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The problems of protection and resupply of forward bases are as old as military history. Useful lessons can often be learned from a look at the details of earlier forward base experiences. This paper considers an episode in World War II—the resupply of the Mediterranean island base of Malta.

THE RESUPPLY OF MALTA IN WORLD WAR II

by
Dora Alves

When in World War II Britain's fortunes were at a low ebb, prodigies were performed to keep Malta resupplied. The troops and civilians on the George Cross Island maintained a heroic, slogging determination to carry on until relief came. In the worst days of 1942, after successive night raids, the half-starved islanders would repeatedly tell the British officers commanding, "Victory is just over the hill." Today we can profitably reread the epic story because Malta, although entirely unprepared at the outbreak of war, proved to be the rock on which Italian hopes in the Mediterranean foundered.¹

Malta measures 17 miles by 9 miles. Its population was 280,000 while the neighboring island of Gozo had a population of 25,000. Tripoli, the capital and port of Libya, is 180 miles to the south. The strategic value of Malta has been appreciated by seamen since antiquity. It was highly valued by Nelson who seized the island in 1800, 2 years after its capture by Napoleon.

Since that event the island has occupied a special place in the perceptions of the British Navy.

In the context of World War II, Malta's situation changed radically with the neutralization of French Mediterranean bases and, with the Axis' progress in North Africa, the island became increasingly isolated. Fortunately for Malta's survival, Churchill saw it as the key to the Middle East and beyond and gave it his strong support. Pitted against Churchill and the Royal Navy were senior staff officers who held that the coming of airpower had made the island indefensible. This determination led to avoidable losses of men, ships, and materiel.

At the outbreak of war Malta, an island that produced only 30 percent of its food supply, had no stocks of food. There were only fourteen coastal defense guns, one airfield, and three obsolescent *Sea Gladiators*, "Faith," "Hope," and "Charity," supplemented by four *Hurricanes*. The authorities

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were aware of the danger of air attack from Sicily, only 60 miles distant, but the harbor at Valetta was without means of providing a smokescreen and no plans had been worked out for the unloading of precious cargoes or for the speedy dispersal of stores. No thought had been given to the safe shelter of submarines.

Because some thought that the island could not be defended, spare parts had not been stockpiled and there were no adequate reserves of fuel. Too few technicians to man the repair shops for the three services and to service the new technological devices coming into use had been brought to the island. Although the rock of Malta provided unrivaled opportunities for tunnels and shelters for living quarters, storage, and workshops the ancient subterranean granaries of the Knights of Malta had not been added to. Because there were no hydraulic drills on the island in 1941, Maltese men, conscripted between the ages of 18 and 40, were working on excavations with handtools, buckets on pieces of string, and pony carts.²

Preparations for resupply were as neglected as the island itself; everything was worked out *ad hoc*. A want of security put valuable lives, cargoes, and ships needlessly at risk. When in August 1942 the large *Pedestal* convoy was forming, crates marked "MALTA" stood on the quay while dockside pub talk anticipated the sealed orders of the ships' Masters. After the heavy sinkings became known in Britain, such carelessness was the subject of angry questions in Parliament.

At the outbreak of hostilities a large Italian force under Marshal Graziani faced British and colonial troops in North Africa.³ By the end of 1940 the British had conquered Cyrenaica and were poised to push the Italians out of their last stronghold at Tripoli. The defense of Malta and Malta's role in the sinking of Axis shipping sailing between Europe and North Africa

present an example of the interrelationship of naval, land and air forces such as had not been seen before. The three services worked together to refine their offensive and defensive tactics aiming to interrupt the enemy's supplies and to conserve to the utmost the limited ships and airplanes that could be spared to the Mediterranean theater.

