

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

Submarine Dispositions.

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

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

General Remarks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

D.4.

(i) DUNCAN contact. No visible result.

D.5.

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

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

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

D.6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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