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B.R. 1736 (6)

RESTRICTED

NAVAL STAFF HISTORY
SECOND WORLD WAR

SELECTED OPERATIONS
(MEDITERRANEAN), 1940

(Battle Summaries Nos. 2, 8, 9 & 10)



1957

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B.R. 1736 (6)

NAVAL STAFF HISTORY

SECOND WORLD WAR

SELECTED OPERATIONS

(MEDITERRANEAN), 1940

BATTLE SUMMARIES

- No. 2: Action off Cape Spada, Crete
- No. 8: Operation M.A.5 and Action off
Calabria
- No. 9: Action off Cape Spartivento, Sardinia
- No. 10: Operation M.B.8 and F.A.A. Attack
on Taranto

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HISTORICAL SECTION

ADMIRALTY

Admiralty, S.W.1

5 March 1957

H.S. /17/55

B.R.1736 (6) Naval Staff History, Second World War, *Selected Operations (Mediterranean), 1940 1957*, having been approved by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, is hereby promulgated.

The following Battle Summaries are hereby superseded:—

No. 2 : Action off Cape Spada, Crete.

No. 8 : Operation M.A.5 and Action off Calabria.

No. 9 : Action off Cape Spartivento, Sardinia.

No. 10 : Operation M.B.8 and F.A.A. attack on Taranto.

B.R. 1736 (4), B.R. 1736 (6) and B.R. 1736 (6) (1) should be destroyed in accordance with instructions contained in B.R. 1.

By Command of Their Lordships,

J. G. Lang

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 (vi) Cpts. (D) 8 and 13, *Firedrake*, *Forester*, *Fury*, *Encounter*, *Jaguar*, *Kelvin*
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FOREWORD

THE FOUR Battle Summaries superseded by this volume were originally issued in 1942, and were contained in three separate books. In the present volume they have been largely re-written to include information from the opposing side and other sources not available at the time they were produced, and have been arranged each as a separate chapter. They have also been amended in matters of detail, where such have proved in error.

The most interesting additions which have been made are an account of the plan and movements of the Italian fleet prior to and during the indecisive action off Calabria (Chapter I), the state of Italian defence measures at Taranto at the time of the F.A.A. attack (Chapter III and App. H) and information derived from Italian sources on Sir James Somerville's action off Cape Spartivento, Sicily (Chapter IV).

It must be remembered that all these events took place in the early days of radar. Few ships were fitted with sets other than for the detection of high-flying aircraft. No ships as yet had fighter direction equipment.

Plans illustrating the events described have been completely re-drawn to include up to date information. As might be expected the composition and movements of the Italian forces in the actions off Calabria and Cape Spartivento differ somewhat from the contemporary estimates of the British. They will be found at the end of the volume, together with a reference chart of the Mediterranean Sea.

August, 1954

Abbreviations

A.A.	Anti-aircraft
A.B.V.	Armed boarding vessel
A/C	Aircraft
ac	Aircraft carrier
A.N.	Aegean—North (convoy)
A.S.	Aegean—South (convoy)
A/S	Anti-Submarine
bc	Battlecruiser
bs	Battleship
C.-in-C.	Commander-in-Chief
C.P.B.C.	Common pointed ballistic capped shell
C.S.	Cruiser Squadron
D.C.	Depth Charge
D.C.T.	Director Control Tower
D.F.	Destroyer Flotilla
dr.	Destroyer
F.A.A.	Fleet Air Arm
F.B.	Flying boat
F.O.	Flag officer
F.O.(H)	Flag officer Commanding Force "H"
G.R.T.	Gross registered tons
H.A.	High angle
H.E.	High explosive
H.L.B.	High level bombing
H.Q.	Headquarters
M.A.S.	Motor anti-submarine
ME.	Malta—East (convoy)
MF.	Malta—Fast (convoy)
MS.	Malta—Slow (convoy)
M/S	Minesweeper
M.T.	Mechanical transport
M.V.	Merchant vessel
MW.	Malta—West (convoy)
N.A.	Naval Attaché
R.A.(A)	Rear-Admiral, Aircraft Carriers
R.A.1	Rear-Admiral 1st Battle Squadron
R.A.F.	Royal Air Force
R/C	Reconnaissance
R.D/F	Radio direction finder (Radar)
S.A.P.	Semi armour piercing
S/M	Submarine
S.O.	Senior Officer
T.O.O.	Time of origin
T.S.R.	Torpedo Spotter reconnaissance
T/B	Torpedo Bomber
Tr.	Trawler
V.A.(D)	Vice-Admiral, Destroyer Flotillas
V.A.L.F.	Vice-Admiral, Light Forces
W/T	Wireless Telegraphy

CHAPTER I

(Battle Summary No. 8)

Operation M.A.5 and Action off Calabria, July 1940

1. STRATEGICAL SITUATION, JUNE–JULY 1940

WITH THE declaration of war by Italy on 11th June 1940 and the collapse of France on the 22nd, the strategic balance in the Mediterranean underwent a radical change, much in favour of the Axis Powers. Prompt decisions by H.M. Government restored the situation remarkably quickly. Stern measures to ensure that no important units of the French Fleet should fall intact into the hands of the enemy and the formation of a powerful force at Gibraltar had largely neutralised the effect of the French defection in the Western Mediterranean within a fortnight, while in the Eastern basin Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham had speedily induced the French Admiral Godfroy to demobilise his ships at Alexandria, and as early as 25th June had decided to resume the running of convoys to and from the Aegean and Egypt and also between Malta and Alexandria.¹

Having settled the distressing question of the French Fleet, the British Naval Forces in the Mediterranean could turn their undivided attention to the Italians, and put Mussolini's much vaunted pre-war claim to the control of the Mediterranean to the test.

Possessing numerically superior forces and well-situated bases they had the advantage of being able to concentrate quickly, but as the lines of communication to their African colonies intersected the important British route from Gibraltar to the Suez Canal, neither side could control their communications without anticipating constant attack. The initiative that the enemy would display in attempting to interfere with the British communications was an open question. He could employ his forces—air, surface or submarine—singly or in combination. The first and third could yield only limited results, but the second or a combination of all three might prove a very difficult problem to tackle.

Early in July Sir Andrew Cunningham drew up plans for an operation termed M.A.5. In this operation he proposed to employ practically the whole strength of his Fleet in making an extensive sweep into the Central Mediterranean almost as far as the Italian coast, while two convoys were passing from Malta to Alexandria. It so chanced that Operation M.A.5 synchronised

¹ See Naval Staff History, *Battle Summary No. 1*, and *Mediterranean, Vol. I*.

with the passage of an important Italian military convoy from Naples and Catania to Benghazi, covered by the bulk of the Italian Fleet. This led to the first surface action between the British and Italian Fleets, an encounter which took place off the Calabrian coast on 9th July 1940.

2. OPERATION M.A.5: OBJECT AND ORGANISATION (Fig. 1)

The primary object of Operation M.A.5 was to ensure the safe passage of two convoys from Malta to Alexandria. These consisted of a fast convoy (M.F.1) of three 13-knot ships¹ carrying evacuees, and a slow convoy (M.S.1) of four 9-knot ships² with stores. They were to sail from Malta at 1600,³ D3,⁴ and steer to pass through $34^{\circ} 40' N.$, $21^{\circ} 50' E.$ (Position "Q").

Governing the convoy movement was the determination to seize any opportunity of bringing the enemy to action, whenever or wherever he might be encountered; and it was also intended to attack ships in Augusta waters with aircraft from the *Eagle*, while the Fleet was in Central Mediterranean waters.

For the Operation, the Fleet was organised in three forces, viz.: FORCE "A", under Vice-Admiral (D) J. C. Tovey, consisting of five 6-inch cruisers of the 7th Cruiser Squadron and the destroyer *Stuart*; FORCE "B", the fast battleship *Warspite*,⁵ flying the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, and five destroyers; FORCE "C", under Rear-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell, the battleships *Royal Sovereign* and *Malaya*, the carrier *Eagle*, and 11 destroyers.

An escort force of four or five destroyers, known as FORCE "D", was to be detached to Malta after the Fleet reached a position east of Cape Passero (Sicily). This force, augmented by the *Jervis* (Lieutenant-Commander A. M. McKillop) and *Diamond* (Lieutenant-Commander P. A. Cartwright) which were already at Malta, would form the convoy escorts.

The three forces were routed to arrive independently at about 1600, D3 (9th July), at which time the slow convoy was to sail from Malta, in the following positions:—

Force "A" $36^{\circ} 30' N.$, $16^{\circ} 20' E.$ (60 miles 100° from Cape Passero),

Force "B" $36^{\circ} 00' N.$, $17^{\circ} 00' E.$ (100 miles 115° from Cape Passero),

Force "C" $35^{\circ} 50' N.$, $18^{\circ} 40' E.$ (180 miles 105° from Cape Passero).

From these positions they were to work to the eastward under their respective senior officers, keeping pace with the convoys to the northward of their route till D6, when Forces "B" and "C" were to return to Alexandria, followed by Force "A", which was to keep to the north-westward of Convoy M.S.1 till nightfall that day.⁶

Arrangements were made for flying boat patrols of 201 Group to operate in conjunction with the Fleet on each day from 8th to 13th July. These patrols were to operate as follows:—

¹ *El Nil*, *Rodi*, *Knight of Malta*.

² *Zeeland*, *Kirkland*, *Masirah*, *Norasti*.

³ Zone minus 2 Time is used throughout.

⁴ D1 being the date of commencement of the operation, i.e. when the covering force left Alexandria.

⁵ The *Warspite* had been modernised in 1937. Maximum range of her 15-inch guns was 32,200 yards, as against 23,400 for the *Malaya* and *Royal Sovereign*. The *Warspite* and *Malaya* could steam at 23 knots, the *Royal Sovereign* at only 20—a serious disadvantage compared with the 26-knot Italian battleships.

⁶ A relief force consisting of the battleship *Ramillies* and the 4th Cruiser Squadron and four destroyers was to leave Alexandria (as soon as the four destroyers which were to be drawn from Force "C" could be fuelled on arrival in the evening of D6) and cover the arrival of Convoy M.S.1.

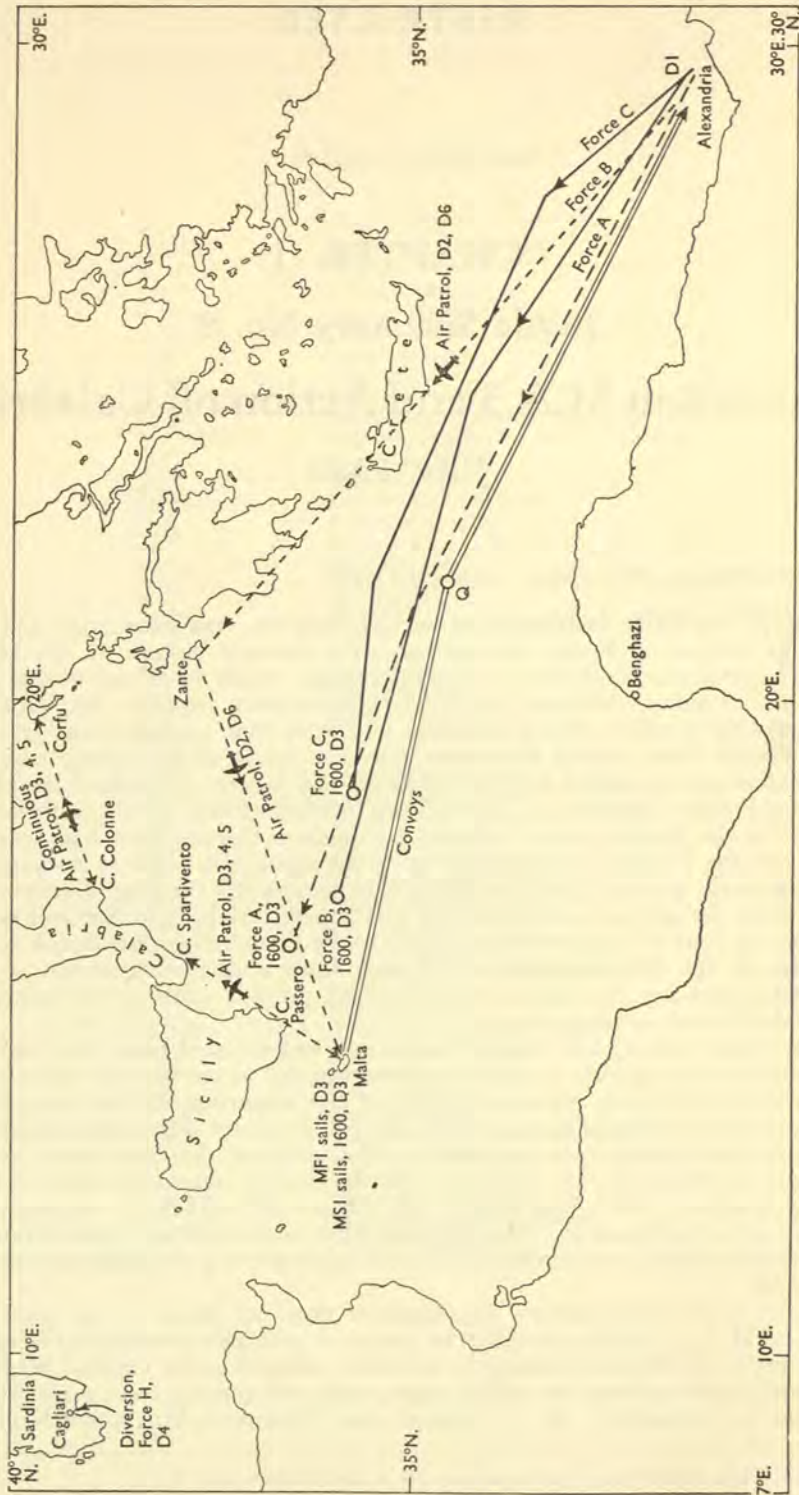


Fig. 1. OPERATION M.A.5 AS PLANNED

D2 and D6 (8th and 12th July): flying boats on passage Alexandria-Zante-Malta.

D3, 4, 5 (9th-11th July): continuous patrol on lines Malta-Cape Spartivento (Calabria) and Cape Colonne-Corfu.

D7 (12th July): to a depth 60 miles to westward of Convoy M.S.1.

During the operation a diversion by Force "H",¹ under Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville, which had arrived at Gibraltar on 6th July after operations off Oran, was staged in the Western Mediterranean. The diversion was to take the form of an air attack by the Fleet Air Arm of the *Ark Royal* on Cagliari (Sardinia), at dawn, 10th July (D4)—the day following the convoys' first night out from Malta.

3. ITALIAN PLAN OF OPERATIONS (Plan I)²

While Admiral Cunningham was making the arrangements just described the enemy were planning to run an important troop and military stores convoy from Naples to Benghazi at about the same time. Leaving Naples on 6th July, the convoy was to pass through the Strait of Messina in the forenoon of the 7th (M.A.5, D1) and follow the Sicilian coast till off Syracuse when it was to steer a diversionary course for Tobruk, altering direct for Benghazi after dark. At 0500, 8th (M.A.5, D2) when it was expected to be in 34° 54' N., 17° 58' E., the convoy was to split into a fast (18-knot) and a slow (14-knot) section, due to arrive at Benghazi 1600 and 1900 that evening respectively.

The convoy was to be escorted by two 6-inch cruisers,³ four fleet destroyers and six torpedo boats, while distant cover was to be provided to the eastward of the route by six 8-inch cruisers⁴ and 12 destroyers, and to the westward by four 6-inch cruisers⁵ and four destroyers. Two battleships, the *Cesare* flying the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral I. Campioni, and *Conti di Cavour*, with six 6-inch cruisers⁶ and 16 destroyers, were to cruise in support.

The surface forces were to remain in their covering positions till the afternoon of 8th July, when they were to return to their bases.

Special submarine dispositions between 6th and 11th July were ordered west of a line joining Cape Passero-Malta-Zuara (32° 50' N., 12° 32' E.) to cover the approaches from the Western Mediterranean, and in the Eastern basin east of a line joining Cape Matapan—Ras el Hilal (33° N., 22° 10' E.), as shown in Plan I.

¹ FORCE "H"

Hood. (Flag, F.O. Force "H")
(eight 15-inch)
Valiant (eight 15-inch)
Resolution (eight 15-inch)
Arethusa.
Enterprise.
Delhi.

Ark Royal (Flag, V.A.(A))
(30 T.S.R., 24 Fighters)

18 Destroyers, S.O., Capt.(D) 8 (*Faulknor*)

Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville,
K.C.B., D.S.O. Captain I. G. Glennie.
Captain H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E.
Captain O. Bevir.
Captain Q. D. Graham.
Captain J. C. Annesley, D.S.O.
Captain A. S. Russell.
Vice-Admiral L. V. Wells, C.B., D.S.O.
Captain C. S. Holland.
Captain A. F. de Salis.

² This plan shows the actual movements of the Italian forces, which closely adhered to the original plan until after they had left the convoys off the North African coast.

³ *Banda Nere*, *Colleoni* (2nd Division).

⁴ *Pola* (flag, Vice-Admiral R. Paladini); *Zara*, *Gorizia*, *Fiume* (1st Division); *Trento*, *Bolzano* (3rd Division).

⁵ *Eugenio di Savoia*, *Duca d'Aosta*, *Attendolo*, *Montecuccoli* (7th Division).

⁶ *Da Barbiano*, *Cadorna*, *da Giussano*, *Diaz* (4th Division); *Duca degli Abruzzi*, *Garibaldi* (8th Division).

4. INITIAL MOVES, OPERATION M.A.5, 7TH-8TH JULY (Plan I)

Operation M.A.5 started in the afternoon of 7th July, when Rear-Admiral Pridham-Wippell sailed from Alexandria with Force "C."¹ That same afternoon, some 900 miles to the north-westward, the Italian squadrons were putting to sea from Palermo, Augusta, Taranto and Messina.

After clearing the swept channel, the *Eagle* embarked No. 813 Squadron from Dekheila,² and course was then set for Kaso Strait. Forces "A"¹ and "B"¹ sailed that evening, and by midnight 7th/8th July all ships³ were clear of the harbour, and steering to pass through the following positions:—

Force "A"—35° 00' N., 21° 30' E.; Force "B"—34° 15' N., 24° 50' E.; Force "C"—33° 20' N., 27° 50' E.

Evidence was soon forthcoming that the enemy was keeping watch on the approaches to Alexandria, when at 2339, 7th, the *Hasty* sighted and attacked a submarine on the surface at 1,000 yards range in 32° 35' N., 28° 30' E. A full pattern of depth charges was dropped and it was considered that the

¹ FORCE "A" (7th Cruiser Squadron)

Orion (Flag of V.A.(D)) (eight 6-inch,
eight 4-inch H.A.).

Neptune (eight 6-inch, eight 4-inch
H.A.)

Sydney (eight 6-inch, eight 4-inch H.A.)

Liverpool (twelve 6-inch, eight 4-inch
H.A.)

Gloucester (twelve 6-inch, eight 4-inch
H.A.)

Stuart (five 4.7-inch, one 3-inch H.A.)

Vice-Admiral J. C. Tovey, C.B., D.S.O.
Captain G. R. B. Back.

Captain R. C. O'Connor.

Captain J. A. Collins, R.A.N.

Captain A. D. Read (joined from Port Said
a.m. 9th July).

Captain F. R. Garside, C.B.E.

Commander H. M. L. Waller, R.A.N.
(Capt. (D) 10th D.F.).

FORCE "B"

Warspite (Flag of C.-in-C.), (eight 15-
inch, eight 6-inch, eight 4-inch H.A.)

Nubian (eight 4.7 inch)

Mohawk (eight 4.7 inch)

Hero (four 4.7 inch)

Hereward (four 4.7-inch)

Decoy (four 4.7-inch, one 3-inch H.A.)

Admiral Sir A. B. Cunningham, K.C.B.,
D.S.O. Captain D. B. Fisher, O.B.E.

Captain P. J. Mack (Capt. (D) 14th D.F.).

Commander J. W. M. Eaton.

Commander H. W. Biggs, D.S.O.

Lieut.-Commander C. W. Greening.

Commander E. G. McGregor.

FORCE "C"

Royal Sovereign (Flag R.A.1) (eight 15-
inch, 12 6-inch, eight 4-inch H.A.)

Malaya (eight 15-inch, twelve 6-inch,
eight 4-inch H.A.)

Eagle (Aircraft Carrier) (nine 6-inch,
four 4-inch H.A.), (17 T.S.R.: 3
Fighters)

Hyperion (four 4.7-inch)

Rear-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell, C.B.,
C.V.O. Captain H. B. Jacomb.

Captain A. F. E. Palliser, D.S.C.

Captain A. R. M. Bridge.

Commander H. St. L. Nicolson (Capt. (D)
2nd D.F.).

Commander J. P. Wright.

Lieut.-Commander L. R. K. Tyrwhitt.

Lieut.-Commander P. L. Saumarez, D.S.C.

Lieut.-Commander C. A. de W. Kitcat.

Commander M. S. Thomas.

Lieut.-Commander St. J. R. J. Tyrwhitt.

Commander W. E. Wilson.

Commander J. A. W. Tothill.

Lieut.-Commander J. A. Walsh, R.A.N.

Commander J. C. Morrow, R.A.N.

² For this occasion, in addition to her normal complement of two T.S.R. Squadrons, the *Eagle* embarked three spare F.A.A. Gladiators (fighters) from Alexandria, which proved their value in the ensuing operations, by shooting down a shadower and two or three bombers. They were flown by Commander (Flying) Keighly-Peach, an old fighter pilot and another officer.

³ Except the *Liverpool*, which was at Port Said, having just arrived there after transporting troops to Aden. She sailed to rendezvous direct with Vice-Admiral Tovey.

submarine was probably sunk. When proceeding to rejoin Force "C", the *Hasty*, at 0100, 8th, attacked a confirmed contact and possibly damaged a second submarine.¹

A few hours later the *Imperial* burst a feed tank, and was ordered to return to Alexandria. Enemy submarines were reported by the *Eagle's* aircraft on A/S patrol at 0658 and 0908; the latter was attacked with bombs.

During the night the Commander-in-Chief, with Force "B", set a mean line of advance 305°, 20 knots. The original plan was modified, and a rendezvous appointed for all forces at 1400, 10th July, in 36° 30' N., 17° 40' E.

Meanwhile, unknown to the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Campioni's forces were at sea, steering southerly courses in pursuance of their plan for covering their convoy to Benghazi.

The first intelligence of the enemy Fleet being at sea was received in the *Warspite* at 0807, 8th, from the submarine *Phoenix* (Lieutenant-Commander G. H. Nowell), who reported that at 0515 she had made an unsuccessful attack at extreme range on two battleships and four destroyers steering 180° in 35° 36' N., 18° 28' E. (about 185 miles to the eastward of Malta). This enemy activity might well be due to movements covering an important convoy, and the Commander-in-Chief ordered the Vice-Admiral, Malta², to arrange for a flying boat to search for and shadow the enemy force. Pending further information, the Fleet maintained its course and speed.

During the day of 8th July, all three forces experienced heavy bombing attacks by formations of aircraft coming apparently from the Dodecanese bases. Between 1023 and 1837, five attacks were made on Force "A", in the last of which the *Gloucester*, seemingly singled out as a special target, was hit by a bomb on the compass platform. This unhappily caused the following casualties:—officers, 7 killed (including Captain F. R. Garside), 3 wounded; ratings, 11 killed, 6 wounded. The damage to the *Gloucester's* bridge and D.C.T. obliged her to steer from aft and use her after gun control.

Force "B" was attacked seven times between 1205 and 1812, some 120 bombs being dropped without result. Six attacks were made on Force "C" between 0951 and 1749. No hits were made, though about 80 bombs were dropped, the *Eagle* being the chief target. In these attacks, which were all delivered from levels between 10,000 and 14,000 ft., there was a number of near misses.

Further information of the Italian fleet was received at 1557, 8th—a signal from Flying Boat L.5803, reporting two battleships, six cruisers and seven destroyers in 33° 08' N., 19° 45' E.³ (60 miles north of Benghazi) steering 340° at 1500. Later, the flying boat reported that the enemy had altered course to starboard, and gave their course at 1630 as 070° 20 knots: it was obliged to return to Malta at 1715 and no relief was then available to continue shadowing the enemy fleet.

Suspecting that the "battleships" reported by the flying boat were probably 8-inch cruisers, the Commander-in-Chief was of opinion that the enemy had some special reason for wishing to keep the British Fleet away from the Central Mediterranean. The intensive bombing already experienced strengthened

¹ It is now known that neither of these submarines was sunk.

² Vice-Admiral Sir Wilbraham T. R. Ford, K.B.E., C.B.

³ There are discrepancies in the reports of this position which cannot be reconciled. (a) In the C.-in-C.'s report on the operation it is stated to be 33° 35' N., 19° 40' E. at 1510. (b) In the C.-in-C.'s War Diary, 33° 18' N., 19° 45' E. at 1510. (c) The actual signal made by F/B L5803 (quoted in an enclosure to the C.-in-C.'s report) puts it as 10 miles 180° from 33° 18' N., 19° 45' E., i.e. 33° 08' N., 19° 45' E. at 1500. This latter position is within 20 miles of the actual position of the Italian 8-inch cruisers (to which it undoubtedly refers) at the time.

his impression that the Italians might be covering the movement of an important convoy—probably one to Benghazi. Acting on this conclusion, he decided to abandon temporarily the operation in progress and to proceed at best possible speed in the direction of Taranto, in order to get between the enemy and that base. He accordingly took the following steps. Forces "A", "B" and "C" were ordered to concentrate to the southward of Zante (36° 55' N., 20° 30' E.) at 0600, 9th July.¹ Two flying boat searches were ordered to commence at dawn, one between 070° and 130° from Malta, the other westward of a line 180° from Cape Matapan between 35° N. and the African coast. At the same time, the *Eagle* was to fly off a search to a depth of 60 miles between 180° and 300°. The submarines *Rorqual* and *Phoenix* were ordered to positions on a line 160° from Taranto—the *Rorqual* as far north as possible, the *Phoenix* south of 37° 30' N.

During the night 8th/9th July the Commander-in-Chief maintained a mean line of advance of 310°, 20 knots, Forces "A" and "C" adjusting courses and speeds as necessary to make the rendezvous.

5. MOVEMENTS OF ITALIAN FLEET, 8TH-9TH JULY (Plan 1)

Meanwhile, the Italians had carried out their convoy movements almost exactly as planned. At 0150, 8th July, Admiral Campioni received a signal from the Italian Admiralty reporting that British forces from Alexandria were estimated to be in positions 34° 10' N., 23° 00' E. and 34° 5' N., 24° 00' E. at 2000, 7th July.²

Steps were taken to concentrate the covering forces, and just before 0500 the convoy's course was altered to 180° till the situation should be clarified. Air search at dawn to the eastward and south-eastward of the *Cesare* to a depth of 100 miles having proved negative, the convoy resumed its course for Benghazi during the forenoon and arrived there without incident that evening.

Between 1430 and 1520, 8th the covering forces turned to the north-north-westward to return to Italy, the battleships then being about 75 miles to the north-east of Benghazi and the 8-inch cruisers some 30 miles north-west of the battleships. It was shortly after the 8-inch cruisers had made this turn that they were sighted and reported by F.B. L.5803.³ Soon after this, on the strength of an air report of three enemy battleships and eight destroyers to the south of Crete, Admiral Campioni decided to steer to intercept them, and altered to a N.N.E. ly course, the cruiser forces altering to close him; but at 1820 the Italian Admiralty intervened and cancelled this movement, pending further orders. Course 330° was therefore resumed.

The Italian Admiralty had intercepted and decyphered enemy signals, which indicated that early next afternoon (9th) the British Fleet would be some 80 miles east of Sicily. This information seemed to offer a golden opportunity of engaging the main British naval force in their own waters with shore-based aircraft, submarines and surface forces. They accordingly directed Admiral Campioni to steer for this area (later amended to one further north, off Calabria), at the same time ordering five submarines to take up positions between 35° 50' N. and 37° N. and 17° and 17° 40' E.

The plan was a good one, but it did not quite take into account Admiral Cunningham's offensive spirit, which led him to change his aim as soon as he saw a chance of getting between the enemy fleet and its base, and to thrust

¹ Sunrise, 0520; Beginning of nautical twilight (sun 6° below horizon), 0450, Zone minus 2.

² It is not known on what information these positions were based. Actually, no British forces from Alexandria were so far west till nearly 24 hours later.

³ See Section 4.

boldly towards Taranto, thereby, as things turned out, leaving the submarine trap some 60 miles to the southward of him.

These intentions and the information on which they were based were communicated to Admiral Campioni during the night, who continued to steer 330°. At midnight 8th/9th July the *Cesare* was approximately 200 miles west of the *Warspite*, both the opposing forces making to the north-westward on slightly converging courses. Soon after this Admiral Paladini, as the result of a signal from the Italian Admiralty giving warning of the presence of two British submarines, altered the course of his 8-inch cruisers to 000°, 20 knots, without informing the Commander-in-Chief, thereby getting to the eastward of the battleships next morning. The four light cruisers of the 7th Division, which after covering the convoy to the westward were proceeding to Palermo, continued steering towards the Strait of Messina till soon after 0600, 9th, when they were ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief to the east of Cape Spartivento.

6. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: THE APPROACH (*Plans 1, 2*)

To return to the British Mediterranean Fleet.

The concentration of the fleet was effected south of Zante at 0600, 9th July, in 36° 55' N., 20° 30' E., and the fleet took up the following formation: Force "A" in the van eight miles ahead of Force "B", with Force "C" eight miles astern of the *Warspite*, the mean line of advance being 260° at 15 knots.

The air searches ordered the evening before had commenced at dawn, the *Eagle* having flown off her aircraft at 0440, and reports of the enemy began to come in. The first came from Flying Boat L.5807 at 0732—two battleships, four cruisers and ten destroyers steering 350°, 15 knots in 37° 14' N., 16° 51' E. Further air reports quickly followed of a group of six cruisers and eight destroyers bearing 080°, 20 miles from the main fleet at 0739, and then at 0805 that the main fleet had altered course to 360°. According to this information the main enemy fleet now bore about 280°, 145 miles from the *Warspite*. The Commander-in-Chief altered course to a mean line of advance of 305° and an hour later to 320° at 18 knots in the endeavour to work to the northward of the enemy and so reach a position between him and Taranto.

At 0858, 9th, the *Eagle* flew off three aircraft to search the sector between 260° and 300° to a maximum depth. Several reports from these reconnaissance aircraft and from Flying Boats 5807 and 9020 were received between 1026 and 1135. These, though they differed considerably, seemed to afford fairly reliable information of the enemy's movements. Thus, at 1105, one of the *Eagle's* aircraft reported two battleships and a cruiser with four other cruisers near by in 38° 07' N., 16° 57' E., while at 1115, Flying Boat L.5807 reported the enemy battlefleet in 38° 06' N., 17° 48' E., steering North. It seemed probable that the ships in the latter report were, if correctly identified, actually considerably further to the westward.

These reports indicated that the enemy fleet consisted of at least two battleships, 12 cruisers and 20 destroyers, dispersed in groups over a wide area. It looked, too, as if the group of cruisers and destroyers, reported at 0739, had made a wide sweep to the north-eastward and had been joined by another group of cruisers and destroyers, possibly those reported as being in company with the battlefleet.

At 1145, 9th, acting on the assumption based on the air reports that the enemy fleet was then steaming north in a position 295° 90 miles from the *Warspite*, a striking force of nine Swordfish aircraft was flown off from the *Eagle* to attack with torpedoes. But owing to a lack of reconnaissance aircraft and to un-

avoidable delay in flying off relief shadowers, air touch had been lost ten minutes earlier (1135), and it so happened that just before Admiral Campioni, deeming that he was getting too far to the northward, had altered the course of the battlefleet to 165° in order to concentrate his fleet in about 37° 40' N., 17° 25' E.

Air touch was regained at 1215, when Flying Boat L.5803 reported six cruisers and ten destroyers in 37° 56' N., 17° 48' E. steering 220° and five minutes later a group of three 8-inch cruisers in 37° 55' N., 17° 55' E. steering 225°; but owing to the battlefleet's turn to the southward, the striking force failed to find it, though at 1252 it sighted a large number of enemy ships and working round to the westward of this group, at 1330 attacked the rear ship. The ship was thought at the time to be a battleship, but actually it was one of Admiral Paladini's 8-inch cruisers which were then steering for the rendezvous; no hits were made in this attack, which had to face heavy A.A. fire, though the aircraft suffered little damage.

Meanwhile the *Warspite* had maintained her course 320°, and at noon estimated her position as 37° 30' N., 18° 40' E. An air report at 1330 that there were no enemy ships between 334° and 291° to a depth of 60 miles from 38° N., 18° E. made it clear that the enemy battlefleet had turned to the southward, and that the cruiser groups which were thought to have been sweeping to the north-eastward had altered to the south-westward. The indications were that the enemy fleet was concentrating south-east of Calabria in the approximate position 37° 45' N., 17° 20' E.

Further air reports helped to establish its position and movements: thus, at 1340, Flying Boat 9020 reported three battleships and a large number of cruisers and destroyers in 37° 58' N., 17° 55' E., steering 220°, and at 1414 gave their course and speed as 020°, 18 knots.

Apparently the enemy had by that time completed his concentration, and turning to the northward was maintaining a central position with three directions open for retreat. Whether he intended to stand and fight in an area of his own choosing was still a matter of conjecture. The British Fleet on its north-west course was rapidly closing and at 1400, having achieved his immediate object of cutting him off from Taranto, the Commander-in-Chief altered course to 270° to increase the rate of closing. Though the cruisers were well ahead, the *Royal Sovereign's* speed limited the rate of approach, and at 1430, in 38° 02' N., 18° 25' E., the *Warspite* increased speed to 22 knots, acting as a battle-cruiser to support the 7th C.S., which in comparison with the enemy cruiser force was very weak, being fewer in numbers and lacking 8-inch gun ships.

At 1434, the *Eagle's* striking force had landed on and an air reconnaissance report received at 1435 gave the enemy's course and speed as 360°, 15 knots. This was amplified four minutes later when the enemy's bearing and distance from the *Warspite* was signalled as 260°, 30 miles. Force "A", less the *Stuart* which had just been ordered to join the *Royal Sovereign's* screen, was then eight miles ahead of the *Warspite* while Force "C" was about ten miles astern of her.

At this stage when the period of approach may be considered to end, there was a general impression that the enemy proposed to vindicate Mussolini's claim of Mare Nostrum concerning the Mediterranean. The moment for which the Italian Fleet had been built up was at hand, if the Italian Commander-in-Chief was prepared to accept the gage of battle.

This impression was not far wrong. The first enemy report received by Admiral Campioni that day had come from an aircraft at 1330. The signal, which arrived at rather an awkward moment, just as he was concentrating his fleet—a manoeuvre complicated by the F.A.A. attack on the heavy cruisers—made it clear that the British had been steering for an objective further north than had been conjectured the night before. He determined, therefore, to

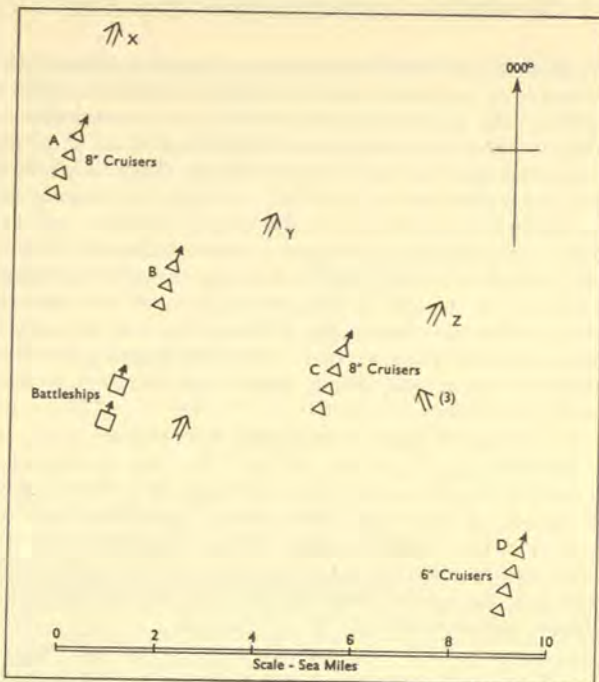


Fig. 2. ITALIAN DISPOSITION, 1500, AS IT APPEARED TO THE BRITISH

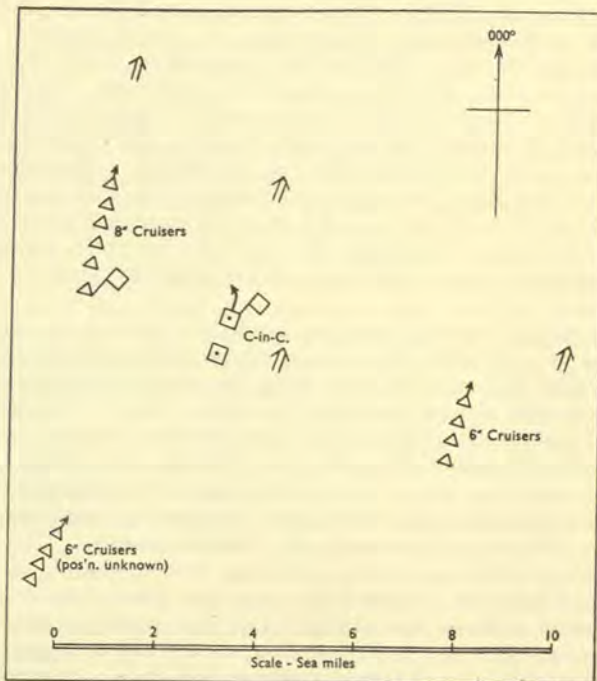


Fig. 3. ITALIAN DISPOSITION, 1500, FROM ITALIAN RECORDS
(Positions of destroyers are unknown)

interpose his fleet between the Italian coast and the enemy, and if possible to get between him and Taranto, accepting battle and relying on his superiority of speed to enable him to break off the action if the superior weight of gunfire of the British capital ships should prove too much for him.

He then had in company the two battleships, six 8-inch cruisers, eight 6-inch cruisers and 24 destroyers.¹ The four light cruisers of the 7th Division were still some distance to the south-westward, but in view of the urgency to keep open the route to Taranto and the marked numerical superiority in cruisers and destroyers he already possessed, he decided to steer to the northward without waiting for them.

7. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: SURFACE CONTACT (Plan 2)

At 1447, 9th July, the *Orion* sighted white smoke bearing 230° and two minutes later black smoke, bearing 245° , being laid by a destroyer. Apparently the enemy was completing his concentration behind this cover of smoke. At 1452 the *Neptune* reported two enemy ships in sight bearing 236° . These reports were amplified by further details at 1455 and 1500 from the *Orion*.

On first sighting the enemy the damaged *Gloucester* was ordered to join the *Eagle*, which—screened by the *Voyager* and *Vampire*—was taking station ten miles to the eastward of the *Warspite*, while the air striking force was re-arming and re-fuelling in readiness to renew its attack. The remaining four cruisers, in order from north to south *Neptune*, *Liverpool*, *Orion*, *Sydney* (henceforth referred to as the 7th Cruiser Squadron) were formed on a line of bearing 320° , steering 270° at 22 knots, distant ten miles 260° from the *Warspite*.

At 1500 the enemy fleet appeared to be disposed in four columns or groups spread over a wide area, with intervals of about five miles between the columns, which were on a line of bearing 130° – 310° . The direction of their advance was reported as 020° , speed 19 knots. Only a few of their ships were visible simultaneously to the British ships and then only for short periods (see Fig. 2). The difficulty of gauging their formation and what ships were present can be seen by a comparison with Fig. 3, which shews it from Italian records.

Taking the enemy columns in order, as they appeared to the British: the port wing column (marked A in Fig. 2) consisted of five or six cruisers, including some of the *Bolzano* class, the next column (B) was thought to consist of two or three cruisers, ahead of two *Cavour* class battleships. In the third column (C) four cruisers, probably 8-inch, and in the starboard wing column (D) four 6-inch cruisers. In the van were a number of destroyers, probably three flotillas (X, Y and Z) while some others formed the battleship A/S screen.

Actually, this was an overestimate of the number of cruisers present in this opening stage, according to the Italian records. Admiral Campioni had been proceeding on a mean course 010° , the six 8-inch cruisers under Admiral Paladini in the *Pola* (in the rear), disposed three miles on his port beam, and four 6-inch cruisers (two from the 8th Division and two from the 4th) five miles on his starboard beam. At 1500 the 8-inch cruisers were going ahead to take station in the van, a movement facilitated by a turn to port by the battleships. The four cruisers of the 7th Division (which it will be remembered had been on their way home) were some distance off, coming up from the south-westward.

It was a fine day, with the wind north, force 4, sea slight, $1/10$ th cloud and visibility ranging from 13 to 18 miles.

¹ The 8th, 15th and 16th Destroyer Flotillas (nine destroyers) had been sent into harbour to re-fuel at 0600, 9th, and did not rejoin the fleet till 1930 that evening. Three other destroyers and two light cruisers (the *Cadorna* and *Diaz*) had been detached with engine trouble or defects in the course of the day.

Vice-Admiral Tovey was getting a long way ahead of the *Warspite*, and at 1508, in order to avoid becoming heavily engaged before she was in a position to support, he altered course together to 000°.¹ As he turned, the *Neptune* reported two battleships bearing 250°, 15 miles off. The 7th Cruiser Squadron was still closing the enemy and soon groups of enemy cruisers and destroyers were seen showing up between the bearings of 235° and 270° at distances of 12 to 18 miles. Course was again altered—to 045°—and at 1514 the squadron was formed on a line of bearing 350°.