The Axis could supply their North African forces with small ships making a 2-3 day voyage across a few hundred miles of the central Mediterranean, making use of the Sicily—Cape Bon route and sailing inshore waters to Tripoli as much as possible. The British, with far too few ships for their worldwide commitments, had to make a 2-3 months' voyage 14,000 miles round the Cape of Good Hope in order to resupply their forces in Egypt, their larger vessels the target of U-boat attacks. On Malta the besieged were sustained by the thought that every Axis cargo sunk and every airplane downed helped the Allied troops fighting in North Africa. Malta was not only a base of operations for sea and air attack in the Mediterranean; it was also necessary as a staging post for aircraft going to the Middle East and beyond.⁴

If Malta had succumbed, Axis airplanes and ships would have been free to reinforce, Egypt would probably have fallen, and all the oil of the Middle East would most likely have been available to the Axis powers. There might even have been a linkup with Japanese forces in the Far East. The German General Staff saw Suez and Basra⁵ as the keys to British power in the East. Agents worked indefatigably to encourage pro-German sentiment in the Middle East. It is clear from the now-available accounts of the belligerents that when Malta was capable of supporting attacks on the Axis supply routes by air and submarine the Axis campaign in North Africa faltered; when Malta was impotent in the face of the forces hurled against it, Rommel

was in the ascendant.⁶ The resupply of the besieged island was the crux of the struggle and the difficulties were enormous. Little by little, from the time of the Battle of Britain, the needed fighter strength was built up by air-ferry operations—carriers bringing aircraft within flying range of Malta.

Only small cargoes or very urgently needed supplies could be sent in by air or by submarine.⁷ Old, slow, inconspicuous vessels were chosen to make the run to Malta when it was realized that the Mediterranean was the only area where single, unescorted merchantmen suffered fewer losses than ships in convoy.⁸ Convoys bringing food and replacements had to sail 1,075 miles from Alexandria and 1,200 miles from Gibraltar. The Royal Navy, divided between the eastern and western Mediterranean, faced huge problems in the conservation of ammunition aboard the escorting vessels. The Sicilian Narrows, an area of shallows and sandbars controlled by Axis airplanes, U-boats, and E-boats, and heavily mined by the naval forces at Taranto and Naples, was the most dangerous stretch for the convoys and their escorts. It simply was not possible to run the two 40,000-ton convoys each month that Admiral Cunningham, Commander in Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, calculated were necessary if Malta's needs were to be supplied.

In 1940, the Italian Fleet had *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio* of 35,000 tons and 30 knots, armed with 9.15 guns. In addition, they had 2 reconstructed battleships, *Cavour* and *Cesare*, actually in service, with *Doria* and *Diulio* still under construction; 7 strong, fast heavy cruisers; 59 large destroyers; 67 frigates and corvettes; and 117 submarines.⁹ By the fall of 1940, 35 destroyers, a third of the entire force, as well as many auxiliaries were on permanent escort duty on the Libyan route.

The resupply of Malta was just one task among many for the inadequate,

overtaxed Allied Fleet. In the western Mediterranean the redoubtable Force H comprised the battle cruiser *Hood*, the battleships *Valiant* and *Resolution*, the carrier *Ark Royal*, the light cruiser *Arethusa* and four destroyers. Because these ships were slower than those of the Italian Navy, the tactic of using air attack to slow down the enemy was adopted. The Italian Navy's strategy was to avoid battle while protecting the military convoys to Libya and to aim at drawing the British Fleet within range of the Italian bombers. 1940 ended on a high note for the Royal Navy. Supplies were sunk off Tunisia, airfields in the Dodecanese were bombed, and Axis supply dumps in the desert were demolished. The Italian Navy noted that the Malta-based torpedo bombers now had an effective range well beyond the earlier 100-mile limit. Half the Italian battle fleet had been crippled at Taranto when twenty-one of the aircraft from *Illustrious* had put out of action three battleships, two cruisers, and two fleet auxiliaries.

In 1940 the second phase of the struggle began as tempo increased. While the tide of battle ebbed and flowed in North Africa, the men of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Service courageously fought the convoys through to Malta. Their seamanship and steadfastness when faced with constant attack in vessels wholly or partially disabled, often in infernos of flaming aviation fuel, brought Malta the help it needed and enabled it to survive the dreadful days of 1942.

