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Press Release
on Battle of Matapan, March 1941

Battle of Matapan

Consecutive hour by hour account of the Mediterranean Naval engagement, which resulted in a overwhelming victory for British forces and will probably rank as one of the most impressive battles in Naval History can now be given. Strategists are already discussing the significance of Italy's crushing defeat but world opinion has been most immediately and most deeply impressed by the fact that while the enemy's losses at a conservative reckoning number seven warships and probably four thousand personnel of whom nearly one thousand are prisoners, the British ships escaped without a scratch to their point or loss to their personnel. They sustained no damage or casualties. The total British losses during these operations were "two Naval aircraft". Naval Officers discussing the battle said today that these highly successful engagements can be accounted as historic for two reasons. - It is the first occasion in history in which skillful coordination of Naval operations with attacks launched by aircraft have resulted in the enemy's speed being reduced and our main units being able to force action upon a reluctant enemy. It is also the first occasion in Naval history in which such severe losses have been imposed upon the enemy while our own forces were completely unscathed.

Midnight March 27th. - Our air reconnaissance reported that enemy cruisers were at sea to the southeast of SICILY. O in C Mediterranean was then at ALEXANDRIA with the main body of his fleet. It was immediately clear to them that these enemy cruisers could not be up to any good and he concluded that their probably intentions were to attack our convoys between SOYOT and GRESSE. Acting on this information he made the following dispositions of forces at his disposal - Vice Admiral commanding Light Forces, Vice Admiral FRIDHAM-WHIPPLE with his flag flying in H.M.S. ORION (Flag Captain BACH) had with him the cruisers AJAX (Captain MAG CARTER) PERTH Royal Australian Navy (Captain Sir P.W. BOWYER - SMYTH) GLOUCESTER (Flag Captain ROWLEY) and some destroyers. This force Commander in Chief was ordered to proceed to a position south of GRESSE in which it would be strongly placed to intercept any enemy force attempting to interfere with our traffic with GRESSE. O in C whose flag was flying in H.M.S. WARGPITE (Flag Captain FISHER) had with him Battleships VALIANT (Captain MORGAN) BARKAN (Flag Captain COCKE) Aircraft Carrier FORMIDABLE (Flag Captain BISHOP) and some destroyers. This force was ordered to raise steam with all despatch and on March 27th O in C took his main fleet to sea from ALEXANDRIA and steamed to the northwestward in the hope of intercepting the enemy force and bringing them to action.

At 0749 on March 28th - Air reconnaissance reported enemy forces consisting of one LITTORIO class battleship, six cruisers and seven destroyers about 35 miles south of GAYDO Island which is 30 miles south of GRESSE. This enemy force was steering to south westward and soon after being sighted was joined by two more cruisers and at least two more destroyers. At the time of this sighting Vice Admiral Light Forces with the Cruiser force was about forty miles to the southeastward of the enemy. O in C with the main fleet was then about 95 miles to the southwestward of the cruiser force and steaming to the northwestward - acting on the aircraft report of the sighting of the enemy our cruiser force altered course to the northward and made contact with enemy cruisers at 0802. Vice Admiral Light Forces then turned his cruisers to the southwestward in order to draw the enemy on towards the Battleship. At about 0900 enemy cruisers turned sixteen points and began to steer to the northwestward - British cruiser force followed suit to keep in touch. This they did until 1058 when V.A.L.F. sighted LITTORIO class battleship sixteen miles to the northward, turned his cruisers once again to southeastward to keep outside the range of the enemy guns of battleship and to draw the enemy forces toward his O in C.

Torpedo bombers attacked from the FORMIDABLE and this developed on the LITTORIO class battleship at 1130. One possible hit was claimed in this attack. Either this attack or the knowledge of the presence of an aircraft carrier caused the LITTORIO class battleship and her accompanying cruisers to turn to northwestward and the enemy was thus again heading for his loss. This abrupt turn by the enemy caused V.A.L.F. to lose touch but our cruiser force almost immediately came in sight of our own Battleship and the whole of our forces pressed on after the enemy.