The surface action which ensued falls into three phases:—

- (1) 1514 to 1536. Cruiser action, in which the *Warspite* intervened.
- (2) 1548 to 1615. Battleships and cruisers in action, and F.A.A. attack by the *Eagle's* aircraft.
- (3) 1615 to 1649. The Italian Fleet in full retreat; British cruisers and destroyers engaging enemy destroyers as opportunity offered.

From 1640 to 1925 the enemy shore-based aircraft carried out heavy but ineffective attacks on both fleets with complete impartiality.

8. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: PHASE 1 (Plan 3)

At 1514 the enemy cruisers (C)² bearing 250° opened fire at a range 23,600 yards on the 7th Cruiser Squadron. Vice-Admiral Tovey increased speed to 25 knots at 1515 and a minute later altered course to 025° to open the "A" arcs. With the advantage of the sun behind him, the enemy's fire was good for range, but it fell off later. After a couple more alterations of course together to 355° and 030°, the 7th Cruiser Squadron was ordered at 1522 to engage an equal number of enemy ships.

The *Neptune* and *Liverpool* immediately opened fire, range 22,100 yards, followed by the *Sydney* at 1523 engaging the fourth cruiser from the right. The speed of the Squadron was increased to 28 knots and the *Orion*, at 1526, fired at a destroyer (Z) for three minutes, range 23,200 yards. When this destroyer altered course away, the *Orion* shifted target to the right-hand cruiser, then bearing 249°, range 23,700 yards. By this time the *Warspite* was intervening. It appeared urgently necessary to support the outnumbered cruisers, and at 1525 the Commander-in-Chief detached his destroyer screen, which formed single line ahead on the *Nubian*, and altered course to starboard to pass on the *Warspite's* disengaged side. A minute later (1526) the flagship opened fire on what was believed to be an 8-inch cruiser (C)³ bearing 265°, range 26,400 yards. Blast from the first salvo damaged the *Warspite's* aircraft, which was subsequently jettisoned. Ten salvos were fired, and it was thought a hit was scored by the last.⁴ The enemy cruisers turned away under smoke; this took them out of range of the 7th Cruiser Squadron which checked fire at 1531.

During this opening stage of the action no hits had been observed on the enemy ships, whose fire had been equally ineffective. The British cruisers were straddled several times, but the only damage done was by splinters from

¹ This manoeuvre anticipated the wishes of the Commander-in-Chief who at 1506 (time of receipt 1520) signalled:—"Do not get too far ahead of me. I am dropping back on battlefleet. Air striking force will not be ready till 1530." Throughout the action, Admiral Tovey manoeuvred his squadron by blue pendant only.

² The 6-inch cruisers *Garibaldi* and *Abruzzi*. According to Italian records their time of opening fire was 1518.

³ Actually a 6-inch cruiser, the *Abruzzi* or *Garibaldi* (8th Division).

⁴ According to the Italians, no hit was scored.

a near miss to the *Neptune's* aircraft, which was jettisoned shortly afterwards, as it was leaking petrol.

Sir Andrew Cunningham was finding the slow speed of his battlefleet a sore trial. Having ordered the *Malaya* to press on at utmost speed, he turned in the *Warspite* through 360° and made an "S" bend to enable her to catch up. The 7th Cruiser Squadron, whose orders were not to get too far ahead of the Commander-in-Chief, made a complete turn to conform with this movement. While under helm the *Warspite* fired four salvos between 1533 and 1536 at each of two 6-inch cruisers, forcing them to turn away.¹ It was thought that these ships were attempting to work round towards the *Eagle*, as they were on an easterly course when sighted.

Apart from this burst of fire, there was a lull in the action till 1548. The Commander-in-Chief could do nothing but wait for his battleships to come up. There is a smack of old world courtesy—almost of apology—in the signal he flashed to Vice-Admiral Tovey at this time:—"I am sorry for this delay, but we must call upon reinforcements."

The situation of the British Fleet was then as follows: the 7th Cruiser Squadron, steering 310°, 28 knots, to close the enemy was 3½ miles to the northward of the *Warspite*, which was turning to 345°. The *Malaya* and *Royal Sovereign*—particularly the former—had gained considerably. The destroyers, all of which had been released from screening duties, were concentrating in their flotillas on the disengaged bow of the battlefleet. A squadron of six enemy cruisers (presumably column A) was in sight ahead of their battlefleet.

9. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: PHASE 2 (Plan 4)

Just at this moment (1548) the second phase or battleship action began, when the enemy battleships opened fire on the *Warspite* at extreme range. Reserving her fire till 1553, the *Warspite* then fired at the right-hand enemy battleship (*Cesare*), bearing 287°, range 26,000 yards. Just previously, the *Eagle's* striking force of nine Swordfish of No. 824 Squadron, which had flown off at 1545, passed over her on their way to the attack.

The enemy's shooting was moderately good, most of his salvos falling within 1,000 yards, some straddling, but nearly all having a wide spread. One closely bunched salvo fell about 400 yards off the *Warspite's* port bow. The destroyers, then passing to the eastward of her, under orders to join Admiral Tovey, were narrowly missed by salvos of heavy shells falling one to two miles over the Fleet flagship.

At 1600 a salvo from the *Warspite* straddled the *Cesare* at a range of 26,200 yards and a hit was observed at the base of her foremost funnel. The effect was immediate; the enemy ships altered course away and began to make smoke. The shell had exploded on the upper deck casing, starting several fires and killing or wounding 98 men. Four boilers were put out of action and her speed dropped to 18 knots, causing the ship to drop back on the *Cavour*. This meant that Admiral Campioni had lost the margin of speed on which he was relying to counter-balance the superiority of the British gunfire, and he decided to break off the action without more ado. Accordingly he altered course to west and later to 230°, and ordered those destroyers suitably

¹ The Italian 4th Division, *Barbiano* and *Giussano*. Neither was hit. The two ships altered right round to port and after steering to the southward for a few minutes passed astern of their battleships on a north-westerly course and took no further part in the action. The other two ships of the division, the *Cadorna* and *Diaz*, had been detached a couple of hours earlier to Messina, suffering from engine trouble.

placed to lay smoke and attack the enemy fleet, though he recognised that in broad daylight against practically untouched ships they were unlikely to achieve material success. All he hoped was that they might delay the enemy from closing during the critical stage of disengaging.

The *Warspite* at 1602 tried to close the range by altering course to 310°. The *Malaya*, by then in station bearing 180° from her, fired four salvoes at extreme range, but all fell short. Three more salvoes, fired by her at 1608, had an equally disappointing result. The *Royal Sovereign*, unable to close the *Warspite* nearer than three miles, took no part in the action. At 1604 the enemy battleships became obscured by smoke, and the *Warspite* ceased fire, having got off 17 salvoes.

Just as this engagement between the battleships was ending, the *Eagle's* striking force attacked Admiral Paladini's 8-inch cruisers. After passing over the *Warspite*, the Swordfish had a bird's-eye view of both fleets opening fire and noticed several salvoes straddling the *Warspite*. When two-thirds of the way towards the enemy they came under A.A. fire at 6,000 feet. The enemy fleet, partially obscured by smoke, seemed to be in some confusion with 15-inch shell straddling their ships. Observing two large ships¹ at the head of a line of cruisers, the squadron leader, Lieutenant-Commander A. J. Debenham, decided to attack the leading ship, which at the moment was turning in a circle. After the attack by sub-flights had commenced this ship became more distinct; though it then seemed probable she was a *Bolzano* class cruiser and not a battleship, he decided not to call off the attack. Anti-aircraft fire became general during the final approach, which was made at 1605 in three sub-flights from ahead. All the aircraft dropped their torpedoes successfully on the enemy ship's starboard side between her bow and beam bearings. Observers in the *Neptune* testified to the determined manner in which the attack was made. On account of smoke from the ships' guns the aircraft crews were unable to establish definite claims to results, but five members reported individually having seen columns of water, smoke, or an explosion. On the strength of this evidence it was assumed that at least one torpedo got home, but it is now known that this was not the case.²

Meanwhile, the cruisers had renewed their action. The 7th Cruiser Squadron, steering 310°, endeavoured to close the enemy, who at 1556 reopened an accurate fire. The *Orion* replied at 1559, her target being a *Bolzano* class cruiser (A) bearing 287°, range 23,000 yards. At 1600, the *Neptune* and *Sydney* opened fire respectively at the second and fourth enemy cruisers from the right, and the *Liverpool* followed suit two minutes later. The course of the Squadron was altered to 010° and then 070°, but as the enemy was seen to be turning away at 1606, course 010° was resumed.

About this time, too, the destroyer flotillas were coming into action. They had been ordered at 1545 to join the 7th Cruiser Squadron, and after their unpleasant experience among the "overs" while passing the *Warspite*, were reformed at 1555 by Captain P. J. Mack, the Senior Captain (D), on course 350° in the following order:—

14th D.F. *Nubian, Mohawk, Juno, Janus.*

2nd D.F. *Hyperion, Hero, Hereward, Hostile, Hasty, Ilex* (in single line ahead 25 knots on bearing 140° from *Nubian*).

10th D.F. *Stuart, Dainty, Defender, Decoy* (in single line ahead 27 knots on bearing 220° from *Nubian*).

From 1602 and 1605 the two leading flotillas (14th and 10th) came under

¹ 3rd Division, *Trento, Bolzano.*

² "The 3rd Division was attacked by torpedo aircraft, three of which were shot down; the torpedoes were avoided by manoeuvring". *Italian Official History.*

heavy fire from the enemy cruisers but were not hit. The enemy destroyers were observed at this time by the *Warspite* moving across to starboard from the enemy's van, and at 1607 two destroyer salvoes could be seen landing close to the *Stuart*.

At 1609 the *Warspite* fired six salvoes at a cruiser bearing 313°, range 24,600 yards, which had drawn ahead of the enemy battleships. A minute later the tracks of three or more torpedoes were seen passing through the 14th Flotilla.

At 1611, the *Orion* shifted target to the right-hand cruiser bearing 308° range 20,300 yards,¹ which was then the only ship within range. The *Sydney* too fired a few salvoes at this ship, her previous target having become very indistinct. The *Neptune* straddled her target which she claimed to have hit, and the *Liverpool* straddled with her fifth salvo, after which the enemy ships altered course away, throwing her salvoes out for line. During this period of the action, a hot fire from the enemy destroyers, which were moving up to gain a position for attack, was a constant source of annoyance to the British cruisers. Their guns outranged the cruisers' 4-inch armament, but as soon as the enemy cruisers had disappeared in the smoke, the cruisers turned their 6-inch guns on to these hornets, which were quickly silenced and driven off. This ended the second phase of the action.

10. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: PHASE 3

At the beginning of the third phase of the action (about 1615) the general position was thus roughly as follows:—

The Italian Fleet was withdrawing to the westward, the damaged *Cesare* and *Cavour* sorting themselves out behind a smoke screen on a westerly course and the cruisers gradually conforming on north-westerly courses.² Their destroyers were either laying smoke, or proceeding to positions suitable for attack on the British; one flotilla was already firing on Admiral Tovey's cruisers.

Turning to the British, the battleships on a north-westerly course were endeavouring to close the enemy battlefleet, with the destroyer flotillas—bearing about 030° from the *Warspite*—steering to join Admiral Tovey, then some nine miles north of the *Warspite*; the 7th Cruiser Squadron had turned back to 010° to conform with the enemy's turn away, and was engaging the 8-inch cruisers.

At 1614 the signal for our destroyers to counter-attack the enemy destroyers was made. The flotillas were then about four miles N.N.E. of the *Warspite*; speed was increased to 29 knots and course altered to 270° to close the enemy, each flotilla manoeuvring as necessary to clear the others and keep their lines of fire open. Speed was increased to 30 knots at 1617 and at the same time the 7th Cruiser Squadron altered course to 340° in support³ but four minutes later altered away to 040° to avoid fouling our destroyers.

The 10th Destroyer Flotilla opened fire at 1619 on an enemy destroyer ahead, range 12,600 yards, and the *Stuart's* first salvo appeared to hit.⁴ The

¹ It is difficult to reconcile this relative position with the Italian movements as shown on their plan.

² If the impressions of the *Eagle's* striking force are correct, the fleet was in considerably greater disorder than the parade ground precision of their movements, shewn in the plan subsequently produced by them, would imply (see Plan 4).

³ About this time the *Orion* thought she scored a hit on the bridge of a destroyer of the *Maestrale* class, bearing 303°, range 17,100 yards; but the Italians state that no such hit was obtained.

⁴ This is not confirmed by Italian sources.

2nd D.F. opened fire at 1626 on a destroyer bearing 290°, range 14,000 yards, and the 14th D.F. at 1629 on one of two destroyers bearing 278°, range 12,400 yards.

Apparently at this time a number of enemy destroyers, after working across to starboard of their main fleet, were attempting in a half-hearted manner to make a torpedo attack. After firing their torpedoes at long range, they turned away to the westward making smoke, the second flotilla retiring through the smoke made by the leading flotilla. On account of these cautious tactics, our flotillas were only able spasmodically to engage targets when they presented themselves within range, unobscured by smoke. No hits on either side were seen by the *Warspite's* aircraft on observation duty.

To return to the 7th Cruiser Squadron, after turning to the north-eastward to clear the flotillas, the enemy quickly disappeared and fire was checked at 1622; at the same time a submarine was reported, which, however, proved to be the wreckage of an aircraft. In order to place the cruisers in a better position to support the destroyers Admiral Tovey then altered course round through south to 280°. The *Orion* then opened fire again on her former target, and the *Neptune* managed to get off a couple of salvos at a cruiser, which showed up momentarily out of the smoke. The *Sydney's* target, a smoke-laying destroyer, was engaged till she became obscured; and the *Liverpool* at 1625 fired four salvos at a cruiser, range 19,000 yards, before she also disappeared into the smoke screen. At 1628, course was altered to 180°; the *Orion*, *Neptune* and *Sydney* fired occasional salvos whenever they caught fleeting glimpses of enemy destroyers, and four minutes later Admiral Tovey hauled round to 210° in pursuit of the enemy. At 1634, with all their targets rapidly disappearing in the smoke, the 7th Cruiser Squadron ceased fire. This marked the end of the cruiser action, apart from a few salvos fired by a ship invisible to our cruisers at 1641. The principal feature of its desultory character was the unanimous determination of the enemy cruisers to avoid close action. This they achieved with conspicuous success.

The Commander-in-Chief, meanwhile, in the *Warspite*, with the *Malaya* in company and the *Royal Sovereign* about three miles astern, had been steering a mean course 313° at 20 knots, and by 1630 was nearing the enemy's smoke screen. Several enemy signals had been intercepted, saying that he was "constrained to retire" at 20 knots and ordering his flotillas to make smoke, and to attack with torpedoes; there was also a warning that they were approaching the submarine line. "These signals,"—wrote Admiral Cunningham afterwards—"together with my own appreciation of the existing situation, made it appear unwise and playing the enemy's own game to plunge straight into the smoke screen."¹ He therefore altered course to starboard to 340° at 1635, to work round to the northward and to windward of the smoke. A few minutes later enemy destroyers came in view and between 1639 and 1641 the *Warspite* fired five salvos of 6-inch and the *Malaya* one salvo at them and they disappeared into the smoke. The proceedings were enlivened by the first appearance that day of the Italian Air Force, which carried out an ineffective bombing attack on the *Warspite* at 1641.

The fitful engagement continued until 1649, our destroyers seizing every opportunity involuntarily offered by the enemy as he bolted in and out of the smoke cover. At 1640 two torpedoes were seen passing astern of the *Nubian*, and at 1647 she observed one of two enemy destroyers apparently hit and dropping astern. The 2nd Destroyer Flotilla passed through the smoke, while the 14th tried to work round it to the northward. All endeavours to get to close quarters were unsuccessful, and at 1654 orders were received from

¹ C.-in-C.'s Report (in M.05369/41).

the Commander-in-Chief, who three minutes earlier had altered course to 270°, to rejoin the 7th Cruiser Squadron. When the destroyers finally cleared the smoke screen at 1700, the enemy was out of sight, having retired to the south-westward in the direction of his bases.

The flotillas then proceeded as necessary to join Vice-Admiral Tovey, who was to the north of the *Warspite* steering 280° at 27 knots, taking stations in accordance with Destroyer Cruising Order No. 3.¹

To the east, the striking force was just getting back to the *Eagle*: all the Swordfish landed on safely at 1705. Another striking force was being got ready, but it could not be despatched before the general recall of aircraft was made at 1750. During the engagement the *Eagle* had also maintained aircraft, as available, on reconnaissance, as well as one acting as spotter for the *Royal Sovereign*.

The surface action was over; its indecisive character at all stages was due to the "safety first" tactics of the Italians. Throughout its course, their cruisers had kept at extreme ranges, the battleships called for smoke protection as soon as one was hit, and the destroyers—dodging in and out of the smoke screen—fired a few torpedoes at long range and then withdrew at their best speed. With the British Fleet between them and their main base (Taranto), they were hurriedly seeking shelter in other bases to the south and west. It was now the turn of the Italian Air Force to see if it could do better against Admiral Cunningham's fleet.

II. ACTION OFF CALABRIA: ITALIAN AIR ATTACKS, 9TH JULY

The first appearance of enemy aircraft on the scene, as already mentioned, was at 1640—just as the surface action was petering out—when the *Warspite* was attacked. From then till about 1930, the Fleet was subjected to a series of heavy bombing attacks by shore-based aircraft.

The *Warspite* and the *Eagle* were particularly singled out as targets, each being attacked five times;² but the 7th Cruiser Squadron received numerous attacks and many bombs fell near the destroyers. At 1654, the *Orion* fired on a formation of nine aircraft which attempted to bomb the flotillas. Vice-Admiral Tovey effectively disposed his cruisers in a diamond formation to resist these attacks, which were frequent till 1920.

Most of the bombing was extremely wild, from heights of between 10,000 and 15,000 feet, carried out by formations of aircraft varying in numbers from nine to a single aircraft, but generally in formations of three. No ships were hit during any of the attacks, but there were numerous near misses and a few minor casualties from splinters. The *Malaya* claimed to have damaged two aircraft by A.A. fire, but none was seen to fall.

During this period of the action the coast of Italy was in sight, the high land of Calabria showing up prominently as the sun got lower in the West.

About 600 miles to the westward, Vice-Admiral Somerville with Force "H", who was then south of Minorca on his way to carry out the diversionary attack on Cagliari, which had been arranged for the next morning, was undergoing a similar experience at much the same time. Admiral Somerville, deeming that the risk of damage to the *Ark Royal* outweighed the importance of a secondary operation, cancelled the proposed attack and returned to

¹ 14th D.F. in the centre, 2nd D.F., to port, and 10th D.F. to starboard.

² *Warspite* at 1641, 1715, 1735, 1823, 1911; *Eagle* at 1743, 1809, 1826, 1842, 1900. No records of times or numbers of attacks on other ships are available.

Gibraltar.¹ No damage was suffered from the air attacks, but the destroyer *Escort* was torpedoed and sunk by a submarine on the return passage two days later.

12. FLEET MOVEMENTS AFTER ACTION (*Plan 1*)

To return to the Italians.

The sudden retirement behind the smoke screens had naturally thrown the fleet into considerable disorder and the manoeuvre had not been helped by the F.A.A. attack on the *Bolzano* which had developed a few minutes later. The battleships steered a westerly course till about 1615 and then steadied on 230°, the other squadrons steering to the north-westward and gradually conforming.

By 1645 the *Cesare's* boilers had again been connected up, and Admiral Campioni considered the possibility of pushing towards Taranto and regaining contact with the British Fleet. Nothing could be seen of the enemy, owing to the smoke screens, and he had received no report of his movements since 1615; but he knew that their battleships were by that time concentrated and there would be danger of his being forced on to the Calabrian coast by their gunfire. He therefore decided to steer for the Sicilian ports. Shortage of fuel in his available destroyers prevented him from sending them to locate the enemy and subsequently attempt a night attack.

From this time onwards the various units of the fleet were repeatedly bombed by their own shore-based aircraft.² "Signals were made with searchlights, wireless messages were sent, national flags were spread on the turrets and decks—but without results. Ships frequently replied with gunfire to the dropping of the bombs."³ The marksmanship of the Italian pilots seems to have been no better on their own ships than on the British for none was hit "due to the quickness of the ships' manoeuvring"; but the attacks kept the fleet in disorder, and it was not till 1800 that it was reformed, the light cruiser squadrons and destroyers then taking station to the east and south-eastward and the heavy cruisers disposed to the north-westward of the battleships.

At 1930 the destroyers which had been fuelling rejoined his flag, and the various units of the fleet arrived at Augusta, Messina and Palermo in the course of the evening—the majority, by order of the Ministry of Marine, sailing for Naples early on 10th July.

The British Fleet, meanwhile, had continued steering 270° from 1700 to 1735, 9th July. As it was plainly evident that the enemy had no intention of renewing the action and that it was impossible to intercept him, the Commander-in-Chief, being then about 25 miles from the Calabrian coast, altered the course of the fleet to 200°. At 1830 the destroyers were ordered to resume their screening formations on the battleships and at 1910 the *Gloucester* was ordered to rejoin Vice-Admiral Tovey. A couple of alterations of course were made to open the land.

¹ An interesting decision as illustrating the considerations which should govern the acceptance of risks. The *Ark Royal*, our only large modern carrier in the Mediterranean, was of unique importance. Already a major attack on Italian battleships (subsequently carried out at Taranto in November 1940) was under consideration. Under these circumstances, Admiral Somerville declined to accept the risk to her for the sake of a subsidiary operation. It is to be noted that he had no hesitation in accepting a greater risk to her in connection with the bombardment of Genoa the following February. In war, risks must often be accepted, but the object should always be adequate.

² Between 1643 and 1750, 12 attacks were carried out by formations of varying strength, usually three at a time. After a pause of about an hour, the attacks recommenced and between 1844 and 2110 a further 11 attacks—the last in the Messina Strait—were carried out.

³ *Italian Official History of the War at Sea.*

An enemy destroyer was believed to have been severely damaged, but on account of shortage of fuel in his own destroyers, Sir Andrew Cunningham reluctantly decided not to detach a force to deal with her. The last information of the enemy fleet received from the *Warspite's* aircraft reported it in 37° 54' N., 16° 21' E. (about 10 miles from Cape Spartivento) at 1905, steering 230° at 18 knots.

At 2115, 9th, Admiral Cunningham altered course to 220° for a position south of Malta. During the night, which passed without incident, eight destroyers (*Stuart, Dainty, Defender, Hyperion, Hostile, Hasty, Ilex, Juno*) were detached to arrive at Malta at 0500, 10th, to complete with fuel.¹

The Vice-Admiral, Malta, had been told to delay the sailing of the convoys for Alexandria. However, "on hearing that the fleets were engaged, he wisely decided that the Italians would be too busy to attend to convoys, so sailed the fast convoy"²—M.F.1—escorted by the *Diamond, Jervis* and *Vendetta* (Lieutenant R. Rhoades, R.A.N.) at 2300, 9th July.

13. MOVEMENTS AND F.A.A. ATTACK ON PORT AUGUSTA, 10TH JULY

At 0800, 10th July, the fleet was in 35° 24' N., 15° 27' E. (about 50 miles E.S.E. of Malta), steering west, and throughout the day cruised to the south of Malta, while the destroyers were fuelling. An air raid took place on Malta at 0855, but no destroyer was hit. Three or four enemy aircraft were shot down. The second group (*Hero, Hereward, Decoy, Vampire, Voyager*) proceeded to Malta at 1525, the last three being ordered to sail with Convoy M.S. 1. Shortly after noon, the *Gloucester* and later the *Stuart* were detached to join Convoy M.F.1.

A flying-boat reconnaissance of Port Augusta having reported three cruisers and eight destroyers in harbour there, the *Eagle's* striking force of nine Swordfish aircraft was flown off at 1850, 10th, to make a dusk attack. Unfortunately, the enemy force had left before it arrived, and the only ships found were a destroyer of the *Navigatori* class and an oil tanker of 6,000 tons in a small bay to the northward. The destroyer—the *Leone Pancaldo*—was hit by two torpedoes and sank after breaking in two; the tanker also was hit. All the aircraft returned safely, landing at Malta.

At 2000, 10th, the 7th Cruiser Squadron was ordered to search to the eastward in the wake of Convoy M.F.1; and half an hour later the *Royal Sovereign, Nubian, Mohawk* and *Janus* were sent in to Malta to refuel. As they neared the island, an air raid on the neighbourhood of Calafra was seen to be in progress. The ships entered harbour at midnight and left at 0430, 11th to rejoin the Commander-in-Chief. The remainder of the fleet at 2100 steered 180° from position 35° 28' N., 14° 30' E., till 0130, 11th July, when course was altered to the north for a rendezvous at 0800.

In view of the bombing attacks experienced on the 8th and 9th July, the Air Officer, C.-in-C., Middle East, was requested to do everything possible to occupy the Italian air forces while the fleet and convoys were on passage to Alexandria.

14. PASSAGE TO ALEXANDRIA, 11TH–15TH JULY (*Plan 5*)

At 0800, 11th July, the ships which had been fuelling rejoined the flag in

¹ The *Stuart* had only 15 tons of oil remaining on arrival.

² Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, English edition, p. 263.

35° 10' N., 15° 00' E., and the *Eagle* landed on her air striking force from Malta.

The slow convoy, M.S.1, escorted by the *Decoy*, *Vampire* and *Voyager* had left Malta at 2100, 10th, and at 0900, 11th, the Commander-in-Chief in the *Warspite*, screened by the *Nubian*, *Mohawk*, *Juno* and *Janus* (Force "B")¹ went on ahead at 19 knots for Alexandria, while Rear-Admiral Pridham-Wippell in the *Royal Sovereign*, with the *Malaya*, *Eagle* and remaining destroyers (Force "C")² proceeded on a mean line of advance 080°, 12 knots, to cover the passage of the convoys. Vice-Admiral Tovey, who after being detached had kept to the southward of the track of convoy M.S.1, closing to about 20 miles from it at daylight, was then about 80 miles to the eastward of the *Warspite*, and had just opened fire on a shadowing aircraft which had appeared a few minutes previously. Considering that the protection against air attack which cruisers of the *Orion* class could give to the slow convoy was not of sufficient value to justify closing it, the Vice-Admiral decided to continue on a south-easterly course until he was 150 miles from Sicily, when he altered course to 045° and took up a covering position.

As expected, it was not long before air attacks commenced. Between 1248 and 1815, 66 bombs were aimed at the *Warspite* and her destroyers in five attacks.³ Force "C"—which had already experienced a submarine alarm, when the *Defender* attacked a contact at 0955, without result—suffered 13 bombing attacks, mostly directed against the *Eagle*, between 1111 and 1804, about 120 bombs being dropped. The *Malaya* and the *Royal Sovereign* each claimed to have damaged an aircraft and one was shot down by a Gladiator in the course of these attacks. It was remarked that the attacks at lowest levels were made on destroyers, and that the seaplanes came in lower than other types of aircraft.

Convoy M.S.1 was attacked four times. None of the ships was damaged, and there was only one casualty—Mr. J. H. Endicott, Commissioned Gunner of the *Vampire*, who died after transference to the *Mohawk*. Convoy M.S.1 was overhauled by the *Warspite* at 1500, and the *Janus* was then ordered to exchange stations with the *Vampire* in the convoy escort.

Further east, Admiral Tovey's cruisers also were bombed. Between 1445 and 1500, they were attacked by 15 aircraft in waves of three. No damage was done to either side, though one stick of bombs fell close to the *Neptune*. After the attack an attempt to evade further attacks was made by altering course to 225° for 75 minutes, after which course 070° was resumed but this proved unsuccessful, for another attack developed at 1812, when eight bombs—"all very bad shots"—fell ahead of the *Orion*. These aircraft, flying very high, were not engaged before they dropped their bombs. Another attack occurred at 1930, the bombs again falling wide. One aircraft hit in this attack made off to the north-west, then turned eastward losing height and with smoke coming from one of its engines. It was thought unlikely that it reached its base 180 miles away.

The night of 11th/12th July passed quietly. The Commander-in-Chief, who was in 34° 22' N., 19° 17' E. at 2100, 11th, continued to the eastward, steering 110°. Force "C", after operating aircraft, at 2000, 11th, feinted to the north-west for an hour and a half, before turning to 150° at 2130, in order to keep to the westward of convoy M.S. 1. At 0254, 12th July, the *Hasty* attacked a submarine contact. The 7th Cruiser Squadron, which had been ordered to join the Commander-in-Chief at 0800, 12th July, steered so as to

¹ Less *Decoy*.

² Less *Vampire* and *Voyager*.

³ The *Warspite* was shadowed during the day by aircraft which transmitted "longs" by W/T at intervals to direct the attacking aircraft.

approach the rendezvous from the northward. It sighted the *Warspite* at 0638, 12th; the *Orion* and *Neptune* were then detached to join Convoy M.F.1, the *Liverpool* and *Sydney* remaining in company with the Commander-in-Chief.

During this day, 12th July, the bombing attacks on the *Warspite* were intensified. Between 0850 and 1550, in seventeen attacks about 160 bombs¹ were dropped. The *Warspite* was straddled three times² and there were several near misses, splinters from one killing three ratings in the *Liverpool*, and wounding her executive officer and five ratings. As a result of these attacks course was altered to close the Egyptian coast and No. 252 Wing was asked to send out fighter aircraft, but when these arrived late in the afternoon the attacks had ceased. Force "C", after flying off A/S patrols at dawn, had sighted Convoy M.S.1 at 0621, 12th. At 0925 the *Defender* was detached to find and escort the oiler *British Union* to Alexandria. As regards bombing, Force "C" got off lightly on this day, only three attacks being made between 1110 and 1804; 25 bombs were dropped, all of which fell wide. Haze overhead made sighting of aircraft difficult. The *Dainty* reported passing the body of an Italian airman at 1848.

Vice-Admiral Tovey with the *Orion* and *Neptune*, on parting company with the Commander-in-Chief at 0730, 12th, had set course 115°, 25 knots, in search of the fast convoy. Between 0850 and 0950 the two cruisers were attacked by 30 aircraft without result, and again at 1312 by a solitary aircraft, which dropped four bombs near the *Neptune*. The effect of these attacks was to deflect the ships to the northward, so that they did not gain touch with Convoy M.F.1—then about 150 miles from Alexandria—till 1825. After passing the morning rendezvous to the *Gloucester*, the *Orion* and *Neptune* proceeded on course 080° to keep clear during the night and arrived at Alexandria at 0645 next morning (13th July). The Commander-in-Chief, in the *Warspite*, with the *Liverpool*, *Sydney* and destroyers had arrived three-quarters of an hour earlier, and Convoy M.F.1, with escort, arrived at 0900. The *Ramillies* (Captain H. T. Baillie-Grohman), screened by the *Havock* (Commander R. E. Courage), *Imperial*, *Diamond* and *Vendetta*, was then sailed to meet and cover Convoy M.S.1.

Meanwhile Rear-Admiral Pridham-Wippell with Force "C" had been slowly working to the eastward, adjusting his advance to keep to the westward of Convoy M.S.1. At nightfall 12th July, course was set to pass rather closer to Ras el Tin than to Gavdo, but as a result of instructions from the Commander-in-Chief, an alteration to 085°, in order to increase the distance from the Libyan coast, was made at 0215, 13th. Some three hours later (0524) the *Capetown* (Captain T. H. Back) flying the flag of the Rear-Admiral, 3rd Cruiser Squadron (Rear-Admiral E. de F. Renouf) and the *Caledon* (Captain C. P. Clarke), which had sailed from Alexandria the previous day to meet Convoy M.S.1 about 60 miles S.W. of Gavdo, hove in sight. These two cruisers then took over M.S.1 and Force "C" went on for Alexandria.

The first warning of trouble from the air came at 0802, when one of the *Eagle's* Gladiators reported a shadower, which it shot down a little later. Air attacks on Force "C" began at 1056 and continued till 1622. From 1110 to 1300 the attacks were too numerous to record precisely, the *Eagle* being the favourite target. The attackers found she could hit back, however, two of them being shot down by the Gladiators and a third so seriously damaged as to prevent its return home. A destroyer was sent to pick up the only airman

¹ The Commander-in-Chief's report (in M.05369) puts this number as 300. The number 160 is taken from the *Warspite's* detailed return of the attack, enclosed in the C.-in-C.'s report.

² The Commander-in-Chief subsequently remarked that "the most unpleasant attack on *Warspite* at 1530, 12th July, resulted in 24 bombs along port side and 12 across starboard bow simultaneously, all within 1 cable but slightly out of line" (Mediterranean War Diary).

seen to come down, but no body was found. The average height of the attacking aircraft was about 12,000 feet; although there were several near misses and straddles, no damage was done to any of the ships.

At 1210, 13th, Force "C" steered to close the coast off Mersa Matruh, in compliance with orders from the Commander-in-Chief and at 1800 course was altered to the east-north-east to adjust the time of arrival at Alexandria next morning. Force "C" entered harbour at 0815, 14th July, and the 3rd Cruiser Squadron, *Ramillies* and Convoy M.S.1 on the morning of the 15th, thus bringing operation M.A.5 to a successful conclusion.

15. REMARKS ON ACTION OFF CALABRIA

Commenting on the action of 9th July, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, remarked:—

" . . . It is still not clear what brought the enemy fleet to sea on this occasion, but it seems probable that it was engaged on an operation designed to cover the movement of a convoy to Libya. When our fleet was reported south of Crete it seems that the enemy retired close to his bases, fuelled his destroyers by relays, and then waited hoping to draw us into an engagement in his own waters (under cover of his Air Force and possibly with a submarine concentration to the southward of him) whence he could use his superior speed to withdraw at his own time.

" If these were, in fact, the enemy's intentions he was not altogether disappointed, but the submarines, if there were any in the vicinity of the action, did not materialise and, fortunately for us, his air attacks failed to synchronise with the gun action.

" It will be noted that the whole action took place at very long range and that the *Warspite* was the only capital ship which got within range of the enemy battleships. *Malaya* fired a few salvos which fell some 3,000 yards short. *Royal Sovereign*, owing to her lack of speed, never got into action at all.

" *Warspite's* hit on one of the enemy battleships at 26,000 yards range might perhaps be described as a lucky one. Its tactical effect was to induce the enemy to turn away and break off the action, which was unfortunate, but strategically it probably has had an important effect on Italian mentality.

" The torpedo attacks by the Fleet Air Arm were disappointing, one hit on a cruiser being all that can be claimed,¹ but in fairness it must be recorded that the pilots had had very little practice, and none at high speed targets, *Eagle* having only recently joined the Fleet after having been employed on the Indian Ocean trade routes.

" The enemy's gunnery seemed good at first and he straddled quickly, but accuracy soon fell off as his ships came under our fire.

" Our cruisers—there were only four in action—were badly outnumbered and at times came under a very heavy fire. They were superbly handled by Vice-Admiral J. C. Tovey, C.B., D.S.O., who by his skilful manoeuvring managed to maintain a position in the van and to hold the enemy cruiser squadrons, and at the same time avoid damage to his own force. *Warspite* was able to assist him with her fire in the early stages of the action.

" The enemy's smoke tactics were impressive and the smoke screens laid by his destroyers were very effective in completely covering his high speed retirement. With his excess speed of at least five knots there was little hope of catching him once he had decided to break off the action. An aircraft torpedo hit on one of his battleships was the only chance and this unfortunately did not occur. . . .

" A feature of the action was the value, and in some cases the amusement, derived from intercepted enemy signals. We were fortunate in having the Italian Fleet Code, and some of his signals were made in plain language. . . .

" My remarks on the bombing attacks experienced by the Fleet during the course of these operations are contained in my signal timed 1619 of 14th July 1940.²

¹ Actually no torpedo hit was obtained by the F.A.A. According to the Italians, three 6-inch shell hits on the *Balzano* was the only damage suffered by the 8-inch cruisers.

² See Appendix C.

" I cannot conclude these remarks without a reference to H.M.S. *Eagle*. This obsolescent aircraft carrier, with only 17 Swordfish embarked, found and kept touch with the enemy fleet, flew off two striking forces of nine torpedo bombers within the space of four hours, both of which attacked, and all aircraft returned. 24 hours later a torpedo striking force was launched on shipping in Port Augusta and throughout the five days' operations *Eagle* maintained constant A/S patrols in daylight and carried out several searches. Much of the *Eagle's* aircraft operating work was done in the fleeting intervals between, and even during, bombing attacks and I consider her performance reflects great credit on Captain A. M. Bridge, Royal Navy, her Commanding Officer.

" The meagre material results derived from this brief meeting with the Italian fleet were naturally very disappointing to one and all under my command, but the action was not without value. It must have shown the Italians that their Air Force and submarines cannot stop our fleet penetrating into the Central Mediterranean and that only their main fleet can seriously interfere with our operating there. It established, I think, a certain degree of moral ascendancy since, although superior in battleships, our fleet was heavily outnumbered in cruisers and destroyers and the Italians had strong shore-based air forces within easy range compared to our few carrier-borne aircraft. On our side the action has shown those without previous war experience how difficult it is to hit with the gun at long range, and therefore the necessity of closing in, when this can be done, in order to get decisive results. It showed that high level bombing even on the heavy and accurate scale experienced during these operations, yields few hits and that it is more alarming than dangerous.

" Finally, these operations and the action off Calabria produced throughout the fleet a determination to overcome the air menace and not to let it interfere with our freedom of manoeuvre, and hence our control of the Mediterranean."¹

The Italian Official History contains a lengthy review of the operations. Much of it deals with topical and technical matters, and with Admiral Campioni's reasons for the decisions he took, all of which seem to have been approved by the Ministry of Marine. The latter in their remarks stress the value of the information received by wireless interception in the early stages of operation M.A.5, and from reconnaissance aircraft on 8th July. On the other hand failure of air reconnaissance on the 9th embarrassed Admiral Campioni in the early stages of the approach.

As regards the action they were impressed by the advantage conferred on the British Fleet by the presence of an aircraft carrier:—

" English reconnaissance aircraft were able to follow our fleet undisturbed, providing valuable information all the time to their Commander-in-Chief, because of our failure to stop them owing to our shore-based fighters being out of range, and not possessing an aircraft carrier with our fleet.

" The presence of an aircraft carrier with the English fleet, besides permitting them to fight off the activities of our aircraft, both bombers and reconnaissance, allowed the enemy to carry out attacks with torpedo aircraft which, although frustrated by ships' manoeuvring, interfered with the formations attacked and so delayed their rejoining the remainder of our forces."

Naturally, as Admiral Cunningham remarked, there was considerable disappointment in the Mediterranean Fleet that the Italians had managed to evade close action. Nevertheless, this first encounter set the tone, as it were, for the whole naval war in the Mediterranean and was the first step in establishing that moral ascendancy which Sir Andrew Cunningham—with numerically inferior forces—maintained against the Italians till their capitulation in 1943.

It was no doubt recognition of this aspect which in some measure prompted

¹ C.-in-C.'s report, in M.05369/41.

the message from the Admiralty received by the Commander-in-Chief on 17th July:—

“ Their Lordships have read with great satisfaction your telegraphic report of operations carried out between 7th and 13th July, and wish to congratulate you and all concerned on the determined and efficient manner in which they were conducted.”

CHAPTER II

(Battle Summary No. 2)

Action off Cape Spada, Crete

19th July 1940

16. PLAN FOR OPERATIONS IN AEGEAN

WITHIN A WEEK of the conclusion of Operation M.A.5, a fortuitous encounter between H.M.A.S. *Sydney* with five destroyers and two Italian 6-inch gun cruisers resulted in the sinking of one of the latter, and must have accentuated Italian doubts as to their control of the Mediterranean which may have been engendered by the brief engagement off Calabria ten days previously.

It was Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham's policy to use his light forces in periodic sweeps as a means of countering the activities of Italian submarines in areas through which British convoys had to pass, and at the same time attacking Italian shipping.

On 17th July 1940 orders were issued for such an operation which was to consist of a submarine hunt towards Kaso Strait and round the north coast of Crete by four destroyers, combined with a sweep by a cruiser and one destroyer into the Gulf of Athens for Italian shipping. The cruiser was to be prepared to support the destroyers in case of need.¹ The forces for these operations were organised in two groups, viz.,—

¹ The operation orders were contained in the two signals from Vice-Admiral Tovey (V.A.(D)) following:—

(i) To: D(2), repeated to C.-in-C., C.S.3, R.A.(L), *Hero*, *Havock*, *Hasty*, *Ilex*, *Sydney*. IMPORTANT. Carry out following operation. Object destruction of U-boats. Leave Alexandria 0001 tomorrow, Thursday, with *Hyperion*, *Ilex*, *Hero*, *Hasty*. Sweep to Kaso Strait to pass through about 2130, then along north coast Crete to pass through Antikithera Channel about 0600C, 19th July, then to Alexandria to arrive 0800C, 20th July. *Sydney* and *Havock* will support as in my 1451/17. (T.O.O.1447/17.)

(ii) To: *Sydney*, repeated to *Ilex*, *Havock*, R.A.(L), C.S.3, *Hero*, C.-in-C., D(2), *Hasty*. IMPORTANT. My 1447. Carry out following operation. Objects support of force under D(2) and interception of Italian shipping in Gulf of Athens. Leave Alexandria with *Havock* at 0430, tomorrow Thursday. Pass through Kaso Strait at about 2200C thence to Gulf of Athens to search for enemy shipping, then pass through Antikithera Channel to arrive Alexandria 1400C, 20th July. (T.O.O. 1451/17.)

