



SUPPLEMENT
TO
The London Gazette

Of TUESDAY, the 11th of MAY, 1948

Published by Authority

Registered as a newspaper

From www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/UK/LondonGazette/38287.pdf

WEDNESDAY, 12 MAY, 1948

REPORT OF AN ACTION AGAINST AN ITALIAN CONVOY ON THE NIGHT OF THE 15TH/16TH APRIL, 1941.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 8th June, 1941, by Admiral Sir ANDREW B. CUNNINGHAM, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

*Mediterranean.
8th June, 1941.*

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the attached report by Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla of the successful action fought by the division of destroyers under his command against an Italian convoy on the night of the 15th/16th April, 1941.

2. The search for the convoy was conducted skilfully and with sound appreciation. The action itself was conducted by all concerned with determination and gallantry and was completely successful, resulting in the annihilation of the convoy and escort.

3. These results reflect the highest credit on Captain P. J. Mack, Royal Navy, and the forces under his command. The fighting spirit and high standard of training of the ships concerned is amply demonstrated by this incident.

4. The loss of such a fine fighting unit as H.M.S. MOHAWK is much to be regretted but such losses by chance torpedoes in a mêlée are only to be expected, and it can be counted fortunate that Commander J. W. Eaton, Royal Navy, and a large proportion of his ship's company were saved.

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

*Office of Captain (D),
Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla,
H.M.S. JERVIS.*

19th April, 1941.

FOURTEENTH DESTROYER FLOTILLA—LETTER OF PROCEEDINGS 15TH-16TH APRIL, 1941.

SKIRMISH OFF SFAX.

I have the honour to submit the following report of the sinking of the Tripoli-bound convoy and escort on the night of 15th-16th April, 1941.

2. At 1800, on 15th April, 1941, JERVIS, NUBIAN, MOHAWK and JANUS* slipped and proceeded from Malta by the eastern searched channel to intercept the convoy reported in a signal from an aircraft timed 1157Z of 15th April, 1941.†

Single line ahead in the order JERVIS, JANUS, NUBIAN and MOHAWK was formed.

3. At a speed of 26 knots I could reach Kerkenah No. 4 buoy well before the convoy, assuming its speed to be 8 knots. At 1915, when clear of the searched channel, course 248 degs. was steered.

4. At 1925, I received Vice-Admiral, Malta's signal timed 1836 of 15th April, 1941,‡ confirming the convoy's course and speed of 8 knots.

Admiralty footnotes:—

* JERVIS—Capt. P. J. Mack, R.N. (Captain (D), 14th Destroyer Flotilla).

NUBIAN—Comdr. R. W. Ravenhill, R.N.

MOHAWK—Comdr. J. W. M. Eaton, R.N.

JANUS—Comdr. J. A. W. Tothill, R.N.

† Signal 1157 of 15th reported five enemy merchant ships, escorted by three destroyers, off the Tunis Coast in the vicinity of Capé Bon and on a southerly course at an estimated speed of nine knots.

‡ Signal 1836 of 15th gave the position of the convoy and escort at 1700, its cruising disposition, and its course and speed as south, 8 knots.

5. At 0044, when in a position 114 degs. No. 4 Kerkenah buoy 6 miles; course was altered to 310 degs. and speed reduced to 20 knots.

6. At 0100, I altered course to 333 degs., this being the reciprocal of the enemy's probable course and, at 0110, started normal night zig-zag.

7. At 0142, I passed the enemy's expected position, assuming that his speed was still 8 knots, and increased to 25 knots. At 0155, had the enemy proceeded at 7 knots, he should have been only three miles ahead; it was therefore clear that he had steered some other course.

There were two possibilities:—

(a) He might have altered to the Northward on realising that he had been reported;

(b) He might have kept closer inshore.

If he had done (a) it would have been a hopeless task to attempt to find him. My only chance, therefore, was to work under the assumption that he had done (b). Therefore, at 0155, I altered course to 214 degs. to close Kerkenah No. 1 buoy.

9. Attached are narratives of the subsequent action of H.M. Ships JERVIS, NUBIAN and JANUS, together with a copy of the Commanding Officer's report on the sinking of H.M.S. MOHAWK.

(Signed) P. J. MACK,
Captain (D).

SKIRMISH OFF SFAX—NARRATIVE OF
H.M.S. JERVIS.

Wind—N.W., Force 5.

Sea—31.*

Moon bearing 135 degs.—140 degs.

