the enemy at times. Rear-Admiral Commanding, 10th Cruiser Squadron reports that, observing they had no fighter direction aid from Force X, he considered the fighters performed a magnificent job of work throughout the day.

26. At 0941, H.M.S. KENYA was near missed by further dive bombers, and at 1017 and 1050 similar combined dive bombing and minelaying attacks occurred. In these S.S. DORSET, who was rejoining, and S.S. OHIO, were both near missed and stopped. H.M. Ships PENN, LEDBURY and BRAMHAM stood by S.S. OHIO and DORSET. The latter was eventually sunk at 2014 after being set on fire by more air attacks.

27. At 1120, Italian torpedo bombers carried out an attack combined with the dropping of parachute mines or circling torpedoes. Torpedoes were dropped at long range and except for one which became entangled in S.S. PORT CHALMERS' paravane (subsequently cleared safely) none appeared to endanger the force.

28. Beaufighters and long-range Spitfires were observed to shoot down at least 4 enemy aircraft in the distance but unfortunately one Spitfire was engaged by merchant ships during a dive bombing attack and crashed, the pilot being killed.

29. By 1230, Force X was within range of Malta's short-range Spitfires and thereafter was unmolested.

30. At 1430, the Malta Escort Force under the Senior Officer, Minesweepers, in H.M.S. SPEEDY, reinforced the escort and at 1600, Force X, less H.M. Ships PENN, BRAMHAM, and LEDBURY, who continued to stand by S.S. OHIO and DORSET, retired to the westward. S.S. PORT CHALMERS, MELBOURNE STAR and ROCHESTER CASTLE were turned over to the local escort and eventually entered harbour at Malta safely at 1825.

*Admiralty footnote*

\* V.H.F.—very high frequency radio telephone.



*Friday, 15th August (D.5).*

31. After an epic struggle by her gallant Master and escorts, S.S. OHIO entered Grand Harbour at 0755.

32. Force X's withdrawal was uneventful in the initial stages. When off Cape Bon at 0130 they were attacked by E-Boats. These were engaged and an explosion was seen which was believed to be an E-Boat blowing up.

33. At 0450 when off Fratelli Rock a U-Boat attacked the force, H.M.S. ASHANTI being just missed. H.M.S. KENYA sighted the submarine and made an attempt to ram but the submarine was inside her turning circle.

34. At daylight the force was S.S.E. of Galita Island and shortly afterwards the first snoopers appeared.

35. At 0912 the first of a long series of air attacks commenced with a number of JU.88s. H.M.S. KENYA was near missed at 0942 and a small fire in "A" boiler room entailed a short reduction in speed.

36. From 1000 to 1300 attacks were almost incessant, and included dive bombers, high level bombers, torpedo bombers and dropping of mines or circling torpedoes by low-flying aircraft. Fortunately, however, Force X came through untouched and at 1800 joined Force Z in position 37° 29' N., 03° 25' E.

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