The Italian Navy was reluctant to risk its fine ships in combat, feeling that the Royal Navy had a decided advantage in new technological devices. However, Aeronautico Italiano had four squadrons based in Sardinia, Sicily, and Calabria specially trained for shipping strikes against the Malta convoys. In January 1941 these were augmented by a force of Heinkels, Junkers and Messerschmitts. Hitler appreciated the

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amount of damage wrought by *Illustrious* and told General Geissler, Commanding Officer of Fliegerkorps X, "*Illustrious müssen sinken.*" To this end, dive bombing was practiced off the Sicilian shore on the mockup of the carrier. The pilots perfected a flexible formation, constantly changing their altitude, speed and formation without the least confusion, diving to machine-gun at deck level before they flattened out. Subsequently, *Illustrious* was repeatedly attacked by Fliegerkorps X and Italian *Savoias* but, though damaged, the carrier was able to reach Malta, be patched up, and return to Alexandria.

The sound construction of *Illustrious* allowed it to survive eight direct hits and seven near-misses. However, the Fliegerkorps had won a strategic victory. No Allied carrier or battleship risked the Sicilian Narrows for another 2 years and the Malta convoys were deprived of their much needed protection. The clear, shallow water of the central basin, through which the convoys had to pass, was strewn with mines and under constant surveillance.

The Italian Navy felt itself at a disadvantage without radar to help it fight at night but the Italians experimented with many devices, including the *motobomba*, in their determination to end the Malta convoys. On 25 July the 10th Flotilla failed in an attempt on Valetta Harbor. The dispatch ship *Diana* brought three "pigs," as the crews called them—a torpedo with a detachable warhead controlled by two men riding astride it—but the pigs were detected and destroyed.

On 6 March British troops landed in Greece and even before the ensuing debacle Rommel and his *panzers* had made their mark on the war in the desert.¹⁰ Rommel flew to Tripoli 12 February followed 2 days later by a reconnaissance battalion and an antitank battalion. On 11 March the

tanks of the 5th Light Division arrived. With the successes of the Afrika Korps, which swept the British back over the Egyptian frontier, and the sudden and complete victory of the airborne German troops in Crete, the task of supplying Malta became even more difficult. Axis aircraft could now escort shipping from Italy to the Greek ports of Patras, Salonika, and Corinth and pass reinforcement aircraft through to North Africa.

For the Allies problems multiplied. There was unrest in Persia and the Iraqi Air Force attacked the airfield at Habbaniya, an important link in the chain between the U.K. and the Far East. As Rommel advanced, *Hurricanes*, unable to carry sufficient fuel to get them from Malta to airfields further east, had to be sent in cases round the Cape. Later a trail was blazed from Takoradi to Khartoum, and thence to Egypt. This gives some indication of the importance of the role Malta had hitherto played as a staging post.

There were now, it is estimated, 200 Italian bombers, in addition to the Fliegerkorps; Italian naval forces of five battleships, ten cruisers, twenty destroyers and some thirty to forty fast E-boats as well as the Axis submarines always ready to attack Allied convoys.

On Malta Air Marshal Lloyd and Admiral Ford, who had made a careful study of German tactics in Norway and Crete, were convinced that air superiority, both offensive and defensive, was the key to success in the Mediterranean. On the island tactics were constantly being improved with the help of antiaircraft and searchlight crews. There were now three airfields, and aircraft were shielded from blast and bomb splinters by laboriously built pens. The work of resiting radar installations, repairing landing strips, and sheltering facilities underground wherever possible went on. Maintenance crews had to work against a shortage of every kind of equipment—

even bicycles were lacking. Aircraft and submarines could bring in a few priority items; for the most part work was accomplished by dogged perseverance and unquenchable inventiveness. Whenever a change was made to a new type of aircraft the ground crews, out of range of the experts who could have helped them with their new problems, could only improvise. Aerial photography had improved when in October *Marylands* took over reconnaissance flights, photographing Taranto, Brindisi, Naples, Trapani, Palermo, Messina, Tripoli and other ports. The intelligence thus furnished enabled Malta-based bombers to attack with full knowledge of the "traffic patterns" of Axis shipping. A notable 2-hour bombardment of Tripoli, on 21 April, was followed by a 30-minute shelling by the fleet from Alexandria. Meanwhile the Italian Navy was suffering from shortage of fuel, the Germans being niggardly with their supplies, and could only operate as fuel permitted.

