



SUPPLEMENT TO
The London Gazette
 OF TUESDAY, 5th OCTOBER, 1948
 Published by Authority

Registered as a newspaper

WEDNESDAY, 6 OCTOBER, 1948

**CONTROL OF THE SICILIAN STRAITS
 DURING THE FINAL STAGES OF THE
 NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN.**

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 13th November, 1943, by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

*Mediterranean Station,
 13th November, 1943.*

OPERATION "RETRIBUTION."

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the enclosed reports* of proceedings of certain light forces which were engaged in the control of the Sicilian Straits during the final stages of the North African campaign.

2. The reports cover the period from the sinking of an enemy merchant ship and torpedo boat off Kelibia on 3rd May, 1943, by H.M. Ships NUBIAN, PALADIN and PETARD, which event marked the last serious effort by the enemy to supply his forces in Tunisia by sea, to the time† when all attempts by the enemy to evacuate Tunisia had ceased and when surface patrols had been reduced to that level necessary for the blockade of Pantellaria.

3. The possibility that the enemy might attempt a large-scale evacuation of Tunisia had been foreseen some months previously, and orders had been issued, under the code name "Retribution", for the concentration of naval forces to meet such a contingency. In the event, no such attempt was made, and the full written orders were never put into force. The orders, however, served a useful purpose in that all

concerned were fully aware of the Commander-in-Chief's intentions, and the task of intercepting those of the enemy who were bold enough to take to the sea was made much easier in consequence. The codeword "Retribution", though never officially brought into force, was adopted for use by the naval forces taking part.

4. As the Armies began to close in on Bizerta and Tunis, night destroyer and motor torpedo boat patrols in the Sicilian Narrows were intensified, Mediterranean destroyers operating from Bone, and Levant destroyers from Malta. In daylight, the task of destroying any enemy shipping that escaped our submarine patrols and offensive minefields was at this time undertaken by the air forces, since lack of fighter protection prevented our surface forces from operating against enemy supply routes by day.

5. With the rapid advance of the Armies in the first week in May, however, our fighters were able to operate from more forward aerodromes and so cover the south-western half of the Straits. By arrangement with the Air Commander-in-Chief, therefore, daylight patrols by destroyers were instituted on 9th May. It was arranged that the air forces should continue to attack enemy shipping and small craft within five miles of the Tunisian shore (i.e., within range of enemy shore-based guns), and that surface forces should have complete freedom of action elsewhere. By night the inshore area was occupied by patrols of motor gunboats and motor torpedo boats of both the United States Navy and the Royal Navy.

6. This somewhat rigid dividing line between the responsibilities of the air and naval forces was necessitated by the fact that a large proportion of the pilots and air crews taking part had not hitherto been engaged in operations over the sea and were thus untrained in ship recognition.

Admiralty footnotes :-

* These reports are not being published.

† Approximately 15th May, 1943.

7. The degree of air support given to our light forces from 9th May onwards may best be judged by the almost complete freedom from enemy interference enjoyed by them. Only one incident marred the co-operation between air and naval forces—the bombing of H.M. Ships BICESTER and ZETLAND on 9th May by our own fighter-bombers. This incident was immediately and fully investigated and was due to the fact that information as to the movements of the destroyers failed to reach some of the forward aerodromes before the aircraft took off early that day.

8. The whole sea area in which the destroyers were required to operate had been heavily mined, both by the enemy and ourselves. Most of our mines, however, had been set to flood by the beginning of May, and it was judged that our intelligence of enemy minefields was good enough to allow a sharp distinction to be drawn between areas where the risk of mines was great and those where the risk could be accepted. In the event, this judgment proved correct, and no casualties from mines were suffered by the destroyers.

9. The minefields had, however, a considerable effect on the operations, particularly the large field which extended north-eastward from Cape Blanc. The destroyers operating from Bone were forced to go a long way round the northern edge of this minefield when proceeding to and from patrol, and in doing so exposed themselves to air attack. This resulted in one casualty, when O.R.P. BLYSKAWICA was

near missed and slightly damaged and was unable to take any further part in the operations.

10. Minesweepers had been concentrated at Bone as soon as the fall of Bizerta seemed imminent, and by 11th May they had swept a channel through to Bizerta. This early success on their part was a forerunner to the excellent work they performed in the succeeding weeks, and it contributed materially to the successful work of the destroyer patrols by saving the destroyers a great deal of unnecessary steaming.

11. From 9th May onwards, ten to twelve destroyers were constantly on patrol off the Cape Bon peninsula, with a similar number of coastal craft in the inshore area by night, until all attempts by the enemy to evacuate had ceased. The patrols resulted in the capture of some 700 prisoners and in the complete denial to the enemy of any chance of evacuating by sea any important part of his forces.

12. To maintain the patrols at the strengths required meant a special effort on the part of the destroyers, coastal craft and maintenance staffs alike. That this effort would be forthcoming was only to be expected; all concerned met the demands that were made on them with the same cheerful spirit with which they faced the not inconsiderable risks that had to be run.

(Signed) A. B. CUNNINGHAM,
*Admiral of the Fleet,
Commander-in-Chief.*

LONDON.

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1948

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