



THIRD SUPPLEMENT

TO

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THURSDAY, 9 OCTOBER, 1919.

*Admiralty,*

9th October, 1919.

The following despatch has been received from the Rear-Admiral, Black Sea, on the action in the Caspian Sea off Fort Alexandrovsk, on the 21st May, 1919:—

5th July, 1919.

I have the honour to submit the following despatch on the action off Fort Alexandrovsk on the 21st May, 1919, with an account of the circumstances leading up to it and all subsequent operations:—

At the beginning of May reports were being received from various sources that the Bolsheviks had occupied, or intended to occupy, Fort Alexandrovsk. From reports of refugees, prisoners, etc., it was also apparent that the Naval Authorities at Astrakhan were desirous of carrying out an attack on Petrovsk or Baku with the object of obtaining oil, of which they were in urgent need.

2.—Commodore Norris determined, therefore, to visit Fort Alexandrovsk and to carry out a reconnaissance by means of the coastal motor boats and by the seaplanes of "A. Yusanoff," supported by the ships of the Caspian Squadron. In accordance with this plan, "Krüger," "Asia," "Emile Nobel," "Sergie," and "A. Yusanoff" left Chechen

on 14th May and steered for a rendezvous off Kulaly Island. Early in the morning of the 15th the wind got up from the south-east, and it was impossible to get out C.M.B.'s or seaplanes, and the Squadron therefore altered course direct for Fort Alexandrovsk. Soon after daylight a number of fishing boats and a steamer hull down were sighted on the star-board bow, and later on a convoy of three steamers towing two barges in sight, escorted by one T.B.D. The convoy made off in the direction of Fort Alexandrovsk and the destroyer kept on the port bow of the squadron out of range. "Emile Nobel" fired a few long range shots at the convoy, and at 07.15 the barges were slipped. The chase was continued until early noon, when the enemy disappeared into the mist which was lying off shore, and Commodore Norris, being unable to determine his position, drew off. During the afternoon the barges were sunk and their crews made prisoners.

3.—The examination of the prisoners revealed the fact that Fort Alexandrovsk was occupied by a considerable number of Bolsheviks, and that the main part of their fleet was there. Also that the concentration was preparatory to an attack on Petrovsk, with the object of obtaining oil.

4.—On 17th May the wind had gone round to west, so that no lee was obtainable on the

eastern shore of the Caspian. Consequently (after an unsuccessful attempt to get the seaplanes away) the seaplane carrier had to return to Petrovsk, escorted by "Emile Nobel," who was running short of fuel. By this time Commodore Norris had news of reinforcements in the shape of "Venture," and he cruised off the eastern shores of the Caspian to the southward to await her arrival.

5.—In addition to "Venture" he was joined by "Windsor Castle" and "Emile Nobel," and on the morning of 21st May was cruising in position lat. 44.57 N., long. 50.02 E. Course S.E., speed 5 knots. Detached squadron, consisting of the C.M.B. carriers and seaplane carrier, had parted company on 20th May, with orders to rendezvous off Fort Alexandrovsk.

6.—At 09.27, in lat. 44.43 N., long. 50.03 E., course was altered to S. 66 E. Two small craft were sighted north of the harbour.

7.—Shortly before 11.00 one T.B.D., two small craft and A.M.C. "Caspie" were sighted under the land west of the harbour steering northward. At 11.00 the destroyer opened fire, but the shot fell a long way short. The enemy craft returned to harbour. It was thought possible to cut them off, and the course was altered accordingly and speed increased to 9 knots.

8.—At 12.03 ranging shots were fired by both sides, and ten minutes later "Venture" was straddled. The general signal to "Open Fire" was made at 12.13.

9.—"Emile Nobel's" third salvo hit a large armed barge, which caught fire amidships, and whose crew were taken off by small craft. From 12.30 to 13.00 all ships were in action with "Caspie," a destroyer of the "Finn" class, and various armed barges. "Caspie" was hit by "Emile Nobel," and the destroyer was probably hit by "Venture," as she was seen to be in difficulties, and appeared to run ashore among the fishing boats.

10.—By this time the enemy's fire was both accurate and heavy. "Asia" was repeatedly straddled, and at 12.57 a shell hit "Emile Nobel" in engine room, killing five and seriously wounding seven, and causing considerable damage to the engines. "Emile Nobel" hauled out of line, but eventually followed the squadron into the harbour and continued to engage the enemy.