Despite their difficulties, Malta-based naval and air forces continued to attack convoys in the Strait of Messina and off the coast of Tunis. They attacked Tripoli and Benghazi almost every night. Tripoli harbor became so congested that Italian convoy escort vessels were forced to cruise at sea till dawn, using up precious fuel and increasing the wear and tear on men and machines. In the Royal Navy there had always been a certain prejudice against submarines. Now the surface forces' comparative weakness in the Mediterranean gave the submarines their chance.¹¹ They sought out the big Italian liners serving as troop carriers. After the sinking of *Esperia* off Tripoli on 20 August, and *Neptunia* and *Oceanea* off Misurata on 18 September the Italians used their high-speed destroyers to carry troops, mostly at night.

Malta's air strength, offensive and defensive, still depended on the availability of carriers to make good the

high attrition rate. The proportion of aircraft getting through had greatly increased from the time of *Argus'* early air-ferry operations when crews were unused to long flights at sea and cooperation between the services had not been perfected. Only five out of fourteen aircraft embarked in Operation White had reached their destination. Now at a time when *Illustrious* and *Formidable* were being repaired in the United States, by ill-chance *Ark Royal* was sunk only 25 miles from Gibraltar. Meanwhile, *Indomitable* had been accidentally grounded off Jamaica on 3 November 1941 and was still working up her ship's company. When the Mediterranean war entered its most difficult phase, the through-carriage of stocks to the Middle East was impeded just when developments in the Far East were giving increasing cause for alarm. The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and had continued a triumphant surge. Much British tonnage was being used to carry supplies to Russia, invaded by Hitler in June, in an effort to satisfy Stalin's insatiable needs. Churchill felt obliged to request help from the U.S. shipbuilding program.

The Malta-based naval and air forces had been so successful in their task of sinking Axis shipping that Hitler felt obliged to transfer to the Mediterranean antisubmarine material and devices, including submarine sound detection gear, and German technicians to instruct the Italians in their use.¹² In mid-May Fliegerkorps X transferred from Sicily to Greece for the Cretan campaign, leaving fewer aircraft for reconnaissance over Malta.

The Germans and Italians were not of one mind in deciding strategic priorities in the Mediterranean but, urged on by the Germans, the Italians used cruiser divisions to protect the Tripoli convoys. The Italians felt that the core of the Libyan supply problem had always been the superiority of Malta's airpower. All available Axis submarines were ordered

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to step up their inshore patrols on the route to North Africa. For the first 3 months of 1942 a force of 22 submarines was fairly constantly maintained.¹³

Hitler and Mussolini decided that Malta had to be destroyed as a base and plans were made for its capture. (The Italian plan to occupy Malta, C3, had existed since 1938.) Aircraft from western Europe joined the transferred Fliegerkorps and some 900 aircraft began to assemble in Sicily for Operation Hercules, which was to take Malta by air assault. When, early in April, Field Marshal Kesselring, in charge of Mediterranean theater, met with Mussolini and General Cavallero, Chief of the Italian General Staff, Mussolini wanted the assault to be timed for the end of May. Italy was to furnish a parachute division of two regiments, a battalion of engineers and five batteries, while Hitler ordered two German parachute battalions and an engineer battalion to take part and transferred aircraft for the airlift of one battalion and a large number of barges from the German Navy. Hitler had his reservations about Operation Hercules, never having regained his confidence in airborne operations over the sea after the loss of so many of his best paratroopers in Crete. Rommel was making use of his considerable influence to urge Hitler to sanction his attack on Egypt without waiting for the capture of the island. Rommel claimed it would take him 1 week to break the British defense, 1 week for him to exploit the results, and calculated that the Fliegerkorps would need a third week to prepare themselves in Sicily for the assault on Malta, which could therefore take place in the second half of July.¹⁴ Rommel prevailed and Hitler turned a deaf ear to Admiral Raeder's cogent arguments about the difficulties of reinforcing Egypt unless Malta were first put out of action.