The operations ordered in the above signals were preliminary to a further submarine hunt starting on 20th July between Crete and Cyrenaica by eight destroyers, which were afterwards to sweep into the Aegean to cover a convoy for Aegean ports sailing from Alexandria on the 19th.

FORCE "A" 3rd Division, 2nd D.F. under Commander (D2).
Hyperion (four 4.7-inch) Commander H. St. L. Nicolson, D.S.O. (D2).
Ilex (four 4.7-inch) Lieutenant-Commander P. L. Saumarez, D.S.C.
Hero (four 4.7-inch) Commander H. W. Biggs, D.S.O.
Hasty (four 4.7-inch) Lieutenant-Commander L. R. K. Tyrwhitt.

FORCE "B"

Sydney (eight 6-inch, eight 4-inch, H.A.) Captain J. A. Collins, R.A.N.
Havock (four 4.7-inch) Commander R. E. Courage, D.S.O., D.S.C.

17. MOVEMENTS OF FORCES, 18TH-19TH JULY

Force "A" sailed from Alexandria at 0015, 18th,¹ and swept towards Kaso Strait. After passing through the strait at 2130, keeping well over towards the Cretan shore to avoid being sighted from Kaso Island,² the division steered westward at 18 knots between Ovo Island and the Cretan shore. Nothing was sighted, and at 0600, 19th, course was altered to 240° to pass through the Antikithera Channel, the destroyers spread in line abreast 1½ miles apart, carrying out the anti-submarine sweep at 18 knots.

Force "B"—the *Sydney* with the *Havock* in company—sailed from Alexandria at 0430, 18th, and after passing through Kaso Strait at 2345, steered a mean course 295°, speed of advance, 18 knots, zig-zagging on account of full moon and improving visibility. Captain Collins seems to have found the double object given to him in the operation orders something of an embarrassment, for he subsequently wrote that in the morning of the 19th "I was . . . proceeding on a westerly course about 40 miles north of Crete in accordance with my instructions to afford support to (D)2 and destroyers . . . My instructions included the second object of the destruction of enemy shipping in the Gulf of Athens. I decided however that it was my duty to remain in support of [the] destroyers until 0800, by which time they should have cleared the Antikithera Strait, although this precluded the successful achievement of the second object."³

Meanwhile, unknown to the British, two Italian cruisers under Vice-Admiral F. Casardi, the *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*⁴ (flag) and *Bartolomeo Colleoni*⁴ had sailed from Tripoli at 2200, 17th July, for the Aegean. Throughout the 18th they steered to the eastward for a point 30 miles north of Derna, which they reached at 2307, 18th, and then turned to the northward. At 0700, 19th, they were steering to enter the Aegean through the Antikithera Channel, just as Commander Nicolson's destroyers were approaching it from the E.N.E. (See Fig. 4).

18. SURFACE CONTACT (Plan 6)

At 0722, 19th July, two Italian cruisers were sighted ahead by the *Hero*, the second destroyer from the northward. The Italians had sighted the destroyers about five minutes earlier, and apparently turned to head them off, as they seemed to the *Hero* to be steering 160°; but Admiral Casardi, suspecting from their formation that they were screening heavy craft, hauled round to port at about 0723 and steadied on 360°. However prudent this may have

¹ Zone minus 3 Time is used throughout.

² One of the Dodecanese, at that time Italian.

³ Report by C.O., H.M.A.S. *Sydney* (M.020932/40).

⁴ *Bande Nere*, *Colleoni* armament:—eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.: speed 34 knots.

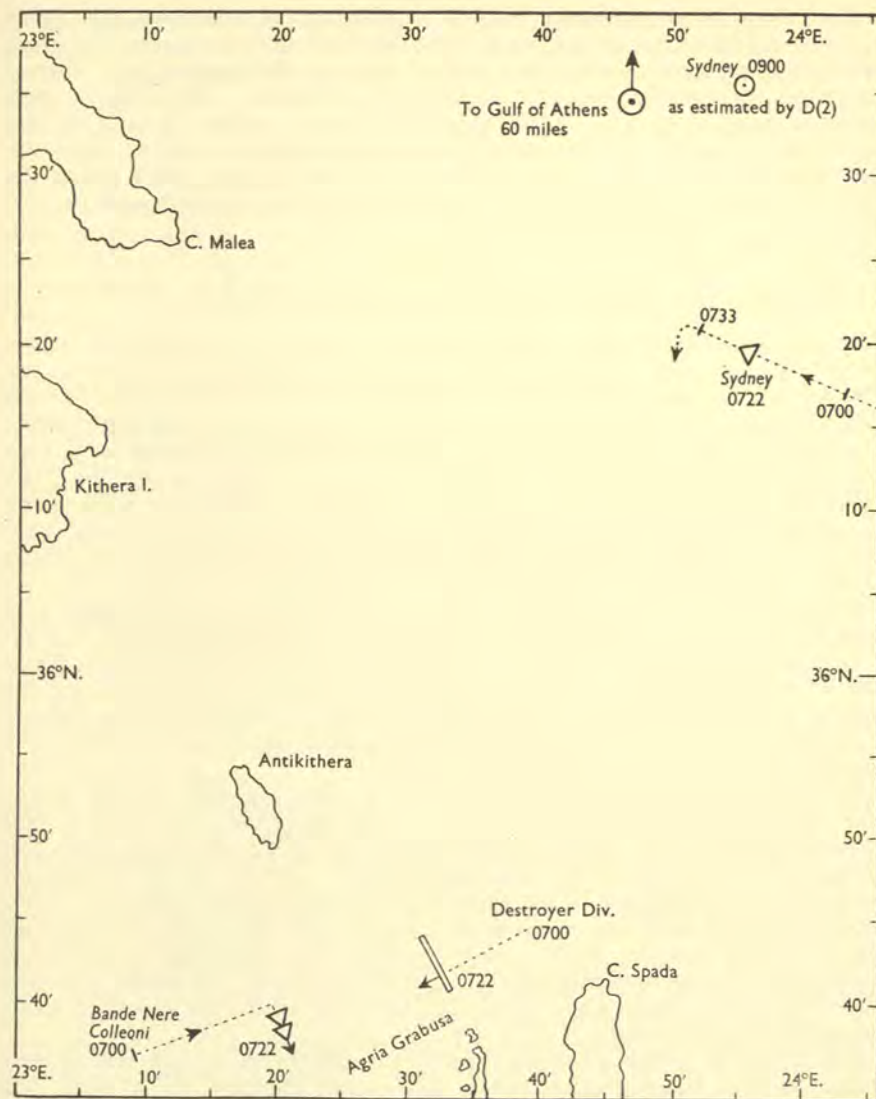


Fig. 4. POSITION OF FORCES, 0722, 19TH JULY 1940

been it lost him an opportunity of inflicting serious damage on the destroyers with his heavier armament.

On sighting the enemy at 0722 Commander Nicolson at once turned his division to starboard together to course 060°, and increased speed, the destroyers concentrating in sub-divisions on the *Hyperion*, in accordance with previous instructions.

It was estimated that the *Sydney* at 0900 would be in position 010°, 55 miles from Cape Spada¹, and while steering for this position Commander Nicolson endeavoured to work round to the northward. Actually, thanks to Captain

¹ North-west extremity of Canea Bay, Crete.

Collins' decision to give precedence to supporting the destroyers, the *Sydney* was a good deal nearer, and when at 0733 she received Commander Nicolson's enemy sighting report (two enemy cruisers steering 160° bearing 255°, distant ten miles) her position was 010° Cape Spada 40 miles. The *Hyperion* gave her own position as 340° Agria Grabusa¹ Light 3 miles. Acting on this information Captain Collins altered course at 0736 to 240° to close the destroyers but on receipt a minute later of an amplifying report giving the *Hyperion's* course as 060° and the enemy's as 360°, he hauled round to 190° and commenced to work up to full speed.

19. DESTROYER ENGAGEMENT WITH ITALIAN CRUISERS (Plan 6)

By this time (0737) Commander Nicolson's destroyers had been in action for 11 minutes. One of the enemy cruisers had opened fire at 0726 on the *Hyperion* and *Ilex*, and the latter returned the fire. With their engines working up fast, the speed of the destroyers reached 31 knots by 0735, and the *Hyperion* then opened fire with her after guns at maximum range, but ceased firing very soon as all her shots fell short. The enemy's shooting was erratic. His salvoes fell short, throwing up red, yellow and green splashes, possibly due to the use of identifiers. The Italian report stated that the destroyers were scarcely visible, either because of mist or the slanting rays of the sun, which was bearing about 070° at 11° elevation.

Although the range was opening rapidly, the enemy instead of heading in chase of the destroyers held on his course north, "manoeuvring so as to keep at the limit of enemy gun range and to avoid the chance of an effective torpedo attack".² These tactics again lost him a favourable chance of utilising his superior gun power. At 0738 the enemy bore 270°, 11 miles, and the *Hyperion* at 0740 ordered her division to cease firing as the enemy was out of range. Five minutes later the enemy's fire also ceased.

At 0747 the enemy, then bearing 270°, 14 miles, was still steering north. With the object of gaining ground and of identifying the class of the enemy cruisers, the destroyer division altered course to 360°. At 0753, when the enemy turned to close, course was altered back to 060°. A signal from the Commander-in-Chief to join the *Sydney* was received by the *Hyperion* at 0800, and four minutes later course was altered to 030°, with the enemy then bearing 265°, 17 miles, steering 090°. These positions were signalled to the *Sydney* at 0805, and course was altered a minute later to 060°. At about this time there was sighted ahead eight miles off a Greek steamer, which turned away quickly to the northward.

Still trying to work to the northward, the destroyers' course was altered to 040° at 0814 and to 030° at 0821. The enemy reopened fire at 0825, but again his shooting was very short and erratic. He ceased fire after five minutes, and was then observed to be altering course to the southward.

This was due to the sudden arrival of the *Sydney*. Commander Nicolson had kept her informed of his movements and those of the enemy. Captain Collins on the other hand had been careful to preserve W/T silence to avoid disclosing the presence of the *Sydney*.³ In this he was entirely successful. He had altered course at 0800 to 150° and shortly afterwards signals arrived from the

¹ Island off C. Busa, north-west extremity of Crete.

² N.I.D. 1900/48. Report of Admiral Casardi to Ministry of Marine.

³ "I realised that I was placing Commander . . . Nicolson . . . in an awkward position and running a certain degree of risk of non-contact by not informing him of my position, course and speed by W/T on getting his enemy report. I was however determined to make full use of surprise . . . I appreciated that, if I made a wireless signal, the enemy would learn that other forces were in the vicinity and make away back through the Straits" (Report by C.O., H.M.A.S. *Sydney*).

Commander-in-Chief directing the destroyers to join the *Sydney* and the latter to support them. Further alterations of course were made at 0815 to 160° and at 0820 to 120°; at 0826 the enemy ships, steering 090°, were sighted bearing 188°, range 23,000 yards, about 20° before the starboard beam, and three minutes later the *Sydney* opened fire on the *Bande Nere* at a range of 20,000 yards.

The gun flashes were seen away on the port beam of the *Hyperion* and at 0832 the *Sydney* and *Havock* could be seen bearing 290°, 10 miles—a welcome sight. Commander Nicolson by then steering 020° at once altered course, first to 240° then to 260° and formed the division in line ahead.¹ The enemy cruisers, then 17,400 yards distant, were by that time steaming fast to the south-eastward making heavy black smoke, and at 0836 the *Hyperion* led round to 170°, in order to get to a position of torpedo advantage on their bow.

20. H.M.A.S. SYDNEY ENGAGES ENEMY CRUISERS (Plan 6)

When the *Sydney* opened fire on the *Bande Nere* at 0829, she took the Italians completely by surprise. They were then engaged with the destroyers on their other side and the first intimation they had of her presence was the arrival of her salvoes. Low-lying mist partially concealed the new enemy, which was thought to consist of two cruisers. Admiral Casardi at once altered course some 40° away steadying on about 115°, and at 0832 the Italians returned the fire, concentrating on the *Sydney's* gunflashes, which were all they could see. Their salvoes fell short at first, then over, with an occasional straddle.

The *Sydney* continued on a south-easterly course to meet the destroyer division and at the same time to close the enemy. At 0835 her fire appeared effective² and the enemy was seen to turn away, making smoke.

Three minutes later (0838) Commander Nicolson's destroyers hove in sight fine on the port bow about six miles off, steering 170°; at that moment they opened fire in divisional concentration at extreme range on the left-hand cruiser, but ceased fire after five minutes as all their salvoes were falling short. The *Havock* at once proceeded to join Commander Nicolson and at 0841 Captain Collins ordered the destroyers to "Close and attack the enemy with torpedoes"; but by the time the signal got through (0844) a drastic alteration of course to the south-westward by the enemy at 0840 had rendered this impossible. Commander Nicolson therefore altered course together to 215° and forming the division on a line of bearing 350°, chased at his best speed. The *Sydney* also turned to 215° at 0845, a manoeuvre which brought her on the beam of the destroyers; from then onwards the action was a chase.

It was not until about this time that Captain Collins was able definitely to identify the class of his opponents and "was relieved"³ to find they were not 8-inch gun ships. He had been "even more pleased"³ to observe the enemy making smoke in the early stages, which implied that they were already thinking of evasive tactics.

At about 0846 the *Sydney's* original target was so obscured by smoke that fire was shifted to the rear cruiser (*Colleoni*), which was engaged by "A" and "B" turrets on bearing 203°, range 18,000 yards. The destroyer division also renewed its fire at extreme range for a couple of minutes. At 0851 the enemy altered course to port, and the *Sydney* conformed, which had the effect of opening her "A" arcs; but two minutes later the enemy, making vast

¹ From 0747 to 0832 all alterations of course by the destroyer division were made by White pendant, i.e. leaders together the rest in succession. (This is not shown in Plan 6).

² It is now known that the *Bande Nere* had already been hit by a 6-inch shell which passing through the foremost funnel and exploding near the after part of the aircraft discharge machinery killed four ratings and wounded four more.

³ Report by C.O., H.M.A.S. *Sydney*.

quantities of smoke, altered course to starboard, 16 points in succession,¹ and the *Sydney*, observing them steadying on course 230° at 0856, resumed the chase in a south-westerly direction.

For a minute, at 0901, the *Sydney* checked fire while she shifted target again to the *Bande Nere*. When this ship, at 0908, again became obscured by smoke, fire was shifted back again to the *Colleoni* then bearing 210°, range 18,500 yards. At 0915 the *Sydney* altered course 30° to starboard to open her "A" arcs, and it was soon evident that her fire was having considerable effect. With the range down to 17,500 yards at 0919, the *Sydney* also came under an accurate fire, receiving her only hit at 0921. This projectile, bursting on the foremost funnel, blew a hole about three feet square in the casings, causing minor damage to three boats and some fittings, but only one slight casualty.

Throughout the chase the destroyers steaming at 32 knots had made every effort to reduce the range, but until 0918, when the range of the *Colleoni* was down to 17,000 yards and closing rapidly, they were unable to do so.

21. THE SINKING OF THE *Bartolomeo Colleoni*

At 0923 the *Colleoni* was seen to be stopped, apparently out of action in a position about five miles E.N.E. of Cape Spada. Survivors afterwards stated that she was brought to by a shell in the engine or boiler room. The electrical machinery failed, including the turret power hoists and steering gear. All her lights went out and ratings stationed in the magazines groped their way out by means of matches and cigarette lighters! The *Bande Nere*, after a tentative turn towards her wounded consort, left her to her fate, and made off at high speed to the southward, rounding Agria Grabusa Island at a distance of about a mile, with the *Sydney* in hot pursuit, leaving the destroyers to finish off the *Colleoni*.

Commander Nicolson altered course to 240° and opened fire in divisional concentration at a range of 14,500 yards. By 0930 the range was down to about 5,000 yards. The *Colleoni* was drifting and silent; for some minutes she had been hit repeatedly, chiefly below the bridge; her control had been put out of action and some H.A. ammunition set on fire. The whole bridge structure was soon in flames. But she was still afloat, and at 0933 the *Sydney* signalled the one word "Torpedo." Ordering Commander Biggs of the *Hero* to take charge of the other destroyers and follow the *Sydney*, Commander Nicolson in the *Hyperion* with the *Ilex* approached his quarry. By then the *Colleoni* was on fire amidships, her colours on the mainmast had been shot away or, as some thought, struck, and a heavy explosion had occurred forward.

At 0935 the *Hyperion* fired four and the *Ilex* two torpedoes at a range of 1,400 yards. One torpedo from the *Ilex* hit the *Colleoni* forward, blowing away about 100 feet of her bows and her aircraft. The *Hyperion's* torpedoes, owing to too great a spread, passed two ahead and two astern, and ran on to explode ashore on Agria Grabusa Island. The *Hyperion* then closed in, and observing the *Colleoni* more or less abandoned, but not sinking or too heavily on fire, Commander Nicolson decided as he passed down her starboard side to go alongside and see if anything could be salvaged. Barely two minutes elapsed, however, before a large fire broke out in the forward superstructure which was followed by an explosion which blew the whole bridge away in a cloud of smoke. The *Hyperion* then fired another torpedo at short range, which hit the doomed ship amidships at 0952, and seven minutes later the *Colleoni* heeled over and sank bottom up in position 029° Agria Grabusa Light 4.5 miles.

The *Hyperion* and *Ilex* immediately began to rescue survivors, in which work

¹ The purpose of these manoeuvres gave rise to some speculation at the time, but Admiral Casardi's report states that they were merely "to lessen the effect of the enemy's fire."

they were joined by the *Havock*, which had been too far off to read Commander Biggs' signal to join him and had apparently missed a signal from Captain Collins at 0943 to Commander Nicolson to leave one destroyer to deal with the *Colleoni*, and follow him with the rest. According to survivors' accounts, the men of the *Colleoni* had started to jump overboard as soon as the ship stopped, and many of them were in the sea before the *Ilex's* torpedo struck the ship. She had suffered many casualties forward, on the upper deck and round the bridge, among them her Captain seriously wounded.¹ There seems to have been little or no attempt to launch any boats or rafts, but all the crew had life belts.

The Italians were much impressed by the rate and accuracy of the British gunfire, as well as the tactical superiority of the British Commanders. Some prisoners even insisted that the calibre of our guns must be more than 6-inch.

During the rescue work several signals were received from Captain Collins directing the destroyers to join him as soon as possible, but it was not till 1024 that the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* proceeded at high speed to do so,² leaving the *Havock* to continue picking up survivors. The *Ilex* had some 230 prisoners on board. Most of them were naked and 58 wounded, 25 seriously, three of whom died that night.

At 1138 the *Havock* signalled to the *Sydney* that survivors stated that the Italian cruisers had expected to meet strong supporting forces that morning.³ At 1237, when she had picked up some 260 survivors, six Savoia bombers were sighted, approaching from the southward. Thus threatened with attack the *Havock* was forced to abandon her humane task and proceeded at full speed for Alexandria.

Altogether, 525 survivors out of a complement of 630 had been picked up by the three destroyers, and it was afterwards learned from the Naval Attaché, Athens, that seven others were rescued off Crete, after swimming for from 26 to 42 hours.

22. CHASE OF THE *Bande Nere*

Meanwhile the *Bande Nere*, after passing between the island of Pondiko Nisi and the Cretan mainland, at 0945 bore 192° at a range of 20,000 yards from the *Sydney*. At 0950 the Italian received a second hit; a shell penetrated the quarter deck and exploded on a bulkhead, killing four and wounding 12 ratings. But ammunition in "A" and "B" turrets was running low and the *Sydney* checked fire; the *Bande Nere*, however, continued firing her after guns, the shots from which fell consistently 300 yards away on the *Sydney's* quarter. At 0955 Captain Collins repeated his signal to Commander Nicolson to finish off the *Colleoni* and rejoin him, and three minutes later reopened fire on the *Bande Nere*, still 20,000 yards distant, but checked fire again at 1011. By this time the range was increasing and the visibility of the target and the fall of shot becoming more indistinct. A final couple of salvos at 1022, range 21,000 yards, could not be observed; the Mediterranean haze combined with the enemy's smoke had rendered spotting impossible. The *Sydney* then had

¹ Captain Umberto Novaro died from his wounds on board the hospital ship *Maine* at Alexandria on 23rd July.

² Vice-Admiral Tovey subsequently remarked that "it was an unfortunate and serious mistake that all destroyers did not continue the pursuit of the second cruiser without delay"—an opinion concurred in by the Commander-in-Chief (see Appendix D).

³ This signal did not surprise Captain Collins, who since 0845—from the *Bande Nere's* determination to escape to the southward, instead of to the westward (which would have been easier) and later her desertion of the *Colleoni*—had suspected she was leading him on to superior forces. There is, however, no confirmation from Italian sources that any such support had been contemplated.

remaining only four rounds per gun in "A" turret and in "B" turret one round per gun of C.P.B.C. shell. Shortly afterwards the *Bande Nere*, 11 miles off, disappeared in the haze, going 32 knots on course 200°.

The *Hero* and *Hasty*, gradually drawing further ahead of the *Sydney*, had continued the chase at 31 knots, firing ranging salvos at intervals in the hope that the enemy's frequent alterations of course would bring him in range, but they all fell short. At 1020 the *Hero* signalled to the *Sydney* "Regret, I am not catching her", and eight minutes later in compliance with a signal from Captain Collins she and the *Hasty* dropped back to form a close screen on the *Sydney*. At 1037 Captain Collins reluctantly abandoned the chase, and altered course to 150° for Alexandria, reducing speed to 25 knots to allow the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* to come up. The last seen of the *Bande Nere* was from the *Hero* at 1044—a smudge on the horizon bearing 177°, 15 miles away.

23. GENERAL SITUATION, 1100, 19TH JULY

While the *Sydney* and the destroyers had been fighting their eminently satisfactory action, the Commander-in-Chief at Alexandria, acting on their reports and in view of the possibility that there might be other enemy forces at sea had decided to take the Fleet to sea.¹

The general situation at 1100, 19th July—shortly after the *Bande Nere* had been lost to view—was as follows. Vice-Admiral Tovey in the *Orion* with the *Neptune* had sailed at 0915 and was sweeping to the north-westward at 30 knots. The Commander-in-Chief in the *Warspite* with destroyer screen was just leaving harbour, to be followed at 1230 by the 1st Battle Squadron (less *Royal Sovereign*), *Eagle* and screen for a sweep to the westward. An air reconnaissance by flying boats of 201 Group R.A.F. was arranged to search for the *Bande Nere*, but as it was clear that she could not be intercepted before reaching Tobruk if making for that port, the *Eagle* was ordered to prepare a striking force to attack Tobruk harbour and 201 Group was requested to make a dusk reconnaissance.

Actually, the *Bande Nere* then (1100, 19th) some 40 miles due west of Gavdo Island, and steering for Tobruk, altered course for Benghazi about an hour after shaking off the pursuit, where she arrived that afternoon.

The *Sydney*, *Hero* and *Hasty* some five miles south of Elaphonisi Light (the south-west point of Crete) were steering 150°, 25 knots, and the *Hyperion* and *Ilex*, about 18 miles astern of them, were steering to overtake them at 30 knots. Off Agria Grabusa the *Havock* was still picking up the *Colleoni's* survivors.

24. H.M.S. *Havock* DAMAGED BY AIR ATTACK

Commander Courage in the *Havock*, as already mentioned, continued rescue work till 1237, when on the appearance of enemy aircraft he steered at full speed for Alexandria. At 1245 and 1250 the bombers in formations of three attacked her without success, doing no more than deluge her with water from near misses. A couple of hours later (1455) nine more aircraft attacked her off Gavdo Island in flights of three, the second flight scoring a near miss, splinters from which penetrated and flooded No. 2 boiler room. Two ratings received minor injuries. These attacks, which were made from levels between 3,000 and 4,000 feet, were countered with effective gunfire, which in two instances broke up the formations. The bomb that caused the damage

¹ The Commander-in-Chief also postponed the movements of convoy Aegean North 2, and the ships which had sailed from Port Said were ordered to return. An oiler convoy from Alexandria to Port Said was ordered to proceed unescorted.

appeared to be one of 250 lb., which burst six feet under water about ten feet from the ship's side. After losing way for five minutes the *Havock* picked up speed again and was able to proceed at 24 knots.

Captain Collins, on receiving the *Havock's* signal reporting her damage at about 1500, and finding to his surprise that she was some 75 miles to the northward,¹ turned back in the *Sydney* in support, after ordering the *Hero* and *Hasty* to continue on their course for Alexandria and informing the Commander-in-Chief, who detached the *Liverpool* to join the *Sydney*. Shortly after turning northward a heavy bombing attack was made on the *Sydney* without success. Realising as he proceeded north the danger of submarine or possibly surface attack, Captain Collins ordered the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* to join the *Havock* at sunset. The *Sydney* made contact with the *Havock* at about 1640 and took station a mile astern of her; as she did so Commander Courage signalled: "Thank you. I hope your H.A. is as good as your L.A."—a happy allusion to the *Sydney's* prowess in the surface action combined with a heartfelt desire in the present circumstances.

Meanwhile the *Hyperion* and *Ilex*, having been unable to rendezvous with the *Sydney* (they had been steering further to the eastward than the cruiser) were proceeding to Alexandria. When the *Havock's* report of being damaged was received, Commander Nicolson turned back to her assistance, but later (1545) learning that the *Sydney* had also turned back, resumed his former course until 1608, when he received Captain Collins' signal to join the *Havock* at sunset. After the junction was effected at 1840, the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* formed a screen ahead of the *Havock* on course 150°, speed 20 knots. The last bombing attacks of the day occurred between 1845 and 1848, doing no damage. At 2100 the *Sydney* parted company to rendezvous with the 7th Cruiser Squadron the destroyers continuing for Alexandria.

25. RETURN TO ALEXANDRIA

Little remains to be told.

As no further information of the *Bande Nere* came in during the afternoon of the 19th July, the Commander-in-Chief decided that at 2100 all forces should return to Alexandria. The *Warspite's* aircraft was catapulted at 1700 to search the Tobruk area, but was obliged to make a forced landing to the eastward of the port, and the *Jervis* was detached to search for it.

Tobruk spent a disturbed night. Aircraft of Nos. 55 and 211 Squadrons, R.A.F., carried out bombing attacks on the shipping there and claimed several hits. At 0240, 20th, six aircraft of No. 824 Squadron, F.A.A., from the *Eagle* made a successful moonlight torpedo attack, encountering heavy barrage fire from all sides of the harbour, which damaged three aircraft, wounded an observer seriously and slightly wounded a pilot. Hits were claimed on three ships, and a sheet of flame from an oiler indicated that she carried petrol. Reconnaissance of Tobruk after the night raids showed the following ships were absent: one large cruiser, one destroyer and two merchant vessels.

Search for the *Warspite's* aircraft was continued by flying boats of 201 Group after dawn on 20th July without success.²

The Fleet entered harbour at Alexandria during the morning of the 20th, where all ships cheered the *Sydney* and Commander Nicolson's destroyers on

¹ Up till then Captain Collins had supposed that the *Havock* was with the *Hyperion* and *Ilex* a few miles astern and catching him up.

² An Italian report on 25th July, 1940 stated the crew was safe. They had swum ashore from their scuttled aircraft and been made prisoners.

their arrival. Immediate recognition¹ of the successful issue of this action was conveyed in a signal from the First Lord of the Admiralty, saying that His Majesty the King had awarded the C.B. to Captain Collins and a bar to the D.S.O. to Commander Nicolson, and "His Majesty has also asked me to send his personal congratulations to all concerned in this splendid achievement."

In his covering letter, dated 21st September, 1940, to the Admiralty, Sir Andrew Cunningham wrote:—

"The credit for this successful and gallant action belongs mainly to Captain J. A. Collins, C.B., R.A.N., who by his quick appreciation of the situation, offensive spirit and resolute handling of H.M.A.S. *Sydney*, achieved a victory over a superior force which has had important strategical effects. It is significant that, so far as is known, no Italian surface forces have returned into or near the Aegean since this action was fought."

26. REMARKS ON THE ACTION OFF CAPE SPADA

The action off Cape Spada was practically a duel between the *Sydney* and two adversaries, each of which was her equal in force, though the presence of the British destroyers undoubtedly influenced Admiral Casardi's tactics. Several points of interest emerge from the narrative.

It will be noted that this was one of the few surface actions of the war in which aircraft—either for reconnaissance, spotting or attacking—played no part. Admiral Casardi had not catapulted any of his aircraft in the early morning because he considered it too rough, and he also thought it certain that reconnaissance by shore-based aircraft over the area of the Aegean he had to pass through would have been arranged by Headquarters at Rhodes. The *Sydney* had no aircraft embarked—a circumstance characterised by Captain Collins as "unfortunate"; she had lost her aircraft at the bombardment of Bardia on 21st June, and a replacement had been damaged by bomb splinters before it could be embarked.

The initial mistake of the Italian Admiral in steering north and engaging the destroyers at long range instead of immediately chasing them and trying to overwhelm them with his superior weight of metal has been remarked on. It is true that the formation of the destroyers may well have looked like a screen for heavier craft; but if a superior force were always to hold off till perfectly certain of what *might* be out of sight beyond the enemy few surface actions would ever take place.² *Per contra* Captain Collins' unhesitating attack on a force practically double his strength, after having duly gauged the risks and taken steps to minimise them by keeping wireless silence and skillfully exploiting the advantage of surprise, achieved the success it deserved. The effect of the surprise was helped by the presence of the *Havock*, which, as he suspected, was mistaken by the enemy for a cruiser in the first shock of the attack. It is also of interest to note the encouragement Captain Collins derived from the Italians' early use of smoke, which he immediately recognised as evidence that his enemy was fighting with one eye over his shoulder.

Perhaps the Italians were particularly unfortunate in meeting the *Sydney*, which had been in action twice during the preceding three weeks. "I was thus," wrote Captain Collins, "in the happy position of taking a ship into action that had already experienced two successful encounters with the enemy."

¹ At a later date additional awards included: Officers, two D.S.O.s, two D.S.C.s, four Mentions in Despatches. Ratings, six D.S.M.s, eight Mentions.

² Admiral Casardi was presumably well aware of the advantage of speed he possessed over the British heavy ships of the Mediterranean Fleet.

The superiority of the *Sydney's* gunfire both for accuracy and rate was most marked throughout the action.¹

The shooting of the Italians was poor. Though described as accurate for range at first, it was slow, erratic and spasmodic, and fell off under punishment. It is remarkable that between them the two enemy ships only succeeded in scoring a single hit. Any advantage they might have had from superior speed was discounted by their violent zig-zagging, which enabled the *Sydney* to keep the range steady, while opening her "A" arcs.

"The destroyers also were ably handled and fought"² both in retirement and on turning back immediately after sighting the *Sydney* at right angles to the enemy's course—a movement that possibly prevented the Italians from trying to escape to the eastward.³

To sum up, this little action well illustrates the value and application of almost all the principles of war. The importance of having the *aim* clearly defined comes out in Captain Collins' deliberate decision the night before the action as to his principal aim—which the operation orders issued to him had left a little ambiguous—and his adherence to it, viz., the support of the destroyer division. Thus, when the enemy cruisers were reported, he was in a position to fulfil his aim, and lost no time in steering to do so. As events developed the destruction of the enemy cruisers became the immediate object. Incidentally, this was the surest way of achieving the original aim. He had exceptional reason to be satisfied with the *Morale* of his ship's company; and—though he does not specifically state it in his report—he was probably equally satisfied from past experience that that of the enemy was not too good. *Offensive action* (which seems to have been rather lost sight of by the Italians) was the keynote of his tactics; but he did not forget *Security*. He was about to attack a very superior force, and he "determined to make full use of *Surprise*,"⁴ in order to redress the balance—so far as might be—in his favour. Such weight did he give to the importance of surprise that he deliberately accepted some risk of failing to concentrate with the destroyers, through their ignorance of his position. This risk—which was much felt by Captain Collins at the time—was more apparent than real, and as things turned out, thanks to the intelligent *Co-operation* of Commander Nicolson, *Concentration of force* was effected most efficiently at the critical moment.

Thereafter, the action became a chase, in which the Italians had the legs of the British, and were bound to get away, except for a speed-reducing hit such as happened to the *Colleoni*; but it is worth noting that after she had been winged, Captain Collins left her to be finished off by some of the destroyers and he himself with the others at once followed up his success by pressing on in chase of the *Bande Nere* (*Economy of Effort* and *Maintenance of the aim*). Nor did he abandon the chase till lack of ammunition and his obvious inability to catch her rendered further pursuit useless.

¹ "*Sydney's* gunnery narrative . . . shows the results obtainable by an efficient control team backed by good material, and it should be given the weight due to the experience of a ship which has had the unique opportunity of firing 2,200 main armament rounds in action in 6 weeks."—C.-in-C., Med., 0903/0710/30/2 of 21st September 1940 (M.020932/40).

² C.-in-C., Med., 0903/0710/30/2 of 21st September 1940.

³ "The manner in which Commander (D) brought his Division into action, after having heard nothing of me until I made my first enemy report at 0827, was most reassuring. The division appeared on my disengaged bow, steering a course to pass ahead of me and practically at right angles to the enemy's course. It was evident that Commander Nicolson had on sighting me anticipated my order to close and attack the enemy with torpedoes". Report by C.O., H.M.A.S. *Sydney* (in M.020932/40).

⁴ Report by C.O., H.M.A.S. *Sydney* (in M.020932/40).

CHAPTER III

(Battle Summary No. 10)

Operation M.B.8 and F.A.A. Attack on Taranto, November 1940

27. GENERAL SITUATION, MEDITERRANEAN, NOVEMBER 1940

DURING THE FIVE months of war with Italy, the British Fleet, or portions of it, had made some 16 sweeps into the Central Mediterranean. Varying in length from three to seven days, these had produced little result, for only on three occasions was the Italian Fleet found to be at sea. Minor surface forces had been engaged on other occasions and losses had been inflicted on the enemy, but the only encounter between the battlefleets had been in the partial action of 9th July, off Calabria. It had been little more than a distant exchange of fire but had apparently been enough to reduce the Italian Fleet to a state of inactivity.

There remained, however, two areas of the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas, where Mussolini might still expect to retain some degree of command, for in those waters he could rely on superior air power and numerous submarines. Safe in the seemingly secure shelter of Taranto, he doubtless hoped that the Italian Fleet would dominate the Greek campaign until the day when it could participate in his triumphal progress to Athens.

At the beginning of November, 1940, the situation in the Mediterranean was governed by the new circumstances arising from Italy's unwarranted attack on Greece on 28th October. In answer to the latter's appeal for assistance, immediate steps were taken to concert measures of action with the Greek authorities, naval, military and air.

Foremost among these was the establishment of a fuelling base for the fleet and aircraft at Suda Bay and for the transport of troops and stores to Crete and supplies to the Piraeus. Preliminary movements had been completed between 29th October and 3rd November, the only enemy interference being a heavy air attack on Suda Bay and Canea on the 1st November, in which no damage was done to the ships and two aircraft were shot down. An attack on a force under Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell, who had succeeded Admiral Tovey as Vice-Admiral Light Forces, by four torpedo aircraft on 2nd November had proved equally fruitless.

The main Italian Fleet was at Taranto, and on 27th October it was reported to consist of five battleships, three 8-inch cruisers, six 6-inch cruisers and a number of destroyers. The possibility of attacking this fleet in harbour had been carefully studied but in the case of torpedo-carrying aircraft was considered feasible only if the fleet lay in an open anchorage.

28. OPERATION M.B.8: OBJECTS

The British Fleet in the Mediterranean consisted on 31st October of four battleships, two aircraft carriers, six cruisers, two A.A. ships, 22 destroyers¹ and 15 submarines. It had been decided to reinforce it with the battleship *Barham*, the cruisers *Glasgow* and *Berwick* and three destroyers, all of which were to embark military reinforcements for the garrison at Malta. Their passage from Gibraltar was to be covered by Force "H" (Operation "Coat") and operations in the Western Mediterranean were to be directed by the Flag Officer commanding that force (Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville).

Convoys were waiting, too, for passage to and from Malta; the Government considered it imperative to hold Crete, and reinforcements, stores, guns and fuel had to be carried to Suda Bay; personnel and fuel also to the Piraeus for the R.A.F. bombers in Greece. In view of these commitments, the Commander-in-Chief decided to take up a central position with the battlefleet so as to cover the various convoy movements and at the same time ensure a junction with the reinforcements coming to him.

This was the basis of Operation M.B.8 which included the passage of reinforcements from Gibraltar (Operation "Coat") and ended with an air attack on Taranto (Operation "Judgment") and a raid by light forces into the Strait of Otranto. Although preliminary movements began on 4th November, the 6th November was to be the starting day (Day one).

29. OPERATION M.B.8: FORCES

The fleet was organised for this operation in the following forces:—

- FORCE "A" Battleships *Warspite* (flag, C-in-C.), *Malaya* (flag, Rear-Admiral Rawlings), *Valiant*; aircraft carrier *Illustrious* (flag, Rear-Admiral Lyster, R.A.(A)); 3rd C.S. *Gloucester* (flag, Rear-Admiral Renouf), *York*; destroyers *Hyperion*, *Havock*, *Hero*, *Hereward*, *Hasty*, *Ilex* (2nd D.F.) *Decoy*, *Defender* (20th Div.), *Nubian*, *Mohawk*, *Janus*, *Juno*, *Jervis* (14th D.F.).
- FORCE "B" Cruisers *Ajax*, *Sydney*. To take troops and equipment from Port Said to Suda Bay and there get the Bofors guns mounted. *Sydney* to join Force "A". *Ajax* to be guardship at Suda Bay till relieved by *Calcutta*, then join Force "A".
- FORCE "C" Cruiser *Orion* (flag, Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell, V.A.L.F.) To take R.A.F. stores and personnel to the Piraeus, then to Suda Bay.
- FORCE "D" (Convoy Escort Force) battleship *Ramillies*; A.A. ships, *Coventry*, *Calcutta*; destroyers *Vampire*, *Voyager*, *Waterhen* (10th D.F.), *Dainty*, *Diamond*, *Wryneck* (A.A. ship); trawlers *Kingston Coral* (A.N.6), *Sindonis*; minesweeper, *Abingdon* to escort Convoy A.N.6 to Suda Bay.
- FORCE "F" Reinforcements for Mediterranean Fleet: battleship *Barham* (700)²; cruisers *Berwick* (750) *Glasgow* (400); destroyers *Griffin* (50), *Greyhound* (50), *Gallant* (50). Attached from Force "H" to Force "F" to proceed as far as Malta, then to return to Gibraltar, destroyers *Faulknor* (50), *Fortune* (50) *Fury* (50).
- FORCE "H" Aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* (flag, Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville); cruiser *Sheffield*; destroyers *Duncan*, *Isis*, *Foxhound*, *Forester*, *Fire Drake*.

¹ Including one A.A. (*Wryneck*).

² Figures in brackets give the number of military personnel on board.

The *Eagle*, aircraft carrier, was unable to accompany the fleet and remained at Alexandria.

The total British forces employed were:—

	B.	A/C C.	Cr.	D.	M.S.	Tr.
Force "A"	3	1	2	13	—	—
Force "B"	—	—	2	—	—	—
Force "C"	—	—	1	—	—	—
Force "D"	1	—	2	6	1	3
Force "F"	1	—	2	6	—	—
Force "H"	—	1	1	5	—	—
TOTAL	5	2	10	30	1	3

30. CONVOYS AND AIR RECONNAISSANCE

There were four convoys waiting to sail. Firstly, M.W.3 (Malta, West 3) to proceed from Alexandria to Malta. It consisted of five ships: the *Waiwera* (12,435 tons), *Devis* (6,054 tons), *Plumleaf* (5,916 tons), *Volo* (1,587 tons) and *Rodi* (3,333 tons), the last three carrying cased petrol. This convoy was to be joined by two ships for Suda Bay—the *Brisbane Star* (12,791 tons) carrying eight mobile 3·7-inch A.A. guns and motor transport, and the *Bramble Leaf* (5,917 tons) with fuel and petrol. The speed of the slowest ship was 11½ knots.

Secondly, there was Convoy A.N.6 (Aegean, North 6) consisting of three ships carrying petrol and fuel from Egypt to Greece. They were the Dutch s.s. *Abinda* (3,359 tons), the *Pass of Balmaha* (758 tons), the *British Sergeant* (5,868 tons). The speed was 8½ knots. Other ships were to be added as ordered by the Senior British Naval Officer, Canal Area, provided their speed was not less than 8½ knots.

Thirdly, there was Convoy M.E.3 (Malta, East 3) of four large ships, empty, from Malta to Alexandria—the *Memnon* (7,506 tons), the *Lanarkshire* (9,816 tons), the *Clan Macaulay* (10,492 tons) and the *Clan Ferguson* (7,347 tons). (All 15-knot ships.)

The monitor *Terror* and the destroyer *Vendetta* were also awaiting passage from Malta to Suda Bay where the *Terror* was to act as a harbour defence ship.

Fourthly, there was A.S.5 (Aegean, South 5) to be made up of ships of over 8 knots speed, proceeding from Greece or Turkey to Egypt.

Arrangements were made with A.O.C. Mediterranean for air reconnaissance in the Ionian Sea and at Taranto on 6th and 7th November; for the same at daylight on the line Zante-Malta on 8th–12th November, when the Malta convoy would be between Crete and Malta; also in the Sicily-Tunis area and along the north coast of Sicily on 9th November when Force "F" with reinforcements would be approaching from the west. The A.O.C., 201 Group, was asked to supplement these arrangements by the provision of reconnaissance ahead of the convoys to Malta and the Piraeus.

