



**Operation Pedestal
Convoy to Malta
August 11-15 1942**

by

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Operation “Pedestal”, Convoy to Malta, 11-15 August 1942
with particular reference to
the strategic value of Malta in the Mediterranean during the Second World War

Malta in the Early War Years of World War II

During the inter-war years Malta was used as a main fleet base for the Mediterranean Fleet, as it lay astride the main Imperial routes to the Middle and Far East theatres and provided a well-placed forward striking base for use against Italian submarines, as was suggested by Admiral of the Fleet, Dudley Pound in 1938.¹ This view, echoing the strategic ideas from the First World War, took little account of the rise of air power.

After Italy entered the war, Malta ceased to be a main fleet base, due to the close proximity of Italian air power which made it too vulnerable. British naval forces were then divided into two: the main portion, the Mediterranean Fleet, being based at Alexandria with a smaller British detachment, known as Force “H”, based at Gibraltar able to operate in the Western Mediterranean and North Atlantic.² Malta remained the lynch pin which connected these two strategic areas of the Mediterranean theatre.³

With the abandonment of the central Mediterranean as a main fleet area, the Mediterranean was effectively closed for the passage of merchant shipping to the Far East via the Suez Canal. For the British, her forces in the Middle East had to be supplied from Australia, India, South Africa and, mainly, from the United Kingdom or North America. The latter distance to the Canal Zone being about 14,000 miles. Even so, the WS Convoys which plied this route were often delayed but almost all arrived safely. Indeed only one ship was lost in these convoys.⁴ Of the many cargoes carried to the Middle East in British convoys barely 3% of them were lost to enemy action. The Axis forces, on the other hand, had to send supplies for their forces in North Africa over just 600 miles across the Mediterranean, but the whole of this passage was within the striking distance of British aircraft, submarines and surface ships based at Malta and the enemy lost, by their own estimate, over 16% of embarked cargoes.⁵ To put the figures in wider context, when Italy entered the war, she lost about one-third of her merchant marine when ships were seized in ports outside the Mediterranean. By September 1942 about one-half of the remainder had been destroyed in the Mediterranean by British striking forces. This substantially reduced her ability to re-supply the Axis forces in North Africa, particularly during periods when the Axis needed to surge reinforcements of men or supplies to meet major operations in the Western Desert.

The area covered by the joint RN and RAF air striking force is illustrated in the map below.

¹ ‘Anti-Submarine Striking Forces,’ Admiral Dudley Pound, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Med.01169/01243/2, 7 December 1938, ADM 1/12141.

