

in the Kos Channel and the enemy searchlight was extinguished during a critical period; later, when north of Rhodes, the ship escaped detection in continuous rain storms.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE OPERATIONS AS A WHOLE.

Air Cover.

65. Throughout the operations our surface forces were unable to exercise that command of the Aegean to which their superiority to the enemy surface forces entitled them due to the complete enemy command of the air.

66. With the help of our submarines and air, and by accepting heavy losses from air attacks by day and latterly with increasing accuracy by night, we were able to interfere seriously with enemy merchant ship convoys to Rhodes and the Dodecanese, but we were unable to stop craft of all types moving by day only with heavy fighter cover and hiding up in out of the way bays and inlets by night. Once again the fact that surface forces cannot exercise their proper functions in restricted waters without air cover, was clearly demonstrated.

Distance of Area of Operations from our Bases.

67. The fact that the centre of the area of operations was 350 miles from our bases in Alexandria and Cyprus had the following adverse effect on the operations of surface forces:—

(a) Operations of the destroyers were limited to two nights in the Aegean at the most, after which they had to return to refuel.

(b) Even when fighter cover was available, long gaps were inevitable, as our fighters usually had to return to base after the first attack owing to shortage of petrol, and it took anything up to 3 hours for reliefs to arrive.

68. It was impracticable to base small craft on Casteloriso or any of the Aegean islands owing to enemy air attack which was very accurate by day, and the policy was for all craft to lie up during daylight.

Command.

69. The question of command was not entirely satisfactory. Policy and major decisions were made by the Commanders-in-Chief Committee in Cairo, but whereas naval operations were conducted by the Commander-in-Chief, Levant from his headquarters, which was combined with that of No. 201 (Naval Co-operation) Group, R.A.F., at Alexandria, the Army appointed a Corps Commander with a Headquarters in Cairo, and the R.A.F. an Air Vice Marshal who, though himself in Cairo, had his operational headquarters in Cyprus. This did not work out well in practice, and finally General Headquarters, Middle East and Headquarters, Royal Air Force, Middle East took over the direct control of operations.

70. On the naval side, experience in the Levant has shown that the best results are obtained by using the normal station operational organisations to the maximum, and that new operational staffs should be limited to those required to enable local naval commanders to exercise operational control in the area of operations.

Operations of Raiding and Reconnaissance Forces.

71. The activities of the Raiding and Reconnaissance Forces merit special mention. When the Axis had been expelled from North Africa the Long Range Desert Group and Special Boat Squadron of the Special Air Support Regiment returned to the Middle East. As it was now necessary for them to cross the sea to continue their activities against the enemy, they were trained on the Levant coast to operate from submarines, Fairmile motor launches and coastal force craft of all types, and a force of caiques and schooners, known as the Levant Schooner Force, was formed under Commander Coastal Forces, Eastern Mediterranean, manned by specially selected officers and men to work with them. These latter craft were fitted with Tank engines giving them a speed of 6 knots and an endurance of 2,000 miles. With the mast down they could be camouflaged so effectively that they could not be spotted when lying up close inshore.

72. These forces were acting over the Southern Aegean throughout the period of operations. They were the first to arrive and the last to leave, and carried out many daring and successful operations in enemy-occupied islands. There is no doubt that forces of this type, well-trained and led, can be of great value both for harassing the enemy and obtaining important intelligence.

Submarine Operations.

73. In common with all other forces operating in the Aegean during this period the submarines were driven hard. Their patrols, which were largely carried out in narrow waters in close proximity to known or suspected minefields, were often considerably prolonged owing to the series of local emergencies which kept developing, and which required the presence of a submarine in the area.

74. In the majority of areas the submarines were subjected to continual surface and air anti-submarine activity, and in addition our own surface forces were always liable to be encountered at night. These factors, coupled with the fact that few torpedo targets were encountered, threw a very heavy strain on all concerned, and particularly on Commanding Officers.

75. It speaks well for the aggressive and determined temper of the First Submarine Flotilla that under these difficult conditions three merchant ships, totalling 7,500 tons, and a 400 ft. floating dock were torpedoed and sunk, and twenty-one caiques and schooners destroyed, mostly by gunfire.

76. The task of the supply submarines was not easy, owing chiefly to dislocation in the working of the ports at Leros. The heavy air attacks which developed at night during moonlight periods, made unloading submarines impracticable at these times.

77. H.M. Submarine SEVERN had to be withdrawn from the supply service after one trip owing to complete failure of her main and auxiliary engines. Of the five Italians, one never left Haifa, and the mechanical condition of the other four was giving rise to considerable concern. They carried out their tasks efficiently and with considerable enthusiasm.