In March an attempt was made to get supplies to Malta with one convoy from

Gibraltar and another from Alexandria. The geography of the Mediterranean afforded little choice of route, but this enterprise was a dismal failure. Desperately needed merchant ships, which had survived the attacks of several hundred German and Italian bombers, were sunk after reaching harbor because Malta's *Hurricanes* were inadequate to control the airspace over Malta. It was decided to replace them by *Spitfires*.

Meanwhile, there was serious concern that Malta would soon be faced with famine, and before General Dobbie, whose health had failed, was replaced by Lord Gort as Commander in Chief he had sent urgent messages to Britain giving estimates of how long the strictly rationed supplies would last. Under the incessant bombing it was impossible to cultivate the fields. Before the war Malta had been noted for its fine potatoes, but to grow these it was necessary to obtain seed potatoes from a colder climate and this had proved impossible. Communal kitchens were resorted to; children and nursing mothers had priority but still everyone was undernourished. Servicemen and civilians alike, short of rest and short of food, were taxed by the heavy work that was necessary after every bombing raid. There were never enough airmen to service the aircraft and resurface the runways so soldiers took the places of the absent. The commandos on the island serviced the submarines. Usually there were four at sea and about four hidden on the harbor bottom, waiting to be repaired at night.

Only about one fifth of the 26,000 tons embarked were successfully landed from the March convoys and there were to be no more convoys for 3 months because it had been decided that no more ships could be risked until Malta could be reinforced with fighters. As a beginning *Eagle* flew in 34, and these normally had to fight at odds of five to ten until fuel and ammunition were exhausted.

Admiral Vian, in command of the convoy from Alexandria in March, had fought a brilliant action at Sirte. With a force of light cruisers and destroyers he had kept at bay a battleship and heavy cruisers, convincing the Germans that the Italian Navy could not be relied upon and that they must trust to themselves. The experienced Fliegerkorps II was ordered back from Russia to Sicily with the bombing of Malta as their first task. Kesselring sought to crush Malta by doing tremendous damage to the dockyard and the ships in the harbor, having an average of 400 fighters to protect his bombers. With the lengthening days and the improving weather the contest for Malta reached its climax. The Axis was able to close the dockyard as well as the harbor entrances with mines sewed by Italian destroyers, German airplanes and motor torpedo boats. Only the underground workshops could function. Because fighter protection could not be built up, Malta's submarines were withdrawn in the 2 weeks from 26 April.

The situation on the island was growing desperate: Churchill asked for details of how much food a submarine could carry and whether it was practicable to send in vitamins and other concentrates. He also wrote directly to the President of the United States asking if *Wasp*, which, it was estimated, could carry more than 50 *Spitfires*, could be used as a ferry. On 1 April 1942 he said,

There are now in Sicily about 400 German and 200 Italian bombers. Malta can now muster only 20-30 serviceable fighters. We keep feeding Malta with Spitfires in packets of 16 loosed from the *Eagle* carrier from about six hundred miles west of Malta. This has worked a good many times quite well, but *Eagle* is now laid up for a month by defects in her steering. There are no Spitfires in Egypt. *Argus* is too small, and too slow,

and more over she has to provide the fighter cover for the carrier launching the Spitfires and for the escorting force.¹⁵

The President granted the Prime Minister's request. It was to prove the turning point in the resupply of Malta. The idea that help was coming from the Western Hemisphere was a tonic to the bomb-numbed besieged, who had been saddened at the news of the fall of Singapore. Kesselring, efficient and ruthless, was well aware that without air support the convoys to Malta could not get through. He was determined to annihilate the island with his bombing. He aimed to starve Malta into surrender; to cut off fuel supplies for her aircraft; and to destroy Malta's aircraft either on the island or in the air so that retaliation would be impossible. Too many of the first *Spitfire* consignment were lost—through ill-prepared aircraft, inexperienced pilots and inadequate defenses on Malta—but *Wasp* returned and the new *Spitfires*, better prepared in Britain, were able to refuel, rearm, and take off again before Kesselring's bombers could attack them. Delighted, Mr. Churchill sent the American carrier the signal, "Who said a wasp couldn't sting twice?"¹⁶ Thus on 9 May 61 out of 64 *Spitfires* reached Malta and the ensuing air battle with the Luftwaffe was the last big one. *Eagle* brought in 17 *Spitfires* in May and 55 in June.

