

ahead at maximum speed with NUBIAN and MOHAWK; WARSPITE (who was having slight condenser trouble) and BARHAM remained in company with FORMIDABLE.

11. FORMIDABLE'S aircraft were not using "Duty Letters" so that it was difficult to follow the series of reports. Their positions were also being omitted from reports as in the case of aircraft 5H report timed 0905. An enemy force was being reported to the northward of the cruisers, but it was not clear to the Commander-in-Chief whether this was in fact another force or either of those already in contact. The term "battleships" was used on one occasion. On balance it seemed probable that there was another enemy force containing battleships, on which the cruisers were retiring; the Commander-in-Chief, therefore, decided to keep the air striking force back until the doubt about this had been cleared up. The aircraft, however, lost touch with the enemy and at 0939 the Commander-in-Chief ordered the air striking force to attack the cruisers in contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces; if another squadron was sighted first, it was to be attacked instead.

12. At this time Force "X" was estimated to be 75 miles 300 degs. from the Commander-in-Chief, being reported 16 miles 320 degs. from the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces. In order to increase the speed of the fleet, BARHAM was ordered to follow in the wake of the screen independently of flying operations. VENDETTA was sighted ahead having been detached by the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces to join the battlefleet on account of engine trouble. The Commander-in-Chief ordered her to proceed independently to Alexandria.

13. By 1030 there was still no further news of the enemy to the northward and it seemed possible that Force "X" in contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces, was after all the only enemy squadron in the vicinity; but at 1058 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces reported two battleships bearing 002 degs. 16 miles from him and steering 160 degs. The Vice-Admiral Light Forces turned away to the south-eastward making smoke, but was evidently placed in a most uncomfortable position with the cruisers on his starboard quarter and the battleships (to be known as Force "Y") to port. The Commander-in-Chief ordered FORMIDABLE to put the air striking force on to the battleships and decided to close the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces as quickly as possible rather than work round between the battleships and their base. The doubt as to whether GLOUCESTER would be able to maintain the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' reported speed of 30 knots weighed in favour of this decision, but the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' 1123 showed that he was still keeping the battleships at a range of 16 miles.

14. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces was estimated to bear 280 degs. 65 miles from the Commander-in-Chief at 1135 steering 120 degs. but there was some doubt as to the accuracy of this owing to possible difference in reference positions. In order, therefore, to be certain of making contact with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces as early as possible, the Commander-in-Chief altered course to 290 degs. at 1135 and to 270 degs. at 1200. FORMIDABLE was detached with two destroyers to operate aircraft independently, VALIANT was still in company and BARHAM had been keeping up well.

Surface contact lost—First air attack.

15. At 1200 Force "Y", which was now reported to consist of only one LITTORIO class battleship with destroyers, was estimated to bear 290 degs. 45 miles from the Commander-in-Chief; the destroyer screen was detached ahead to join the Captains (D), but at 1210 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces reported having lost touch with the enemy battlefleet and five minutes later the air striking force returned with the news that the battleship had last been seen at 1145, steering 270 degs. with cruisers 20 miles to the south-east. The striking force reported one probable hit on the battleship. A JU. 88 had been shot down by a Fulmar.

Second heavy Enemy Force reported.

16. A new force (to be known as Force "Z") was now sighted to the northward by Flying Boat Duty V. It was reported to consist of two CAVOUR class battleships, one POLA and two ZARA cruisers and five destroyers in position 35 miles west of Gavdo Island steering 315 degs. 25 knots.

Contact made with the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces.

17. At 1230 the Vice-Admiral, Light Forces was sighted bearing 220 degs. 12 miles with all his force undamaged. The Commander-in-Chief altered course to 290 degs. and ordered the second air striking force to attack the LITTORIO battleship. The Vice-Admiral, Light Forces' signal timed 1245 was the first intimation to the Commander-in-Chief that the enemy had turned northward, but this was later assumed to be a signal error and the enemy to have turned westward as reported by the striking force.

By 1250 it was evident that Forces "X" and "Y" had turned back and there was no prospect of overtaking them unless the speed of the LITTORIO was reduced by air attack. The destroyers were, therefore, ordered to reform a battlefleet screen, the Captain (D), Second Destroyer Flotilla and two destroyers being sent to the assistance of FORMIDABLE who was now a long way astern and seen to be engaging two Torpedo-Bomber aircraft. Speed was reduced at 1306 to 22 knots and at 1325 to 21 knots to allow FORMIDABLE and BARHAM to keep up. Force B was now in position 230 degs. 6 miles from the battlefleet.

The Chase.

18. At 1350 course was altered to 310 degs. as it was thought probable that Forces "Y" and "Z" were trying to make contact with each other. An air search was also ordered to the north-westward since no further reports had been received of Forces "X" and "Y". Doubts whether Duty "V" might in reality be reporting Force "Y" were cleared up when his position was checked by a landfall and at 1342 the Commander-in-Chief signalled the positions of the three forces to the fleet. 201 Group were instructed to concentrate all flying boats in the area south and west of Crete to maintain touch with the enemy. JUNO and Force D were ordered to patrol the Kithera Straits.

19. During the forenoon a strong breeze from the north-east had made flying operations delay the fleet, but in the afternoon the wind dropped altogether and the heavy cloud dispersed. This change in the wind probably also affected the accuracy of the reported positions of the shore based aircraft.