31. CONVOY A.N.6 SAILS FOR THE AEGEAN

The operation commenced on 4th November with the sailing of three ships of A.N.6 from Port Said. It was escorted by a minesweeper and two trawlers, but, owing to the breakdown of the latter the *Dainty* and two other trawlers, the *Kingston Coral* and *Sindonis*, were sent off from Alexandria to take their place. They picked the convoy up on the Egyptian coast on the 5th; the next day the A.A. ship *Calcutta* and the *Pass of Balmaha* joined them and Convoy M.W.3

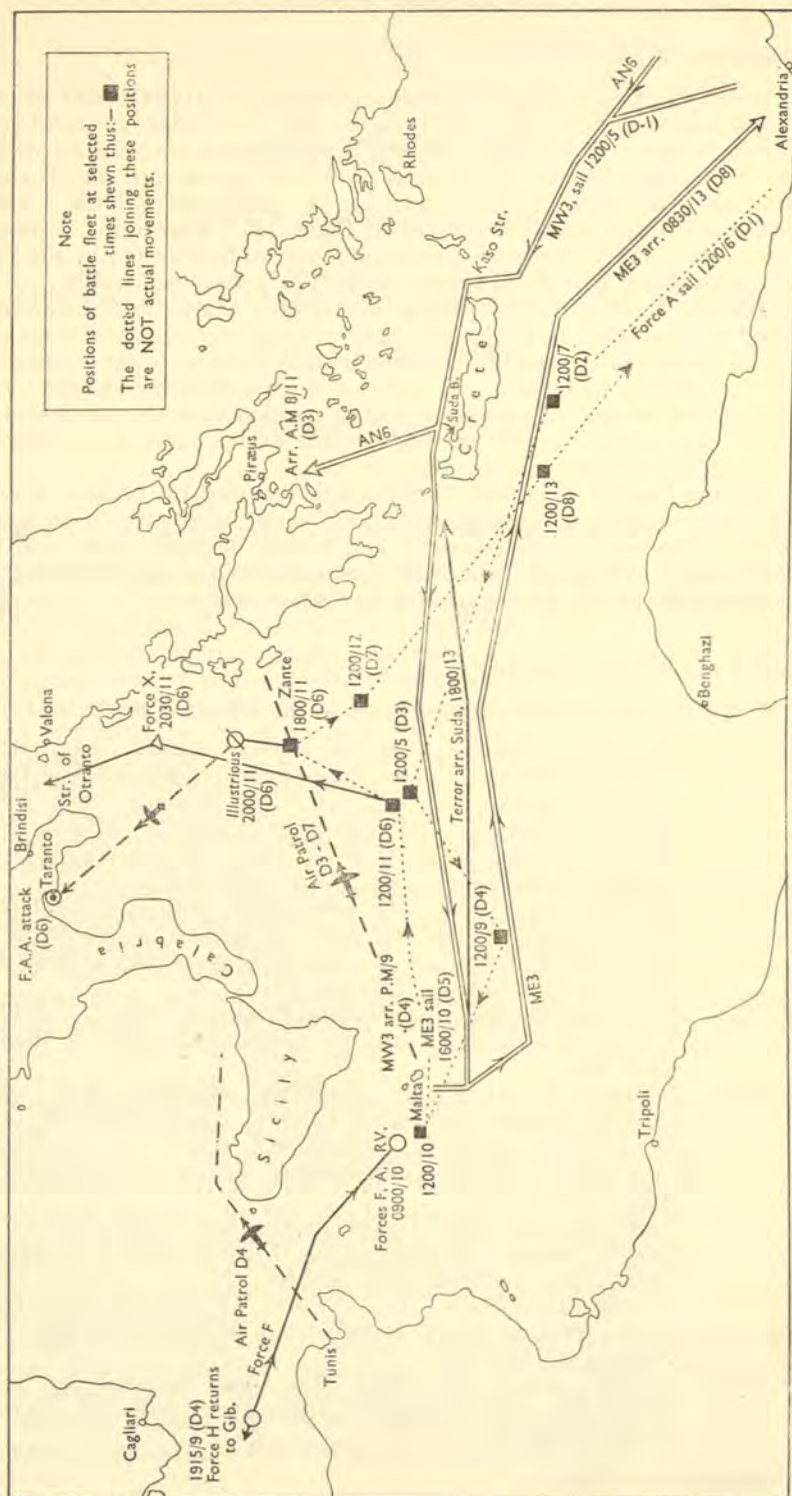


Fig. 5. OPERATION M.B.3 AS PLANNED

at 1500, 6th,¹ passed them going some $2\frac{1}{2}$ knots faster. A.N.6, numbering by that time seven ships,² went steadily on, delayed by its slow trawler escort which could go only 7 knots. A bright moon was shining as they made their way through Kaso Strait, east of Crete. The *Calcutta* went on ahead to act as S.N.O. at Suda Bay where there was much to be done—a boom to be laid, A.A. guns to be mounted and an airfield to set up.³

The convoy steamed on along the north coast of Crete and arrived safely at the Piraeus with its anxiously-awaited load of stores and petrol. It had seen nothing of enemy aircraft or submarines.

32. C-IN-C. AND CONVOY M.W.3 FOR MALTA

Convoy M.W.3 consisting of five ships for Malta and two for Suda Bay left Alexandria on 5th November, with an escort of one A.A. ship (*Coventry*) and three destroyers. Making $11\frac{1}{2}$ knots it passed A.N.6 off Kaso Strait, detaching later the two ships, *Brisbane Star* and *Bramble Leaf*, for Suda Bay, where they arrived on 7th November with the important loading of A.A. guns. The remainder passing north of Crete passed through Antikithera Channel and at 1800, 7th, were some 40 miles south of Cape Matapan ($35^{\circ} 44' N.$, $22^{\circ} 41' E.$) proceeding westward.

Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell was to examine the situation at the Piraeus and in Crete. Having embarked R.A.F. personnel and stores for Athens the *Orion* sailed from Alexandria at 0900, 6th, arriving at the Piraeus at 0930, 7th. There the Vice-Admiral had a long consultation with the Greek authorities before proceeding to Suda Bay to examine the defences there.

The Commander-in-Chief with the *Warspite*, *Illustrious*, *Valiant*, *Malaya*, *Ramillies* and destroyers had left Alexandria at 1300, 6th, steering to the westward. The *Ajax* and *Sydney* (Force "B") had sailed on 4th November for Port Said where they embarked the H.Q., 14th Infantry Brigade, a light and a heavy A.A. battery and administrative troops for Crete. After disembarking them at Suda Bay on the 6th, they joined the Commander-in-Chief.⁴ At 1200, 8th, the fleet was half-way between Crete and Malta (in $35^{\circ} 27' N.$, $18^{\circ} 46' E.$) when Convoy M.W.3 was sighted ten miles to the south-west and the fleet took up a covering position to the north of it. At 1230, 8th, an enemy reconnaissance aircraft reported the convoy and was chased off by Gladiators. The fleet was then some 180 miles from Sicily and at 1520 another reconnaissance aircraft appeared and was driven off. An hour later seven bombers, S.79s, appeared on the scene: they were attacked by three Fulmars who shot down two and forced the remainder to jettison their bombs and make off.

At 0920, 9th, the *Ramillies* and three destroyers were detached to take the convoy on to Malta, while the Commander-in-Chief remained some 100 miles to the south-eastward of the island and the 3rd C.S. (*Gloucester* and *York*) and 7th C.S. (*Ajax* and *Sydney*) proceeded to carry out sweeps to the northward. No air searches were carried out at this time as the weather was overcast and squally. Between 1048 and 1550, 9th, enemy aircraft were reported four times and continued to shadow throughout the day, one of them (a Cant. 506) being shot down at 1640 by a Fulmar. At 1219, a Swordfish, just after taking off

¹ Zone minus 2 Time is used throughout.

² *Mandalay*, *British Sergeant*, *Abinda*, *Hannah Molter*, *Odysseus*, *Pass of Balmaha*, and a Turkish gunboat.

³ *Calcutta* submitted that trawlers with such limited speed as 7 knots should not be sent on escort duty. Also that *British Sergeant* and *Pass of Balmaha* which were to proceed independently to Suda Bay had not been informed of the swept channel and did not know that nets had been laid. This entailed a lot of complicated signals to ships without a signal staff.

⁴ *Sydney* at 1700, 7th November and *Ajax* at 1700, 8th.

on A/S patrol, made a forced landing near the *Warspite*, the crew being rescued by the *Jervis*.

33. JUNCTION WITH REINFORCEMENTS

At 2100, 9th November, the fleet shaped course for the rendezvous 40 miles west of Gozo ($36^{\circ} 8' N.$, $13^{\circ} 26' E.$) where it had been arranged to meet the reinforcements from Gibraltar (Force "F"). There seem to have been submarines following it, for at 0010, in $35^{\circ} 13' N.$, $15^{\circ} 25' E.$, two heavy explosions were heard in the *Warspite*, thought later, on the evidence of Italian broadcasts, to have been torpedoes fired at the fleet. Aircraft were flown off at 0700, 10th, to search a sector between 315° and 045° ; one of them crashed into the sea shortly after flying off, the crew being picked up by the destroyer *Nubian*. The 3rd C.S. (*Gloucester* and *York*) and the 7th C.S. (*Ajax* and *Sydney*) rejoined the flag at 0715. Three hours later the *Barham* and Force "F" were met at the appointed rendezvous. Force "H" (the *Ark Royal*, *Sheffield*, *Glasgow* and six destroyers) after carrying out Operation "Crack"—the bombing of Cagliari on 8th November—had accompanied it as far as Sardinia and had parted from it at 1915, 9th, in $37^{\circ} 55' N.$, $9^{\circ} 8' E.$, 165 miles west of Sicily.

The *Berwick*, carrying some 750 troops and ten Bofors guns for Malta, and the *Glasgow*, 400 troops, with the *Griffin*, *Greyhound*, *Gallant* and *Faulknor* went on with all despatch to Malta to disembark the troops from their crowded decks.

At noon on the 10th, the Commander-in-Chief was in $35^{\circ} 55' N.$, $13^{\circ} 30' E.$, some 40 miles west of Malta. Danger was lurking in the air; shadowers were sighted and at 1230 one of them (a Cant. 501) was shot down. The approach of an enemy formation was detected; about an hour later ten bombers appeared and at 1330 attacked in two formations from about 14,000 ft. Intercepted and engaged by Fulmar fighters who disabled one, they dropped about 25 bombs at random without doing any damage to the battlefleet which was awaiting them in a loose formation.

At 1500, Convoy M.E.3 (four ships) which had left Malta at 1330 for Alexandria escorted by the *Ramillies*, *Coventry*, *Decoy* and *Defender*, was sighted away to the eastward. The *Terror* and *Vendetta* which left Malta the same day were on their way independently to Suda Bay. The convoy was probably attacked that night by a submarine, for at 0310, 11th, the *Ramillies*¹ felt three explosions and an Italian broadcast reported a successful attack by a submarine. Actually no ship was hit. The *Ramillies'* convoy made the passage at 14.7 knots and reached Alexandria safely.

The Commander-in-Chief and the fleet went on to the eastward. At noon on 11th November, he was half-way between Malta and Crete (in $36^{\circ} 10' N.$, $18^{\circ} 30' E.$). Here the *Orion* (Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell) rejoined the flag. After visiting the Piraeus Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell had proceeded to Suda Bay to examine the situation on the spot. He arrived at 0700, 9th. Much—very much—remained to be done. Guns, net defence, A.A. guns, ammunition dumps, coal, water, security, medical arrangements, all were calling for labour and transport, and the Navy and Royal Marines were right in the forefront.² Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell left at 1630, 10th, to rejoin the flag.

The convoy operations were over; the two other tasks remained—the air attack on Taranto and the raid on Otranto Strait. The raid was to be carried out by a force (temporarily termed Force "X") consisting of the

¹ In $34^{\circ} 43' N.$, $16^{\circ} 8' E.$

² See Appendix L.

cruisers *Orion* (flag), *Sydney* and *Ajax* with the destroyers *Nubian* and *Mohawk*. At 1310, 11th, Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell proceeded with it towards Otranto Strait. Later in the day, at 1800 the carrier force under Rear-Admiral Lyster in the *Illustrious* with the 3rd C.S. (*Gloucester*, *Berwick*, *Glasgow* and *York*) and four destroyers¹ was also detached and made for a position 40 miles west of Cephalonia, while the Commander-in-Chief with the remainder of the fleet took up a position to cover the two operations.

34. TARANTO: CONDITIONS AND PLAN OF F.A.A. ATTACK (Plan 7)

Taranto, lying in the gulf of that name, some 320 miles from Malta, is the finest naval port in Italy. The inner harbour, entered by a narrow channel, called "the canal", is completely landlocked and immune from surface torpedo attack; the large outer harbour, open to the westward, is protected by long breakwaters from surface attack. The Italians were fully alive to the danger of air attack and had taken every precaution that occurred to them to guard against this menace. These included numerous A.A. batteries, with reporting stations and searchlights, balloon barrages, anti-torpedo nets round the ships, and a carefully worked out plan for co-ordinating A.A. fire of shore batteries with that of the ships. Details of the defences will be found in Appendix H: suffice it to note here that it was a first-class modern defended port and that its defenders were kept fully on the alert.

The possibility of attacking it with torpedo bombers had been carefully studied, but it was not till the arrival of the *Illustrious* that the project became practicable. Initiated originally on instructions from the Admiralty it was intended to be subsidiary to the passage of reinforcements to the Mediterranean Fleet (Operation "Coat"). Its success depended chiefly on three factors—first, an accurate and timely reconnaissance, giving the exact location of the enemy ships, which did not become possible till the arrival of Glenn Martin aircraft at Malta; second, an undetected approach necessitating in the case of Swordfish the use of long range tanks, which were not available till the arrival of the *Illustrious* early in September; third, a sufficient standard of efficiency in night flying which was not reached till mid-October. An attack planned for the night of 21st October had to be deferred on account of a fire in the *Illustrious*' hangar which destroyed or damaged a number of aircraft. It was hoped to carry it out on the night of 30th–31st October, when the fleet was off the coast of Greece, but again it had to be deferred as there was no moon and the crews had had very little practice in the use of flares. These successive postponements were not, however, without their compensations, for the latest photographs by the R.A.F. revealed the existence of balloons and nets, a knowledge of which was of the greatest value in planning the actual attack.

A plan had been drawn up by Rear-Admiral Lyster (28th October 1940, amended 6th November 1940) embodying the following proposals for an attack on the Italian main fleet in Taranto,² numbering four to six battleships, five cruisers and 20 destroyers:—

- (a) A moonlight torpedo attack against battleships and cruisers in the outer harbour (Mar Grande) simultaneously with dive-bombing attacks on ships in the inner harbour (Mar Piccolo).

¹ *Hyperion*, *Ilex*, *Hasty*, *Havock*.

² This plan was substantially the same as a plan worked out by Rear-Admiral Lyster when captain of the *Glorious* by direction of Admiral Sir Dudley Pound (then C.-in-C., Mediterranean) at the time of the Munich crisis in September 1938, when it appeared quite probable that war would break out at any moment with Italy on the side of Germany. Admiral Lyster subsequently remarked that he was "fortunate in having planned an attack in detail in peace time and carried it out in war time".

- (b) The torpedo attack to be made from the west and towards the moon, the date depending on a suitable direction of the moon.
- (c) The carrier force not to be far north of the line Malta–Kithera before dark; the run to the north to be made before moonrise; aircraft to fly off as soon as possible after 2100; not to fly more than 400 miles; to fly off and land on in moonlight.

Any night from the 11th to the 19th November was suitable for these conditions.

The carrier force should be detached after dark to reach a flying-off position about 60 miles west-south-west of Cephalonia¹ and aircraft should fly on in a position 20 miles west of Cephalonia. A maximum striking force should be employed consisting of 30 Swordfish in two ranges of 15 each; in each range nine to be armed with torpedoes (to attack battleships), five with bombs to dive-bomb cruisers and destroyers and one with bombs to attack as a diversion from the east.

Enemy action might take the form of air, surface or submarine attack against the carrier force and of A.A. fire against the aircraft. The distance of the carrier force—240 miles by day and 150 miles at night—should in itself prove a sufficient protection against air attack. Surface attack could be countered by a strong cruiser escort or by patrol of the area or by keeping well to the eastward if the enemy was out. The A.A. fire likely to be encountered at Taranto was not considered a serious deterrent. As searchlights at a low angle might dazzle the torpedo droppers, a distraction should be provided to keep them up. Photographic reconnaissance would be required on each day prior to the attack and it would be necessary to have a clearance search of the Ionian Sea during the day and patrols of the Strait of Otranto, the Gulf of Taranto, and Messina, up to midnight.

Some modifications had to be introduced into this plan arising from lack of aircraft, a revised date of attack and the discovery by photographic reconnaissance of balloons and net obstructions in the enemy defences. First, there were not 30 aircraft available. The *Eagle* was to have co-operated in the attack but was unable to take part owing to serious defects in her petrol system caused by near misses earlier in the war.² Five of her T.S.R. with eight complete crews were therefore transferred to the *Illustrious*; but three T.S.R.s had unfortunately been lost³ during preliminary operations on 9th–11th November. The attack had therefore to be made by the *Illustrious* alone and the number of aircraft taking part had to be reduced to 21 in two flights, one of 12 and the other of nine.

Further it was considered unnecessary for the purpose of "surprise" to keep to the southward until after dark, and it was decided to carry out the operation earlier in order to lessen the risk of attack by surface craft. It was decided, too, to use flares and, on account of the number of suitable dropping places being restricted by balloon and net obstructions, only six torpedo aircraft were to be used in each attack.

In the final dispositions for attack it was decided that the *Illustrious* and her escort were to be in a position 270°, 40 miles⁴ from Kabbo point, Cephalonia, by 2000 on 11th November, when the first range of 12 aircraft would fly off followed by a second range of nine at 2100. Aircraft were to land on commencing about 0100 12th in a position 270°, 20 miles from Kabbo Point

¹ i.e., in about 37° 43' N., 19° 10' E., about 200 miles south-east of Taranto. (See Appendix K.)

² Heavily bombed on 11th July 1940.

³ The crews were all saved. Investigation proved the loss to be due to contaminated petrol from the tanker *Toneline*.

⁴ i.e. 38° 12' N., 19° 30' E.

(38° 12' N., 19° 47' E.). The first range was to pass up the centre of the Gulf of Taranto and approach the harbour from the south-west. The primary attack was to be by six torpedo bombers on battleships in the Mar Grande, preceded by flares dropped along the eastern side and by dive-bomber attacks on cruisers and destroyers in the Mar Piccolo (see Plan 7). A proposal that the Wellington bombers at Malta should attack the dockyard and ships in Mar Piccolo between 2030 and 2115 was not adopted.

35. AIR ATTACK ON TARANTO (OPERATION "JUDGMENT") (Plan 7)

It was 1800, 11th November, when Rear-Admiral Lyster in the *Illustrious* with the four cruisers and four destroyers parted company, while the Commander-in-Chief took up a covering position¹ to the southward. The latest photographs had arrived from Malta, and confirmed the fact that no important changes had taken place at Taranto, except the arrival of another battleship during the afternoon. The *Illustrious* reached the flying off position and the first range of 12 aircraft were all away by 2040, heading for Taranto 170 miles away. The second range of nine aircraft got away an hour later (2134); one of them (LF5) damaged its wing fabric and had to be struck below for repairs, but so keen was the crew to take part that it got away only 24 minutes late.

The surface wind was light and variable, the upper winds westerly, about 10 knots, with 8/10 thin cloud at 8,000 feet. The moon was three-quarters full, bearing nearly south.

The first flight entered a cloud at 2115, and four aircraft got separated.² The Squadron Commander (Lieutenant-Commander Williamson) continued his way with eight (five torpedo, two flare droppers and one bomber). At 2252 they sighted the flash of guns³ and four minutes later the flare droppers were detached to lay their flares along the east side of the harbour.

On the eastern side of Mar Grande, behind the breakwater (Diga di Tarantola) and a zereba of nets were lying six Italian battleships—two *Littorios* (35,000 tons) and four *Cavours* (23,620 tons).⁴ They were moored three-quarters of a mile from the eastern shore, which was encircled with barrage balloons. To seaward of them were three 8-inch gun cruisers and eight destroyers.

About 2300 the flares of the first aircraft began to illuminate the harbour. The Italians were on the alert, and barrage fire from the fortress batteries opened at once, in which some of the battleships joined with their machine guns a few minutes later. The torpedo attacks developed at about 2315. Three aircraft coming in from the west over San Pietro Island made for the battleships on the south side and fired at the *Cavour*. One torpedo hit and a great explosion flamed up alongside her. The other two passed close ahead and ran on towards the *Doria*. Heavy A.A. fire was soaring up from the batteries on San Pietro, the cruisers and destroyers, and one aircraft (L4A)

¹ At noon, 12th November, the C.-in-C. was in 36° 40' N., 28° 8' E., E., miles 95 south of the flying off position.

² Narratives of individual aircraft will be found in Appendix J.

³ The Italians received reports of "suspicious noises from the air" at 2225, and the defences were alerted. Presumably the noises came from the first flight. Twenty-five minutes later (2250) the nearest observation posts again reported noises, and the A.A. batteries of the San Vito zone commenced barrage fire towards the south and south-east.

⁴ At the time of the attack these ships could of course not be accurately identified, except as to their class; but it is now known how they were lying, and their actual names are given in this account.

was brought down, crashing into the sea near the floating dock.¹ Three others coming in from the north fired their torpedoes at the *Littorio*, one of which hit her starboard bow and another her port quarter. Within five minutes the torpedo attacks were over and all the aircraft except the one shot down had made their get-away. The bombing attacks lasted longer. The two flare droppers bombed the oil storage depot, and the remaining four aircraft attacked cruisers and destroyers in Mar Piccolo, and the seaplane base, where a large fire began to blaze.

By 2335 the last aircraft of the first flight had withdrawn; but barrage fire in all four quadrants continued, for by this time the second flight was approaching. They were only eight, as one had been obliged to return owing to a defect.² At 2355 two aircraft dropped flares and five minutes later the torpedo craft led by Lieutenant-Commander Hale came in from the north-west. Four fired torpedoes, two at the *Littorio*, one at the *Veneto* and one at the *Duilio*; one (E4H)³ which was shot down in the middle of Mar Grande, may have fired at the *Gorizia*. In these attacks, two torpedoes found their mark, one on the already twice hit *Littorio* and one on the *Duilio*. Of the remaining aircraft, the two flare droppers bombed the oil storage depot and the last bombed cruisers and destroyers in Mar Piccolo, obtaining a hit on the *Trento* with a bomb that failed to explode.

The torpedo bomber had justified its existence in no uncertain terms. In a first-class defended port, half the Italian battlefleet had been put out of action for six months or more, for the loss of two Swordfish and four officers,⁴ two of whom happily survived as prisoners of war.⁵ The bombers were not so successful; direct hits were scored on the *Trento* and destroyer *Libeccio*, but in each case the bomb failed to explode, as did several others—according to the Italians—which narrowly missed other ships in Mar Piccolo.

With the exception of the two aircraft which were missing, all the Swordfish had landed on by 0250, 12th November, and the *Illustrious* shaped course to rejoin the Commander-in-Chief at 0700. She was greeted by the flag signal: "*Illustrious* manoeuvre well executed"—a masterpiece of understatement.

¹ The crew of this aircraft (L4A), Lieut.-Commander Williamson and Lieutenant Scarlett, were quickly picked up by a boat from the dock. According to the destroyer *Fulmine*, which was well placed to witness the incident, it was this aircraft which obtained the hit on the *Cavour*.

² It lost its external overload tank at 2205, and the loose strap began to give trouble.

³ Neither of the crew of this aircraft, Lieutenants Bayley and Slaughter, survived.

⁴ These remarkably light losses are the more impressive when viewed in the light of the opposition encountered. From Italian sources, the ammunition expenditure from shore batteries was as follows:—

CANNON	4·09-inch	1,430 rounds
	4·02-inch	313 rounds
	3·05-inch	6,854 rounds
MACHINE-GUN	1·61-inch	931 rounds
	·83-inch	2,635 rounds
	·52-inch	698 rounds
	·32-inch	637 rounds
TOTAL		13,489 rounds

Ships' gunfire was confined to machine-guns; expenditure is unknown.

⁵ It is pleasant to record that these two officers were well treated by the Italian Navy, "in fact," to quote Lieut.-Commander Williamson, "we were almost popular heroes. Two nights after our raid the R.A.F. came over and we were put in an air raid shelter full of seamen. They all pressed cigarettes on us and towards the end of the raid about 20 of them sang 'Tipperary' for our benefit."

36. RESULTS OF F.A.A. ATTACK

A full appreciation of the results of the attack was not possible for some days. The extent of the damage could not be known to the pilots at the time, though enough had been observed to be able to pronounce the operation a success.

Photographs taken by reconnaissance aircraft from Malta in the course of the next few days showed clearly that three battleships had been hit. The *Littorio* was badly down by the bow, which was partly awash; on 14th November she had alongside her two naval auxiliaries, a large submarine, a tanker and several smaller craft. Actually, she had got off fairly lightly, considering that she had been hit by three torpedoes;¹ a dent in her starboard quarter may have been caused by a fourth, which was found unexploded, embedded in the mud beneath her. The *Cavour* to the south of her was in a worse state; she was abandoned and beached, with practically the whole of her decks underwater and with the after turret completely submerged.² The *Duilio*, north of the *Littorio*, had also been beached, and was attended by small craft and enclosed by nets;³ later removed for docking and repairs to Genoa, she was narrowly missed when that port was bombarded by Force "H" the following February.

The total number of torpedoes fired was eleven and the ships attacked as follows:—

TARGET	FIRST FORCE	SECOND FORCE	TOTAL FIRED	HITS
<i>Littorio</i>	1 (400 yd.) 1 (1,000 yd.)	1 (700 yd.) 1 (700 yd.)	4	3
<i>Veneto</i>	1 (1,300 yd.)	1 (500 yd.)	2	Nil
<i>Duilio</i>	Nil	1 (800 yd.)	1	1
<i>Cavour</i>	3 (700 yd.)	Nil	3	1
<i>Gorizia</i>	Nil	1	1	Nil
TOTAL	6	5	11	5

The results of the bombing attacks were not noticeable at the time. It is now known as already mentioned that the *Trento* and *Libeccio* received direct hits from bombs which failed to explode, and other ships were narrowly missed; according to the Italians few of these bombs exploded.

¹ Two in the first attack, one on the starboard bow which blew a hole 49 by 32 feet in the bulge abreast No. 1 6-inch turret, and the other on the port quarter, abreast the tiller flat (hole 23 by 5 feet). In the second attack a torpedo exploded at a very low level in the bulge on the starboard side, forward of the previous hit, blowing hole 40 by 30 feet. Repairs were not completed till the end of March 1941.

² Hit on the port bow under the foremost turret and seriously damaged by a torpedo in the first attack, which blew a hole 40 by 27 feet. Nos. 1 and 2 oil fuel tanks were flooded, with resultant difficulty in preventing flooding in adjacent compartments. The *Cavour* was towed towards the shore and abandoned at 0545, 12th November, settling down with her stern on the bottom at 0800. She was refloated in July 1941, and towed to Trieste, but was not repaired in time to take any further part in the war.

³ Hit on starboard side abreast of No. 1 5.25-inch mounting, at a depth of 29ft. 6in. Blew a hole 36 by 23ft. between Nos. 1 and 2 magazines, which were completely flooded. Repairs were not completed till mid-May 1941.

37. RAID INTO STRAIT OF OTRANTO, 11TH/12TH NOVEMBER (Plan 8)

Meanwhile, Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell with his force of three cruisers and two destroyers (Force "X") had proceeded into the Strait of Otranto with the object of "enheartening the Greeks and dealing the enemy a blow in his own waters." The particular objective was the Italian convoy which ran nightly across the Adriatic from Otranto, Brindisi and Bari. His force consisted of the cruisers *Orion*, *Sydney*, *Ajax* and the destroyers *Nubian* and *Mohawk*. Their orders were issued by signal in the forenoon of the 11th. They were to pass through position 39° 10' N., 19° 30' E., at 2030 that evening (south-west of Corfu), thence steering 340° at 25 knots till 2230, when speed would be reduced to 20 knots. At 0100, 12th (when they should be level with Brindisi), they were to turn round and rendezvous at 0800, 12th, in 38° 20' N., 19° 50' E. (off Cephalonia). The cruisers were to be in line ahead in close order with the destroyers two miles on either bow. All darkened ships were to be treated as hostile. Any ship becoming detached was to withdraw immediately to the southward. If illumination were necessary, star shell was to be used in preference to searchlight. In the event of a single merchant ship being met, the rear cruiser was to part company and deal with her. If a convoy was met, ships were not to keep rigid station but were to manoeuvre as necessary, maintaining touch.

Keeping his force concentrated on account of the bright moonlight, Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell steered a course up the middle of the Strait, passing some ten miles west of Fano Island. The sea was calm, wind force 1, sky seven-tenths cloud, and the moon three-quarters full, bearing S.W. His ships apparently escaped observation or detection by the reported hydrophone.¹ There was time enough to reach the line Brindisi to Valona but not the Bari-Durazzo line, and there remained a margin of only half an hour available for action against any ship sighted.

By 0100, 12th, the force had reached its northern limit. It was on its way back when at 0115 the *Mohawk* on the port bow of the *Orion* sighted darkened ships. They bore 120° about eight miles away and proved to be four merchant ships in convoy, escorted by a destroyer and torpedo-boat, steering to the north-westward towards Brindisi.

Increasing speed to 25 knots, the *Mohawk* made the alarm signal to the *Nubian*, and turned to 120° to close the enemy, opening fire at 0125 on the torpedo boat, at 4,000 yards range. A hit was obtained with the fourth salvo and the enemy turned away making smoke.

The *Orion*, which had sighted the enemy at the same time as the *Mohawk*, headed across the bows of the convoy and at 0128 opened fire with her 6-inch guns on the third ship while the 4-inch guns fired four salvos at the torpedo boat. The range was 6,400 yards, the bearing 088°. The merchant ship was badly damaged and set on fire; two torpedoes were fired at her, one of which hit and she was seen to sink. Star shell from the 4-inch were lighting up the target as the 6-inch guns shifted to the fourth ship bearing 063°, range 5,300 yards. Hit repeatedly, she was set on fire and abandoned by her crew, then hit by a torpedo (range 5,000 yards, bearing 012°), she settled by the stern.

The *Ajax*, sighting the convoy at 0125, had opened fire at 0130 on the destroyer, which passed astern out of effective range apparently unhit. Her guns then shifted to one of the merchant ships which was set ablaze. A second ship came under fire; a torpedo fired at her missed but she was hit by two salvos and left sinking.

¹ A remote-controlled hydrophone had been recently reported off C. Santa Maria di Leuca.

The *Sydney*, the last ship in the line, sighting five darkened ships as early as 0121 opened fire at 7,000 yards on the leading ship which was hit and set ablaze. Fire was shifted to the second ship from the right which was seen by the light of star shell (0132) to be turning away with shots falling all round her; then the destroyer, which was making smoke, came under fire. She drew ahead and fire was shifted to the original targets now bunched together, which were hit and lost to sight in the night. A torpedo track passed under the *Sydney* (0140). Fire was shifted to a vessel lying stopped which was under fire from the other ships and being badly hit. Course was altered to the southeast and at 0148 two torpedoes were fired at a ship to the right of the one on fire. At 0150 when the guns ceased fire, there were two ships in sight bearing 020° and 025° and one on fire bearing 349°, which was seen to sink at 0200.

The two destroyers had been equally busy. The *Nubian* at 0119 saw four merchant ships on the port bow, bearing 110° and opened fire (0131) at 8,000 yards on a light grey ship; then when she was on fire shifted to the one on her right.

The *Mohawk*, after her engagement with the torpedo boat, had fired on the second merchant ship from the left. The escorting ships had been lost to sight and the convoy was beginning to scatter. At 0145 land could be seen looming to the south-eastward. The *Nubian* was then forming up astern, and the *Mohawk* shifted target to the fourth ship from the left. The last ship, hit by a salvo aft, was lying stopped, emitting clouds of steam. The *Nubian* took over the target and the *Mohawk* was about to turn to starboard in order to form astern of her and attack the disabled ships with torpedoes, when at 0153 there came an order from the Vice-Admiral to steer 166°, 28 knots. The ships turned accordingly and the action was broken off.

Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell had received a signal¹ from the Naval Attaché, Ankara, conveying a report that the Italian Fleet intended to sail that night to bombard Corfu. The report was incorrect, but at the time suggested the unpleasant possibility of a strong force of cruisers in the Strait, waiting to cut them off. The convoy had been virtually destroyed and there was nothing more in view. Though smoke screens laid by the enemy and the blinding flash² of our own gunfire made it very difficult to assess results, one merchant ship—hit by a torpedo and gunfire—had been seen to sink, while two others were on fire, completely disabled and in a sinking condition. The fourth was last seen making for Valona, apparently on fire.³

At 0315 the *Ajax* reported a shadowing aircraft, which hung on to them till 0515, half an hour after the moon had set. Speed was maintained at 28 knots in order to get as far as possible before daylight from the enemy bases which had been stirred up during the night. It was 1100, 12th November, when in compliance with a signal passed by flying boat, the 7th Cruiser Squadron, having satisfactorily performed its task, rejoined the Commander-in-Chief.

¹ T.O.O.1936/11.

² Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell in his report referred to the immense advantage that would be conferred by the provision of flashless cordite for use at night. He also recommended that in future raids should be confined to nights of little or no moon and should be carried out by two sub-divisions of destroyers, each working in its own area with a dividing line up the middle of the Strait.

³ "The supporting force of cruisers should remain outside the Straits and should retire ahead of the raiding force so as to be in close support at daylight without risk of contact between these forces at night. As this raid will probably cause the enemy to establish patrols at the entrance to the Adriatic and to support them with striking forces, as was done in the last war, though not by the Italians, the raiding forces should be instructed to withdraw as soon as they have reason to suppose their presence has been detected."

⁴ *Catalani* (2,429 tons), *Capovado* (4,391), *Premula* (4,427), *Antonio Locatelli* (5,691). All were sunk. Total 16,938 G.R.T.

"The raid . . ." subsequently commented Sir Andrew Cunningham, "was a boldly executed operation into narrow waters where the enemy might well have been expected to be encountered in force. It succeeded in doing considerable damage to the enemy, and undoubtedly had considerable moral effect."

38. CONCLUSION OF OPERATION M.B.8

At noon, 12th November, the Commander-in-Chief was in 36° 40' N., 20° 8' E., between Greece and Sicily. He had been joined by Rear-Admiral Lyster with the Carrier Force and by Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell with Force "X". It was intended to repeat the air attack on Taranto, and the fleet remained in this area during the day, escaping detection from the air through the skilful action of three Fulmars, who shot down three Cants. before they could make reports. A striking force of 15 aircraft, consisting of six torpedo aircraft, seven dive-bombers and two flare droppers, was got ready for the purpose of a new attack¹ but the weather deteriorated and after consulting the R.A. (A) by signal the Commander-in-Chief decided to cancel the operation.

At 1800, 12th, the Commander-in-Chief shaped course for Alexandria; Rear-Admiral Rawlings (1st Battle Squadron), with the 2nd Division, *Malaya* and *Barham*, together with the *Ajax*, *Dainty*, *Diamond*, *Greyhound*, *Griffin* and *Gallant*, was detached to fuel at Suda Bay. The *York* and *Berwick* proceeded at best speed for Alexandria, on their way, at 0920, 13th, sighting a submarine which did not attack, in 32° 48' N., 26° 45' E. On arriving off Alexandria at 1745, 13th, their entry was delayed for half an hour by an air raid. Convoy M.E.3, which was being escorted by the *Ramillies*, arrived safely at Alexandria at 0645, 13th. Convoy A.S.5, which had left the Piraeus for Port Said, escorted by the destroyers *Wryneck* and the trawlers *Victorian* and *Sindonis*, was joined by the *Fiona* and *Chakla* at 0210, 12th, in 34° 48' N., 23° 46' E. After parting company with the *Wryneck* at 1100, 13th, the convoy was attacked at 1330 in 32° 55' N., 28° 17' E., by two S.79 aircraft with torpedoes, both of which missed. It arrived safely at Port Said on 15th November.

Meanwhile at noon, 13th, the Commander-in-Chief was south-west of Crete (34° 23' N., 23° 43' E.) The fleet was located during the afternoon by aircraft, and one shadower was possibly shot down; course was accordingly altered to 050° at 1600 and to 090° at 1800. An enemy air force was detected to the southward by radar but failed to find the fleet. During the whole course of Operation M.B.8 only one air attack—by high level bombing—was made on the fleet (see Section 33). This immunity was attributed by the Commander-in-Chief to effective fighter interception², and underlined the importance of the inclusion of an aircraft carrier in the fleet.

The fleet arrived at Alexandria without further incident at 0700, 14th November.

¹ The story goes that an Observer on being warned to stand by for this second attack remarked that after all they had only asked the Light Brigade to do it *once!*

² On 8th November one reconnaissance aircraft was shot down and a formation of seven S.79 bombers was subsequently intercepted and turned back 35 miles from the fleet, one S.79 being shot down and one damaged. On the 9th a reconnaissance aircraft was shot down. On the 10th a shadower was shot down and a bomber formation broken up; on the 12th three reconnaissance aircraft were shot down before they could make reports. On the 13th a Cant. 501 was engaged and apparently shot down and two aircraft made an abortive attack on Convoy A.S.5.

39. COMMENT AND REFLECTIONS, OPERATION M.B.8

Commenting on Operation M.B.8, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham remarked:—

“The operation (M.B.8) was originally initiated in the instructions of the Admiralty for the passage of the *Barham*, *Berwick* and *Glasgow* to reinforce the Mediterranean Fleet (Operation “Coat”). The period of the moon was also favourable for the execution of the oft-postponed Operation ‘Judgment’ (the attack on Taranto).

“Coming as it did shortly after the entry of Greece into the war there were also outstanding commitments in the way of passing supplies to Greece and the establishment of naval and military base forces and equipment at Suda Bay. These were in addition to the passage of convoys to and from Malta, which have always to be made when operations in the Central Mediterranean provide suitable cover.

“In addition, it was necessary to get H.M.S. *Terror*¹ away from Malta, to provide temporary defence at Suda Bay while the coast defence guns were being installed, and with a view to her ultimate employment on the flank of the army in Libya.

“Finally, it was decided to carry out a raid into the Straits of Otranto while the opportunity offered, with the object of enheartening the Greeks and of dealing an additional blow to the enemy in his own waters.

“It can therefore be seen that the operation became one of considerable complexity, covering a large area with a wide succession of subsidiary movements. Apart from the excellent results obtained in offensive action, perhaps the most surprising feature of the operation was the almost clockwise regularity with which the convoys ran, ships unloaded guns and material, and with which the rendezvous of widely dispersed units were reached at the appointed time.

“These results were only rendered possible by the good co-operation of the Naval, Army and Air Force authorities concerned at Suda Bay in the establishment of the base, whereby ships were released punctually to their duties; and not least by the good performance of merchant ships in convoys whose punctual arrivals contributed much to the success of the operation. The work of Malta in the rapid unloading of stores and troops and in the refuelling of destroyers was excellent.”

The Commander-in-Chief might well be satisfied with every part of the operations, but the palm must go to the F.A.A. Squadrons of the *Illustrious* and *Eagle*, operating from the *Illustrious*. The potentiality of the carrier, not merely as an indispensable component of a modern fleet, but as a mobile airfield capable of operating aircraft against objectives otherwise immune to air attack was—perhaps for the first time—fully demonstrated to the world. It is not too much to claim that the *Illustrious* on this occasion effected as radical a change in the naval strategical conditions in the Mediterranean as the Japanese carriers at Pearl Harbour² and the American carriers at Midway Island³ were to do in the Pacific in the not too distant future.⁴

Commenting on this, the first occasion on which the F.A.A. attacked an enemy base in the Mediterranean, Captain Boyd of the *Illustrious* made the following remarks:—

“The excellent photographic reconnaissance promoted by the Royal Air Force was a most important factor in the success of this operation. The accurate meteorological forecast from Malta was also most useful.

“There was considerable debate as to the wisdom of using Duplex pistols in such constricted waters. It was decided to run off 100 yards of the safety range and the battery resistance was removed to ensure that the torpedoes would remain

¹ Monitor (1915), two 15-inch, eight 4-inch, three 2-inch H.A.

² 7th December 1941.

³ 3rd—6th June 1942.

⁴ Admiral Lyster deeply regretted the unavoidable absence of the *Eagle*. “Her fine squadrons (instead of only a few representatives)” —he wrote in a private letter—“would have increased the weight of the attack considerably, and I believe would have made it devastating.”

dangerous on completion of their run. The decision to use them was indeed fortunate as the results could not have been obtained by any other weapon. To those whose faith in this weapon has remained unshaken the greatest honour is due and their faith has been amply justified by three battleships being either sunk or crippled by nine, or possibly eleven, 18-inch torpedoes.

“The attack was carried out under somewhat difficult conditions. Owing to the heavy Fleet programme no rehearsal had been possible. Aircraft from H.M.S. *Eagle* were embarked the day before leaving the harbour and had had no previous experience of landing on H.M.S. *Illustrious*'s deck, or of our controlled landings and the use of the barrier. A third obstacle was presented by the discovery that our petrol was contaminated, three Swordfish being lost on the preceding days from this cause. In spite of this, the zeal and enthusiasm of everyone to carry out this great enterprise was unabated and it is impossible to praise too highly those who in these comparatively slow machines made studied and accurate attacks in the midst of intense anti-aircraft fire.

“Although the proper function of the Fleet Air Arm may perhaps be the operation of aircraft against an enemy in the open sea it has been demonstrated before and repeated in no uncertain fashion by this success that the ability to strike unexpectedly is conferred by the Fleet Air Arm.