Course 214 degs. Speed—25 knots.

Single line ahead in sequence JERVIS,
JANUS, NUBIAN and MOHAWK.

Time—Zone -2.

- 0158 Sighted ships bearing 170 degs. about 6 miles.
- 0159 Made signal "Enemy in sight to port".
- 0200 Altered course to 140 degs.
- 0201 27 knots.
- 0202 Made signal "Train torpedo tubes to starboard".
- 0203 Altered course to 210 degs. to bring enemy between me and the moon.
- 0205 Made signal "Train torpedo tubes to port".
- 0207 Able to count 5 ships in all.
- 0210 Enemy bearing 140 degs. 4 miles.
- 0211 7 ships counted. Altered course to 170 degs.
- 0212 Enemy bearing 135 degs.—150 degs. 2½-3 miles.
- 0213 Altered course to 160 degs. Enemy now seen to consist of 5 merchant vessels, 1 large destroyer, 2 small destroyers.
- 0214 Altered course to 150 degs.
- 0215 Enemy bearing 128 degs.—140 degs.
- 0218 Altered course to 140 degs.
- 0220 Opened fire on enemy destroyer bearing 100 degs., range 2,400 yards.
- 0222 Enemy hit by pom-pom and 4.7-in. Enemy appeared to return fire with Breda and probably 3.9-in. with flashless cordite.

Admiralty footnote:—

* "Wind force 5" signifies "fresh breeze. (16-20 miles per hour)."

"Sea 31" signifies "moderate sea with short, low swell."

0225 1 merchant vessel on fire.

0227 Checked fire. Destroyer sinking.

From now on a general mêlée ensued. Fire was opened with 4.7-in. pom-pom, Breda, 0.5-in. and Hotchkiss at many enemy ships at ranges varying from 50 to 2,000 yards. 1 merchant vessel of about 3,000 tons attempted to ram me, but I just crossed his bows in time by going full speed ahead on both engines.

Fighting lights were switched on. One large destroyer passed down the line to starboard and was heavily engaged, hit with the first salvo and set on fire amidships.

0240 Fired one torpedo at large enemy destroyer, probably obtaining a hit aft.

0244 Fired one torpedo at merchant vessel stopped and on fire, but missed.

0250 An ammunition ship blew up with an enormous explosion; smoke and flames rose to a height of 2,000 feet and JERVIS who was 1,500 yards away was showered with pieces of ammunition, etc., weighing up to 20 lbs.; the sea around appeared as a boiling cauldron. Inspection reveals that the ammunition was of German manufacture.

0252 Received a signal from NUBIAN reporting that MOHAWK had been sunk by torpedo. I ordered NUBIAN to burn masthead lights and I proceeded towards her.

0311 A torpedo track passed directly under the bridge, apparently fired from the large destroyer previously engaged, which was stopped and burning and thought to be out of action. Opened fire on this destroyer, scoring several hits, and as the bearing drew too far aft ordered JANUS to finish her off, which she did.

0320 The situation was now as follows:—

1 destroyer sunk; 2 destroyers and 4 merchant vessels burning fiercely; the fifth merchant vessel (the ammunition ship) sunk; MOHAWK sunk in about seven fathoms lying on her side with about 50 feet of her fore-castle above water. NUBIAN picking up MOHAWK's survivors.

0323 Went alongside wreck of MOHAWK and took off two survivors. I then picked up more survivors and ordered JANUS to sink the remains of MOHAWK which she did by gunfire having no torpedoes left. Position of MOHAWK's wreck 34 degs. 56.5 mins. North, 11 degs. 42.4 mins. East by fix from Kerkenah Nos. 3 and 4 light buoys. Whilst picking up survivors 1 merchant vessel was seen to turn over and sink.

0403 Set course 080 degs. 20 knots.

0418 29 knots.

0420 Normal night zig-zag (10 degs. either side of mean course).

SKIRMISH OFF SFAX—NARRATIVE OF
H.M.S. NUBIAN.

0045 Altered course to 330 degs. 20 knots. Snaking the line.

About 0120. Sighted dark shapes on the port bow, which were thought to be land.

