

and west of Sardinia before dawn on 7 May found no sign of Italian warships, the covering force rejoined the convoy as close escorts and prepared for the inevitable air attacks. Late that morning an enemy signal stating that the convoy had been sighted was intercepted.

Pre-war the navy had not expected its carriers to operate within range of land-based fighters, or indeed to fight the armed forces of three nations in Europe instead of just the one. Now operating in waters that the *Regia Aeronautica* and the *Luftwaffe* were attempting to dominate, every fighter onboard was needed. The maintainers worked through the night, but 8 May dawned with only twelve out of the eighteen Fulmars of Nos. 807 and 808 Squadrons serviceable.

Damaged and Ditched 8 May 1941

Ark Royal flew off reconnaissance Swordfish from 0500 with orders to break radio silence only if any enemy units detected were a threat to the fleet. An hour later dawn broke with poor visibility, low cloud and rain with gusting winds. Recovering her search aircraft, the *Ark* then launched the first CAP of two No. 807 Squadron Fulmars, Red Section, led by the commanding officer and VAT at 0830, landing back on two hours later as another two No. 807 Squadron Fulmars launched.

When the light cruiser *Naiad* in the advance screen opened fire and radar reported contacts bearing 080 degrees at twenty miles distance, two more No. 807 Squadron Fulmars were launched at 1143. This included VAT, only seventy minutes since landing on, now flying with Lieutenant (P) Nigel "Buster" Hallett leading White Section. Joining the already airborne Blue Section, they drove off the enemy. At 1207 the radar screen was clear, and they were recalled to patrol overhead the carrier. *Ark Royal* now commenced a rolling CAP, launching fighters every hour to ensure there was always a section airborne with more than 90 minutes endurance. Each section would have an observer in the leader's aircraft and a TAG in the wingman's. Buster and VAT landed back on at 1334.



A No. 807 Squadron Fulmar fighter taking off from Ark Royal. The cruiser Sheffield is on the carrier's port quarter.