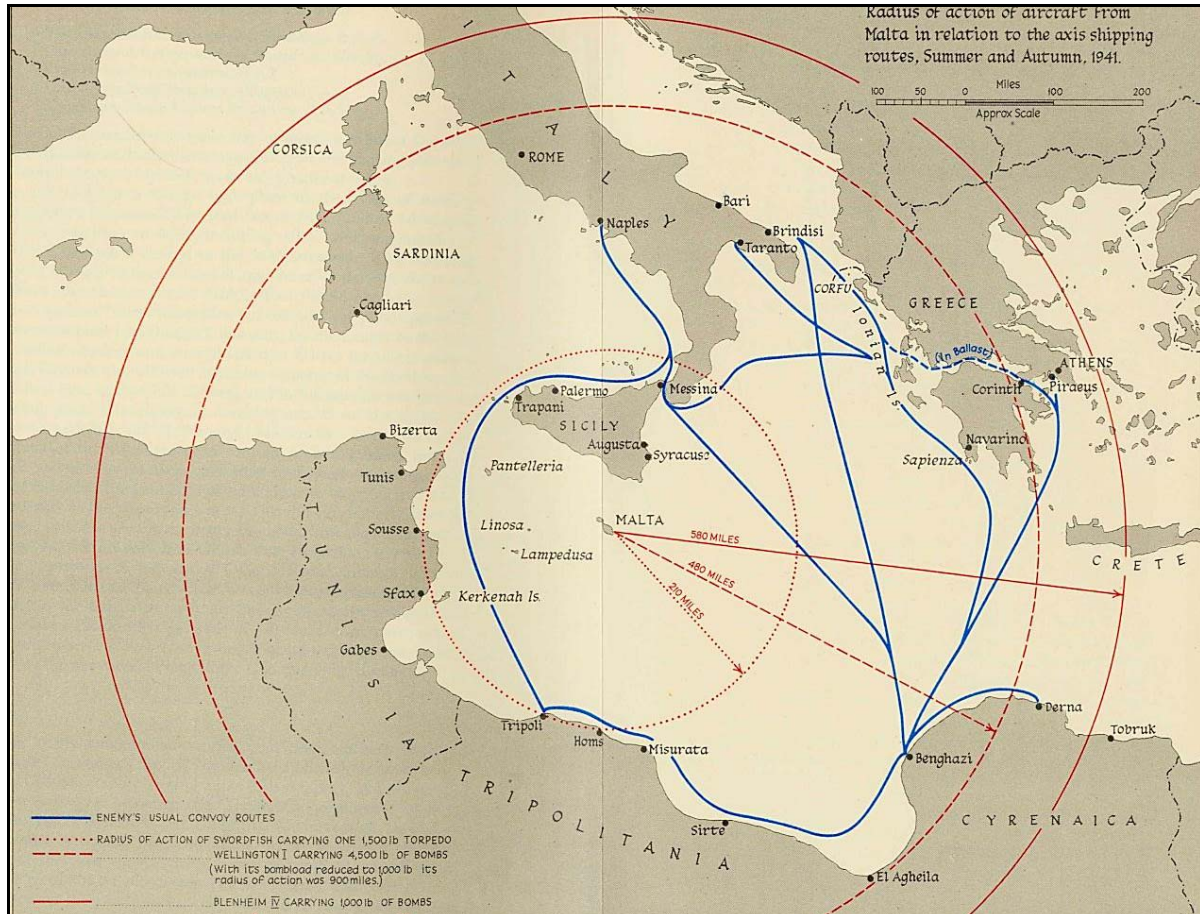
² Force “H” was a key player in the hunt for the *Bismarck*.

³ ‘Maritime Defence Historical Survey in the Mediterranean during the Second World War (1939-1945),’ Report of Joint Admiralty/Air Ministry Historical Sub-Committee, 28 September 1950, in Addendum to ‘Maritime Air Defence Joint Historical Sub-Committee Report: Atlantic and Mediterranean, 1939-1945,’ 23 August 1950, NHB, pp. 1-2.

⁴ This was the SS *Souron* of Convoy WS 18 sunk in May 1942 by a mine laid by the German raider *Thor* off the Cape of Good Hope. I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney and T.P. Gleave, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London: HMSO, 1960), p. 330.

⁵ I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney and T.P. Gleave, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London: HMSO, 1960), pp. 329-330.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF



The Radius of Action of Aircraft from Malta, from I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney, S.E. Toomer, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. II, "The Germans come to help their Ally"* (1941) (London: HMSO, 1956), pp. 278-279.

Apart from its offensive value lying athwart the Axis lines of communication to North Africa, Malta was also an essential staging post for larger aircraft on the air reinforcement route to the Middle East and India. In a post war lecture it was noted that:—

When the history of the war comes to be written, it will be generally recognised that the maintenance of Malta, as a base for offensive operations, was the "Corner Stone" on which the whole strategy of the war in the Mediterranean has been built. The success of its air and submarine offensive in the last months of 1941, and from July onwards of 1942, played a decisive part in those Military successes in Libya and North Africa which have culminated in the tremendous victory in Tunisia. Malta's contribution to the destruction of the Axis air strength alone is impressive: 1,000 enemy aircraft have been shot down by the fighters and A/A gunfire of the Island. ...⁶

Award of the George Cross to Malta

After the heavy air attacks on Malta throughout the spring of 1942, King George VI bestowed the George Cross on the Island on 15 April 1942, so as to "bear witness to the heroism and devotion of its people."⁷ The news of the award appeared in the newspapers in Malta two days later, and the medal itself was flown to the island on 7 May 1942 in a Coastal

⁶ 'Malta, Lecture,' n.d., in, 'Lectures,' Folder No. 7, NHB.

⁷ This was the first, of only two collective awards of the GC: the other being to the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1999.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

Command Sunderland which was carrying the new Governor, General Viscount Gort, VC.⁸ The CG was subsequently incorporated into the Maltese National Flag (though this remains a contentious issue amongst some parts of the population).