“It is often felt that this arm which has had a long struggle with adverse opinions, and its unspectacular aircraft is underestimated in its power. It is hoped that this victory will be considered a suitable reward to those whose work and faith in the Fleet Air Arm has made it possible.”

The Commander-in-Chief in his report remarked that the attack was

“admirably planned and the determined and gallant manner in which it was carried out reflects the highest credit on all concerned.

“This was the first occasion on which Duplex pistols were used in the Mediterranean. It is considered that the results achieved have proved the value of this weapon and that the many years of research and experiment devoted to its development have been well repaid.

“There can be little doubt that the crippling of half the Italian battlefleet is having and will continue to have, a marked effect on the course of the war. Without indulging in speculation as to the political repercussions, it is already evident that this successful attack has greatly increased our freedom of movement in the Mediterranean and has thus strengthened our control over the central area of this sea. It has enabled two battleships to be released for operations elsewhere while the effect on the morale of the Italians must be considerable.”

40. MESSAGE FROM H.M. THE KING

These operations marked the culminating point of the successes achieved in 1940 by the Mediterranean Fleet against an enemy superior in strength operating from his home bases.

Foremost amongst its achievements was the Fleet Air Arm attack on the Italian Fleet. A brilliantly conceived operation executed with skill and daring against a powerful fleet in a strongly defended anchorage, it merits a classic place in naval annals as an outstanding example of the strength of air power exercised by a fleet at sea.

The following message from H.M. The King was received by the Commander-in-Chief on the 18th November:—

“The recent successful operations of the Fleet under your command have been a source of pride and gratification to all at home. Please convey my warm congratulations to the Mediterranean Fleet, and in particular to the Fleet Air Arm on their brilliant exploit against the Italian warships at Taranto.”

CHAPTER IV

(Battle Summary No. 9)

Action off Cape Spartivento, Sardinia,

27th November 1940

41. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

WITHIN A FORTNIGHT of the events described in the last chapter, there occurred an action in the Western Mediterranean, off Cape Spartivento, Sardinia, between British forces under Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville and units of the Italian Navy under Admiral I. Campioni. The encounter took place during operations to ensure the passage of very important military stores and personnel through the Mediterranean to the Middle East. The safe passage of these reinforcements was Sir James Somerville's paramount consideration throughout and it is in the light of this liability that the action must be studied.¹

Once again the Italians, availing themselves of their superior speed, withdrew almost before action was joined, and little material damage was suffered by either side. But the British were thereby left free to pass the convoy through according to plan, and the operations contributed another nail in the coffin of Italian supremacy in the Mediterranean.

42. PLAN OF OPERATION "COLLAR"

The British units taking part in the operation, which was known as "Collar", were organised in three groups² as follows:—

¹ "In convoy defence there is only one object, namely THE SAFE AND TIMELY ARRIVAL OF THE CONVOY AT ITS DESTINATION"—*Fighting Instructions*, 1939, Art. 625. In mid-1941, the Section on "Convoy Defence" was amended. In this and later versions, including *Fighting Instructions*, 1947, "the safe and timely arrival of the convoy at its destination" remains the primary object or aim of the escort Commander but it is not so strongly emphasised, the words "there is only one object" being omitted.

² See Appendix M.

FORCE "B"		FORCE "F"	FORCE "D"
<i>Renown</i> (F.O.H.)		<i>Manchester</i>	<i>Ramillies</i>
<i>Ark Royal</i>		<i>Southampton</i>	<i>Newcastle</i>
<i>Sheffield</i>		<i>Hotspur</i>	<i>Coventry</i>
<i>Despatch</i> (Commodore) [West Indies]		<i>Peony</i>	<i>Berwick</i>
<i>Faulknor</i> (D.8)		<i>Salvia</i>	<i>Defender</i>
<i>Firedrake</i>		<i>Gloxinia</i>	<i>Greyhound</i>
<i>Forester</i>		<i>Hyacinth</i>	<i>Gallant</i>
<i>Fury</i>	<i>Encounter</i>	<i>Clan Forbes</i>	<i>Hereward</i>
<i>Duncan</i> (D.13)	<i>Kelvin</i>	<i>Clan Fraser</i>	<i>Diamond</i>
<i>Wishart</i>	<i>Jaguar</i>	<i>New Zealand Star</i>	

Note. For the sake of clarity, the composition of these forces is repeated in abbreviated form throughout the narrative, e.g. Force "F" (2 cr. 1 dr., etc.).

FORCE "B" consisting of the battle-cruiser *Renown* (Flag Officer Commanding Force "H", Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville), the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, cruisers, *Sheffield* and *Despatch*, and nine destroyers of the 8th and 13th Flotillas.

FORCE "F" composed of the cruisers *Manchester* (Flag, Vice-Admiral L. E. Holland) and *Southampton*, each carrying about 700 R.A.F. and military personnel, the destroyer *Hotspur*, four corvettes on passage to the Eastern Mediterranean, and three merchant vessels carrying mechanical transport.

FORCE "D" from the Eastern Mediterranean, consisted of the battleship *Ramillies*, the cruisers *Newcastle*, *Berwick* and *Coventry* (A.A.) and five destroyers.¹

The general plan of the operation was that Forces "B" and "F" should escort and cover the passage of the transports and corvettes from Gibraltar through the Western Mediterranean, and should be met by Force "D" to the south of Sardinia at approximately noon,² 27th November. All three forces were then to make for a position between Sicily and Cape Bon (latitude 37° 40' N., longitude 10° 50' E.) which they would reach at dusk. After dark, Vice-Admiral Holland with Force "F", reinforced by the *Coventry* and destroyers of Force "D" was to pass through the Narrows to the Eastern Mediterranean, where he would be met the next day by the Mediterranean Fleet. Force "B" with the *Ramillies*, *Newcastle* and *Berwick* would then return to Gibraltar.

43. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS AND ENEMY INTELLIGENCE

The condition of the ships taking part in the operation was not wholly satisfactory. The *Renown*, *Ark Royal* and *Sheffield* were in good fighting condition, but the *Ark Royal* had a number of inexperienced pilots and observers, and the efficiency of her torpedo striking force was low, owing to the lack of opportunities for exercise. The destroyers of the 8th and 13th Flotillas had been running very hard, though there was no reason to anticipate the development of any definite defects. These ships comprising the permanent nucleus of Force "H", were the only vessels in the whole force which had ever worked together as a squadron.³ Some of the cruisers were handicapped by defects. The *Berwick* could not steam more than 27 knots, owing to the removal of some rows of turbine blades, and *Newcastle's* boilers were not entirely reliable.

The *Hotspur* had just undergone temporary repairs and her speed was limited to about 20 knots; she was also without asdics. The corvettes could not be relied upon for a speed of advance of more than 14 knots.

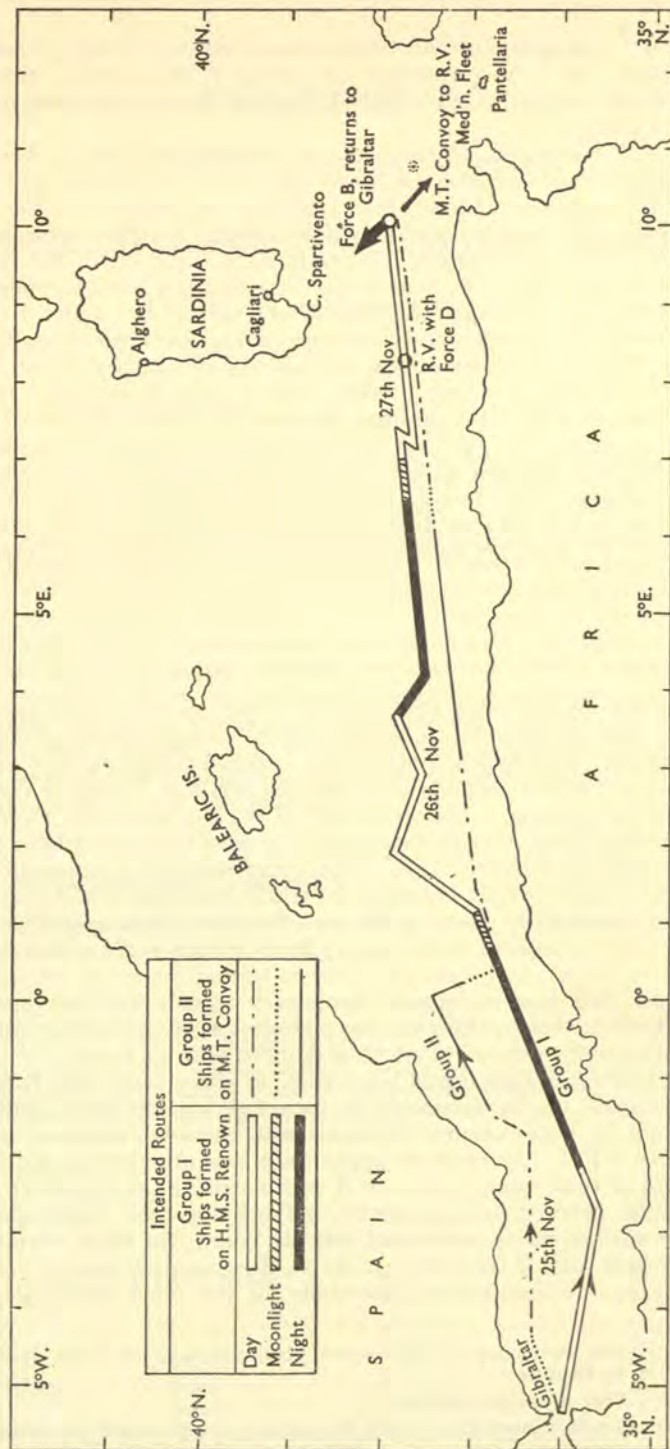
The *Manchester* and *Southampton* were each to carry some 700 R.A.F. and military personnel, to the detriment of their fighting efficiency, and doubts were expressed by Vice-Admiral Holland as to the advisability of including them in Force "F". As extreme importance was attached to the safe and timely arrival of these reinforcements at Alexandria, he represented that the cruisers should proceed independently, relying on their high speed and mobility, for with so many additional men on board, the ships were not in a condition to fight, and if compelled to do so, the casualties among the R.A.F. might be heavy. Vice-Admiral Somerville on the other hand, was of the

¹ For measures and movements in the Eastern Mediterranean, see Naval Staff History, *Mediterranean*, Vol. II, Chapter I.

² Zone minus 2 Time is used throughout.

³ In this connection it is interesting to note the constant changes which circumstances had imposed on the composition of Force "H". Between 1st July and 27th November 1940, the following different ships were at one time or another included in the Force:—

7 capital ships, 3 aircraft carriers, 13 cruisers, 33 destroyers.



opinion that the complete object of the operation, which included the safe passage of the transports and corvettes, was more likely to be achieved by a show of force sufficiently powerful to deter the Italians from attempting to interfere.¹

No very definite intelligence with regard to the Italian Naval Forces seems to have been available,² but Vice-Admiral Somerville considered it very probable, in view of the Taranto episode,³ that the enemy would attempt some operation in the Western basin of the Mediterranean. There they could achieve a considerable superiority over Forces "B" and "F" (1 bc., 1 ac., 4 cr., 10 dr.) which would be forced to stand and fight owing to the presence of the slow transports (16 knots). He estimated that a concentration of three battleships, five to seven 8-inch cruisers, and several 6-inch cruisers with other light forces could be effected by the enemy for this purpose.⁴ For this reason, he asked for the battleship *Royal Sovereign*, then undergoing repairs at Gibraltar, to be included in the operation; this was approved by the Admiralty, but her defects could not be completed in time.

44. BRITISH AND ITALIAN MOVEMENTS, 25TH-27TH NOVEMBER

The transports passed through the Strait of Gibraltar during the night of 24th/25th November, and were joined by the four corvettes to the eastward of Gibraltar a.m., 25th. The remainder of Forces "B" and "F" sailed at 0800 that morning, and the operation proceeded according to plan without any particular incident until the morning of 27th November.

These movements and the departure of Force "D" from Alexandria did not escape the notice of the Italians and at 1200, 26th November, strong forces under Admiral Campioni, the Commander-in-Chief Afloat, left Naples and Messina and steered to pass to the southward of Cape Spartivento, Sardinia (a distance of about 350 miles) with the intention of intercepting Force "H". The Italians were organised in two Squadrons, viz:—

FIRST SQUADRON, consisting of the battleships, *Vittorio Veneto* (flag, Commander-in-Chief), *Cesare*, and eight destroyers.

SECOND SQUADRON, under Vice-Admiral Iachino, six 8-inch gun cruisers, *Pola* (flag, Vice-Admiral Iachino), *Fiume*, *Gorizia* (1st

¹ At Vice-Admiral Holland's request, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, was asked whether the safe passage of personnel or M.T. ships should receive priority if circumstances were to arise which made a decision necessary, after Force "F" had parted company for the passage of the Narrows. The Commander-in-Chief replied, "Personnel" but subsequent instructions were received from the Admiralty that this must be subject to the overriding consideration that if Italian forces were in sight, the action taken by the cruisers must be the same as if personnel were not embarked.

² Air reconnaissance from Malta, on 24th November, gave the following disposition of Italian forces:—

Taranto	Outer harbour, two battleships, five cruisers, nine merchant vessels. Inner harbour—not seen.
Messina	Three cruisers, five destroyers, six submarines.
Catania	Nil.
Augusta	A few small vessels.
Syracuse	Possibly one destroyer and a few smaller vessels.

³ Attack by torpedo bombers on Italian Fleet, 11th November 1940 (see Chapter III).

⁴ Reliance was apparently placed entirely on reconnaissance by shore-based aircraft to locate enemy units in the Western Mediterranean during the days immediately preceding the battle (24th/27th November), a task for which Vice-Admiral Somerville subsequently stated they proved entirely inadequate.

No information was received from any special sources, and the first report received by the Admiral of enemy ships being at sea in the Western Mediterranean was provided by carrier reconnaissance a few hours before the action commenced.

division), *Trieste* (flag, Vice-Admiral Sansonetti), *Trento*, *Bolzano* (3rd division) and eight destroyers.¹

Throughout the afternoon of 26th November and the night 26th/27th, the fleet made to the westward without incident. No further news of the British came in, except a report shortly after midnight from the torpedo boat *Sirio*, which had sighted seven warships (types unspecified) on a north-westerly course off Cape Bon; to these ships (Force "D"), Admiral Campioni correctly assigned the intention of joining the group coming from Gibraltar.

45. SITUATION AT 0800, 27TH NOVEMBER (Plan 9)

At 0800, 27th November, about half an hour before sunrise,² the situation was as follows. The Italian battlefleet was about 30 miles east-south-east of Cape Spartivento steering 260° 16 knots with the 1st Cruiser Division some 11 miles ahead and the 3rd Division disposed 180° five miles from the 1st Division.

Vice-Admiral Somerville in the *Renown*, with the *Ark Royal*, *Sheffield* and four destroyers, was about 90 miles south-west of Cape Spartivento, steering 083° , 16 knots.

Some 30 miles to the west-south-west of him, the Vice-Admiral, 18th Cruiser Squadron, in the *Manchester*, with the *Southampton*, *Despatch*, and five destroyers was in company with the convoy. The four corvettes had been unable to keep up with it and were about 10 miles to the westward.

The visibility was excellent, the wind south-easterly, force 3 to 4, and the sea calm. Neither British nor Italian forces were aware of the presence of each other.

At this time the *Ark Royal* flew off a section of fighters, one A/S Patrol, one meteorological aircraft and seven T.S.R.s designed to cover the area to the west of Sardinia, and between Sardinia and Africa. The depth of this reconnaissance to the eastward was sufficient to cover Force "D" (1 bs., 3 cr., 5 dr.) which was approaching from Skerki Bank.

Vice-Admiral Somerville continued on an easterly course, in order to concentrate with Force "D" should the air reconnaissance reveal the presence of important enemy units in the vicinity of that force.³ At 0900, having received no such report, he altered course to the south-westward to join the convoy and give it additional A.A. defence against the earliest bombing attacks from the Sardinian airfields.

46. RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT REPORT ENEMY FORCES AT SEA

Just about this time, at 0852, one of the *Ark Royal's* reconnaissance aircraft had sighted a group of warships about 25 miles to the southward of Cape Spartivento, and closing to investigate, at 0906 sent an alarm report of four cruisers and six destroyers, which, however, was not received by any ship of the British Forces. Sighting the convoy at 0920, the *Renown* manoeuvred to pass astern of it and take station to the southward and up sun, in the probable direction of air attack. At 0956, while still on the port quarter of the convoy, Vice-Admiral Somerville received from the *Ark Royal* an aircraft report, timed

¹ See Appendix N.

² Sunrise was at 0824, Zone minus 2.

³ A signal from the Chief of Staff, Alexandria, timed 0330/27, indicated that the presence of Force "D" might be known to the enemy.

0920, of five cruisers and five destroyers some 65 miles to the north-eastward of him.¹

Though it seemed possible that this report referred to Force "D" steam was at once ordered for full speed, and screens of two destroyers each were detailed for both the *Ark Royal* and the convoy. Further reports from aircraft, confirmed by the *Ark Royal*, established by 1015 the presence of enemy battle-ships and cruisers, and the *Renown* altered course to 075° to join the *Ramillies*, increasing speed as rapidly as possible to 28 knots.

47. MEASURES TO SAFEGUARD CONVOY AND TO JOIN FORCE "D" (Plan 9)

Twenty minutes later, though the plot at 1035 clearly showed enemy forces

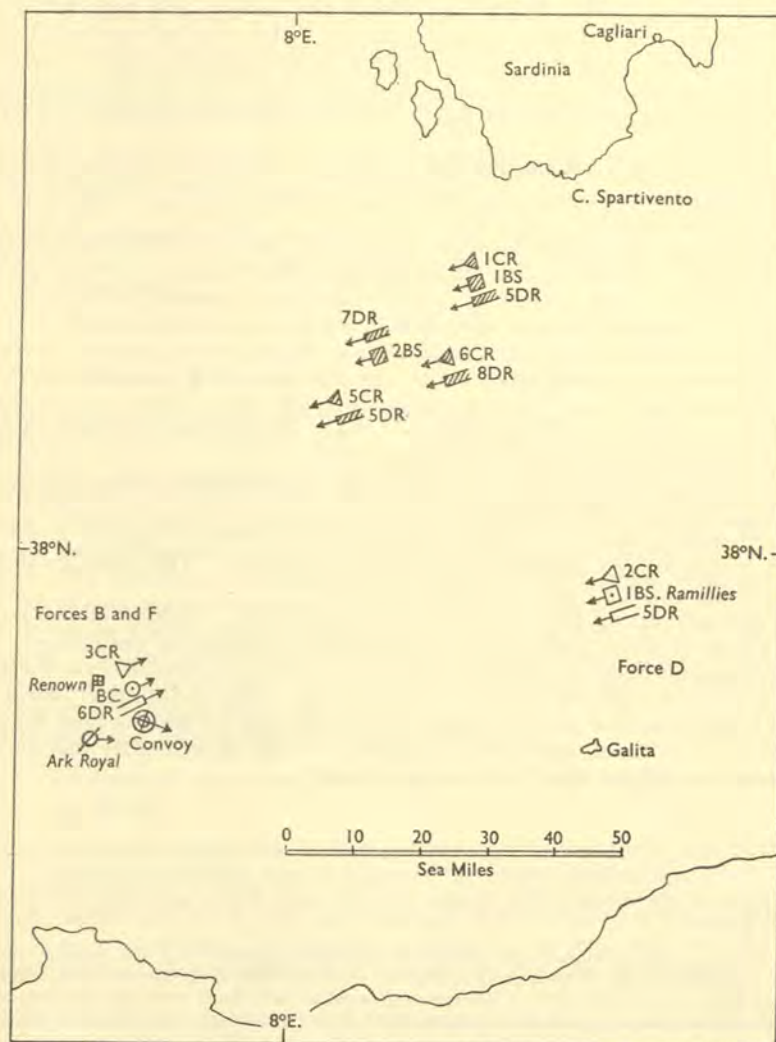


Fig. 7. SITUATION AT 1035 FROM *Renown's* PLOT

¹ Owing to faults in the receiver the *Renown* failed to receive the first 11 aircraft reports made on the reconnaissance wave.

to the north-east, their composition and relative position was still in doubt. In these circumstances, the Vice-Admiral decided that the convoy should continue towards its destination, steering a south-easterly course (120°) in order to keep clear of any action which might develop. It was given an escort of two cruisers, the *Despatch* (Commodore C. Douglas-Pennant) and *Coventry* and two destroyers.¹ The remainder of the cruisers and destroyers of Force "F" (2 cr., 3 dr.) were ordered to join Force "B" (1 bc., 1 ac., 1 cr., 4 dr.) which steered to concentrate with Force "D" (1 bs., 3 cr., 5 dr.) prior to attacking the enemy. At the same time, Malta was told the position of two enemy battleships, and the *Ramillies* was told the position of the *Renown*. The *Ark Royal* was ordered to prepare and to fly off a T/B striking force, acting independently under cover of the battlefleet.

At 1058 a Sunderland flying-boat closed the *Renown* and reported Force "D" bearing 070° 34 miles. As the junction of the two forces seemed to be assured, the speed of the *Renown* was reduced to 24 knots, in order to maintain a position between the convoy and the enemy force. Its estimated position was 025° 50 miles distant and the flying-boat was ordered to shadow and report its composition.

The cruisers *Manchester*, *Sheffield* and *Southampton* had meanwhile concentrated with the destroyers in the van, bearing five miles from the *Renown* in the direction of the enemy.

Reports from the reconnaissance aircraft of the *Ark Royal* contained a number of discrepancies which made it impossible to obtain a clear picture of the situation. Two groups of cruisers had been reported, as well as two battleships; it seemed certain that five or six cruisers were present, but the number of battleships remained in doubt; it might be one, or two or three. "But whatever the composition of the enemy force," it was clear to Vice-Admiral Somerville that "in order to achieve his object—the safe and timely arrival of the convoy at its destination—it was essential to show a bold front and attack the enemy as soon as possible."

At 1115, the enemy originally steering to the westward, were reported to be altering course to the eastward.²

All this time Force "D" had been coming westward, and at 1120³ was sighted in the *Renown*, approximately 24 miles distant. The *Ramillies* sighted Force "H", bearing 239°, five minutes later.

The aircraft reports indicated that the enemy force consisted of two battleships, six or more cruisers and a considerable number of destroyers. The action appeared likely to develop into a chase, and the *Ramillies* was therefore ordered to steer 045°, so as not to lose ground. Vice-Admiral Holland was placed in command of all the cruisers in the van, and the *Berwick* and *Newcastle* from Force "D" were ordered to join him. It was shortly after this that the *Ark Royal* flew off the first T/B striking force.⁴

¹ Exclusive of the *Holspur*. The *Coventry* and destroyers *Wishart* and *Duncon* did not make contact till 1300.

² An observer who witnessed this alteration of course reported that the eastern group of cruisers appeared to be thrown into confusion. The leading ship turned 180°, while the following ships turned only 90°. Collisions appeared to have been narrowly averted, and at one time all three ships seemed to be stopped with their bows nearly touching each other.

³ In Admiral Somerville's report, time of sighting is given as 1128, but in the Chronological Appendix to the report it is given as 1120. From other evidence, this latter time appears to be the correct one.

⁴ See Section 53.

48. THE APPROACH (*Plans 9, 10*)

At 1134, Vice-Admiral Somerville increased to 28 knots, and six minutes later altered course to 050° to close the enemy. The position of the British forces was as follows. Fine on the port bow of the *Renown* were the cruisers *Manchester*, *Southampton* and *Sheffield* in single line ahead; the *Berwick* and *Newcastle* were coming from the eastward to join them. Two miles astern of the cruisers, Captain de Salis (D.8) in the *Faulknor* was gradually collecting the *Encounter* and the 8th Flotilla, some of which had been screening the convoy. The five destroyers of Force "D" were also coming west to join the *Faulknor*, and were eventually stationed three miles 270° from her.

Ten miles fine on the starboard bow of the *Renown*, the *Ramillies* was altering to a parallel course. The *Ark Royal* had dropped some distance astern, and was carrying out flying operations between the main force and the convoy, which was now about 22 miles south-south-west from the Admiral.

At 1154, the Sunderland flying-boat returned, and reported six cruisers and eight destroyers, bearing 330°, 30 miles from the *Renown*. Her report unfortunately gave no course or speed of the enemy, and she disappeared from sight before this could be obtained. This information—the first visual link received—indicated that one group of the enemy forces was considerably further to the west than those previously reported, and moreover that it was in a position to work round astern and attack the *Ark Royal* and the convoy. Vice-Admiral Somerville accordingly altered course to north in order to avoid getting too far to the eastward.¹

49. VICE-ADMIRAL SOMERVILLE'S APPRECIATION, NOON, 27TH NOVEMBER

The situation as it appeared from the *Renown's* plot just before noon is shown in Fig. 8 overleaf. The prospects of bringing the enemy to action appeared favourable. The composition of the Italian forces was not definitely established, but there did not appear to be more than two battleships with them.

The British forces had effected their concentration, of which the enemy seemed to be unaware, since no shadowers had been sighted, or detected by radar. His speed was reported as between 14 and 18 knots, which suggested that his reconnaissance was not completed. The sun was immediately astern of the British forces, giving them the advantage of light, and, if the nearest reported position of the enemy was correct, there seemed every possibility of bringing off a simultaneous surface and T/B attack, providing he did not retire immediately at high speed.

Vice-Admiral Somerville's intentions were:—

- (i) To drive off the enemy from any position from which he could attack the convoy.
- (ii) To accept some risk to the convoy, providing there was reasonable prospect of sinking one or more of the enemy battleships.

To achieve the second of them he considered that the speed of the enemy would have to be reduced by T/B attacks to 20 knots, or less, and that the enemy battleships must be engaged by the *Renown* and *Ramillies* in concert.

¹ No further report of this group was received during the action, and the Admiral consequently remained in doubt as to its whereabouts and intentions. The *Ark Royal* was, however, between his main forces and the convoy, and he considered that her returning aircraft would sight and report this group should it attempt to work round to a position from which to attack the latter.

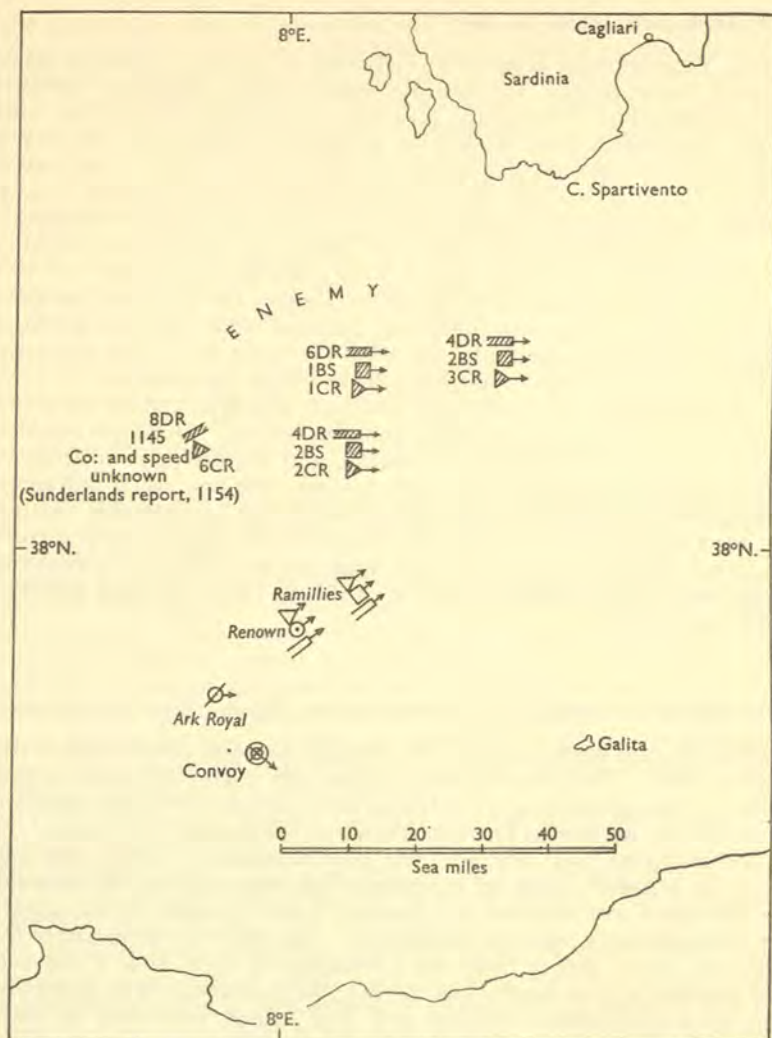


Fig. 8. SITUATION SHORTLY BEFORE NOON FROM *Renown's* PLOT

50. ADMIRAL CAMPIONI'S APPRECIATION, NOON, 27TH NOVEMBER (Plans 9, 10)

It was not till 1015, 27th November, that the Italian Commander-in-Chief received any further news of the British. This came from an aircraft catapulted from the *Bolzano*—a report of one battleship, two light cruisers and four destroyers in position 20 miles north of Cape de Fer (135 miles S.W. of Spartivento) steering 090° at 0945.¹ Admiral Campioni for a time thought this was the Cap Bon force (Force "D"), as the numbers coincided with the group reported during the night, though the position was further to the west than was to be expected, even if the ships had only just reversed course.

A second sighting report, received from the *Gorizia's* aircraft at 1144, con-

¹ This report almost certainly referred to Force "B."

firmed the position given in the 1015 report, but did not mention "two cruisers," an omission possibly explained by the fact that the cruisers of Force "B" had by then moved on ahead of the *Renown* to join the cruisers of Force "D". (See Plan 9.)

Acting on the *Bolzano's* report Admiral Campioni led the First Squadron round to course 135° at 1128. Both divisions of cruisers of the Second Squadron conformed to his turn to the S.E. He then envisaged an encounter between the whole of his forces and the *Renown* with possibly two cruisers and some destroyers, and this view was upheld by the *Gorizia's* aircraft report at 1144. He had not, at that time, appreciated that Forces "B" and "D" had joined, nor that the *Ark Royal* was in the offing, although he knew the aircraft-carrier had left Gibraltar with the other ships. His report reads as follows:—

"The sighting report (at 1015) persuaded me to alter course to 135° in order to close the English forces, and if possible intercept them. This appeared possible at the time, also I had in mind that the English forces were inferior to the Italian. Furthermore the encounter would be brought about in waters closer to Sicily than Sardinia, that is in conditions favourable to us.

"But whilst our forces were taking up station on the new course I received at 1155 a signal, originally made at 1110 by an aircraft from Armera, giving the position of the *Renown's* group. This position was 20 miles nearer to the *Vittorio Veneto* than the one shown by the plot based on previous sighting reports, and was near enough to the other British forces to render their meeting very easy.

"A state of affairs was thus created which on the best hypothesis was unfavourable to us numerically¹ and qualitatively. Particularly important was the presence of an aircraft-carrier, which with well-directed action properly synchronized with action of their ships, that were certainly not inferior to ours, would have brought about a situation of the utmost gravity.

"It was a situation not only at variance with the directive given to me by the Ministry of Marine, but with that imposed by military necessity." The Admiral then explains that in this latter term he was referring to the effect on the Italian navy of the F.A.A. attack on Taranto on 11th November, and the fact that the battleship *Andrea Doria* was not yet ready.

"Under these conditions," continued Admiral Campioni, "in conformity with the spirit and letter of the orders received and with what at that moment I deemed to be my duty I decided not to become involved in a battle. In theory I should have been able to take into calculation an effective intervention by our shore-based aircraft, but my previous experience discouraged me from putting too much faith on such intervention, having learnt from experience what to expect."²

At 1215, 27th November, the Italian admiral's appreciation and decision amounted briefly to this:—

"The British aircraft will damage our ships, the Italian aircraft will not damage theirs, the enemy are not inferior in numbers or quality to us, and at present we cannot afford any further reduction in capital ship strength."

He therefore hoisted the signal not to become involved in action, "course 090°; increase speed of engines."

51. SURFACE CONTACT (Plan 10)

Meanwhile, Admiral Somerville was steering to the northward at his best speed to close the enemy.

¹ In the matter of actual numbers and strength the Admiral's statement about the "English being numerically superior" was incorrect, for there were two capital ships on each side, seven Italian 8-inch cruisers compared with one 8-inch and four 6-inch on our side, and 16 Italian destroyers to our ten (i.e. not counting the two destroyers with the *Ark Royal*).

² Presumably Admiral Campioni had in mind the action off Calabria, 9th July 1940, when the Italian Air Force, although well within range, failed to inflict any damage on the British Fleet, and, in addition, bombed their own.

At 1207, the *Renown* developed a hot bearing on one shaft, which limited her speed to 27½ knots. At the same time, puffs of smoke were observed on the horizon bearing 006°, and the cruisers in the van sighted masts and ships between the bearings of 006° and 346°. Six minutes later (1213, 27th), a signal (timed 1147) came in from the *Ark Royal*, reporting the composition of the enemy as two battleships and six cruisers, accompanied by destroyers. This report did not nullify that of the *Sunderland*. There still remained the possibility that the *Sunderland's* reported group of six cruisers and destroyers was a separate force further to the westward. The British cruisers by this time were concentrated in the van, and had formed a line of bearing 075°–255° in the sequence from west to east, *Sheffield*, *Southampton*, *Newcastle*, *Manchester*, *Berwick*.¹

The nine destroyers were stationed five miles 040° from the *Renown*, in order to be placed favourably to counter-attack any destroyers attempting a torpedo attack on the *Renown* or *Ramillies*.²

The situation as seen by the cruisers immediately before the action commenced was as follows. Between the bearings of 340° and 350° three enemy cruisers and some destroyers were visible at a range of about 11 miles, steering a northerly course.³ This force will be referred to as the "Western Group".

A second group of cruisers, also accompanied by destroyers, which will be referred to as the "Eastern Group" bore between 003° and 013°. This group was further away and was steering approximately 100°.

52. THE ACTION (Plan 10)

At 1220, 27th the enemy in the western group⁴ opened fire, and the British advanced forces immediately replied. The enemy's first salvo fell close to the *Manchester*, exact for range, but 100 yards out for deflection. As soon as fire was opened by the British cruisers, the Italians made smoke and retired on courses varying between north-west and north-east. Behind their smoke screen they seemed to be making large and frequent alterations of course, judging from glimpses which were obtained.

Actually, the cruisers had just received the Commander-in-Chief's orders to steer to the eastward, followed at 1224 by a signal "Do not join action". At 1222 the eastern group⁵ had altered to 050°, 28 knots, increasing to 30 knots at 1230. At the same time Vice-Admiral Iachino ordered the western group to

¹ The *Newcastle* could not maintain the speed of the remainder and never quite reached her station.

The *Berwick* had signalled at 1158 that as her speed was limited to 27 knots she proposed to join the *Renown*. This she turned to do, thereby losing ground. She subsequently took station on the starboard bow of the *Manchester*, but owing to her lack of speed, dropped back during the action.

² The destroyers maintained a distance of five cables apart throughout the action. Vice-Admiral Somerville remarks that when the number of destroyers present or on a flank is limited to approximately one flotilla, this is a very suitable distance. It relieves the commanding officers of the necessity to maintain accurate station, and reduces the damage likely to be caused by gunfire.

³ Evidence as to the movements of the western group immediately prior to the action was conflicting. It appeared probable that this group was in line ahead on a southerly course until 1210, when course was altered together to the northward. Between 1210 and 1220 further alterations might have been made. When first observed from the *Renown* the ships appeared to have a fairly broad inclination to the eastward. Actually, this group—the 3rd Division (*Trieste*, *Trento*, *Bolzano*)—was making two 180° turns to starboard, in order to take station 270° from the 1st Division. (See Plan 10).

⁴ Third Division (*Trieste*, *Trento*, *Bolzano*).

⁵ First Division, *Pola* (flag Vice-Admiral Iachino), *Fiume*, *Gorizia*.

keep further away from the enemy. "The Third Division," he subsequently wrote, "being the target of the English fire and realising that at any moment a salvo of 15-inch shells might hit them, increased to their maximum speed and presented their sterns to the enemy".

It was at 1224 that the *Renown* opened fire at the right-hand ship of the western group (identified as an 8-inch cruiser of the *Zara* class) at a mean range of 26,500 yards. After six salvos, the target was lost in smoke. The *Ramillies* also fired two salvos at maximum elevation to test the range, but both fell short; she then dropped astern following in the wake of the *Renown* at her best speed, 20.7 knots, throughout the action.

Just before opening fire, the *Renown* had sighted two ships which were not making smoke, bearing 020° at extreme visibility. They were thought at the time to be the Italian battleships though they proved later to be cruisers of the eastern group. On losing her first target the *Renown* altered course to starboard to close these supposed battleships and to bring the cruisers of the western group broader on the bow. She had hardly done so when the centre ship of the latter group appeared momentarily through the smoke, and was given two salvos. Again course was altered to open "A" arcs on the left-hand ship, at which eight salvos were fired at a range of about 30,700 yards before she too disappeared in the smoke at 1245. At this moment, two large ships steering to the westward emerged from the smoke cloud; the *Renown's* turrets were trained on this new target, but before fire could be opened, they were fortunately identified as French liners.

The enemy were by this time on the run, and had passed outside the range of our capital ships, though at 1311 the *Renown* fired two ranging salvos, which fell short, at two ships of the eastern group.

Meanwhile the British cruisers had been hotly engaged at ranges varying between 23,000 and 16,000 yards. Many straddles were obtained, but smoke rendered spotting and observation exceedingly difficult. No concentration of fire was ordered, owing to the rapidly changing situation, and the large number of targets.¹

The *Manchester*, *Sheffield* and *Newcastle* all opened fire at first on the right-hand ship of the western group; the *Berwick* engaged the left-hand ship of the same group, whilst the *Southampton* chose the left-hand ship of the eastern group. The *Manchester* and *Sheffield* continued firing at the same ships for about 20 minutes (until 1236 and 1240 respectively), but the *Newcastle* after firing 18 broadsides shifted to the *Berwick's* target. The *Southampton*, after five salvos at her original target, engaged a destroyer which was seen to be hit. At least one other destroyer was believed to have been hit during this phase and the *Faulknor* at 1227 and *Newcastle* at 1233½ thought they saw hits on a cruiser by large calibre shell.

The enemy's fire was accurate during the early stages but, when fully engaged, it deteriorated rapidly, and the spread became ragged. Their rate of fire is described as "extremely slow." The only casualties on the British side occurred in the *Berwick*, which received a hit from an 8-inch shell at 1222, which put "Y" turret out of action.² The *Manchester* was straddled several

¹ The Vice-Admiral, 18th Cruiser Squadron, was doubtful what the results of an attempt at concentration would have been, as the ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron had not been in company for a considerable time, and had come from Rosyth, Reykjavik (Iceland), Malta and the vicinity of the Azores.

² This shell entered "Y" gun barbette about 15 inches above the quarter deck, and, travelling down through the training pump space, burst on the starboard side of the barbette above the main deck, and expended itself in the cabin flat, killing Surgeon-Lieutenant W. W. Wildman, R.N.V.R., and six ratings, and wounding nine others. A considerable fire was started inside the turret training space, which spread to the gunhouse and was not subdued for over an hour.

times, but though under continuous fire from 1221 till about 1300, escaped unscathed.¹

By 1234, 27th, the ships in the western group were almost lost in smoke. At this time the course of the British cruisers was 020°, and the eastern group of the enemy was passing across their front from left to right. Vice-Admiral Holland therefore altered course to 360°, with the intention of separating the two enemy groups, and then concentrating on one or other of them. This manoeuvre was successful, and he selected the eastern group as his target,² the *Manchester* shifting her fire to the left-hand ship of this group, then 30° on her starboard bow, at a range of 21,000 yards. This ship she engaged for between three and four minutes, and then shifted her fire to a destroyer making a smoke screen 17,000 yards on the port bow, which after being straddled several times, turned away behind her own smoke.³ By 1240, all ships of the 18th Cruiser Squadron were firing at this group. The *Berwick* received another hit at 1235, which wrecked some cabins without causing any casualties. She had just started to engage a ship thought to be an 8-inch cruiser of the *Pola* class at which she fired 47 salvoes during the next 20 minutes.⁴

At 1245 the cruisers altered course to 090° to prevent the enemy working round ahead and attacking the convoy. This brought the relative bearing of the eastern group to Red 40, and the *Manchester* once more engaged the left-hand ship. Five minutes later a further alteration to the southward was made to counter what appeared to be an attempt to "cross the T" of the 18th Cruiser Squadron. The enemy, however, at once resumed their north-easterly course, and Vice-Admiral Holland led back to 070° at 1256 and 030° at 1258. The rear ship of the enemy line was heavily on fire aft⁵; between 1252 and 1259, she appeared to lose speed, but picked up again and drew away with her consorts.

At 1301, the masts of a fresh enemy unit steering to the south-west were sighted at extreme visibility right ahead of the *Manchester*. It bore 045° and two minutes later, two battleships were identified in it; their presence was quickly corroborated by large splashes which commenced to fall near the *Manchester* and *Berwick*, and an enemy report was made to the Admiral. The

¹ The 35 officers and 623 other ranks of the Army and R.A.F. taking passage in the *Manchester* were dispersed between decks throughout the ship. All bathrooms were filled with troops. A number of officers and men were formed into willing parties to transfer ammunition from "X" and "Y" turrets to "A" and "B" turrets. "To carry a shipload of passengers into battle", wrote Vice-Admiral Holland, "is an unenviable lot, but their presence had perforce to be dismissed from my mind. They themselves were exhilarated at having been in a sea battle."

