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**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.