- 0143 Increased speed to 25 knots. Altered course as required to close shapes from northward, towards moon. Ships in line ahead, approaching convoy bearing Red 20,* inclination 010 to the right.
- 0210 approx. Opened fire on rear merchant vessel. This vessel was hit about third salvo, there was an explosion and a large fire broke out aft. Shifted target to second from rear; and again to a small ship turning away to port. Both these ships were also repeatedly hit and were on fire. Checked fire to allow smoke to clear. Proceeded to head of convoy.
- 0223 Sighted 1 destroyer (Navigatori class) on opposite course, range about 1,000 yards on starboard beam.
- 0225 Increased speed and altered course towards and then away. Engaged destroyer with pom-pom, 0.5 M.G. and 4.7. Destroyer fired back and there was a short engagement which had to be terminated as MOHAWK passed between NUBIAN and the enemy. Hits were definitely obtained under the bridge and on the hull aft.
- 0230 Crossed bow of leading merchant ship.
- 0236 Received V/S signal from MOHAWK (astern of NUBIAN about 4 cables†) "Have been hit by torpedo".
- 0237 Made signal to Captain (D) 14 re MOHAWK. Sighted destroyer (1 funnel) on port bow and engaged, several salvos were fired and she was repeatedly hit and caught fire. Turned and pursued merchant vessel making off to south westward. Engaged with 4.7-in and hit, setting on fire. Turned to port and closed MOHAWK.
- 0300 Stopped among MOHAWK survivors.
- 0301 Proceeded 27 knots on report of sighting unknown vessel to the westward.
- 0307 Reported this unknown vessel to Captain (D) 14. JERVIS and JANUS closed. Turned to port and engaged unknown vessel, now identified as merchant ship. From subsequent information I consider this was probably an old wreck. Ceased fire when vessel was seen to be on fire, and closed MOHAWK.

JANUS closed merchant vessel to investigate.

- 0313 to 0405 Engine movements as required to pick up survivors.
- 0405 Proceeded 15 knots, increasing to 29 knots, course 080 degs.

(Signed) R. W. RAVENHILL,
Commander-in-Command.

SKIRMISH OFF SFAX—NARRATIVE BY
H.M.S. JANUS.

- 0140 Obtained contact by R.D.F.‡ at a range of 12,000 yards on a westerly bearing.
- 0220 JERVIS opened fire on a small one funnel destroyer.
- 0222 Opened fire on this destroyer with an R.D.F. range of 2,400 yards and hit with the opening salvo. This was

the only time that an R.D.F. range could be used as later the targets became too numerous and confused.

As soon as this destroyer was seen to be well hit fire was shifted to the rear merchant ship. Hits were obtained at a range of 4,000 yards with the second salvo and, after about 5 salvos, a fire was started. Fire was then shifted to the next merchant ship, a fire started in her too, and the order check fire given. One torpedo was fired at the destroyer which had previously been engaged and this missed.

- 0230 approx. Opened fire on the largest merchant ship in the leading group of three and obtained hits.

Fired three torpedoes at this same group of merchant ships. Results not observed from the bridge but tubes' crews claim that one hit was clearly seen.

- 0231 approx. A Navigatori class destroyer passed through the line from port to starboard at high speed, between JERVIS and JANUS. Two torpedoes were fired which missed astern. The 4.7-in. guns could not train fast enough to catch up the target but the pom-pom claimed to have hit this ship.

- 0241 Having altered round to port to the northward, opened fire on a large merchant vessel on fire to the eastward.

- 0242 Fired one torpedo at this ship, which blew up at 0243.

- 0246 Sighted a Navigatori class destroyer ahead steaming north and making smoke. Increased to 30 knots and hauled out to port clear of the smoke. As soon as his bow could be seen, fire was opened and 3 hits with the first salvo spotted through his smoke.

- 0247 Engaged the LUCA TARIGO on various courses at speed varying between 16 to 30 knots, mostly at fixed sight range. During this time two torpedoes were fired in bridge control and one in local control, all of which missed. The Italian gunnery was poor, their tracer could be seen going high and wide.

A great many hits were scored on the LUCA TARIGO and by 0259 she was stopped, on fire, and had ceased firing. I considered that she was in a sinking condition and withdrew to the eastward to join Captain (D). Ordered by Captain (D) 14 to finish off the LUCA TARIGO. Fire was opened at 2,000 yards, many hits were scored, and an explosion occurred amidships. A very fierce fire broke out, and the ship could be seen listing over to starboard.

- 0326 Obtained R.D.F. contact range 10,000 yards bearing 330 degs. Increased to full speed and closed.

- 0326 I realised that I was in extremely shallow water and hauled off to the eastward.

This contact was two ships about 1,500 yards apart, and obviously aground.