11.—At 13.03 course was altered down harbour in single line in the following order: "Kruger," "Venture," "Asia," "Windsor Castle," "Emile Nobel." The enemy had retired to the southern end of the harbour and taken shelter behind barges and small craft, so that only the flashes of his guns could be seen, and it was difficult to get good points of aim. At this time a shore battery situated on the cliffs opened fire on the squadron, and was engaged by "Kruger," "Venture," and "Asia." A few minutes later "Kruger" was hit aft, but, beyond cutting away the telegraphs, little damage was done.

12.—All the enemy ships were now packed together at the south end of the harbour, and it was estimated that five or six separate ships were firing at the British Squadron; these included "Caspie" and the "Finn" class T.B.D. "Caspie," who had been hit repeatedly, was on fire, but was continuing to fire with one gun. A very large fire was started ashore at the south end of the harbour,

and many of the ships and small craft were observed to be on fire. This rendered all control very difficult, as there was so much smoke and so many splashes from the various ships. At times the enemy were seen landing from their ships and running up the hillside.

13.—About 13.30, in view of the difficulty in manœuvring and "Emile Nobel's" condition, Commodore Norris decided to haul off. The shore battery had been silenced and did not fire at the Squadron on its way out. When well clear of the harbour speed was eased to 5 knots, but at 14.30 "Emile Nobel" reported she could steam 8 knots, and speed was accordingly increased.

14.—While still in sight of Fort Alexandrovsk the smoke on shore was seen to be increasing; one very large explosion was observed at 15.00 and two others at 15.15 and 15.43, besides several smaller ones. It was known that "Caspie" and one steamer were on fire during the action, and it was presumed that the enemy was destroying his stores and fuel.

15.—At 17.00 the Squadron stopped and surgeons were sent to "Emile Nobel." Squadron then proceeded N.N.W. in the direction of Astrakhan, as Commodore Norris intended, if possible, to remain on the enemy's line of retreat.

16.—At 20.10 "Emile Nobel" was forced to stop, and the Squadron so remained till midnight. At midnight course was shaped S. 37 W., speed 4 knots, but during the night "Emile Nobel" worked up to 7 knots.

17.—In the early morning two more heavy explosions were observed in the direction of Fort Alexandrovsk.

18.—At 10.00, on 22nd May, the men who had been killed in "Emile Nobel" were buried at sea, after which "Emile Nobel" and "Windsor Castle" were detached to Petrovsk.

19.—In the meantime the detached squadron of C.M.B. and seaplane carriers had arrived at rendezvous, and a seaplane had been sent up to bomb Alexandrovsk. Unfortunately, he had to return owing to engine trouble, and was out of action for 12 hours. He again went up at 15.35, and returned two hours later. Bombs were dropped, but no direct hits were obtained. He reported that a large oil steamer was burning as a result of the bombardment of the afternoon.

20.—In the evening some fishing boats were observed from "Sergie" and searched by a C.M.B., and their cargoes thrown overboard.

21.—At 05.25 the seaplane again started for Fort Alexandrovsk, and dropped bombs on the shipping in the harbour and small craft machine-gunned. During the 22nd May five raids were carried out by this one seaplane with the following results:—

First Raid.—Shipping and Eastern Pier bombed and machine-gunned. No direct hits, but probably some damage done as bombs fell close.

Second Raid.—Shipping bombed. Direct hits obtained on large destroyer of "Finn" class, which sank. One hit on armed merchant cruiser. Ships and piers machine-gunned.

Third Raid.—Barges at eastern and western piers bombed. No direct hits, but bombs fell very close, and damage was probably inflicted.

Fourth Raid.—Shipping bombed. No direct hits. T.B.D. bombed in second raid now completely sunk.

**Fifth Raid.**—Southern pier bombed. Bombs fell very close. Shipping machine-gunned.

A sixth raid was attempted, but machines failed to rise. Photographs were taken on second and fifth raids.

22.—On the evening of 22nd and on the morning of 23rd a deserted appearance of ships and town was noticed, no one being seen in streets nor on decks of ships. No armed forces or encampments were seen in vicinity. On the first day heavy A.A. fire was experienced, but on the evening of 22nd and morning of 23rd there was none.