² On this decision Admiral Holland wrote:—"It was reasonable to suppose that the smoke screen enveloping Group A (the western group) was hiding some damage, and this group was believed to be the weaker of the two. By closing Group A it seemed that some immediate tactical achievement might result. Against this, however, it has to be appreciated that the object of the whole enterprise was to pass a convoy through the Narrows, and that if our cruisers sheered off to the westward the field would be left clear for Group B (the eastern group), to turn to the south-eastward and attack the convoy. I therefore decided that Group B should be our future target . . ."

³ The destroyer *Lanciere* was hit at 1235 by a 6-inch shell in the after boiler-room. She continued to steam at 23 knots, but at 1240 a second shell struck her amidships, port side, penetrating a petrol tank without exploding. A third shell struck her under the water line, starboard side, without exploding. About 1300 she came to a stop, and at 1440 was taken in tow by the *Ascari* at 7 knots for Cagliari.

⁴ Vice-Admiral Iachino was not impressed by the British gunnery. "The English", he wrote, "as usual, fired rapid salvoes with a limited spread, making frequent turns to disturb our fire and so as to bring all their guns to bear. The general result was ineffective and not well directed. The fire from our cruisers was appreciably better and more efficacious, since two enemy cruisers were certainly hit."

⁵ This was observed by the *Manchester*, *Newcastle* and *Southampton*, but no report of it reached Vice-Admiral Somerville until after the action.

end on approach resulted in the range decreasing very rapidly, and at 1305 Vice-Admiral Holland turned the cruisers to 120°, with the dual purpose of working round the flank of the battleships, and closing the gap to the *Renown*. The enemy battleships were not prepared to close and altering course to the north-eastward, presumably joined their 8-inch cruisers. Vice-Admiral Holland therefore altered back to 090° at 1308, and steadied on a course of 050°. The enemy were by now rapidly running out of range, and ten minutes later the action came to an end.

53. FIRST ATTACK BY H.M.S. *Ark Royal's* T/B STRIKING FORCE (Plan 10)

Meanwhile, a T/B striking force consisting of 11 aircraft of No. 810 Squadron had been flown off from the *Ark Royal* at 1130, with orders to attack the Italian battleships reported by reconnaissance aircraft. At 1216 they sighted two battleships between 25 and 30 miles to the eastward, and altered course so as to approach from the direction of the sun. The ships were identified as one of the *Littorio* (*Vittorio Veneto*) and one of the *Cavour* (*Cesare*) class; they were screened by seven destroyers, one ahead, and three in line ahead about 1,000 yards on each beam of the heavy ships. The enemy's course was easterly, and their speed about 18 knots; this course was altered in succession to the westward some five minutes before the attack developed and almost immediately afterwards back again to the eastward together.

The aircraft were unobserved by the battleships until the leader was about 1,500 ft., although the cruisers to the westward had opened fire on them, evidently only as a warning to the battleships, for the bursts were very short.

The leading battleship *Veneto* was selected as the target, and all torpedoes were dropped inside the screen at about 700 to 800 yards range. One hit was claimed just abaft the after funnel,¹ and an explosion also occurred just astern of her; another explosion was seen ahead of the *Cesare*. No other hits were seen. A very heavy concentration of light A.A. fire from both heavy ships and screening destroyers was opened on the aircraft; during the getaway, heavier weapons were used, and the cruisers which by then were about five miles to the west also joined in. The aircraft in passing machine-gunned the bridges of the battleships and destroyers; all returned safely to the *Ark Royal*.²

The Italian views on this attack are now available, and are of interest. After remarking that the attack was carried out with resolution, Admiral Campioni stated that it

"was successfully staved off by the manoeuvring and gunfire of our ships, and through the presence of a close escort of destroyers.

"The fact that the battleship group had, as it happened, inverted their course just previous to the attack developing,³ must have had a marked effect as well. The aircraft could not pass over the destroyer lines except with extreme difficulty and suffering a loss of control; which confirms the great usefulness of a close escort in the special case of air-torpedo attacks. It is essential that the close escort should be left in position up to the last moment, and removed only when the gun action renders their presence no longer possible. Furthermore, I wish to confirm the great advantage of distant A.A. escorts, although the tasks of our smaller naval units does not usually permit of such employment."

In this connexion Vice-Admiral Iachino, in his summing-up, recommended that in future 6-inch cruisers of the *Di Giussano* class should accompany the Squadrons to act as A.A. cruisers.

¹ According to Italian sources this hit did not occur.

² The Italians claimed to have shot down two aircraft, but this was not the case.

³ Course was altered in order to close Vice-Admiral Iachino's cruisers.

54. VICE-ADMIRAL SOMERVILLE'S APPRECIATION, 1315, 27TH NOVEMBER

The relative positions of the opposing forces at 1315 are shown in Fig. 9. Firing had practically ceased, owing to the enemy drawing out of range. The heavy smoke made by the Italians during the chase had prevented accurate fire, and so far as was known, no serious damage had been inflicted on them. The British striking force had attacked, but no report of the results had been received. It seemed evident that the speed of the enemy had not been materially reduced.¹

The British forces, meanwhile, were rapidly approaching the enemy coast,

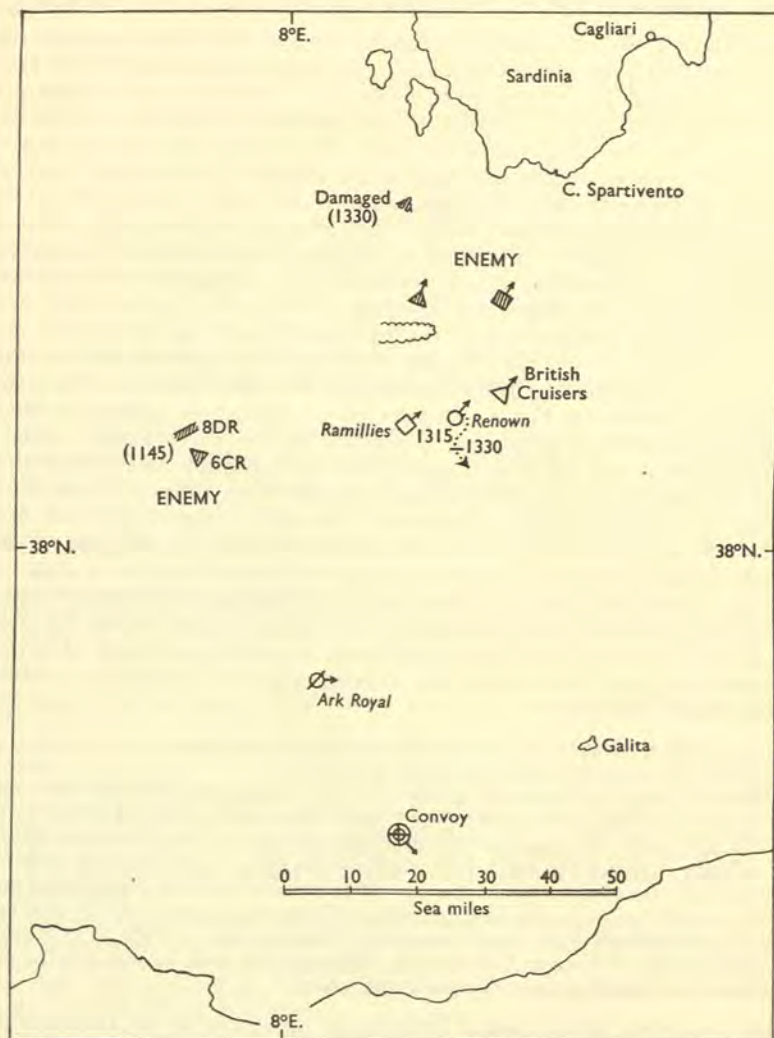


Fig. 9. SITUATION AT 1315 FROM *Renown's* PLOT

¹ At 1308 Vice-Admiral Somerville had signalled to Vice-Admiral Holland: "Is there any hope of catching cruisers?" to which the latter had replied "No." A later message from Vice-Admiral Holland estimated that the enemy had three knots excess of speed.

and it was a question whether a continuance of the chase was justified, and likely to be profitable.

The main object of the whole operation was still the safe passage of the convoy. The enemy's principal units had been driven off far enough to ensure that they could no longer interfere with it, even if the cruisers reported to the north-westward by the *Sunderland* had been working towards it round the western flank of the British forces. It was also important to provide the fullest possible scale of defence for the transports against attacks by torpedo bombers and light surface forces at dusk,¹ and in order to reach the convoy in time to do this, it would be necessary for the British main forces to shape course for it before 1400. In any case, the enemy's superiority of speed rendered it most improbable that he could be brought to action by the *Renown* and the *Ramillies*. Under these circumstances, Vice-Admiral Somerville decided to abandon the chase and rejoin the convoy as soon as possible.²

At 1312 Vice-Admiral Somerville accordingly ordered his forces to retire, course 130°. Half an hour later, he received a report of an enemy damaged cruiser stopped in a position 30 miles from the *Renown* and ten miles from the coast of Sardinia. The question of detaching the *Berwick* and *Newcastle*³ to search for and attack this ship was carefully considered. It would, however, have involved the main British forces remaining in a position to support these cruisers, which would cause unacceptable delay in rejoining the convoy. There was the further possibility of isolated ships in such close proximity to the enemy coast being singled out for air attack; the *Berwick* was most vulnerable to this form of attack, and her disablement would have involved the whole British force in the task of effecting her extrication. There was nothing to indicate that the damaged enemy would remain stopped, and she might well effect her escape before she could be overtaken.⁴

Instructions were therefore sent to the *Ark Royal* to attack the damaged cruiser with aircraft if it was considered feasible; all the rest of the force continued to the southward, the Vice-Admiral, 18th Cruiser Squadron, being ordered to join the convoy with the *Manchester* and *Southampton*.

55. FURTHER ATTACKS BY H.M.S. *Ark Royal's* AIRCRAFT

The signal directing an attack to be made on the damaged cruiser was received in the *Ark Royal* at 1351. The Second Torpedo Bomber striking force was just ready to fly off. Captain Holland considering that the signal which he had sent at 1339 reporting the hit believed to have been scored on the *Veneto* by the First striking force had not reached Vice-Admiral Somerville, and that, had the Admiral received it, he would have ordered the second attack to be made on the battleships,⁵ decided to send the torpedo bombers against them, and to dive-bomb the damaged cruiser with seven Skuas, which were then arming with 500-lb bombs.

¹ Sunset was at 1807; nautical twilight ended 1908, Zone minus 2.

² See Appendix O.

³ It was obviously undesirable to use the *Manchester* and *Southampton* for this purpose on account of the R.A.F. personnel embarked in these two ships for passage. The *Sheffield's* radar was required to deal with the bombing attacks which would inevitably develop.

⁴ A subsequent air search failed to locate the damaged ship, so the stoppage was apparently only temporary.

⁵ The signal ran "Striking Force report that Italian battleship, *Cavour* class, damaged and speed reduced." The groups for "damaged and speed reduced" were received in corrupt form in *Renown*. The first part of the signal gave no indication that it was a report of damage inflicted by the striking force.

The T/B striking force consisting of nine Swordfish was flown off at 1410. The Squadron Leader was given the enemy battleships as his objective, but with full liberty to change it at his discretion, as he alone would be in a position to judge the possibility or otherwise of achieving a successful attack.

The aircraft sighted three cruisers screened by four destroyers about 12 miles off the south-east coast of Sardinia, steering to the eastward at high speed. These were the *Pola*, *Fiume* and *Gorizia*. Some eight miles ahead of the cruisers were the two battleships, heavily screened by ten destroyers. There was a total absence of cloudcover, and it was considered essential to attack from the direction of the sun, if any degree of surprise were to be achieved. As any attempt, however, to gain such a position with regard to the battleships would inevitably have led to the striking force being sighted by the cruisers, it was decided to attack the latter.

The attack was carried out at 1520 and was not sighted till very late, only two salvos being fired before the first torpedo was dropped. As the first Swordfish reached the dropping position, the cruisers turned together to starboard; this caused several of the following aircraft, who were already committed to their "drop", to miss their targets, but one hit was claimed on the rear cruiser, and another possible hit on the leading cruiser.

The enemy gunfire then became intense, apparently quite regardless of direction, or of danger to their own ships. One large projectile was seen to hit the water close to the rear cruiser, and shells from close-range weapons were seen to burst close alongside all ships. Two of the British aircraft were struck by shrapnel, but all returned safely to the *Ark Royal*.

Describing the attack, Vice-Admiral Iachino reported that it was carried out by eight or nine aircraft, who "launched three torpedoes at the *Pola*, and five or six against the *Fiume* and *Gorizia*. One torpedo was seen to break up on reaching the water and some of the others may not have run since their tracks were not seen. The *Fiume*, however, observed four or five tracks which passed rather close, and one torpedo exploded at the end of its run. One of the aircraft was definitely brought down; and another when passing over the bridge of the *Libeccio* machine-gunned her with negative results.

"The ships manoeuvred repeatedly to prevent the attacks and to avoid the torpedoes, which were dropped at an inclination of between 30° and 50° and at a distance of 1,700 to 2,200 yards, coming in by groups always from the same side, i.e., 'down sun'. . . It remains to be said that our A.A. fire was not brilliantly controlled".

Meanwhile, the striking force of seven Skuas had flown off at 1500. They failed to locate the damaged cruiser but carried out an unobserved attack on three cruisers identified as *Condottieri* class, steering north off the south-west corner of Sardinia. These were actually the *Trieste*, *Trento* and *Bolzano*, which had been sent by Vice-Admiral Iachino to cover the retirement of the damaged *Lanciere*; no hits were obtained, but according to the Italian report five bombs fell very close to the *Trento*.

On the way back to the *Ark Royal* the Skuas encountered and shot down an Italian R.O.43.

56. ENEMY AIR ATTACKS ON BRITISH FORCES

While these British flying operations had been taking place Vice-Admiral Somerville had been steering to the southward in accordance with his decision to close the convoy. The *Ark Royal* had lost sight of the *Renown* to the north-eastward at about 1250, but since the receipt of the signal ordering the retirement of British forces, Captain Holland had been making good a course of 090°, so far as his flying operations permitted, in order to rejoin the Flag. The first

radar indications of the presence of enemy aircraft were received in the *Renown* at 1407, and the line was staggered. Shortly afterwards bomb splashes were observed on the horizon—the result of an attack by the *Ark Royal's* Fulmars, which caused several of the Italians to jettison their bombs.

As soon as the enemy aircraft, consisting of ten S.975 in "V" formation, were sighted by the *Renown* a turn by blue pendant was made by the British ships, in order to bring all guns to bear.

The enemy maintained a steady course, and their bombs fell well clear of the heavy ships, but close to the screening destroyers.

Two further attacks were made at about 1645, each by squadrons of five aircraft. These attacks were concentrated on the *Ark Royal*, which by this time was in company with the fleet, but owing to flying operations, not actually in the line. Apart from a few bombs which were jettisoned as the result of interception by our fighters, the high level bombing performed from a height of about 13,000 ft. was most accurate. Some 30 bombs fell in her vicinity—two at least, within ten yards of the ship—and she was completely obscured from view by the splashes.

About 1½ minutes after this attack, a stick of bombs fell unexpectedly just ahead of the ship. These were dropped by four Caproni bombers, which had succeeded in approaching unobserved under cover of the first attack, and missed by a very narrow margin.

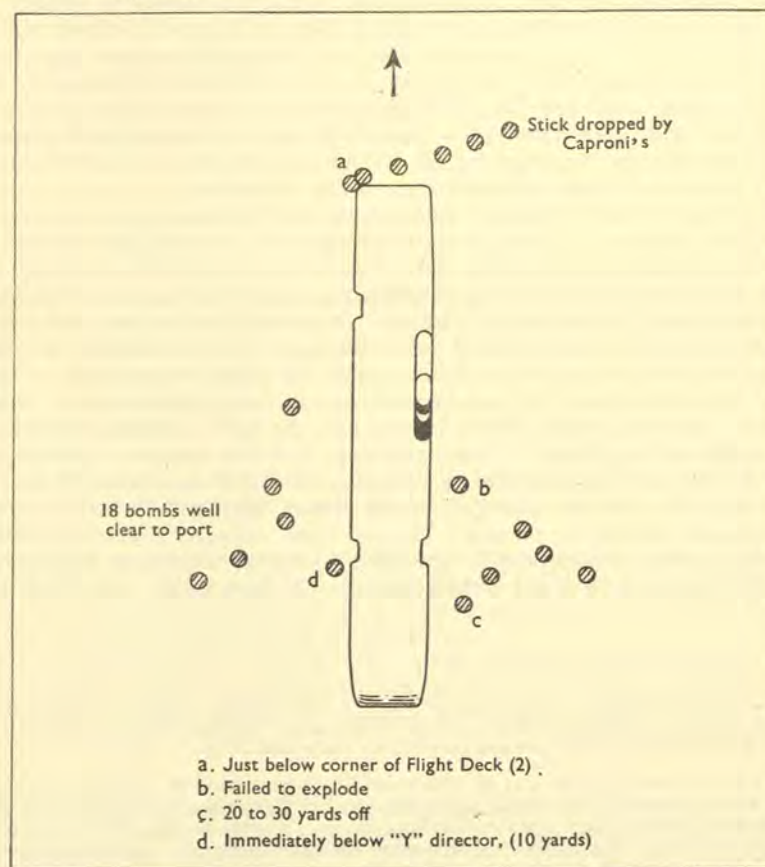


Fig. 10. BOMBING ATTACK ON H.M.S. *Ark Royal*

The *Ark Royal* fortunately suffered no damage, nor, so far as is known, did the enemy bombers.¹ Vice-Admiral Somerville remarked that the complete failure of either fighter attack or gunfire to break up the formation of the Italian Squadrons was most noteworthy.

No further bombing attacks took place; the convoy² was sighted at 1700, and the operation proceeded subsequently according to plan.

57. COMPOSITION OF AND DAMAGE TO ITALIAN FORCES

Owing to the long ranges at which the action was fought, the use of smoke by the Italians, and also to somewhat confusing air reconnaissance reports, there was considerable speculation after the action as to what enemy forces had actually been present. The composition of the battlefleet and the Eastern Group of cruisers was correctly assessed. These cruisers had closed to about eight miles from the battleships by 1240, and were thought to have followed astern of them. Immediately after the surface action ceased, the battlefleet steered for Cagliari at about 25 knots; at about 1500 it turned to the eastward and when last seen was steering north up the east coast of Sardinia. The composition of the Western Group was doubtful; the *Newcastle* considered that all these cruisers were 6-inch gun ships, but other ships were of the opinion that one or more 8-inch cruisers were included in it. After the action their movements were very uncertain; it was thought probable that they rejoined the battlefleet, but it was recognised that they might have been the cruisers attacked by the Skuas at 1530 (as was actually the case). Whether a third group of cruisers was operating, as suggested by the report of the *Sunderland* at 1154, was still more doubtful. After analysing all the available evidence, Admiral Somerville considered that it was not possible to state definitely whether the enemy forces included six or nine cruisers.

With regard to the damage inflicted on the Italians, the estimate was considerably in excess of that actually suffered. It was thought that the rear cruiser of the Eastern Group and two destroyers in the Western Group were certainly hit; some observers in the *Southampton* considered that one of the latter was sinking, and Vice-Admiral Holland suggested that it was not unlikely that the Western Group received other damage which prompted the dense smoke screen into which it retired. Actually, according to the Italian Official History, the only ships hit in the gun action were the destroyer *Lanciere* (seriously) and the cruiser *Fiume*; in this case the shell failed to explode and the damage was negligible. One battleship, and one cruiser or possibly two were believed to have been hit by torpedoes in the F.A.A. attacks, and one cruiser might have been damaged by the Skuas' bombs; but in fact none of these attacks achieved success. Despite this meagre material damage, however, the resolute attitude of Vice-Admiral Somerville's force was sufficient to deter the enemy from any serious attempt on the convoy.

¹ Vice-Admiral Holland remarked that he was in a good position to observe the British A.A. fire at the formation, which attacked at 1645. The gunfire was intense, but he estimated the bursts to have been 1,000 feet low and about 1,000 yards short.

² When it had become clear that an action was in progress south of Sardinia, Commodore Douglas-Pennant had decided to take the convoy south of Galita Island, keeping in the narrow deep water channel to minimise the risk from mines. Several French aircraft sighted the convoy in the course of the day. A submarine contact—afterwards believed to have been "non-sub"—enforced an alteration of 180° in the narrow part of the channel; this caused a delay of some 45 minutes. Apart from this the passage was uneventful.

58. THE VICE-ADMIRAL, FORCE "H"'S REMARKS ON THE ACTION

In commenting on the action Vice-Admiral Somerville remarked that the fact that ships carried out their action duties correctly with the minimum of signalled instructions, and despite the fact that many of them were working together for the first time, is a tribute to the soundness of our tactical training in peace and to the *Fighting Instructions*. On the other hand, in many important respects the standard of fighting efficiency obtained in peace considerably exceeded that reached in war; this he attributed to lack of systematic practices and exercises, and instanced the reluctance of Vice-Admiral Holland to attempt a concentration of fire by the recently re-united cruisers of his squadron.

This lack of opportunities for training during war time made itself felt in several directions in this action. Many of the young observers of the *Ark Royal* had little or no experience of reporting enemy formations, and owing to the necessity of maintaining wireless silence, except in the immediate neighbourhood of Gibraltar, had had but little opportunity of exercising communications in the air.¹

The results too of the torpedo attacks by the air striking force were disappointing as compared with peace-time practices. In each case the approaches were skilful and unobserved and the attacks were pressed home with courage and resolution, but the results fell far short of what might have been hoped for. This was attributed entirely to lack of initial training and subsequent "runner" practices.

Spotting aircraft did not give much assistance. This was partly due to the fact that in almost every case they were flown off too late, owing to wrong estimates of the probable time of contact with the enemy. In the *Berwick* the aircraft was damaged by the blast of the first salvo, which was fired just as it was about to be launched, and it had to be jettisoned.

The Admiral pointed out that it was better to fly off spotting aircraft too soon rather than too late, especially when an aircraft carrier on which they can land in an emergency is present. Difficulties were experienced by them in obtaining communication and in observing the fall of shot owing to the dense smoke surrounding the targets. Most ships commented on the difficulty of target identification and observation due to this smoke. Apart from this, difficulties were experienced in maintaining line, due in part to "canted trunnion" error, and in part to evasive action of the enemy coupled with a long time of flight.

The initial accuracy of the Italian fire and its rapid deterioration when replied to has already been mentioned. Vice-Admiral Holland suggested that on this account it might be worth while in future to open fire before the Italians.²

This initial accuracy was attributed to the stereoscopic range-finders in use in the enemy ships, and both Vice-Admiral Holland and Vice-Admiral Somerville expressed the opinion that further experiment with this type of range-finder was desirable in the British Fleet.

From the tactical point of view, Vice-Admiral Somerville pointed out that on this occasion the first consideration was to force the enemy away from the direction of the convoy as soon as possible, and that immediate attack by the cruisers proceeding at their maximum speed, and with the *Renown* in as close

¹ Both Vice-Admiral Somerville and the Captain of the *Ark Royal* suspected that the original enemy reports by aircraft referred in actual fact to Force "D." Taking all things into consideration, the Admiral considered that the crews of the reconnaissance aircraft acquitted themselves with credit.

² On this occasion the *Manchester* did not open fire at extreme range.

support as her speed permitted, appeared to offer the best prospects of achieving this object.

He suggested, however, that when dealing with enemy forces which have superior speed, ineffective air reconnaissance, and a pronounced inclination to retire as soon as engaged, it might prove advantageous for our heavy and light forces to remain concentrated until contact is made, provided our Air reconnaissance is accurate and reliable. This might enable a heavy long range fire concentration to be brought on the whole or part of the enemy forces before he could retire out of range.

With regard to the operation of carrier-borne aircraft, Vice-Admiral Somerville remarked that it is most desirable that the carrier should act independently, provided her commanding officer is fully aware of the Admiral's view as to how his aircraft are to be employed. Not only do signalled instructions concerning striking forces, reconnaissances and so forth add to wireless congestion, but they may be impracticable to carry out precisely, without dislocating the intricate flying on and off programme. Special circumstances may arise which call for special instructions, but the policy should be for the commanding officer of the carrier to act in accordance with the general situation, and with what he knows to be the Admiral's views.

59. EPILOGUE

Vice-Admiral Somerville arrived back at Gibraltar with Force "H" in the afternoon of 29th November. Ships in harbour paraded bands and received him with cheers. Though naturally disappointed that the speed of the Italian ships had robbed him of the opportunity of forcing them to a close action, he could congratulate himself on the complete success of the operation in passing the reinforcements unscathed through to their destination.

Early next morning there arrived a signal from the Admiralty informing him that a Board of Enquiry, consisting of Admiral-of-the-Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery (President), Vice-Admiral Sir G. H. D'Oyly Lyon and Captain R. G. Duke had been ordered to Gibraltar to enquire into his conduct in breaking off the action and the reasons why the second flight of the *Ark Royal's* Swordfish had not attacked the enemy's battleships.

No report from him (except a signal containing a brief, general account of the action, made before arrival in harbour) had reached the Admiralty, and he was consequently surprised that his conduct and that of officers serving under him "should be called to account before any information could have been received on which to base a considered opinion of our actions."¹ Though he realised that the summoning of a Board of Enquiry did not necessarily imply criticism, he felt that it might in some measure compromise his prestige with Force "H". The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, agreed with this view and refers to the matter in his book.²

The Board of Enquiry sat from 3rd to 7th December, and upheld Sir James Somerville's actions throughout.

¹ Force "H", 215/12 of 19th December 1940.

² *A Sailor's Odyssey* (English edition), pp.292-294.

APPENDIX A

Italian Naval Forces: Operations 7th-9th July 1940

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, AND COMMANDING FIRST SQUADRON,
ADMIRAL I. CAMPIONI

NAME OF SHIP	MAIN ARMAMENT	SPEED	REMARKS	
FIRST SQUADRON (2 Battleships, six 6-inch Cruisers, 16 Destroyers) Admiral Campioni (flag in <i>Cesare</i>). 5TH DIVISION (BATTLESHIPS) Vice-Admiral Brivonesi				
<i>Giulio Cesare</i>	ten 12·6-inch, twelve 4·7-inch	26	} In support of convoy operations	
<i>Conti di Cavour</i>	ten 12·6-inch, twelve 4·7-inch	26		
4TH DIVISION (6-INCH CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Moriondo				
<i>Da Barbiano</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	40		
* <i>Cadorna</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	39		
<i>Da Giussano</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	40		
* <i>Diaz</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	39		
8TH DIVISION (6-INCH CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Legnani				
<i>Duca degli</i> <i>Abruzzi</i>	ten 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	35		
<i>Garibaldi</i>	ten 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	35		
7TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
<i>Freccia</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36	} With battlefleet	
* <i>Dardo</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
<i>Saetta</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
* <i>Strale</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
8TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
* <i>Folgore</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
* <i>Fulmine</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
* <i>Baleno</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
<i>Lampo</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36		
14TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
<i>Vivaldi</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
* <i>Da Noli</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
<i>Pancaldo</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
15TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
* <i>Pigafetta</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
* <i>Zeno</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		

* Not present at action of 9th July.

NAME OF SHIP	MAIN ARMAMENT	SPEED	REMARKS	
FIRST SQUADRON—(Cont.)				
16TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
* <i>Da Recco</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38	} With 4th and 8th Divisions (6-in. Crs.)	
* <i>Usodimare</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
* <i>Pessagno</i>	six 4·7-inch, four 21-inch torp. tubes	38		
SECOND SQUADRON (six 8-inch Cruisers, six 6-inch Cruisers, 20 Destroyers) Admiral R. Paladini (flag in <i>Pola</i>)				
<i>Pola</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33	} Distant Cover east of Convoy route	
1ST DIVISION (8-INCH CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Matteuchi				
<i>Zara</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33		
<i>Gorizia</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33		
<i>Fiume</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33		
3RD DIVISION (8-INCH CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Cattaneo				
<i>Trento</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	36		
<i>Bolzano</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	36		
7TH DIVISION (6-INCH, CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Sansonetti				
<i>Eugenio di Savoia</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	37		
<i>Duca d' Aosta</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	37		
<i>Attendolo</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	37		
<i>Montecuccoli</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	37		
2ND DIVISION (6-INCH, CRUISERS) Vice-Admiral Casardi				
* <i>Bande Nere</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	34	} Convoy escort	
* <i>Colleoni</i>	eight 6-inch, six 4-inch A.A.	34		
12TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA				
<i>Lanciere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	} With <i>Pola</i>	
<i>Carabinieri</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39		
<i>Corazziere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39		
<i>Ascari</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39		

* Not present at action of 9th July.

NAME OF SHIP	MAIN ARMAMENT	SPEED	REMARKS
SECOND SQUADRON—(Cont.)			
9TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA			
<i>Alferi</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	} With 1st Division (<i>Zara</i>)
<i>Oriani</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Carducci</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Gioberti</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
11TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA			
<i>Artigliere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	} With 3rd Division (<i>Trento</i>)
<i>Camicia Nere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Aviere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Geniere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
13TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA			
<i>Granatiere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	} With 7th Division (<i>Eugenio di Savoia</i>)
<i>Fuciliere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Bersagliere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Alpino</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
10TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA			
<i>Maestrone</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	38	} With Convoy
<i>Libeccio</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	38	
<i>Grecale</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	38	
<i>Scirocco</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	38	
4TH TORPEDO BOAT FLOTILLA			
* <i>Procione</i>	two 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	28	} Convoy escort
* <i>Orsa</i>	two 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	28	
* <i>Pegaso</i>	two 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	28	
* <i>Orione</i>	two 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	28	
ADDITIONAL TORPEDO BOATS			
* <i>Pilo</i>	five 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	32	}
* <i>Abba</i>	five 4-inch, four 17·7-inch torp. tubes	32	

* Not present at action of 9th July.

APPENDIX B

Action off Calabria: Comparison of British and Italian Forces

BRITISH	ITALIAN
3 battleships mounting twenty-four 15-inch, thirty-two 6-inch	2 battleships mounting twenty 12·6-inch, twenty-four 4·7-inch
1 aircraft carrier mounting nine 6-inch, 17 T.S.R., 3 fighters	
5 light cruisers mounting forty-eight 6-inch	6 heavy cruisers mounting forty-eight 8-inch 8 light cruisers mounting sixty-eight 6-inch
16 destroyers mounting sixty-nine 4·7-inch, eight 4-inch	24 destroyers mounting one hundred 4·7-inch

In speed the Italian battleships had an advantage of 2-3 knots over the *Warspite* and *Malaya*, and 5-6 knots over the *Royal Sovereign*. With the exception of the four *Zara* class 8-inch cruisers, the Italian cruisers were from two to four knots faster than the British. The destroyers were practically equally matched for speed and armaments.

While the British Fleet had an advantage in having present an obsolescent aircraft carrier, the Italians had, at short range, numerous shore air bases affording a potentially vast aerial superiority.

Within easy distance, too, were the naval bases of Taranto, Messina, Port Augusta, Syracuse, Palermo and Naples, any one of which offered secure shelter to damaged ships. All these ports were submarine bases, from which a strong concentration of submarines could operate at short notice.

APPENDIX C

Italian Air Bombing

The Commander-in-Chief made the following report to the Admiralty:—

“Following is my summary of Italian air bombing threat as seen before detailed reports from units have been scrutinised.

(1) All units of the Fleet have been bombed several times a day for five days. As an example force with *Warspite* on 12th July was attacked 22 times, 260 to 300 bombs being dropped. Only period of immunity was when Fleet was unlocated South of Malta on 10th July and during hours of darkness.

(2) Attacks have all been high level bombing in daylight, average height 12,000 feet by formations varying from nine to single aircraft but generally in sub flights of three. Bombs have been dropped in sticks varying from six heavy bombs to 18 or 27 light bombs per formation. Majority of bombs appear to be light case H.E.

(3) Single aircraft have generally shied off when fired at, but formations have generally flown steadily on with surprising determination.

(4) Most unpleasant attack on *Warspite* at 1550 12th July resulted in 24 bombs along port side and 12 across starboard bow simultaneously, all within one cable but slightly out for line.

(5) A.A. fire with exception of one or two ships has been below pre-war standard but is improving under stress. It has been disappointing that I have not seen any enemy aircraft directly hit and fall into the sea. I am however satisfied that an appreciable number of Italians have failed to return. Naval Attaché, Athens reports one forced landed in Crete. Intercepted Italian reports show one forced landed off Cephalonia and one off Benghazi. Italians admit loss of two in Fleet engagement on 9th July. Three aircraft have been seen to leave formation after close burst by A.A. gunfire. *Warspite* has seen airmen getting out by parachute on two occasions.

(6) Ammunition expenditure has been very heavy and Fleet has returned to harbour with less than half long range outfit remaining.

(7) My summing up is:—

- (i) Intensive high level bombing is to be expected on each occasion of a Fleet operation in the Central Mediterranean.
- (ii) The accuracy of Italian bombing entitled them to one per cent of hits and the Fleet were extremely lucky that this number was not obtained.
- (iii) This probable percentage of hits rising to two per cent as the Italians get more practice must be carefully weighed in considering the employment of valuable ships in the Central Mediterranean.
- (iv) That provided proper antidotes are supplied this scale of bombing attack can be accepted as a reasonable war risk like mines or submarines.
- (v) Prolonged bombing is very wearing to personnel and system started by my predecessor of having at least two complete reliefs for whole A.A. armament in battleships and cruisers has been shown to be essential for prolonged operations.”

(Med. War Diary
15th July 1940).

APPENDIX D

Action off Cape Spada: Comparison of the Opposing Forces, 19th July

The comparative force of the ships engaged in the action of 19th July off Cape Spada was:—

BRITISH

	TONS	KNOTS	GUNS	GUNS	GUNS
<i>Sydney</i>	6,980	32·5	8—6-inch	8—4-inch	—
<i>Hyperion</i>	1,340	36	—	—	4—4·7-inch
<i>Hasty</i>	1,340	36	—	—	4—4·7-inch
<i>Havock</i>	1,340	36	—	—	4—4·7-inch
<i>Hero</i>	1,340	36	—	—	4—4·7-inch
<i>Ilex</i>	1,370	36	—	—	4—4·7-inch
			8—6-inch	8—4-inch	20—4·7-inch

ITALIAN

	TONS	KNOTS	GUNS	GUNS
<i>Giovanni delle Bande Nere</i>	5,069	34	8—6-inch	6—4-inch
<i>Bartolomeo Colleoni</i>	5,069	34	8—6-inch	6—4-inch
			16—6-inch	12—4-inch

APPENDIX E

Action off Cape Spada: Expenditure of Ammunition by the British Ships, 19th July

The expenditure of ammunition by the *Sydney* was 935 rounds C.P.B.C. and 21 rounds H.E., in 181 salvos. The destroyers expended:—

<i>Hyperion</i>	150 rounds
<i>Hero</i>	170 rounds
<i>Havock</i>	55 rounds
<i>Ilex</i>	213 rounds
<i>Hasty</i>	150 rounds

APPENDIX F

Commander-in-Chief's Memorandum: Rescue of Survivors from Enemy Ships

As a result of the bombing attack on the *Havock* while engaged in picking up survivors, the Commander-in-Chief on 22nd July issued the following memorandum:—

“ Whilst the instincts of the British race and the traditions of the sea produce in us all a powerful urge to rescue survivors of sinking ships, it must be remembered that there are other considerations to be weighed against this humane work.

2. We are waging a relentless war against odds, and here in the Mediterranean not only are we competing against numerically naval superior forces, but we have also against us very considerable air forces which our own Air Force is not yet in a position to attack, except in eastern Libya.

3. It follows that no favourable opportunity must be lost of destroying enemy forces, and the rescue of survivors must never be allowed to interfere with the relentless pursuit of enemy ships.

4. It must also be borne well in mind that practically the whole of the area of our operations is subject to enemy bombing. Therefore ships cannot usually afford to hang about picking up survivors, for not only do they thus expose themselves to bombing attack under very disadvantageous conditions, but also subsequent operations are liable to be delayed. Moreover a destroyer with a large number of prisoners on board is bound to be considerably reduced in fighting efficiency.

5. Difficult and distasteful as it is to leave survivors to their fate. Commanding Officers must be prepared to harden their hearts, for, after all, the operations in hand and the security of their ships and ships' companies must take precedence in war.”

APPENDIX G

Operation M.B.8: British Forces Employed

FORCE "A"

1st B.S.

Warspite (eight 15-inch, eight 6-inch) (Flag of C.-in-C. Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O.)
Captain D. B. Fisher, C.B.E.

Malaya (eight 15-inch, twelve 6-inch) (Flag of Rear-Admiral H. B. Rawlings, O.B.E.)
Captain A. F. E. Palliser, D.S.C.

Valiant (eight 15-inch, thirty 4.5-inch) Captain C. E. Morgan, D.S.O.

Illustrious (24 Swordfish, 15 Fighters) (Flag of Rear-Admiral A. L. St. G. Lyster, C.V.O., D.S.O.)
Captain D. W. Boyd, D.S.C.

3rd C.S.

Gloucester (twelve 6-inch) (Flag of Rear-Admiral E. de F. Renouf, C.V.O.)
Captain H. A. Rowley

York (six 8-inch) Captain R. H. Portal, D.S.C.

2nd D.F.

Hyperion (four 4.7-inch) Commander H. St. L. Nicolson, D.S.O.

Havock (four 4.7-inch) Commander R. E. Courage, D.S.O., D.S.C.

Hero (four 4.7-inch) Commander H. W. Biggs, D.S.O.

Hereward (four 4.7-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. C. W. Greening

Hasty (four 4.7-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. L. R. K. Tyrwhitt

Ilex (four 4.7-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. P. L. Saumarez, D.S.C.

20th D.F.

Decoy (four 4.7-inch) Commander E. G. McGregor, D.S.O.

Defender (four 4.7-inch) Lieutenant G. L. Farnfield

14th D.F.

Jervis (six 4.7-inch) Captain P. J. Mack, D.S.O. (Capt. (D) 14)

Nubian (eight 4.7-inch) Commander R. W. Ravenhill

Mohawk (eight 4.7-inch) Commander J. W. Eaton

Janus (six 4.7-inch) Commander J. A. W. Tothill

Juno (six 4.7-inch) Commander St. J. R. J. Tyrwhitt

FORCE "B"

Ajax (eight 6-inch) Captain E. D. B. McCarthy

Sydney (eight 6-inch) Captain J. A. Collins, C.B.

FORCE "C"

Orion (eight 6-inch) (Flag of Vice-Admiral H. D. Pridham-Wippell, C.B., C.V.O. (V.A.L.F. 7th C.S.)
Captain G. R. B. Back

FORCE "D"

(Convoy Escort Force)

Ramillies (eight 15-inch, twelve 6-inch) Captain A. D. Read (when detached from Force "A")

Coventry (eight 4-inch H.A./L.A.) Captain D. Gilmour

Calcutta (eight 4-inch H.A./L.A.) Captain D. M. Lees, D.S.O.

10th D.F.

Vampire (four 4-inch) Lieutenant J. A. Walsh

Voyager (four 4-inch) Commander J. C. Morrow, D.S.O.

Waterhen (four 4-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. J. H. Swain

20th D.F.

Dainty (four 4.7-inch) Commander M. S. Thomas, D.S.O.

Diamond (four 4.7-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. P. A. Cartwright

Wryneck (four 4-inch) H.A./L.A. (A.A. ship) Lieut.-Cdr. A. F. Burnell-Nugent, D.S.C.

¹*Kingston Coral* (Tr.) Skr. W. Kirman, R.N.R.

¹*Sindonis* (Tr.) Ch. Skr. G. Rawding, R.N.R.

¹*Abingdon* (M/S) Lieutenant G. A. Simmers, R.N.R.

FORCE "F"

²*Barham* (eight 15-inch, twelve 6-inch) Captain G. C. Cooke (700)

²*Berwick* (S.O.) (eight 8-inch) Captain G. L. Warren (750)

²*Glasgow* (twelve 6-inch) Captain H. Hickling (400)

²*Griffin* (four 4.7-inch) Lieutenant K. R. C. Letts (50)

²*Greyhound* (four 4.7-inch) Commander W. R. Marshall-A'Deane, D.S.C. (50)

²*Gallant* (four 4.7-inch) Lieut.-Cdr. C. P. F. Brown (50)

¹ With Convoy A.N.6 to Suda Bay.

² Reinforcements for Mediterranean Fleet.

¹ <i>Faulknor</i> (five 4·7-inch)	Captain A. F. De Salis (50)
¹ <i>Fortune</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Lieut.-Cdr. E. N. Sinclair (50)
¹ <i>Fury</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Lieut.-Cdr. T. C. Robinson (50)

FORCE "H"

<i>Ark Royal</i> (Aircraft Carrier)	(Flag of Vice-Admiral Sir J. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O. (F.O., Force H)) Captain C. S. Holland
<i>Sheffield</i> (twelve 6-inch)	Captain C. A. A. Larcom
<i>Duncan</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Captain A. D. B. James (act.)
<i>Isis</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Commander C. S. B. Swinley, D.S.C.
<i>Foxhound</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Commander G. H. Peters
<i>Forester</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Lieut.-Cdr. E. B. Tancock, D.S.C.
<i>Firedrake</i> (four 4·7-inch)	Lieut.-Cdr. S. H. Norris, D.S.C.

The *Eagle* (Captain A. R. M. Bridge) was unable to accompany the Fleet on account of defective petrol tanks.

Note: The names of the Commanding Officers are taken from contemporary Navy Lists.

