

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Admiralty footnote.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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