23.—Commodore Norris had every hope of carrying out a final attack with C.M.Bs. on the morning of 22nd May, but was unable to get into W./T. communication with the carriers. In view of the fact that the remainder of the enemy did not leave until night of 22nd May this lost opportunity is very much to be regretted.

24.—On 23rd May, after a night of thick fog, "Kruger" and "Venture" were attacked by two enemy destroyers, who had the range and speed of them, so that they were forced to withdraw. The carriers were informed of the presence of the enemy by W./T., and a seaplane was again got out to attack the enemy. Unfortunately the seaplane was unable to locate the enemy destroyers, and finally carried out another raid on Port Alexandrovsk.

It is probable that the enemy sighted the carriers, as they suddenly turned towards "Kruger," and then made off to the northward. The seaplane ran into a fog on her way back from Port Alexandrovsk and fell in the water. The officers were not picked up until 32 hours later (see par. 25 below).

25.—On 24th May Commodore Norris in "Kruger," who was short of fuel, with "Sergie" and "Edinburgh Castle," parted company, and proceeded to Petrovsk, leaving Captain Washington in charge of the squadron, which now consisted of "Windsor Castle," "Asia," "Venture," "Bibi-Abat" and "A. Yusanoff," with orders to cruise to the northward and search for the missing seaplane, to ascertain that Chechan was safe, and, when the carriers returned, to make an extended reconnaissance of Port Alexandrovsk. The seaplane was picked up on the evening of 24th May, after which the squadron cruised between Port Alexandrovsk and Chechen until the carriers arrived.

26.—On 28th May Captain Washington, with "Windsor Castle," "Venture," "Slava," "Bibi-Abat," "Sergie," "Edinburgh Castle," and "A. Yusanoff," made a close reconnaissance of Port Alexandrovsk. The 1st and 2nd Divisions (1st Division "Windsor Castle" and "Venture," 2nd Division "Slava" and "Bibi-Abat") took up positions for covering the approach of the C.M.Bs. who were got out and proceeded up harbour under the command of Commander Eric G. Robinson, V.C. On their way up harbour they torpedoed a large barge, and on arrival up harbour a white flag was hoisted ashore and a deputation came off. The deputation consisted of the Chief Engineer of the "Leila" and some of her crew, and some Persians and agents of the K-M Company.

From these men full details of the Bolshevik occupation were obtained, and also information concerning the capture of the

"Leila" and the death of General Almaroff. The attached lists show the details of the ships which were sunk and which escaped.

27.—From the reports of Commodore Norris, Captain Washington and other officers in command of vessels, and also from the Royal Air Force reports, the conduct of the officers and men appears to have been in accordance with the traditions of the service. I would specially draw attention to the following:—

Commodore David T. Norris, C.B., in command of the Caspian Flotilla. Quite apart from the successful conduct of this action, Commodore Norris deserves the highest praise for the unflinching tenacity with which he has overcome many and great difficulties and eventually succeeded in getting his Squadron in such a state of efficiency as to make this successful action possible. He has been handicapped all through the winter by want of efficient officers, by frequent and serious strikes in the various works at Baku, by delay in the arrival of material and also personnel, by the serious accident he met with in the autumn of 1918 and from which he is by no means recovered, his arm causing him continual discomfort. The way in which he has risen superior to all these and many other difficulties is beyond all praise. He had to take serious risks in attacking an enemy which was known to be efficiently manned and to possess ships with superior gun-power, including several destroyers. He has taken these risks, and has succeeded, by the latest reports, in driving the superior enemy from the Caspian.

Act. Captain Basil G. Washington, C.M.G. He commanded the "Windsor Castle" with great ability, and was the only British officer on board during the action. He did admirable work whilst temporarily in charge of the Caspian during Commodore Norris's illness from 9th October, 1918, to 5th February, 1919.

Commander Kenneth A. F. Guy. Handled the "Emile Nobel" with great ability under difficult circumstances.

Lieutenant-Commander Richard Harrison, R.N.R., of H.M.S. "Venture."

Lieutenant Alexander G. B. Wilson, commanding the "Asia."

Both handled their ships well.

Lieutenant Robert M. Taylor, D.S.C., of the "Emile Nobel." By his admirable control of fire was responsible for much damage to the enemy.

Engineer Lieutenant Thomas Gardner. The manner in which this officer kept his engines running after considerable heavy losses in personnel and severe damage to the complicated machinery reflects the greatest credit on his ability and resource.

