

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

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

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

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

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

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

PHASE II (1230-1800).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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