Malta still had to be relieved. The fast minelayer, *Welshman*, made two heroic blockade runs, disguised as a French *Leopard*-class destroyer. It brought Malta ammunition and other essentials—but it was not enough. In April over 6,700 tons of bombs had fallen on the island, which Goering had ordered "concentrated," and her needs were very great. *Welshman* was too fast to be caught by the Italians, but in studying her course they discovered the British route—Cape Bon to Mustafa, then south to off Kelibia, then a dash straight to Malta.

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In June it was felt that sufficient air superiority had been achieved for another attempt at resupply. With the idea of splitting the Axis forces it was planned to sail one convoy from Gibraltar and one from Alexandria. Unfortunately, the clear days and short nights favored the attacking forces. Two ships got through from the western Mediterranean: the eastern convoy, *Vigorous*, failed for a number of reasons. It was bedeviled by poor communications, a lack of meticulous preparation between naval and air forces, and the decision to control the operation from Alexandria, rather than with on-the-spot command, proved unwise. The convoy's losses were too heavy, but Malta was enabled to carry on until the August convoy.

The heroism of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Service in the August *Pedestal* convoy, commanded by Admiral Syfret, is well documented. The Axis bombers and torpedo bombers were well protected by fighters pushing to the limit of their range and a skilled and determined enemy took maximum advantage of natural phenomena—cloud cover, darkness, flying out of the sun, etc.—as fresh waves attacked the exhausted sailors and gunners.

Axis pilots had learned to make their attacks on carriers at the difficult moments of refueling or when the fighters were being flown off or were striking down into the hangars. Thus it was that two *Reggiane* 2001s, camouflaged to look like *Hurricanes*, joined *Victorious*' aircraft landing circuit, broke circle, and came sweeping low over the flight deck to drop two 1,000 bombs. Astonishingly, they rolled and no harm was done. *Eagle* had sunk within 8 minutes after a U-boat attack and *Indomitable* had suffered three direct hits and two near misses before the convoy reached the Skerki Channel. In this dangerous stretch U-boats could take advantage of acoustic interference; **asdic (sonar) was confused by** distorting

echoes, while lack of fighter direction handicapped the Malta *Beaufighters*, and in the convoy's confusion torpedo bombers and E-boats took their toll.

Nonetheless, at Grand Harbor over 60,000 tons of urgently needed supplies were unloaded from the five surviving merchantmen. With the oil, ammunition, kerosene, naval stores, aviation fuel, coal, grain, meat and flour they brought Malta could carry on for 2 months. Operation Hercules, after being postponed, was finally abandoned. When, after El Alamein, in November the Allies recovered control of much of the North African coast, the Narrows could be safely sailed again and Malta's resupply was no longer a problem.

Malta resumed its tasks, and it became the headquarters for the Allied landings in Sicily. After the armistice with Italy had been signed on 8 September the Italian Fleet sailed from La Spezia, Taranto, and Naples to Grand Harbor. Admiral Cunningham was able to signal the Board of Admiralty, "Be pleased to inform their Lordships that the Italian Battle Fleet now lies at anchor under the guns of the fortress of Malta."

Roskill, in an introductory chapter to *The War at Sea*, comments that aircraft had assumed in the recent war some of the traditional naval roles. In the resupply of Malta aircraft did in fact take over the traditional function of the battle fleet to seek and destroy the enemy's principal naval units. Aircraft performed a cruiser's work in reconnaissance and shadowing the enemy and performed antisubmarine duties. In the naval battle in the Mediterranean fighters were indeed a decisive factor. In the opinion of at least one observer, Rear Admiral Simpson, had more fighters been sent to Malta earlier in the struggle, the base could have been made safe from air attack.