- 0333 Ordered by D.14 to finish off the MOHAWK. About 100 feet of her

Admiralty footnotes:—

* Bearing Red 20 signifies 20 degs. from right ahead on the port side.

† 1 Cable = 200 yards.

‡ R.D.F., i.e. radar.

keel was showing, and the maximum height above water was about 6 feet. Fire was opened with one gun of "B" mounting in quarters firing and 4 hits obtained. This released air from inside the hull and the wreck slowly sank.

One survivor from the MOHAWK was picked up near the wreck. No sign was now left of the LUCA TARIGO.

There were two merchant vessels left afloat, heavily on fire, and one small destroyer with her fore end completely ablaze. Nothing else was afloat and one of these blew up about 0415.

JANUS suffered no damage from enemy action.

(Signed) J. A. W. TOTHILL,
Commander, R.N.

H.M.S. ST. ANGELO.

17th April, 1941.

I have the honour to submit the following report in regard to the circumstances which led up to the sinking of H.M.S. MOHAWK at 0241 on 16th April, 1941.

2. At 0045, MOHAWK was in company with JERVIS (Captain (D), Fourteenth Destroyer Flotilla), JANUS and NUBIAN, steering 330 degrees, speed 20 knots.

At 0130, suspicious objects were sighted on the port bow and course was altered to close from northward, speed being increased to 25 knots.

3. At 0145, these objects were made out to be a convoy of five merchant ships, screened by three destroyers, and JERVIS led round so as to close on the starboard quarter, opening fire on the nearest screening destroyer at 0205.

This destroyer was quickly hit and disabled and MOHAWK engaged the rear merchant ship, opening fire a few minutes later. This ship was hit at the second salvo and burned fiercely and fire was checked after firing about eight salvos.

4. Fire was opened spasmodically for the next few minutes, as the merchant ships were being repeatedly hit by the destroyers ahead of MOHAWK and I did not wish to waste ammunition.

At 0223, an enemy destroyer of the Navigatori class was sighted on the starboard bow, steering an opposite and parallel course at high speed. She was immediately engaged by NUBIAN and MOHAWK, hit and set on fire and was last seen stopped and on fire about a mile astern.

5. At 0230, NUBIAN led round to port across the bow of the leading merchantman, who immediately altered course to starboard and tried to ram MOHAWK. This ship appeared

to be quite undamaged and on avoiding her and crossing over to the port side, I turned to starboard with the object of engaging and sinking her.

6. As the ship was still under helm and turning to starboard, a torpedo struck on the starboard side abreast "Y" gun, blowing away the after part of the ship from just forward of this gun. The ship was at once stopped and I ordered the Engineer Officer to report to me as to the extent of the damage.

The foremost group of guns then opened fire on the merchant ship in Director firing and hits were at once obtained, the ship catching fire and stopping. No ship could be seen in the vicinity which could have fired this torpedo, apart from the enemy destroyer who was stopped and on fire over a mile astern of MOHAWK, and I came to the conclusion that it must have been a stray torpedo fired by this vessel, possibly with the object of getting rid of top-weight.

7. The Engineer Officer then reported to me that although most of the stern had been blown away, the propeller shafts and propellers were still in place and that he would try to move them and get way on the ship.

About five minutes after the first torpedo had struck, a second one struck MOHAWK on the port side approximately on the bulkhead separating Nos. 2 and 3 boiler rooms. The ship commenced to settle rapidly on an even keel and I ordered all hands on deck.

Less than a minute after this order had been given, the ship took up a very heavy list to port and settled on her beam ends with the after parts submerged as far as the after end of the torpedo tubes. The order was then given to abandon ship as I considered that it was only a matter of minutes before the ship sank.

8. Six Carley floats were got out and manned, the remainder of the hands jumping into the sea. It was not possible to lower the boats owing to the rapid listing of the ship but the hands abandoned ship in an orderly manner and I consider that under the circumstances it was not possible to get out the remainder of the Carley floats.

The approximate position in which the ship was torpedoed was 34 degs. 56 mins. North, 11 degs. 42 mins. East. The depth of water in this position was seven fathoms.

9. The survivors were eventually picked up by JERVIS and NUBIAN and the forepart of the forecabin of the MOHAWK which still remained above water was sunk by JANUS.

10. I cannot pay too high a tribute to the way officers and men behaved during the action. The foremost group fired rapidly and accurately after the ship had been torpedoed and the spirit of the men in the water was admirable.

(Signed) J. W. EATON,
Commander, R.N.

LONDON

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