APPENDIX H

Taranto: Italian Defences and Arrangements,
11th November

Note. The following information is based on extracts from the report of the Italian Commander-in-Chief Afloat to the Chief of the Naval Staff, after the F.A.A. attack.

1. STATE OF BASE ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENCES

- (a) *A.A. artillery.* All in working order in accordance with plans which had been prepared for some time, with the addition of numerous machine guns recently arranged to deal with torpedo aircraft.
 - 21 batteries armed with 4-inch guns.
 - 68 machine gun mountings with total of 84 guns in stations ashore and afloat.
 - 109 light machine guns ashore and afloat.
- (b) *Reporting Stations*
 - 13 Airphonic stations, two linked with searchlights.
 - 22 searchlights, mostly modern type long range, placed on shore and on pontoons.
 - 2 searchlights from each ship were also to be used.
- (c) *Anti-torpedo net obstructions*
About 12,800 metres of nets were required for protection of ships moored in the Mar Grande, but only 4,200 metres were in position.¹
- (d) *Aerial obstructions*
In position, 27² balloons of which 16 were moored to the westward of ships inside the Diga di Tarantola and northward of it, the other 11 being along the eastern shore of the anchorage.

2. SITUATION OF SHIPS, ETC.

- (a) *Position of 1st Squadron at 2000, 11th November.* As shown in Plan 7. The anchor berths were as previously arranged, except that the *Doria* had been unable to recover her stern moorings on her last return from sea. All ships in accordance with Admiralty instructions were at three hours notice.
- (b) *Weather conditions.* Good; sky clear except for occasional slight mist; wind, north-east.
- (c) *Defence of anchorage.* Defence of outer anchorage from air attack was arranged as follows:—
 - Shore batteries (4·09-inch, 4·02-inch, and 3·05-inch).
 - Stations, ashore and afloat, of machine guns (0·8-inch, and 1·6-inch), were specially detailed to engage torpedo aircraft.
 - 'Photo-electrics', ashore and on pontoons, could intercept on moonlight nights either bombers or torpedo aircraft, according to arrangements made by the Central Control.
 - Balloon and net obstructions.

¹ A further 2,900 metres were in store at the base, shortly to be placed in position; the remainder was still being woven. A monthly output of 3,600 metres had been reached by September, with which requirements of several bases had to be met.

² The persistent bad weather in the few days preceding the attack destroyed 60 balloons. It had not been possible to replace them, because the local production of hydrogen was insufficient to cope with such a large demand at short notice.

¹ *Faulknor, Fortune, Fury*, from Force "H", to accompany Force "F" as far as Malta. The figures in brackets give the numbers of military personnel on board each ship.

The part to be played by ships at anchor was as follows:—

No barrage fire at the same time as that of shore batteries. Machine guns to be manned and fired with the main armament against aircraft visible to the naked eye or illuminated by searchlight.

On moonlight nights, two searchlights a ship to work with those of the shore batteries in previously defined sectors, for defence against torpedo aircraft. These had to be integrated with the searchlights worked by the base.

- (d) *Readiness of Ships.* All ships were in a state of complete readiness. Since the possibility of the Italian attack on Greece, watchfulness during the night and at dawn had been intensified. Passive defence on board ship was at the maximum efficiency that circumstances permitted. At the "Alarm" all men on watch went to positions of safety; those not on duty went to shelter. Ships' main armaments were half-manned; A.A. guns fully so. The berths occupied by ships were considered the best protected for all particular alarms and circumstances—moonlight nights etc.
- (c) *Warnings.* For some considerable time Taranto had been the object of visits, both by day and by night, of enemy aircraft. This persistence, as well as special activity of the enemy, served as a warning of heavy air attacks. To meet this contingency no steps other than those described could be taken, except to remove the ships from the port (as was done on 12th November 1940), which of course suffered from the grave drawback of taking them from the most important centre of the theatre of operations.

3. SHIPS PRESENT IN TARANTO, 11/11/40

- (a) *In Mar Grande.* Battleships, 15-inch, *Vittorio Veneto, Littorio*; twelve 6-inch, *Cavour, Cesare, Duilio, Doria*. Cruisers, 8-inch, *Zara, Fiume, Gorizia*. Destroyers, *Folgare, Baleno, Fulmine, Lampo, Alfieri, Gioberti, Carducci, Oriani*.
- (b) *In Mar Piccolo.* Cruisers, 8-inch, (at buoys) *Trieste, Bolzano*, (at wharf) *Pola, Trento*; 6-inch (at wharf) *Garibaldi, Abruzzi*. Destroyers (at buoys) *Granatiere, Alpino, Bersaglieri, Fuciliere*, (at wharf) *Freccia, Strale, Dardo, Saetta, Maestrone, Libeccio, Grecale Scirroco, Camicia Nera, Geniere, Lanciere, Carabinieri, Coreziere, Ascari, Da Rocco, Usadimari, Pessagno*. Five torpedo boats, 16 submarines, supply and hospital ships; four minesweepers, one minelayer, nine tankers with a number of tugs and merchant ships.

APPENDIX I

F.A.A. Attack on Taranto; Aircraft, H.M.S. *Illustrious*

Aircraft bearing the initial letter L belonged to H.M.S. *Illustrious*, those with E to H.M.S. *Eagle*. Members of the crews from the *Eagle* are marked. ¹

All the torpedoes carried were 18-inch, Mark XII, set to 27 knots, 33ft. and armed with Duplex pistols, safety range setting 300 yards.

All bombs carried were 250lb. S.A.P.

All aircraft carried one parachute flare, setting 7, except the three flare droppers which each carried eight parachute flares, setting, 7 and eight setting 16.

T—Torpedo, B—Bombs, F—Flare

1ST STRIKING FORCE

AIRCRAFT SQUADRON	PILOT. OBSERVER.	LOAD	TARGET AND DROPPING POSITION, PLAN 7
L.4A (815) (did not return)	Lt.-Cdr. K. Williamson, R.N. Lt. N. J. Scarlett, R.N.	1 T	<i>Cavour</i> (1)
L.4C (815)	S/Lt. (A) P. D. J. Sparke, D.S.C., R.N. S/Lt. (A) A. L. O. Neale, R.N.	1 T	<i>Cavour</i> (2)
L.4R (815)	S/Lt. (A) A. S. D. Macaulay, R.N. S/Lt. (A) A. L. O. Wray, R.N.V.R.	1 T	<i>Cavour</i> (3)
L.4K (815)	Lt. N. McI. Kemp, R.N. S/Lt. (A) R. A. Bailey, R.N.	1 T	<i>Littorio</i> (4)
L.4M (815)	Lt. (A) H. A. I. Swayne, R.N. S/Lt. (A) J. Buscall, R.N.V.R.	1 T	<i>Littorio</i> (5)
E.4F (813)	¹ Lt. M. R. Maund, R.N. ¹ S/Lt. (A) W. A. Bull, R.N.	1 T	<i>Littorio</i> (6)
L.4P (815)	Lt. (A) L. J. Kiggell, R.N. Lt. H. R. B. Janvrin, R.N.	4 B 16 F	Oil storage tanks (12)
L.5B (813)	Lt. (A) C. B. Lamb, R.N. ¹ Lt. K. G. Grieve, R.N.	4 B, 16 F	Oil tanks (13)
E.5A (824)	¹ Capt. O. Patch, R.M. ¹ Lt. D. G. Goodwin, R.N.	6 B	Cruisers and destroyers in <i>Mar Piccolo</i> (14)

AIRCRAFT SQUADRON	PILOT. OBSERVER.	LOAD	TARGET AND DROPPING POSITION, PLAN 7
L.4L (815)	S/Lt. (A) W. C. Sarra, R.N. Mid (A) J. Bowker, R.N.	6 B	Seaplane base in Mar Piccolo (15)
L.4H (815)	S/Lt. (A) A. J. Forde, R.N. S/Lt. (A) A. Mardel-Ferreira, R.N.V.R.	6 B	Cruisers and destroyers in Mar Piccolo (16)
E.5Q (824)	¹ Lt. (A) J. B. Murray, R.N. ¹ S/Lt. (A) S. M. Paine, R.N.	6 B	Cruisers and destroyers in Mar Piccolo (17)

2ND STRIKING FORCE

L.5A (819)	Lt.-Cdr. J. W. Hale, R.N. Lt. G. A. Carline, R.N.	1 T	<i>Littorio</i> (7)
E.4H (813) (did not return)	¹ Lt. G. W. Bayley, R.N. ¹ Lt. H. J. Slaughter, R.N.	1 T	<i>Gorizia</i> (8)
L.5H (819)	Lt. (A) C. S. C. Lea, R.N. S/Lt. (A) P. D. Jones, R.N.	1 T	<i>Duilio</i> (9)
L.5K (819)	Lt. F. M. A. Torrens-Spence, R.N. Lt. A. W. F. Sutton, R.N.	1 T	<i>Littorio</i> (10)
E.5H (824)	¹ Lt. (A) J. W. G. Welham, R.N. ¹ Lt. P. Humphreys, E. G. M., R.N.	1 T	<i>Veneto</i> (11)
L.5B (819)	Lt. R. W. V. Hamilton, R.N. S/Lt. (A) J. R. Weeks, R.N.	2 B 16 F	Oil storage tanks (17) (18)
L.4F (815)	Lt. (A) R. G. Skelton, R.N. S/Lt. (A) E. A. Perkins, R.N.V.R.	2 B 16 F	Oil storage tanks (18) (19)
L.5F (819)	Lt. E. W. Clifford, R.N. Lt. G. R. M. Going, R.N.	6 B	Dive bomb cruisers and destroyers in Mar Piccolo (19) (20)
L.5Q (819)	Lt. (A) W. D. Morford, R.N. S/Lt. (A) R. A. F. Green, R.N.	1 T	External tank fell off. Returned to carrier

APPENDIX J

F.A.A. Attack on Taranto:
Narratives of Aircraft

- Note.* (1) These narratives have been supplemented, and where necessary amended, by information received from Italian sources since the war.
- (2) Numbers in brackets after torpedoes or bombs refer to dropping positions on Plan 7.

FIRST FLIGHT

- No. 1 L4A (Lieut.-Cdr. Williamson, Lieut. Scarlett)
Arrived over island of San Pietro with L4C and L4R at 4,000 feet and flew to centre of Mar Grande. This was the last seen of L4A by the British. The aircraft was sighted in the path of the moon diving at high speed with the engine cut out at 2314 by the destroyer *Fulmine*, which at once opened fire at about 1,000 yards range. L4A's torpedo (1), dropped from a height of about 30 feet, narrowly missed the *Fulmine* and hit the *Cavour*. The aircraft then crashed near the floating dock. Both officers were rescued by the Italians and made prisoners of war.
- No. 2 L4C (Sub-Lieutenants Sparke and Neale)
Dived from the centre of Mar Grande and crossed the breakwater on Tarantola shoal about two-thirds of its length from the shore at a height of 30 feet. Had intended to attack the *Vittorio Veneto* but she could not be identified; sighted the *Cavour* and dropped his torpedo (2) at about 700 yards.¹ An explosion was seen near the ship a minute later. L4C then turned 180° sharply to port and got away south of San Pietro. Intense A.A. fire from the batteries at the harbour entrance was experienced during both the approach and the withdrawal. L4C landed on the carrier at 0120, 12th November.
- No. 3 L4R (Sub-Lieutenants Macaulay and Wray)
L4R's story closely follows that of L4C. Torpedo (3) was also fired at the *Cavour* at almost the same time as L4C.¹ During the get-away the observer noted a line of balloons at 1,000 feet outside Tarantola breakwater. A.A. fire was noticed from the batteries east and south of the harbour. L4R landed on the carrier at 0125.
- No. 4 L4K (Lieut. Kemp, Sub-Lieut. Bailey)
Approached from the west over western breakwater at 4,000 feet, experiencing heavy A.A. fire from batteries on San Pietro Island and near Cape Rondinella. Fire was continued from shore batteries as the aircraft dived between Taranto and the cruisers, who opened an intense fire as sea level was reached. Several shells

¹ The *Doria* reported two bombs exploding ahead of her at 2315. No bombs were dropped in this vicinity. It seems probable that these explosions were the torpedoes launched by L4C, and L4R, which had missed the *Cavour* and run on towards her. The *Doria* was undamaged.

from the cruisers were seen to hit merchant ships at anchor. Fired torpedo at about 1,000 yards (4) from the *Littorio*, which was hit on the starboard bow. L4K then turned to starboard and passing over the end of Tarantola breakwater gained the open sea to the southward. A fire was observed in the vicinity of the seaplane base. The carrier was then reached without incident.

- No. 5 L4M (Lieut. Swayne, Sub-Lieut. Buscall)
Became detached from leader and waited a quarter of an hour off the harbour for the other aircraft. Having sighted flares, came down to 1,000 feet over western breakwater, meeting violent A.A. fire from ships and batteries. Lost height while crossing Mar Grande and at end of Tarantola breakwater made a sharp turn to port and dropped torpedo (5) about 400 yards from the *Littorio* at 2315. The torpedo hit the *Littorio* on the port quarter a few seconds after L4K's hit on the starboard bow. L4M then passed directly over the *Littorio*, and got away over San Pietro under heavy fire from the cruisers and shore batteries, eventually landing on the *Illustrious* at 0150.
- No. 6 E4F (Lieut. Maund, Sub-Lieut. Bull)
Arriving over the land north of Cape Rondinella, E4F met with A.A. fire from shore batteries and cruisers while planing down to dropping position S.W. of the Canal. Torpedo (6) was fired at the *Veneto* at a distance of about 1,300 yards. The torpedo probably grounded and exploded off the starboard quarter of the *Littorio* about 2315.¹ E4F then turned sharply to starboard and got away over San Pietro, meeting violent A.A. fire on the way.
- No. 7 L4P (Lieuts. Kiggell and Janvrin)
Was detached to seaward of Cape San Vito, and with L5B proceeded at a height of 7,500 feet, experiencing A.A. fire while crossing the coast. Beginning at 2302 dropped a line of flares east of the harbour, to burn at 4,500 feet at intervals of half a mile. L4P then turned to starboard and cruised for 15 to 20 minutes, when a dive-bombing attack (12) was made on the oil fuel depot to the southward, after which it returned to the *Illustrious*, landing on at 0120.
- No. 8 L5B (Lieuts. Lamb and Grieve)
Followed astern of L4P, but did not drop flares as those already dropped were functioning efficiently. The A.A. fire encountered and course followed were the same as for L4P, and the same oil fuel depot was dive-bombed (13).
- No. 9 E5A (Captain Patch, R.M., Lieut. Goodwin)
Arrived over San Pietro at 2306 at height of 8,500 feet and was fired on by shore batteries there and at Cape Rondinella. Proceeded to western part of Mar Piccolo. After some difficulty in identifying target, carried out a dive-bombing attack on two 8-inch cruisers (14), crossing Mar Piccolo from N.W. to S.E. Machine gun fire was opened from many places and the cruisers. E5A then turned east and about five minutes later noticed a large fire in the vicinity of the seaplane base. A.A. fire from a new position was avoided by sheltering behind a range of hills. E5A eventually crossed the

¹ The *Duilio* observed an explosion in this position at the time.

coast to the southward about eight miles east of Taranto harbour, and landed on the *Illustrious* at 0135.

- No. 10 L4L (Sub-Lieut. Sarra, Midshipman Bowker)
Arrived over land to westward of Taranto at 8,000 feet and dived to 1,500 feet over Mar Piccolo. The pilot could not identify the target, so attacked the seaplane base from height of 500 feet (15) hitting hangar and slipway and causing a large explosion in the store. Heavy machine gun fire was met, particularly after the attack. L4L disengaged to the south, leaving the land about five miles east of the harbour, and returned to the *Illustrious* without incident.
- No. 11 L4H (Sub-Lieuts. Forde and Mardel-Ferreira)
Lost contact with main group and arrived to eastward of Cape San Vito whilst the first flares were being launched. A fire was noticed in the oil fuel depot. Arriving over Mar Piccolo, turned to port and attacked from N.E. to S.W., dropping bombs from 1500 feet (16). First bomb fell in water short of the two 8-inch cruisers. During the dive intense A.A. fire was suffered. The pilot was not sure that his bombs had dropped, so turned round in the western part of Mar Piccolo and repeated the attack. The breakaway was made to the N.W., and L4H crossed the coast about five miles west of the harbour.
- No. 12 E5Q (Lieut. Murray, Sub-Lieut. Paine)
Arrived to eastward of Cape San Vito while flares were being dropped and proceeded north to eastern extremity of Mar Piccolo. Carried out bombing attack from east to west along the line of moles as far as the western cruiser from 3,000 feet (17). The destroyer *Libeccio* was hit by a bomb which failed to explode. E5Q then turned 180° to port and drew away in the same direction from which it had approached.

SECOND FLIGHT

- No. 13 L5A (Lieut.-Cdr. Hale, Lieut. Carline)
After experiencing heavy A.A. fire from San Pietro, arrived one mile north of Cape Rondinella at 5,000 feet and dived over the merchant ship harbour, under intense fire. Torpedo was dropped at range of 700 yards at the *Littorio*¹ (7), and aircraft then turned to starboard and got away just north of the Tarantola shoal breakwater, heavily engaged by destroyers. L5A landed on the *Illustrious* at 0200, 12th.
- No. 14 E4H (Lieuts. Bayley and Slaughter)
Followed L5A over Cape Rondinella and was not afterwards seen by the British. The Italian account mentions an attack on the *Gorizia* and shows an aircraft shot down in this vicinity.
- No. 15 L5H (Lieut. Lea, Sub-Lieut. Jones)
Followed L5A and dived over Cape Rondinella to a point 2½ cables south of Canal entrance. Launched torpedo at the *Duilio* (9) and hit her on starboard side abreast No. 2 turret (angle of impact 80°,

¹ The *Littorio* was hit by a torpedo which exploded on her starboard bow at 0001. This may have been L5A's, or L5K's, which was launched practically simultaneously from the same direction. An unexploded torpedo was afterwards found stuck in the mud under the *Littorio*'s keel.

- depth 29.5 feet). L5H then turned to starboard and got away between the *Zara* and *Fiume* and then over the north of San Pietro under violent A.A. fire from cruisers, destroyers and shore batteries.
- No. 16 L5K (Lieuts. Torrens-Spence and Sutton)
Followed L5A and dived over Cape Rondinella to about five cables south of the Canal entrance, under A.A. fire from battleships, cruisers and shore batteries. Torpedo fired from about 700 yards at the *Littorio*², (10), and L5K then broke away to the southward of Sao Paolo, eventually landing on the *Illustrious* at 0215.
- No. 17 E5H (Lieuts. Welham and Humphreys)
After passing over Cape Rondinella astern of L5A flew over the Mar Piccolo and the town of Taranto; then turned to starboard towards the centre of Mar Grande, passing very close to the northern balloon on the Eastern shore. E5H then dived to the attack under heavy machine gun fire; the outer aileron rod was hit, temporarily putting the aircraft out of control. When control was regained, torpedo was launched 500 yards from port quarter of the *Veneto* (11). The aircraft then turned sharply to starboard and got away through intense A.A. fire north of San Pietro, after receiving a hit on the port wing. The *Illustrious* was reached at 0205.
- No. 18 L5B (Lieut. Hamilton, Sub-Lieut. Weekes)
Arriving over Cape San Vito at 7,500 feet came down to 5,000 feet and dropped a line of flares at intervals of 15 seconds to eastward of the harbour was fired on by A.A. guns while dropping the flares. L5B then carried out a dive bombing attack on the oil storage depot, causing a small fire (18), and then returned to the carrier, landing on at 0230.
- No. 19 L4F (Lieut. Skelton, Sub-Lieut. Perkins)
Approached on a similar course to L5B and dropped flares to south-east of the harbour. Bombs were dropped near the oil storage depot (19), it was thought unsuccessfully. A.A. fire was met with and some shells came very close during the dive bombing attack. L4F landed on the *Illustrious* at 0200.
- No. 20 L5F (Lieuts. Clifford and Going)
This aircraft left the *Illustrious* 24 minutes late, arriving at Taranto while the attack was in progress. It reached land about five miles east of the harbour entrance and steered for the dockyard at the edge of Mar Piccolo. Turning to port, a bombing attack (20) was carried out at 2,500 feet from west to east along the line of cruisers and destroyers. The *Trento* was hit and other ships narrowly missed, but none of the bombs exploded. L5F then turned north, crossing Mar Piccolo before altering to starboard to cross the coast five miles east of the harbour entrance. A.A. fire was experienced the whole time the aircraft was overhead, being particularly intense from pom-poms during the bombing run. L5F landed on at 0250.
- No. 21 L5Q (Lieut. Morford, Sub-Lieut. Green)
The external overload petrol tank fell off at 2205 and the fittings banging against the fuselage necessitated a return to the carrier. Fired red Very Light on approaching the *Illustrious*, but not being expected, the *Illustrious* and *Berwick* opened fire. Fired a two star identification light and firing ceased.

² See note, L5A.

APPENDIX K

F.A.A. Attack on Taranto: R.A.(A)'s Orders to *Illustrious* and Escort Force, 11th November¹

When detached, *Illustrious* will adjust course and speed to pass through position "X", 270° Kabbo Point 40, at 2000, when course will be altered into wind and speed adjusted to give speed of 30 knots. On completion of flying off first range, course will be altered 180° to starboard, speed 17 knots and a second alteration of 180° to starboard will be made to pass again through position "X" at 2100 when course and speed will be adjusted as before. On completion of flying off second range, *Illustrious* will alter course to 150°, 17 knots and subsequently to pass through position "Y", 270° Kabbo Point 20², at 0100 when course will be altered into wind and speed adjusted to wind and speed of 25 knots to be maintained till both ranges have landed on. If there is an easterly wind it may be necessary to reverse the course between flying on first and second ranges, in which case both turns will be to starboard and speed of ship down wind 25 knots. On completion of landings, course will be altered to return to C.-in-C., speed 18 knots. All the above and any other alterations of course necessary without signal.

Normal night zigzag will be maintained, except during flying operations.

If enemy surface forces are encountered during the night *Illustrious* is to withdraw, remainder are to engage under C.S.3. Two destroyers are to be detailed to withdraw with *Illustrious*.

¹ Report of C.O. *Illustrious*, 13th November 1941, App. V (in A.0138/41).

² i.e. 270° 20 miles from Kabbo Point, Cephalonia.

APPENDIX L

Report on Suda Bay, 11th November

The defence of Crete was a matter of primary importance at this time and the C.-in-C. had, on 28th October, issued orders for the establishment of a fuelling base at Suda Bay. Net defence was to be laid by the *Protector* and A.A. cruisers were to defend the anchorage. "Although the need for an advanced base in the Eastern Mediterranean had been appreciated for many years and was fully provided for in 1935, in 1940 owing to more urgent requirements in Home Waters it had not been possible to allocate any personnel or special material to the Mediterranean." (C.-in-C., 19/3/41). A "commission" of naval, army and air officers left Alexandria by air on 29th October. A conference was held with the Governor-General and the Greek General Officer Commanding, General Alexakis. The *Protector* arrived on 31st October and started laying nets. A Base Defence party from H.M.S. *Liverpool* of 11 officers and 147 men under Lieut.-Commander J. N. Hicks, with four 4-inch guns, two machine guns, five pom-poms and four 3-pdrs., also arrived in the *Fiona* and *Chakla*. Air raids commenced on 1st November. Major P. W. Phibbs, R.M., had four 6-inch guns mounted by 24th November. Lack of labour and transport were the principal difficulties. On 16th November, 13,500 Greek troops left, taking 215 of the 382 lorries in the island. The 4-inch guns were mounted on baulks but only one of the mountings fitted accurately. In the remainder the holes were not in line with those of the base plate and had to be laboriously burnt out as there were no large augurs available. Major Phibbs had difficulties in mounting and setting up the base plates in the concrete. The Naval Officer-in-Charge (Suda) was Lieut.-Commander H. R. M. Nicholl, and though there were many difficulties they were wonderfully surmounted by the Navy and Marines.

Vice-Admiral Pridham-Wippell visited the Base on 8th November. Work was progressing satisfactorily. The laying of the net defences was proceeding satisfactorily but there was an "urgent need" for an A/S patrol. The question of who was Fortress Commander required to be settled at an early date. The Naval Officer-in-Charge needed secretarial assistance and Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant E. P. G. Kealey, R.N.V.R., was landed from the Vice-Admiral's staff for this duty.¹

¹ V.A.L.F. report of 11th November 1940, in C.-in-C., Med., 19/3/41 (Establishment of Naval Base at Suda Bay) in M.05521/41.

APPENDIX M

Operation "Collar": H.M. Ships, with Main Armament and Commanding Officers

FORCE "B"

<i>Renown</i> (six 15-inch guns)	Flag, Vice-Admiral Sir James F. Somerville, K.C.B., D.S.O. (ret.) (F.O. "H") Captain C. E. B. Simeon Captain C. S. Holland
<i>Ark Royal</i> (sixteen 4.5-inch guns) (60 aircraft)	
<i>Sheffield</i> (twelve 6-inch guns)	Captain C. A. A. Larcom
<i>Despatch</i> (six 6-inch guns)	Broad pendant. Commodore C. E. Douglas-Pennant, D.S.C. (Comre. W.I.) (D.8) Captain A. F. De Salis
<i>Faulknor</i> (five 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander S. H. Norris
<i>Firedrake</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander E. B. Tancock
<i>Forester</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander T. C. Robinson
<i>Fury</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Commander E. T. Cooper
<i>Wishart</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander E. V. St. J. Morgan
<i>Encounter</i> (four 4.7 inch guns)	Commander J. H. Allison, D.S.O. Lieutenant-Commander J. F. W. Hine
<i>Kelvin</i> (six 4.7-inch guns)	
<i>Jaguar</i> (six 4.7-inch guns)	

FORCE "F"

<i>Manchester</i> (twelve 6-inch guns)	Flag, Vice-Admiral L. E. Holland, C.B. (C.S.18) Captain H. A. Packer
<i>Southampton</i> (twelve 6-inch guns)	Captain B. C. B. Brooke
<i>Duncan</i> (D.13) (four 4.7-inch guns)	Captain A. D. B. James
<i>Hotspur</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Commander H. F. H. Layman, D.S.O.
<i>Vidette</i> (four 4-inch guns)	Lieutenant E. N. Walmsley
<i>Peony</i> (one 4-inch gun)	Lieutenant-Commander M. B. Sherwood, D.S.O. (retired)
<i>Salvia</i> (one 4-inch gun)	Lieutenant-Commander J. I. Miller, D.S.O., R.N.R.
<i>Gloxinia</i> (one 4-inch gun)	Lieutenant-Commander A. J. C. Pomeroy, R.N.V.R.
<i>Hyacinth</i> (one 4-inch gun)	Lieutenant J. I. Jones, R.N.R.

FORCE "D"

<i>Ramillies</i> (eight 15-inch guns)	Captain A. D. Read
<i>Newcastle</i> (twelve 6-inch guns)	Captain E. A. Aylmer, D.S.C.
<i>Coventry</i> (ten 4-inch A/A guns)	Captain D. Gilmour
<i>Berwick</i> (eight 8-inch guns)	Captain G. L. Warren
<i>Defender</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander G. L. Farnfield
<i>Greyhound</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Commander W. R. Marshall-A'Deane, D.S.C.
<i>Gallant</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander C. P. F. Brown
<i>Hereward</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander C. W. Greening
<i>Diamond</i> (four 4.7-inch guns)	Lieutenant-Commander P.A. Cartwright

APPENDIX N
Italian Naval Forces:
Action off Cape Spartivento

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, AND COMMANDING FIRST SQUADRON, ADMIRAL I. CAMPIONI

NAME OF SHIP	MAIN ARMAMENT	SPEED	REMARKS
	FIRST SQUADRON (2 Battleships, 8 Destroyers) Admiral Campioni, C.-in-C.		
<i>Vittorio Veneto</i>	nine 15-inch, twelve 6-inch	29	Flag, C.-in-C.
<i>Giulio Cesare</i>	ten 12·6-inch, twelve 4·7-inch	26	
	7TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA		
<i>Freccia</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36	
<i>Dardo</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36	
<i>Saetta</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36	
<i>Strale</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	36	
	13TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA		
<i>Granatiere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Fuciliere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Bersagliere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Alpino</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
	SECOND SQUADRON (6—8-inch Cruisers, 8 Destroyers) Vice-Admiral A. Iachino		
	1ST CRUISER DIVISION		
<i>Pola</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33	Flag, Vice-Admiral A. Iachino
<i>Gorizia</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33	
<i>Fiume</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	33	
	9TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA		
<i>Alfieri</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Oriani</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Garducci</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Gioberti</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
	3RD CRUISER DIVISION		
<i>Trieste</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	36	Flag, Vice-Admiral Sansonetti
<i>Trento</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	36	
<i>Bolzano</i>	eight 8-inch, twelve 4-inch A.A.	36	
	12TH DESTROYER FLOTILLA		
<i>Lanciere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	Damaged in action
<i>Goraziere</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Ascari</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	
<i>Libeccio</i>	four 4·7-inch, six 21-inch torp. tubes	39	

APPENDIX O

Action off Cape Spartivento:
Admiral Somerville's Reasons for
Decision to Abandon Chase

Vice-Admiral Somerville summarised the reasons for and against continuing the chase as follows:—

For continuing the chase—

- (i) The possibility that the speed of the enemy might be reduced by some unforeseen eventuality.
- (ii) He might appreciate that his force was superior to mine and decide to turn and fight.

Against continuing the chase—

- (i) There was no sign that any of the enemy ships, and especially his battleships, had suffered damage, nor was there reasonable prospect of inflicting damage by gunfire, in view of their superior speed. Unless the speed of the enemy battleships was reduced very materially he could enter Cagliari before I could bring him to action with *Renown* and *Ramillies*.
- (ii) I was being led towards the enemy air and submarine base at Cagliari, and this might well prove a trap. His appearance in this area appeared to be premeditated, since it was unlikely that this was occasioned solely by the information he had received the previous night of Force "D"'s presence in the Narrows.
- (iii) The extrication of one of my ships damaged by air or submarine attack from my present position would certainly require the whole of my force and must involve leaving the convoy uncovered and insufficiently escorted during the passage of the Narrows.
- (iv) The enemy main units had been driven off sufficiently far to ensure they could no longer interfere with the passage of the convoy.
- (v) A second T/B attack could not take place until 1530 to 1600, by which time the convoy would be entirely uncovered and the enemy fleet could be under the cover of the A.A. batteries and fighters at Cagliari. I entertained little hope that the attack would prove effective, as I knew that the second flight was even less experienced than the first.
- (vi) I had no assurance that the cruisers reported to the north-west might not be working round towards the convoy and the *Ark Royal*.
- (vii) It was necessary for contact to be made with the convoy before dark, to ensure the cruisers and destroyers required for escort through the Narrows should be properly formed up. It was also necessary to provide the fullest possible scale of defence against T/B and light surface force attack at dusk. To effect this a retirement between 1300 and 1400 was necessary.

APPENDIX P
Details of British Naval Aircraft

I. FIGHTER AIRCRAFT CAPABLE OF DECK LANDING

	SEA GLADIATOR	SKUA	FULMAR	REMARKS
Crew	1	2	2	The climb of these aircraft varied; for Gladiator and Fulmar it was 3½ to 4½ minutes to 10,000 feet; for the Skua 12¼ minutes.
Armament	4—·303 F* 1—·303 R† 1—500 lb. or 1—250 lb. bomb	4—·303 F 1—·303 R 1—500 lb. or 1—250 lb. bomb	8—·303 F 1—500 lb. or 1—250 lb. bomb	
Whether dive bomber	No	Yes	No	
Fitted for observer navigation, W/T, and folding	No	Yes	No	
Maximum speed, Knots	213	195	230	
Endurance at maximum (approx.)	¾ hour	2 hours	2 hours	
Maximum endurance at economical speed	2¼ hours	6 hours	6 hours‡	

II. RECONNAISSANCE AND STRIKE AIRCRAFT

	SWORDFISH	ALBACORE	WALRUS§
Crew	3 reconn: 3 strike	3 reconn: 2 strike	3 reconn:
Armament	1—·303 (or ·3) Front, 1—·303 (or ·3) Rear Gun		
	Torpedo or bombs, 1,500 lbs.	Torpedo or bombs, 1,500 lbs.	Bombs, 500 lbs.
Capable of dive bombing	Yes	Yes	Limited
Capable of torpedo attack	Yes	Yes	No
Maximum speed, Knots	125	155	110
Maximum endurance and range without extra tankage:—			
Reconnaissance	5½ hours	6 hours	3½ hours
Strike Force	450 miles	630 miles	300 miles
Whether extra tankage	Yes	Yes	No

* F — Fixed Front Gun. † R — Rear Free Gun. ‡ With extra tank. § Catapult ship aircraft.

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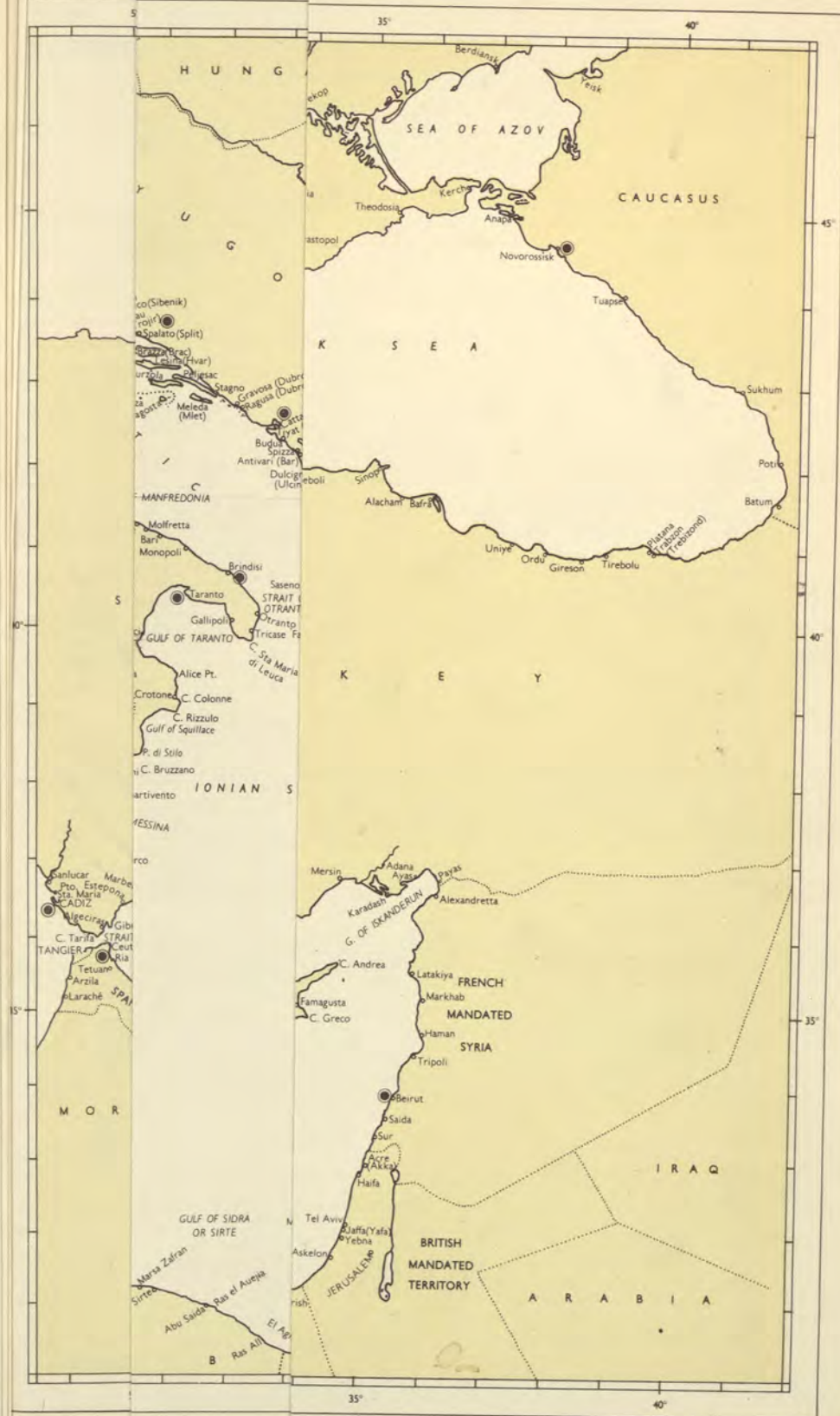
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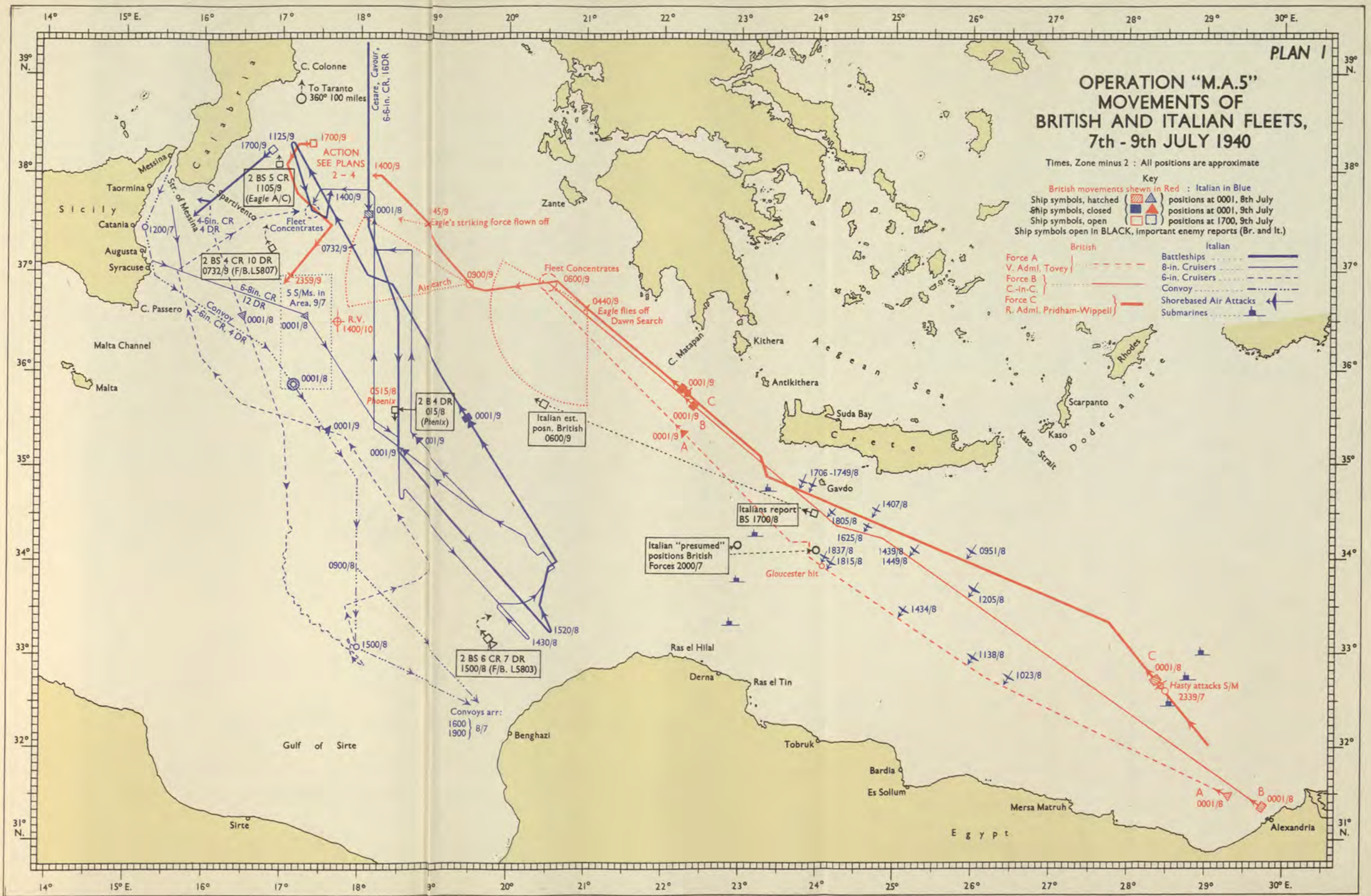
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MEDITERRANEAN AND BLACK SEA REFERENCE CHART

Frontiers shown as in 1937.
Ports at which there were Foreign Naval Authorities (1937)
are indicated thus 





PLAN I

OPERATION "M.A.5"

MOVEMENTS OF BRITISH AND ITALIAN FLEETS, 7th - 9th JULY 1940

Times, Zone minus 2 : All positions are approximate

Key

British movements shown in Red : Italian in Blue

Ship symbols, hatched (red/blue) positions at 0001, 8th July
 Ship symbols, closed (red/blue) positions at 0001, 9th July
 Ship symbols, open (red/blue) positions at 1700, 9th July
 Ship symbols open in BLACK, important enemy reports (Br. and It.)