Malta gave the Allies a toehold in the Mediterranean, and proved to be a

thorn in the side of the Axis powers. Because the island's strategic value, owing to its geographical position and its geological formation, was not appreciated, its natural facilities were not improved on in time. Contrary to the Italian view, Van Creveld is of the opinion that Malta's share in Rommel's eventual defeat for want of supplies was not important.¹⁷ However, he thinks the air raids from Egypt were a major factor—without seeming to realize how many of the attacking aircraft came through Malta en route for Egypt, as so vividly described by Lloyd.

In Simpson's view, criticism of Italian strategy and warfighting in the Mediterranean is unjustified. In his judgment they became increasingly skillful opponents. It is clear, however, that the Italian forces were handicapped by complicated operational procedures that impeded close and speedy cooperation between naval and air forces. Admiral Weichold, the German Liaison Officer to Supermarina, commented after the war that German-Italian cooperation in the theater had suffered from the German undervaluation of naval power in the overall conduct of the war and, in particular, of the meaning of the Mediterranean within the general scheme of the whole conflict.

Malta's survival was a close-run thing. During the thirties the General Staff had assumed that Malta, with its narrow approaches and its proximity to possible enemy airfields and naval bases, was indefensible; yet Malta survived thanks to skill, subterfuge and will. Lessons were learned from the costly failure of the Crimean landings. Today we should do well to evaluate whether the effort to keep Malta barely

alive and functioning minimally was worthwhile in the long run.

When the decision not to defend Malta and its fine dockyard was made few grasped the significance of the tremendous rate of attrition in modern warfare. The resupply of Malta made it clear that, with the development of airpower, courage and good seamanship no longer sufficed to the Royal Navy. Hitherto undreamed of quantities of ammunition were needed to defend ships against the peril from the skies. Ships cannot survive in waters dominated by shore-based hostile aircraft without their own aircraft to protect them. In the absence of adequate naval air protection enemy air forces with special training, precision, and determination can make the loss of costly ships too expensive to be borne. In the resupply of Malta the success or failure of the convoys depended on the inclusion of armor decked carriers—though it must be admitted that this was not the case in other theaters. Too often they were not available because inadequate shipbuilding programs had left the Royal Navy with too few ships for the tasks it was called on to perform in three oceans.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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NOTES

1. Ian Cameron, *Red Duster, White Ensign, The Story of the Malta Convoy* (London: Muller, 1959), p. 1.

2. U.S. Naval War College, *Logistical Operations, The Story of Malta's Part in African Victory* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 34.

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3. The former Governor of Libya, in 1940 C-in-C., North Africa.
 4. Lloyd.
 5. Basra, on the Shatt-al-Arab, which carries the waters of the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Karun into the Persian Gulf. Historically, it is the nerve center of the region.
 6. M.A. Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1957), p. 154.
 7. In all, some 65,000 tons of stores were carried to Malta by submarine. In supplying the island not a single submarine was lost. Cameron, p. 171.
 8. Ships sailing in convoy August 1940 through August 1942: 55 set out, 22 were sunk, 11 turned back and 22 arrived. Of ships sailing alone in the same period, 31 set out, 9 were sunk, 1 turned back, and 21 arrived.
 9. The new cruisers were *Trento*, *Trieste*, *Bolzano*, *Fiume*, *Gorizia*, *Paula* and *Zara*. In the light category were 4 in the *Da Barbiano* class, 2 in the *Cardona* class, 2 in the *Monte Cuccoli* class, 2 in the *Aosta* class and 2 in the *Garibaldi* class.
 10. Barely 2 months after the arrival of German troops the British were thrown out of Cyrenaica, apart from Tobruk, although the British had discounted the possibility of an attack before the late summer.
 11. S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea* (London: H.M.S.O., 1956), *The Defensive*, v. I, p. 252.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 534.
 13. *Ibid.*, v. II, p. 51. The Period of Balance.
 14. M.A. Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1957), p. 168.
 15. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Vol. IV, The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassell, 1951), pp. 268-69.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
 17. Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 199-201.
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