

## Foreword

The Royal Navy's Admiral Lord Nelson, legendary but tragically ill-fated hero of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and an incredible string of audacious victories before that, is quoted as saying:

I shall fault no commander who lays his vessel alongside a ship of the enemy.

Nowhere was the Royal Navy's ethos of 'engaging the enemy more closely' observed and applied more vigorously, however overwhelming the odds, than in the Mediterranean during the Second World War. At the war's inception, the Italian Regia Marina regarded the Mediterranean as 'Mare Nostro' (Our Sea), and it maintained a formidable fleet to keep it that way. Despite this, the ships and submarines of the Royal Navy, sometimes supported by others of the Royal Australian Navy, Royal Canadian Navy, South African Navy and the US Navy, fought again and again, overcoming superior numbers in a series of battles and skirmishes, most notably the Battle of Cape Matapan, before finally wresting control of this watery but fiercely contested arena from the Italians.

When questioned about the advisability of subjecting his ships to yet more grievous losses from air attack during the evacuation of Allied forces from Crete after it had been overrun by the Germans in May 1941, Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham, the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, more familiarly known as 'ABC', is reported to have said:

The Navy must not let the Army down... It takes three years to build a ship; it takes three centuries to build a tradition.

To the uninitiated, it might seem strange that the Mediterranean was such a hotly contested theatre of the Second World War, and that significant forces on both sides were so desperate to seize and maintain control of the North African desert, particularly besieged outposts like Tobruk which relied on supplies of men and materiel from a sea fraught with lethal hazards for its very survival. Like the Atlantic, however, the scene of the longest battle that lasted from the first day of the war in September 1939 until the surrender of German forces May 1945, the Mediterranean, via its connection to the Suez Canal, was a vital SLOC

(Sea Line of Communication) for the transportation of crucial raw materials to Britain from the resource-rich countries of the Far East and the carriage of reinforcements and supplies to far-flung garrisons.

In his usual manner, David Bruhn has captured and brought to life many unit and individual acts of bravery in this violent cauldron of maritime warfare involving threats from land, air and sea. He describes amazing acts of courage by Allied forces, such as the devastating raid on the Italian fleet at Taranto by deceptively fragile-looking Fairey Swordfish, known as 'Stringbags,' flown from the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious*. However, he also gives due credit to the heroic Italian divers of the clandestine Decima MAS who drove human torpedoes and explosive motorboats to attack and sink heavily protected British ships at Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria.

David also gives credit to the population of Malta and its defenders who suffered the heaviest prolonged bombing of the war, apart from being subject to starvation and other privations only relieved by the arrival of battered convoys containing desperately needed supplies of food, fuel and ammunition. These convoys ran the gauntlet of air and U-boat attack as epitomised by Operation PEDESTAL, the convoy focused on the heavily-damaged tanker SS *Ohio*. Daily air raids by aircraft of the Italian Regia Aeronautica and the German Luftwaffe based in nearby Sicily succeeded in driving the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet from its base in Grand Harbour to far-away Alexandria in Egypt leaving only a few motor launches and minesweepers to keep the waterways clear for the arrivals and departures of surface ships and submarines carrying supplies. In recognition of the resilience of the people of Malta, King George VI granted the island the George Cross, the highest decoration that can be awarded to civilians. It remains a feature of the country's flag to this day.

From a personal perspective, mines or, to be more precise, minefields, played a significant role in the Mediterranean war. Although the depth and strength of currents precluded their use in the Strait of Gibraltar, they were sown liberally by all parties elsewhere including the waters of southern Europe, off the coast of North Africa and along the Suez Canal. It was discovered only recently that several British submarines, previously thought lost through surface or air attack, were instead mined soon after leaving Malta. With regard to operational escapes, I find this story particularly poignant. HMS *Perseus* was mined off Kefalonia in the Mediterranean on 6 December 1941. The only survivor was a stoker called John Capes who escaped from a depth of 52 metres using the Davis Submerged Escape Apparatus (DSEA). He

was sheltered by the islanders for 18 months before re-joining the Allies. As his presence on board had not been registered before sailing, the Admiralty refused to believe his story until the wreck of the submarine was discovered in 1997 and photos were taken of the wreck showing the open 'wet & dry' escape hatch. Sadly, Capes had died by then. Wartime mines are still found throughout the region during mine countermeasures exercises.

All in all, the Mediterranean during the Second World War can be described as a 'target-rich environment' for naval historians and David Bruhn has exploited this to the full. He has applied his usual, meticulous research skills to provide a fascinating and easily readable narrative, well-seasoned with historical fact and anecdote. It will be a valuable addition to my bookshelf and that of anyone else with an interest in maritime history in general and the exploits of the Allied navies during the Second World War in particular.

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