

## MARE NOSTRUM Supplement to Chronology of the War at Sea 1939 – 45

- **2 September 1940**
  - **09:00:** 56° and 92° Gruppo from Rhodes bombs Force A with 16 SM79s. Cruiser *Liverpool* is hit, disabling a secondary and causing some hull damage.
  - **10:00:** Submarine *Triton* sinks tanker *Indio Mantovani* from convoy headed for North Africa.
  - **11:00:** Force A has brief skirmish with *Duilio* battle group. Outgunned British break contact screened by long ranged torpedo attack by 2<sup>nd</sup> Flotilla destroyers at 10:56 hrs. DD *Hero* and cruiser *Bande Nere* damaged by gunfire.
  - **22:00:** Force A clashes with cruiser distant escort for an Italian convoy. *Liverpool* is sunk by accurate gunfire and torpedoes, but evens the score by fatally torpedoing *Garibaldi* as she closes in. CA *Abruzzi* is hit by a flurry of 6" salvos from *Gloucester* and several destroyers on both sides are damaged by gunfire before contact is broken.
  - **23:00:** The unescorted convoy meanwhile evades detection, but stumbles on submarine *Truant* patrolling nearby. Tanker *Aegina* is sunk before convoy escort returns.
- **3 September 1940**
  - **06:00:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Flotilla DDs arrive Malta for refueling and repairs. Force A cruisers are attacked by SM79 bombers from 52°, 53° and 59° Gruppo along with Ju87s from 96° Gruppo. This is the first offensive action by Italian manned Ju87s. Two SM79s and one Ju87 are shot down by covering Hurricanes from Malta based 261 Squadron. Maggiore Falconi then downs two Hurricanes in an ensuing dogfight with 23° Gruppo CR42s.
  - **20:00:** Force A cruisers ambush the vanguard destroyers from Italian battle group in a display of superior British night fighting capability. The shattered DDs limp off when Force A shifts fire to the Italian cruisers and battleships *Cesare* and *Cavour*. The British break contact once they realize the size of the Italian battle group and resume passage West to join a British force steaming East from Gibraltar.
- **4 September 1940**
  - **07:00:** Fulmars from *Illustrious* down a Z506 from 170<sup>a</sup> Squadriglie. But, a later scout sights the British carrier force steaming East in the Sicilian Narrows having rendezvoused with Force A.
  - **10:00:** 24 SM79 bombers from the 27° and 28° Gruppos bomb *Illustrious*, resulting in a hit on her funnel. Defending Fulmars end up in a dogfight with escorting CR42s from the 3° Gruppo. Two Fulmars are shot down in exchange for British claims of one CR42 damaged and a probable.
  - **10:30:** 830 Squadron Swordfish from Malta unsuccessfully attack an Italian battle group North West of Sicily, losing two Swordfish to AA fire.
  - **12:00:** *Illustrious* launches 18 Swordfish escorted by 4 Fulmars to attack the Italian battle group steaming to intercept the British carrier force. Air Ministry directed close formation torpedo attack tactics prove ineffective. One Fulmar and a CR42 are downed in dogfights between opposing fighters.
  - **14:00:** A shadowing Wellington from 216 Squadron is downed by the CAP over the Italian battle group after destroying one CR42 and damaging another in deteriorating weather. Meanwhile, a Z501 of 170<sup>a</sup> Squadriglie regains contact with the British force reporting its location. The lumbering floatplane downs a Fulmar and escapes well holed in the clouds after another Fulmar breaks off with guns jammed. The epic mission results in a Medale Oro for the Italian pilot and a promotion to sergente for the gunner.
  - **14:12:** Unwilling to engage the Italian battle group with only battleship *Valiant*, the British carrier force and Force A reverse course.
  - **15:00:** 24 SM79s bomb the *Illustrious* again, in light rain, hitting her amidships. A defending 806 Squadron Fulmar is downed when attacking the rear of the Italian bomber formation. Through out the day, the marginal performance of the Fulmar proves disappointing, handicapping it in bomber interceptions and putting it at a disadvantage trying to dogfight the nimble CR42s.
  - **16:00:** A small *Illustrious* strike of 4 Swordfish and two Fulmars attack the closing Italian battle group. Two Swordfish are shot down by AA fire after torpedoing *Pola* twice in point-blank attacks. The Italian commander breaks off pursuit to cover the crippled cruiser and avoid a night action with the British force.
  - **17:30:** The British force then resumes its course and completes passage of the Sicilian Narrows in steadily deteriorating weather. During the following three days, the *Illustrious* force links up with the Mediterranean Fleet battle squadron in stormy conditions, completing Operation HATS, Hands Across The Sea.