<p>British</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Force A V. Adml. Tovey Force B C-In-C. Force C R. Adml. Pridham-Wippell 	<p>Italian</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Battleships 8-in. Cruisers 6-in. Cruisers Convoy Shorebased Air Attacks Submarines
---	---

ACTION SEE PLANS 2-4

45/9 Eagle's striking force flown off

0900/9 Airsearch

0600/9 Fleet Concentrates

0440/9 Eagle flies off Dawn Search

0515/8 Phoenix

0001/9 Italian est. posn. British 0600/9

1700/8 Italians report BS

Italian "presumed" positions British Forces 2000/7

Gloucester hit

Hasty attacks S/M 2339/7

Convoys arr: 1600 1900 B/7

2 BS 6 CR 7 DR 1500/8 (F/B. L5803)

2 BS 4 DR 015/8 (Phoenix)

2 BS 4 CR 10 DR 0732/9 (F/B. L5807)

2 BS 5 CR 1105/9 (Eagle A/C)

C. Colonno To Taranto 360° 100 miles

Cesare, Cavour, 6-8-in. CR. 18DR

1125/9 1700/9

1400/9 0001/8

0732/9 0001/8

2359/9 5 S/Ms. in Area. 9/7

0001/8 0001/8

0001/8 0001/8

0001/8 0001/8

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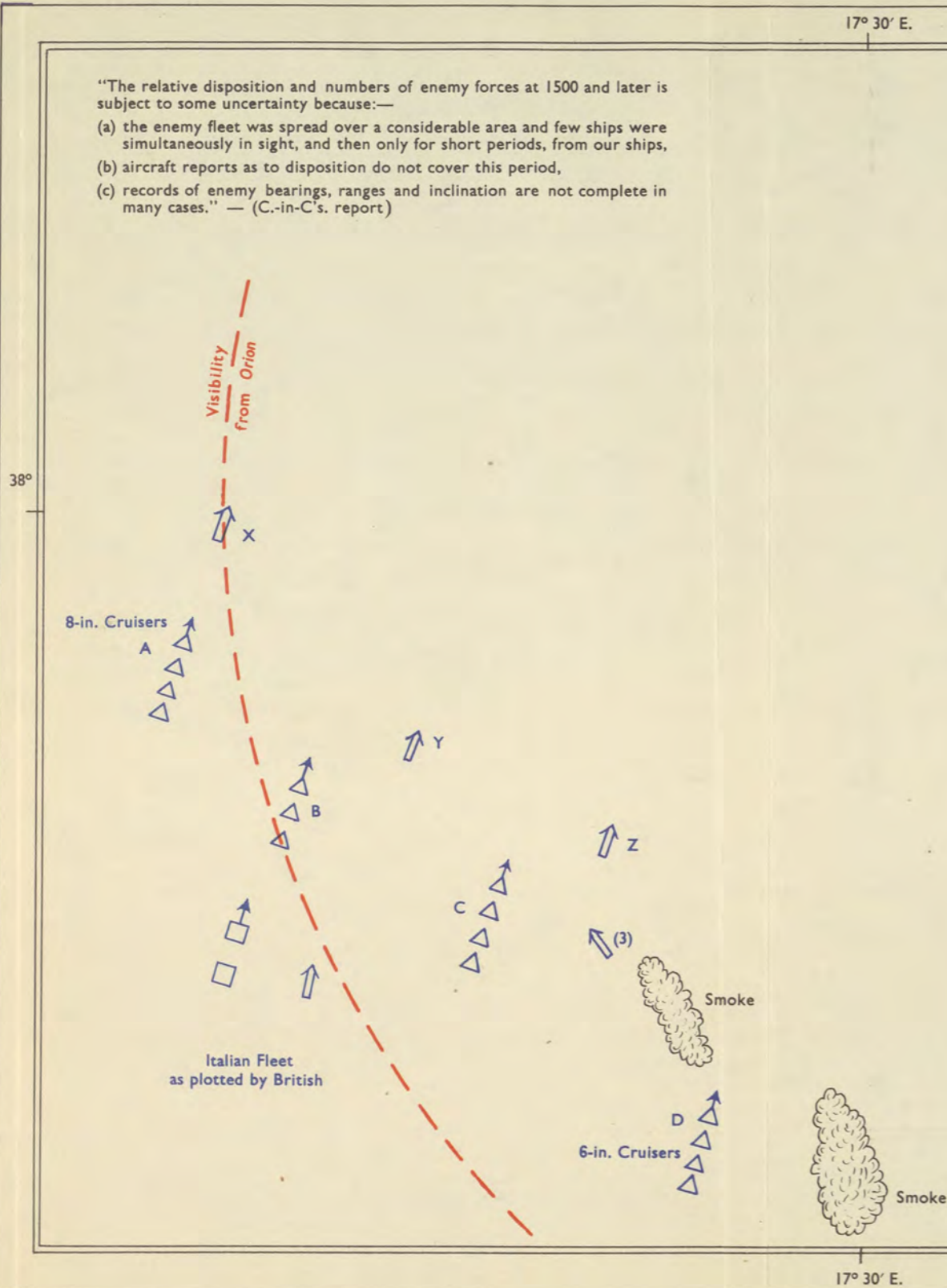
0001/8 0001/8

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"The relative disposition and numbers of enemy forces at 1500 and later is subject to some uncertainty because:—

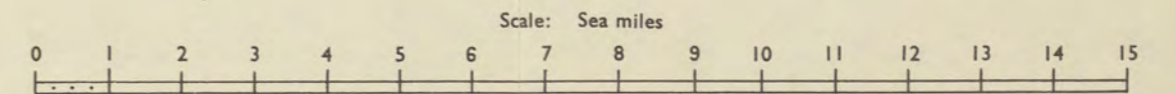
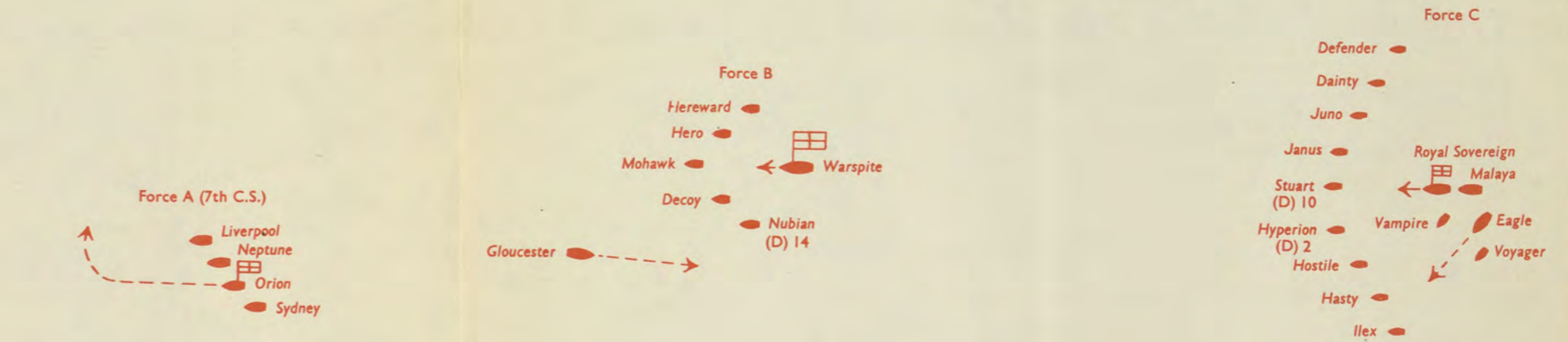
- (a) the enemy fleet was spread over a considerable area and few ships were simultaneously in sight, and then only for short periods, from our ships,
- (b) aircraft reports as to disposition do not cover this period,
- (c) records of enemy bearings, ranges and inclination are not complete in many cases." — (C.-in-C's. report)



ACTION OFF CALABRIA, 9th JULY 1940 SURFACE CONTACT: APPROXIMATE POSITIONS AT 1500

PLAN 2

Based on plan accompanying C.-in-C's. report
Times, Zone minus 2



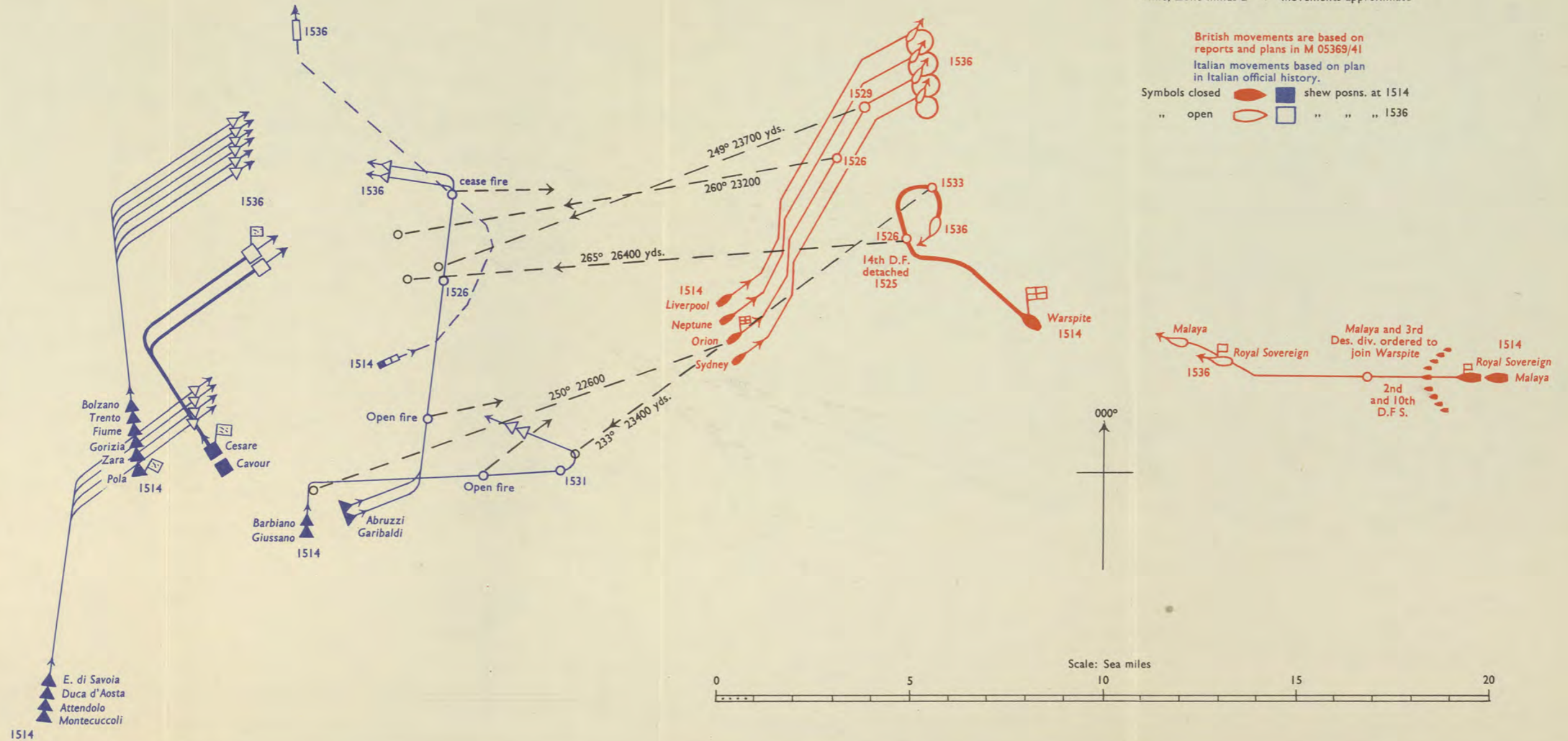
ACTION OFF CALABRIA, 9th JULY 1940 PHASE I : 1514 - 1536

Time, Zone minus 2 : Movements approximate

British movements are based on reports and plans in M 05369/41

Italian movements based on plan in Italian official history.

Symbols closed   shew posns. at 1514
 " " open   " " " 1536



1514

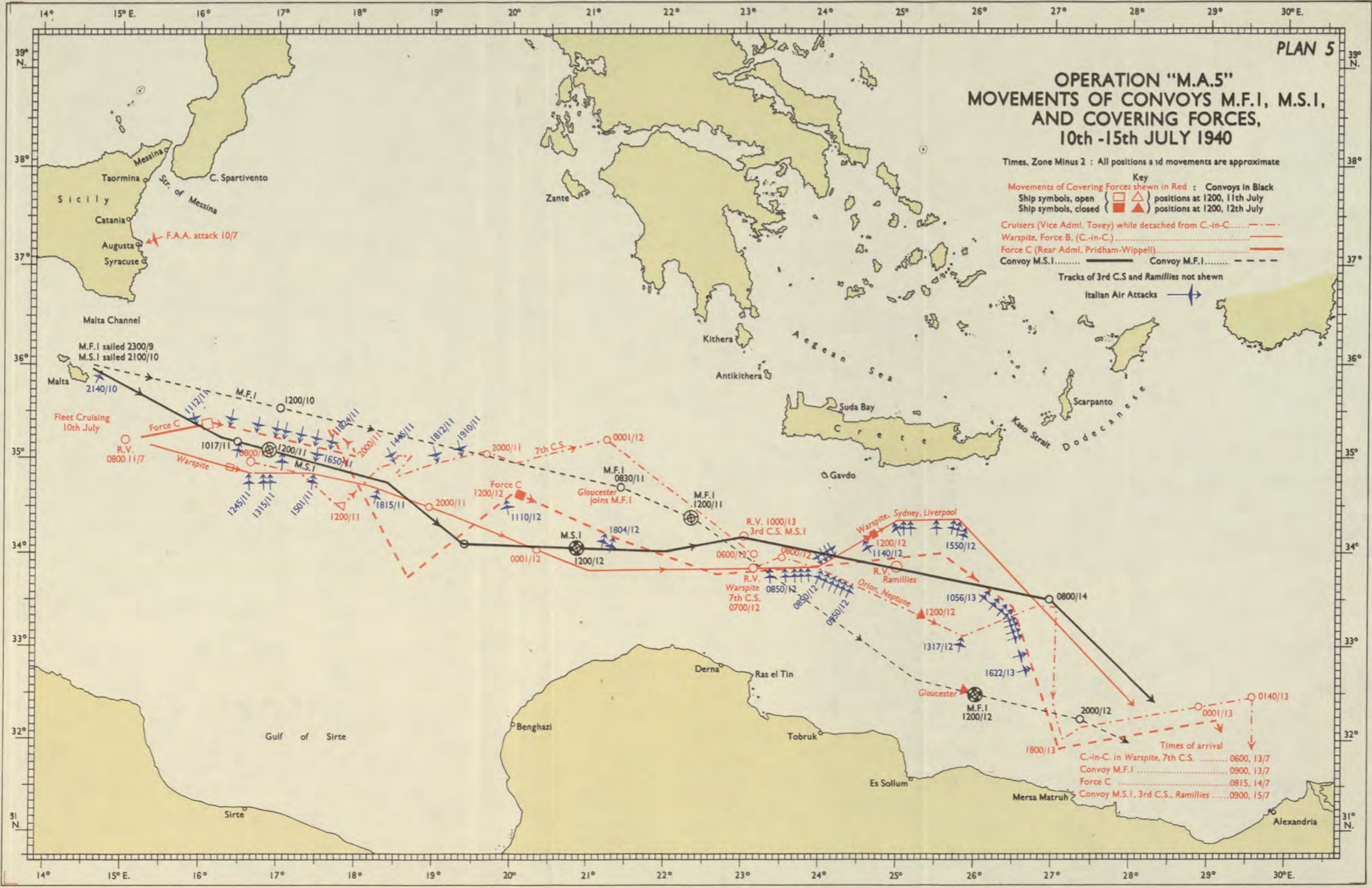
OPERATION "M.A.5" MOVEMENTS OF CONVOYS M.F.I, M.S.I, AND COVERING FORCES, 10th -15th JULY 1940

Times, Zone Minus 2 : All positions and movements are approximate

Key
 Movements of Covering Forces shown in Red : Convoys in Black
 Ship symbols, open { } positions at 1200, 11th July
 Ship symbols, closed [] [] positions at 1200, 12th July

Cruisers (Vice Adml. Tovey) while detached from C.-in-C.
 Warspite, Force B, (C.-in-C.)
 Force C (Rear Adml. Pridham-Wippell).....
 Convoy M.S.I..... Convoy M.F.I.....

Tracks of 3rd C.S and Ramillies not shown
 Italian Air Attacks →



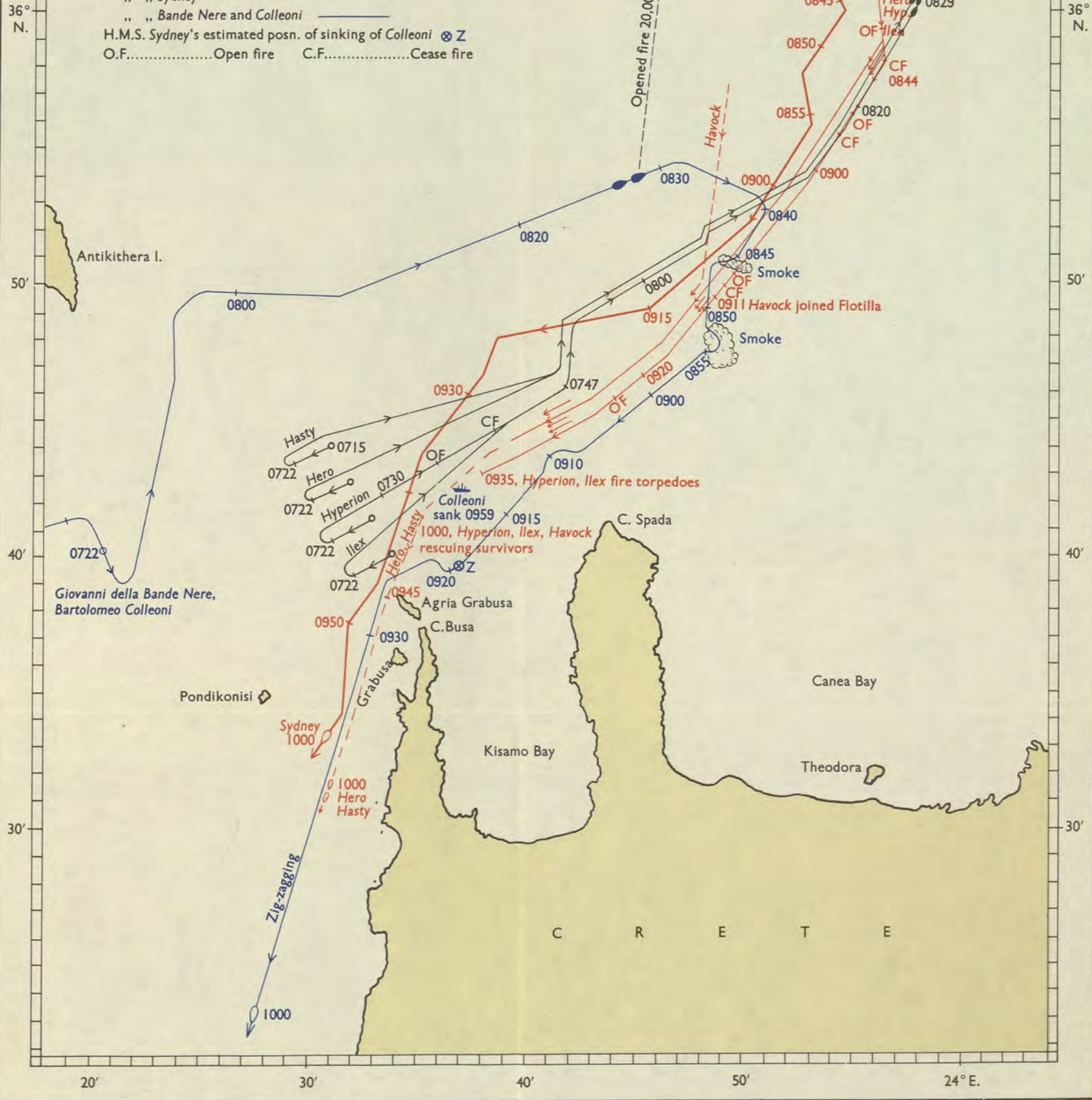
ACTION OFF CAPE SPADA, 19th JULY 1940

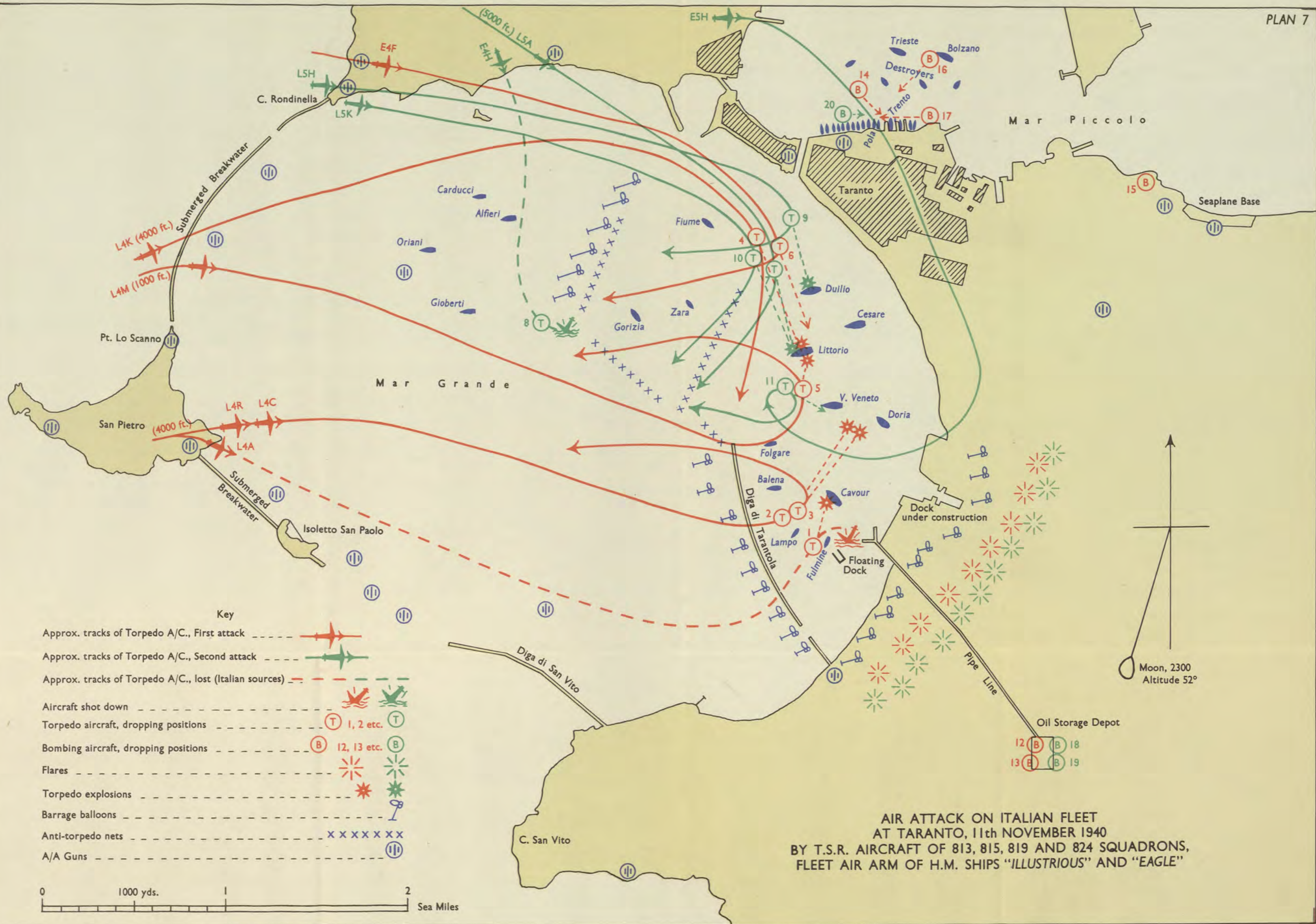
PLAN 6

Compiled from plans by H.M. Ships *Sydney* and *Hyperion* (M. 020932/40)
Time, Zone minus 2 : Movements are approximate

KEY

- British movements, Black and Red : Italian, Blue
- Ship symbols closed (●) posns., 0829 (*Sydney* open fire
- " " open (○) " 1000
- Track of 2nd D.F. run to N.E. (0715 — 0833) ———
- " " " " " S.W. (0833 — 1000) ———
- " " *Sydney* ———
- " " *Bande Nere* and *Colleoni* ———
- H.M.S. *Sydney*'s estimated posn. of sinking of *Colleoni* ⊗ Z
- O.F.....Open fire C.F.....Cease fire





- Key
- Approx. tracks of Torpedo A/C., First attack - - - - -
 - Approx. tracks of Torpedo A/C., Second attack - - - - -
 - Approx. tracks of Torpedo A/C., lost (Italian sources) - - - - -
 - Aircraft shot down - - - - -
 - Torpedo aircraft, dropping positions - - - - - (T) 1, 2 etc. (T)
 - Bombing aircraft, dropping positions - - - - - (B) 12, 13 etc. (B)
 - Flares - - - - -
 - Torpedo explosions - - - - -
 - Barrage balloons - - - - -
 - Anti-torpedo nets - - - - - x x x x x x x
 - A/A Guns - - - - -

0 1000 yds. 1 2 Sea Miles

AIR ATTACK ON ITALIAN FLEET AT TARANTO, 11th NOVEMBER 1940 BY T.S.R. AIRCRAFT OF 813, 815, 819 AND 824 SQUADRONS, FLEET AIR ARM OF H.M. SHIPS "ILLUSTRIOUS" AND "EAGLE"

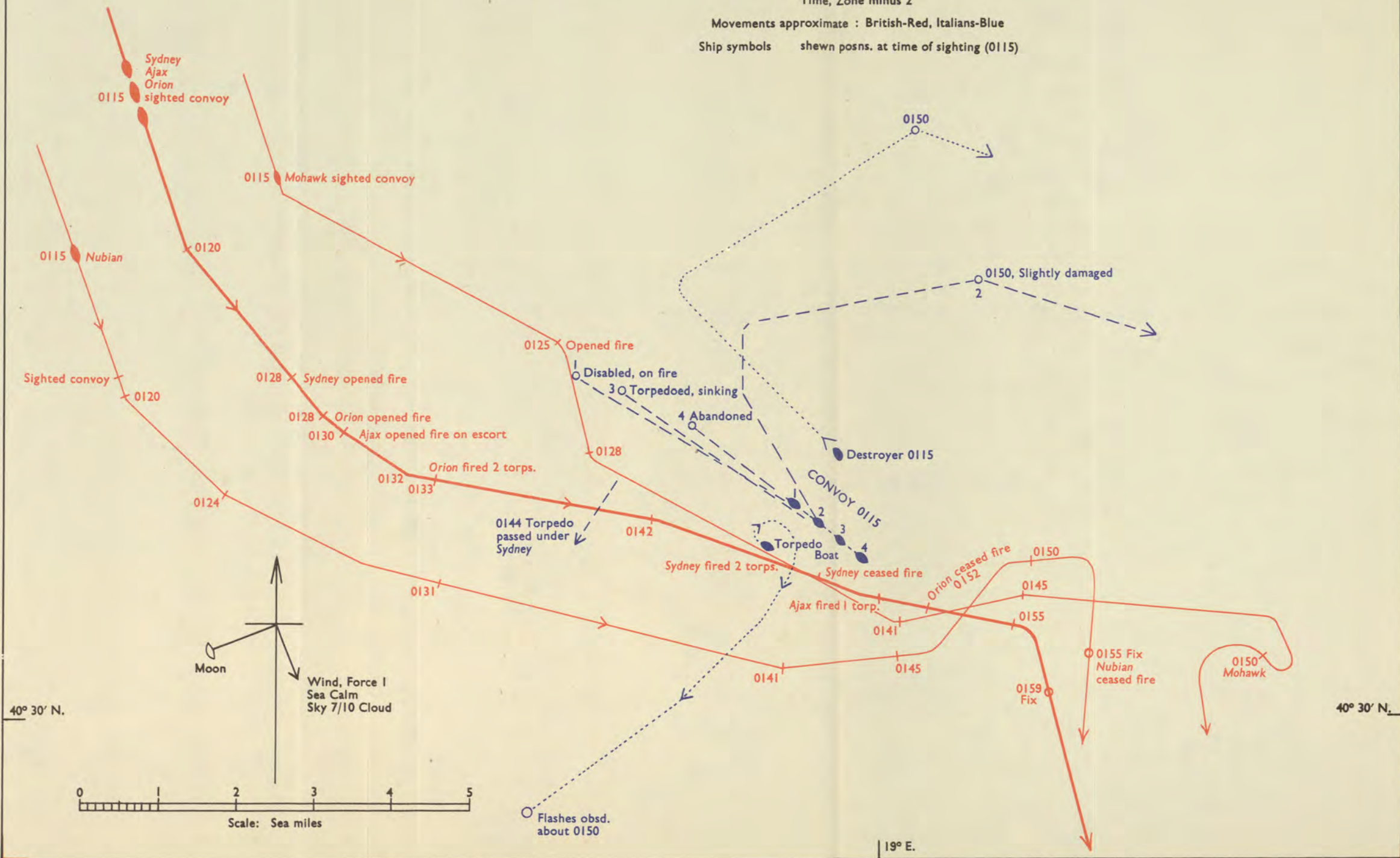
STRAIT OF OTRANTO RAID ON ITALIAN CONVOY, 12th NOVEMBER 1940

(From Plan in M06480/41)

Time, Zone minus 2

Movements approximate : British-Red, Italians-Blue

Ship symbols shown posns. at time of sighting (0115)



40° 30' N.

40° 30' N.

19° E.

6°30'E. 7°E. 8°E. 9°E. 10°E. 11°E.

37° N.

38° N.

37° N.

38° N.

PLAN 9

OPERATION "COLLAR" MOVEMENTS OF BRITISH AND ITALIAN FORCES 0800 - 1140, 27TH NOVEMBER 1940

Times, Zone minus 2 : Movements and positions approximate

KEY

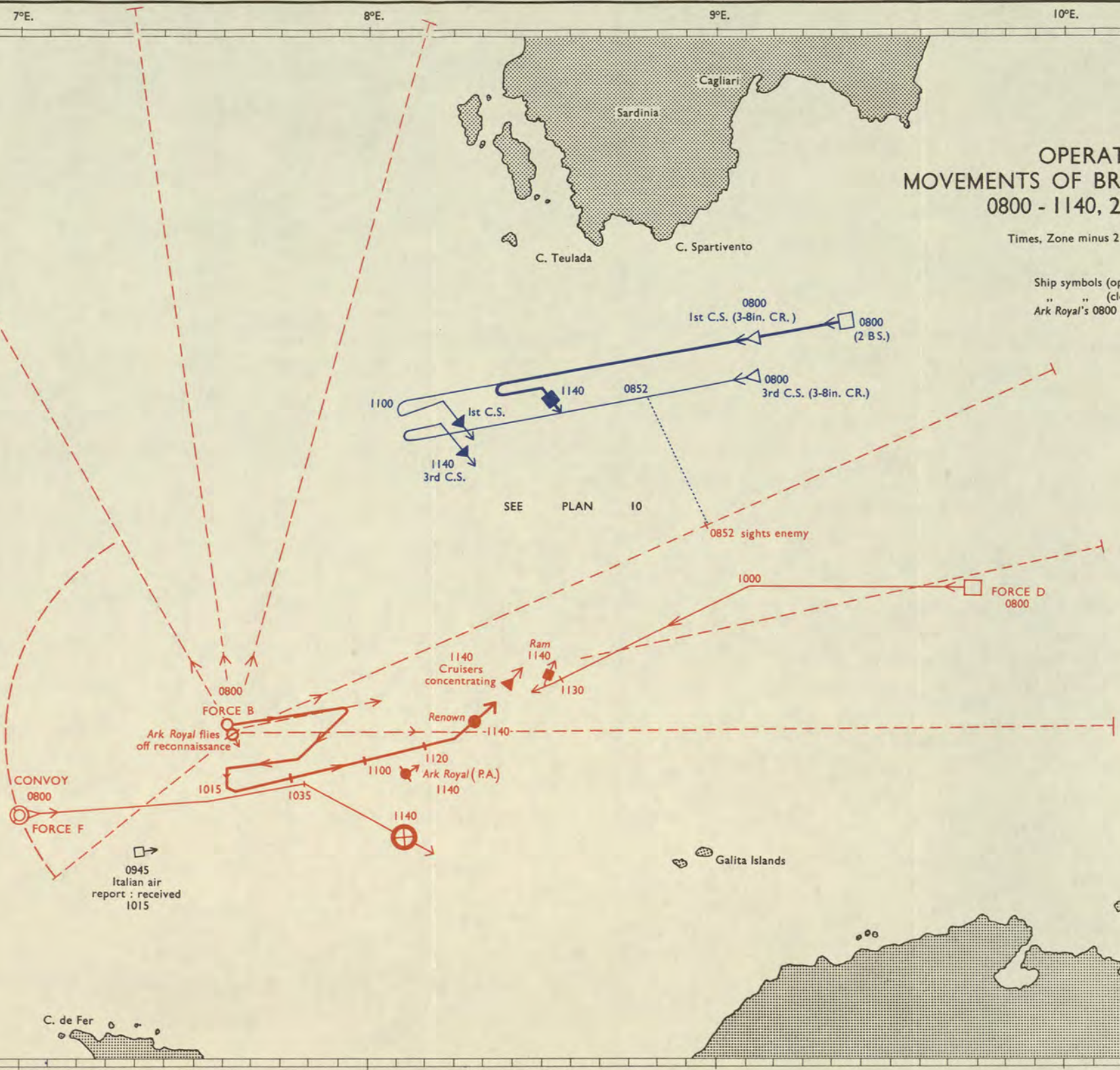
Ship symbols (open) □ ▷ etc. shew posns. at 0800
 " " (closed) ■ ▶ " " " " 1140
 Ark Royal's 0800 reconnaissance..... - - - - -

NOTE

British movements (red) are from ships' logs and reports in W.H.S. 7415 Vol. B : Italian movements (blue) from Italian Official History.

Positions have been adjusted for errors in dead reckoning.

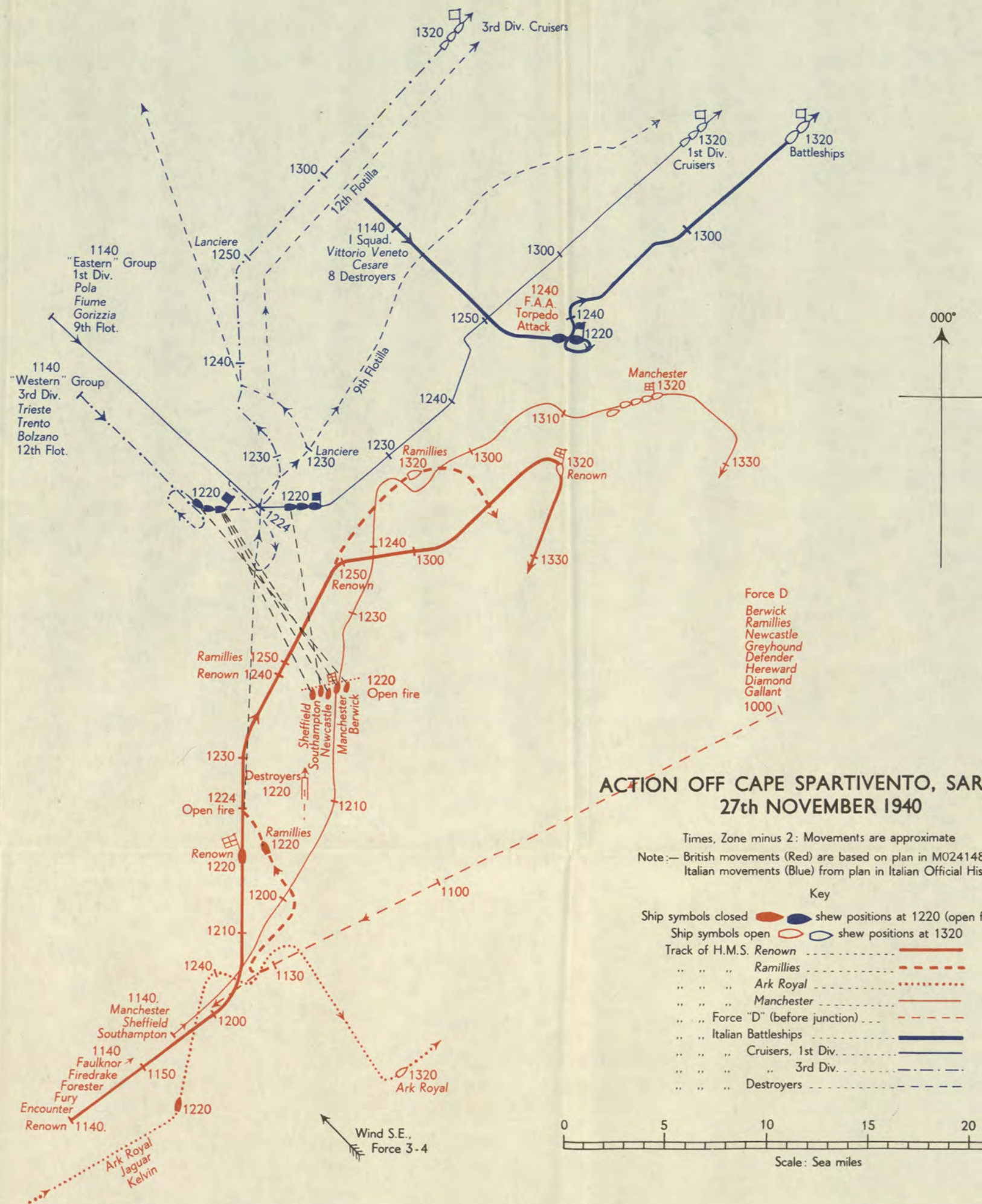
The *Renown's* position at 1140, which closely agrees with that on the contemporary track chart rendered after the action, is about 12 miles to the eastward of the geographical position shewn on her plot (see figures in text).



SEE PLAN 10

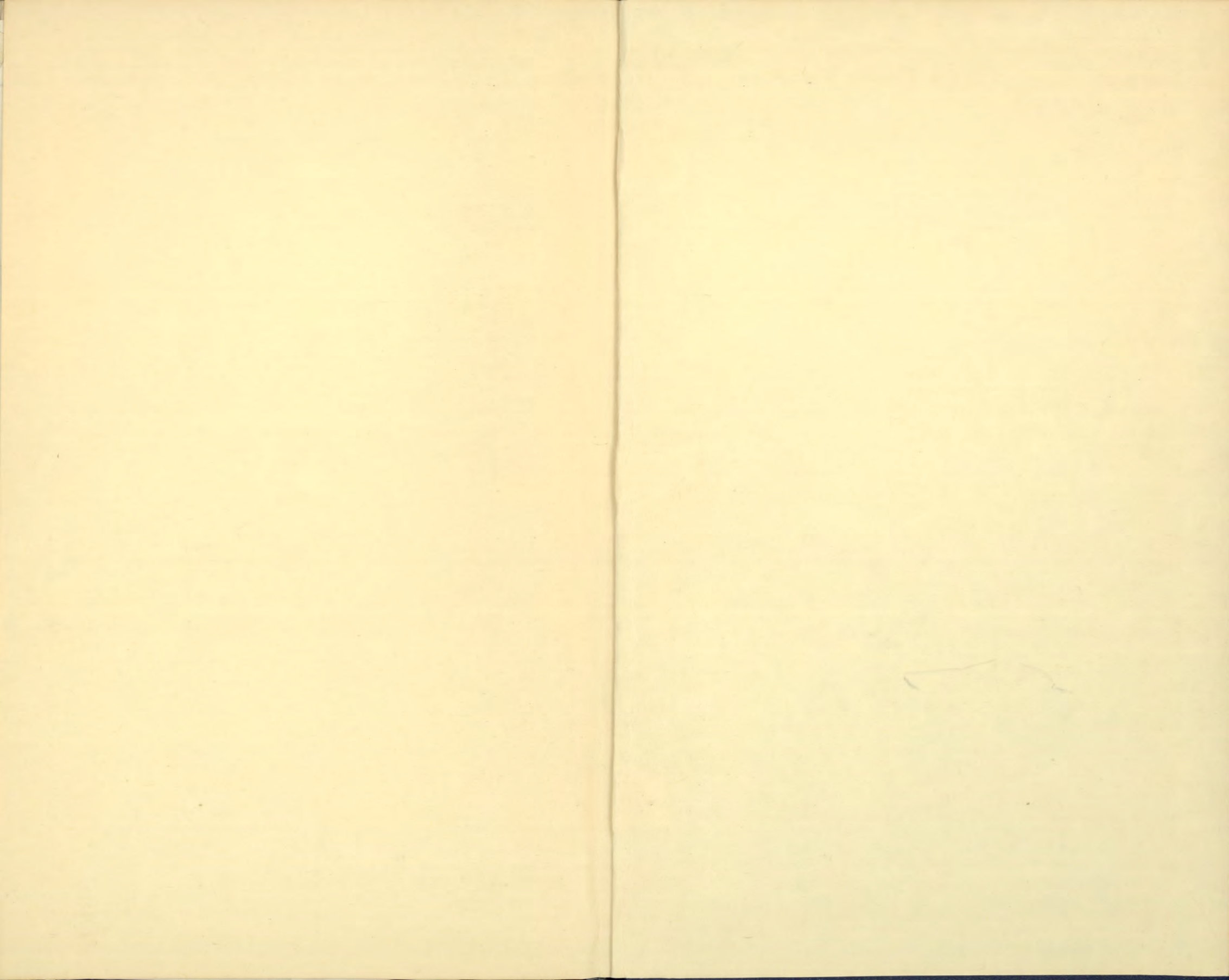
Force D reported to Italians 0030, 27 Nov.

6°30'E. 7°E. 8°E. 9°E. 10°E. 11°E.



**ACTION OFF CAPE SPARTIVENTO, SARDINIA
 27th NOVEMBER 1940**

Times, Zone minus 2: Movements are approximate
 Note:— British movements (Red) are based on plan in M024148/40
 Italian movements (Blue) from plan in Italian Official History



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