At 1135 - Our aircraft sighted and reported a second enemy force about eight miles west of GAYDO Island. This force consisted of two GAYOUR class battleships, three cruisers and four destroyers. At about this time another torpedo bomber attack by our Royal aircraft was launched against enemy forces which included the LITTORIO class battleship. One hit was claimed. During the early afternoon after touch had been temporarily lost the enemy was again located by Naval aircraft. A further torpedo bombing attack was launched and three torpedo hits on the LITTORIO class battleship were claimed. Between 1500 and 1700 R.A.F. BLISTERIN bombers attacked the enemy forces, hits on one cruiser and one.

one destroyer and two probable hits on another cruiser were scored. At 1600 C in C received a report from aircraft that the speed of the LITTORIO class battleship had been drastically reduced. He at once ordered V.A.L.F. to press on his four cruisers to regain touch. At dusk two further torpedo bombing attacks were launched by Naval aircraft. It is not thought that the LITTORIO class battleship was again hit during these attacks but one more enemy cruiser was severely hit by a torpedo. V.A.L.F. reported that just after dusk and some destroyers were ordered to attack, others being retained with one battleship for screening duties against submarines. Having led the destroyers to a position from which they were to commence their attack V.A.L.F. led his cruisers clear of his destroyers to the north-eastward.

A 2210 - It was reported that an enemy vessel was lying damaged and hove to three miles off port of the battleship course. C in C at once turned the Battleship to engage this unit - the ITALIAN cruiser POEA, while approaching POEA three enemy cruisers were sighted on the starboard bow namely - two ZARA class cruisers led by a smaller cruiser of the GUILIOTTI class. This enemy force was crossing the bows of our Battleship from starboard to port. As the enemy cruisers passed ahead of the screen H.M.S. GREENBOND (Commander MARSHALL A'DONNER) illuminated the leading heavy cruiser. Our Battleship at once opened fire - the enemy must have been taken completely by surprise. Salvoes hit at the very short range of about 4,000 yards and practically wrecked both enemy cruisers of ZARA class. Enemy destroyers astern of the cruisers were then seen to turn and race torpedoes and our Battleship turned away to avoid them. Exactly what followed is still obscure but H.M.S. STEWART (Captain WALLER) and H.M.S. R. VOOK (Lieutenant WALKERS) certainly did considerable execution. The destroyer attacking force searching for the damaged LITTORIO class battleship failed to locate her and it seems probable that she moved off during the action between our Battleship and enemy cruisers. Some destroyers from this attacking force presumably made contact with destroyers sent in by C in C to mop up and they succeeded in sinking both our POEA. It is probable during the night the LITTORIO class battleship became heavily engaged with her own forces as heavy gunfire was heard at a time and from the direction from which made it impossible for any of our forces to be engaged.

An extensive air search, next morning failed to disclose any remaining ITALIAN ships who must have made their escape under cover of darkness. Results of the action at present known are that the heavy cruisers ZARA, POEA and PIUMI were sunk, one six inch gun cruiser of the GUILIOTTI class was probably sunk, the large ITALIAN destroyer VIRGILIO VIOBERTI and the destroyer MASTRALI were sunk and the large destroyer ALFIERI was probably sunk. The new battleship of the LITTORIO class suffered serious underwater damage and other enemy units were also certainly damaged. On the following day some 55 officers and 820 men from ITALIAN vessels sunk were picked up by our forces and by GREEN destroyers which were actively cooperating. Some hundreds more survivors would have been picked up but life saving operations were interrupted by ineffective dive bombing attacks delivered by the GERMAN air force. One J.U. 88 was shot down during these attacks. One J.U. 88 which attempted to interfere with operations on the previous day had also been shot down. When C in C reluctantly decided to suspend rescue work he radioed signal orders to the Chief of the ITALIAN Naval Staff stating that over 500 ITALIAN survivors believed on water given the air positions and stating that a fast hospital ship would be needed to pick up such survivors. C in C received the following reply from Chief of the ITALIAN Navy, "Thank you for your communication. Hospital ship GROSSECA already left TARANTO yesterday evening at 1700." C in C has made a signal the King the GERMAN navy for its very prompt and valuable cooperation.

FRANK BULL.

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Received From:

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