- **8 September 1940**

- **07:00:** Force B, consisting of battleships *Malaya*, *Valiant* and *Warspite* and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, conduct a surprise 35 minute bombardment of Tripoli, screened by the 14<sup>th</sup> DD Flotilla. 13,000 ton *Victoria* and five other merchant ships from a recently arrived Italian convoy are sunk in the harbor by aircraft adjusted gunfire. Port facilities are also heavily damaged, but most of the newly unloaded supplies are not touched. Small caliber shore batteries are unable to disrupt the British force. Meanwhile, Italian air defenses are busy pursuing the withdrawal of British Wellingtons after a long-range dawn bombing raid. One Walrus spotter plane is shot down and another heavily damaged by Tripoli AA. An Italian inquiry is convened to review defense plans.
- **08:00:** An Italian cruiser force which departed Tripoli before dawn is recalled. After identifying Force B withdrawing NE after the bombardment, the Italian squadron maintains visual contact and takes up a shadowing position to the north.
- **11:00:** A Gladiator flying CAP for *Eagle* splashes a Ro43 from Rhodes.
- **12:00:** *Osiris* is sunk by depth charges from *Baleno*, *Folgore* and *Lampo* while making a submerged attack on an Italian convoy.
- **13:00:** *Eagle* is torpedoed twice by Italian sub *Gondar*. The heavily damaged carrier returns to Alexandria, escorted by *Vendetta* and *Waterhen*. *Gondar* evades British escort with minor depth charge damage.
- **14:00:** Italian Destroyer Divisions 1 and 11, which had sortied from Benghazi, make contact with the withdrawing British bombardment force and take up a shadowing position to the east. The British Force B then turns north to steer for an Italian battle force reported steaming south from Taranto. Italian shadowing forces conform, maintaining visual contact.
- **16:00:** Main Italian battle fleet, consisting of *Duilio*, the new battleships *Littorio* and *Veneto*, *Bolzano*, *Trieste*, *Trento* and four destroyers of Div 7, sight the British Force B consisting of *Malaya*, *Valiant*, *Warspite*, *Neptune*, *Orion*, *Sydney*, AA cruisers *Calcutta* and *Coventry*, and eight destroyers. Shadowing Italian cruisers *Attendolo*, *d'Aosta*, *di Savoia*, *Montecuccoli* and 11 destroyers of Div 1, 4 and 11 take up battle positions. *Veneto* opens fire at 16:04 at 25,000 yards. Both sides launch several spotter planes. An Ro43 attacks a Walrus and is shot down by its gunner. The pugnacious Walrus is in turn shot down when it attempts to intercept another Ro43. The remaining floatplanes then settled down to spot the fall of shot. Aerial spotters contribute significantly to capital ship accuracy in the initial phase of the engagement before AA damage and breakdowns ends their utility. Other spotter aircraft are jettisoned by ships to eliminate fire hazards early on.

In the initial phase of the engagement, British cruisers and destroyers push ahead aggressively and are soon out of supporting range of the slower English battleships. The outnumbered British screening forces are then forced to turn away under heavy Italian fire. *Sydney* is heavily damaged by spotter assisted fire from the Italian battleships. The remaining two CLs of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron and accompanying DDs lay a thick smoke screen to cover the retirement of the beleaguered *Sydney*. The Italian heavy cruisers of Division 3 then maneuver around the end of the smoke screen, crossing the British cruisers "T" at short range. Lead cruiser *Neptune* is shattered in a deluge of 8" fire and soon sinks, covering the retreat of the British light forces.

Meanwhile, the seven Italian destroyers of Div 1 and Div 11 close to deliver a textbook torpedo attack on the British battlefleet. No hits are scored; *Aviere*, *Geniere* and *Turbine* are sunk by defensive fire from the British battleships and screening forces.

The first phase of the fleet action ends when 9 Wellingtons of 216 Squadron are sighted approaching from the East. Italian forces regroup into AA formation while British forces continue to withdraw. The Wellingtons, on an epic shuttle mission from Egypt to Malta, have been redirected by RAF Malta Headquarters to the coordinates of the battle to attack with their small, transit bomb-loads. Bombs are dropped from medium altitude, but successfully evaded by the wildly maneuvering Italian battleships. One Wellington is downed by AA fire and another damaged. The formation then continues on to Malta, from which it conducts nocturnal bombing raids for the rest of the week before returning to Egypt.