Commodore Norris reports that Commander Edward L. Grieve's services on his Staff were of greatest assistance to him. This officer's services in the Caspian have been very valuable.

Lieutenant Bolinsky, R.N.V.R., of "Emile Nobel." Was of great service in attending the wounded.

Petty Officer John William Thompson, O.N. 239958. G.L. II., "Windsor Castle." This petty officer was of greatest assistance during the action to Captain Washington, who had no British officer with him.

J. E. Pether, Ch. E.R.A., O.N. 270497, "Emile Nobel." Was of greatest assistance in refitting repairs and in keeping the engines running after they were damaged.

The conduct of the following ratings is specially mentioned:—

- Sabin, Percy Robert, S.B.S., O.N.351617, "Kruger."  
 Collins, William Frank, P.O., J.2387, "Emile Nobel."  
 Bell, Mark, Lg. Smn., 238463, "Emile Nobel."  
 Crofts, Albert Ernest, Lce.-Cpl., Ply./8538, "Emile Nobel."  
 Hansler, James Henry William, Cpl., Po./14568, "Emile Nobel."  
 Young, Reginald George, S.B.A., M.21585, "Emile Nobel."  
 Hall, Henry Amos, Lce.-Sgt., Ply./15471, "Emile Nobel."

and also the Russian Rating Nikolai Samliteoff, who I consider it is very desirable should be included in any awards that may be given.

28.—I have the honour to call particular attention to the services rendered by the following officers of the Royal Air Force who between them carried out 5 raids in one seaplane on the same day with excellent results, and attempted a sixth, and also the services of Lieutenant Chilton, R.N.R., commanding "A. Yousanoff," for his able handling of the ship and organisation which allowed this to be done.

**Pilots—**

- 2nd Lieutenant Howard Grant Thompson.  
 Captain John Archer Sadler.  
 2nd Lieutenant Robert George Kear Morrison.

**Observers—**

- Lieutenant Frank Russell Bicknell.  
 2nd Lieutenant Frank Leslie Kingham.  
 2nd Lieutenant Henry Godwin Pratt.  
 (Signed) M. SEYMOUR,

Rear-Admiral.

*Vessels Sunk in Alexandrovsk Harbour.*

*Name of Ship and Details.*

- "Barge No. 2" (properly an oil barge). Two 6 in. guns (reported). Hit by shell when outside the Harbour. Twelve men killed. Abandoned on fire. Hit again. Later towed inside and afterwards sunk.  
 "Scheastlevy" (motor boat).—One gun. Run ashore by crew and abandoned. Useless now.

"Reval."—S/M Depot Ship. Fitted with machine gun. Set on fire by us, and abandoned. Blew up. Reported all the crew escaped. Two mines or torpedoes on board. It is stated that this ship had all the Bolshevik money and valuables in gold on board.

"Tuman" or "Kuman."—Store ship carrying ammunition. Unarmed. Burnt and sunk. Not clear if by us or by their own action.

"Galema" (?).—Small tug. No gun. Burnt and sunk.

"Muskvityanise."—T.B.D., 2/4 in., 2/3 in.; two tubes, two pom poms. Damaged in action, and either sunk by Bolsheviks or by seaplane bomb on 22/5. The latter most likely from photographs.

Small Barge.—No details. Sunk.

"Zoroaster" (old).—Depôt ship now. Formerly carried Mazout. Torpedoed 28th May.

"Ruvik."—Steel barge. Very strong. Fresh water and Mazout (now mixed). Torpedoed 28th May.

"Demisthene."—Baltic M/S or M/L. Two 4 in., and probably being used as ordinary fleet unit. Sunk, probably as result of gunfire.

Small Barge.—No details. Sunk.

Coal Barge (Wooden).—Large and laden. Torpedoed 28th May.

*Ships that Escaped from Alexandrovsk after the Action.*

"Caspie."—Damaged in boilers. ? by bombs. Reported could only steam 5 knots.

"Martin" or "Meshty."—Mine carrier. Ninety-nine mines on board.

"Alehper."—Ammunition carrier. Unarmed.

"Communist."—Tug. ? 2/4 in.

"Baku."—Coal transport.

"Spartacus."—Tug. 2/2½ in. Hit but got away.

Two submarines.—One had fouled propeller and had to be towed.

This is exclusive of the various groups of enemy destroyers and armed merchant vessels that were in action with our vessels outside.

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