After the air attack, Italian fleet units turn to pursue the withdrawing British forces. Cruiser Divisions 3 and 7 use their superior speed to overhaul the damaged British 7<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron. The British battle-line and close escort of DDs and two AA cruisers steer to support their withdrawing units. The four lightly armored

CLs of Division 3 close aggressively amid heavy British fire. *Luigi di Savoia* is soon left dead in the water from hits in the engine room and boiler room but the other three and accompanying DDs close to point blank range. *Attendolo*, *Montecuccoli* and destroyers *da Noli* and *Tarigo* are heavily damaged by a concentration of British 15" and 6" fire from the British battleships along with fire from *Orion* and *Sydney*, escorting DDs and rapid fire 4" fire from *Calcutta* and *Coventry*. Italian 8" from Division 3 and 6" fire from the light cruisers meanwhile reduces *Orion* and DDs *Ilex* and *Mohawk* to sinking wrecks. The cruisers also score hits on the English battleships in the melee, but are unable to penetrate their thick armor.

The slower Italian battleships provide long range covering fire and cause considerable damage to the English battleships, disabling several turrets and slowing *Malaya* and *Warspite*. This phase of the battle ends with the Italian DDs launching a torpedo attack on the British battle-line to cover the withdrawal of their outgunned cruisers. A shallow running torpedo hits *Warspite* in the stern, but explodes against her armor, causing flooding but failing to disable her rudder or propellers. *Da Noli* and *Tarigo* are sunk and disabled cruisers *Attendolo* and *Montecuccoli* are shelled into shattered wreckage by point blank fire from the passing British battleships. The two cruisers sink in their wakes.

During the withdrawal, the Italian cruisers of Division 3 steer too close across the bow of their approaching battle-line and *Trieste* is cut in half by *Littorio* in a high speed collision. In the final phase of the battle, the opposing battle-lines engage to cover the withdrawal of their light units. Battleships of both sides are hard hit; and all three of *Veneto's* 15" turrets disabled. A British torpedo attack fails with *Nubian* sunk by the secondaries of *Littorio* and *Veneto* and AA destroyer *Wryneck* sunk by two torpedoes from *Bolzano*. Withdrawing *Juno* is sunk in collision with *Coventry*.

As the sun sets, opposing battleships close to point blank range. *Valiant* is hard hit and *Warspite* disabled while several salvos from slowly moving *Malaya* disable *Littorio*. With *Duilio* also damaged, both sides lay smoke and withdraw as night falls, ending the second major fleet engagement in the Mediterranean. *Warspite's* engines fail and she must be towed by *Valiant* as both sides limp off in the darkness. Several crippled Italian ships are also in tow. During the next two days, damaged Italian ships evade submarines and slowly make their way back to Italy, while the damaged British fleet crawls into Malta.

- **23:30:** British submarine *Pandora* torpedoes Italian tanker *Francesico Barbero*, forcing her return to Taranto.
- **9 September 1940**
  - **13:00:** Four SM79s of 278 à Squadrigile from Benghazi, make the first Italian torpedo bomber attack of the war on the British convoy heading for Malta. Tanker *Pericles* is hit and scuttled by the British when she is unable to keep up.
  - **13:30:** Six Swordfish from Malta, escorted by two Fulmars and two Hurricanes, attack *Cavour*, *Zara* and DD *Carducci* steaming south east along the coast of Sicily, escorted by four CR42s of 23° Gruppo. Four Swordfish and one Fulmar are downed by the defending CR42s, three of which are in turn shot down by the Hurricanes of 261 Squadron. A fifth Swordfish is destroyed by AA fire and *Zara* narrowly avoids a torpedo dropped by the surviving Swordfish.
  - **15:00:** A Ro43 flying ASW patrol from cruiser *di Giussano*, part of the escort for an Italian convoy for the Dodecanes, spots the British convoy headed for Malta, escorted by a battleship. The Italians decline to attack.
  - **16:30:** Another British attack is made on the *Cavour*, *Zara* and *Carducci* by 12 Swordfish, escorted by 2 Hurricanes. Defending CR42s down two Swordfish in exchange for a CR42 lost to the Hurricanes. Two more Swordfish are destroyed by AA fire from the Italian ships which evade the torpedo attacks. The Italian force reverses course and withdraws northeast to avoid further air attack.
- **10 September 1940**
  - 17:00: The British convoy arrives in Malta after fighting off several unsuccessful Italian bombing raids.