June 1942 Convoys to Malta

An attempt to run a re-supply convoy, MG 1, through to Malta from Alexandria in March 1942 ended in failure with barely one-fifth of the embarked cargoes being off-loaded in Malta. However, the passage of the Convoy had brought on an action between the light cruisers of Rear Admiral Philip Vian's covering force and the Italian Fleet's heavy ships during which the Royal Navy, though out-numbered and out-gunned, nevertheless gained a victory and forced the Italians to retreat. Following on from the earlier offensive strikes at Taranto and Cape Matapan, this Second Battle of Sirte sealed the psychological dominance of the Royal Navy over their Italian adversaries for months to come.

It was decided not to run a convoy through to Malta from the west for the time being, but the Governor of Malta felt it necessary to point out that:

...our situation is so grave that it is my duty to restate in the clearest possible terms. The decision materially reduces our chances of survival not because of any failure of morale or fighting efficiency but because it is impossible to carry on without food and ammunition. ...The position with regard to these is as follows:–

(A) Flour. We have enough to last until the later half of May....

(B) A/A Ammunition...we have slightly over a month's supply....⁹

In the interim several RN submarines and fast ships were pressed into service to run supplies into the Island. In June 1942 there was an attempt to carry out a large-scale resupply of Malta with two convoys, "Harpoon" from the Gibraltar end and "Vigorous" from Alexandria. The latter failed completely and none of its 11 supply ships got through, due to the threat from the Italian Battle Fleet which delayed the westerly progress of the convoy and incessant air attacks which absorbed almost all the escorts' anti-aircraft ammunition. However, 2 out of 6 ships of eastbound "Harpoon" Convoy got through to the island.¹⁰ With the meagre 15,000 tons of the stores landed it was estimated that, provided there was a good harvest, the Island's supplies would then last until September. Consequently it was decided in London that no attempt would be made to run another convoy in July, reserving the naval forces for a Convoy to Russia in June-July 1942).¹¹ But, in the opinion of Lord Gort, the Governor and Supreme Commander in Malta, the stocks of aviation spirit were being used up too quickly. If resistance was to be prolonged for as much as possible, these stocks would need to be replenished soon in order to sustain the defending RAF fighter force. However, during the first weeks of July, the RAF had lost 36 out of 135 Spitfires based on the island while repulsing renewed Axis air attacks. The continuing shortage of aviation fuel also affected the Island's air striking force's ability to operate effectively against Rommel's supply lines across the central Mediterranean basin.¹²

⁸ Ian Bisset, *The George Cross* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1961), pp. 133-136.

⁹ Governor and C-in-C, Malta, to Admiralty for Chiefs of Staff, Hush Message, 1320/20 April 1942, 'Hush Signals, April to June 1942,' Microfilm, NHB.

¹⁰ Malcolm Llewellyn-jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 67.

¹¹ This was the ill-fated Arctic Convoy PQ 17.

¹² J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. III, Part II, *June 1941 – August 1942* (London: HMSO, 1964). p. 605; I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney and T.P. Gleave, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London: HMSO, 1960), p. 314. The aircraft based in Malta at this time consisted of 8 Squadrons of fighters (mainly Spitfires and Hurricanes, with a few Beaufighters, including one squadron of night fighters), 4

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

The problem of deciding the allocation of fuel between the air defence of Malta and the operation of its air striking force was to a large extent governed by the situation in the land battles in North Africa. The Eighth Army had begun its withdrawal from the Gazala position while Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous" were running and these convoys attracted a high proportion of the Axis air power that would, otherwise, have been directed against the Eighth Army's well-ordered retreat (and which might have turned the withdrawal into a rout).¹³ A few days after the convoy operations ended Tobruk had fallen and by the end of June the enemy were in possession of Mersa Matruh about 160 miles from Alexandria. As a direct result of the air threat and possible ground occupation of Alexandria, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Harwood, decided to disperse what remained of the Mediterranean Fleet to ports in the Eastern Mediterranean and to the south of the Canal. Nevertheless, some of the offensive parts of the Fleet remained to assist the Army by carrying out bombardments of enemy positions around Mersa Matruh.¹⁴ Worse still, for the prospects of the defence of Malta from Axis air attack, with the 8th Army now forced back towards the Canal Zone and the airfields near Benghazi and Derna in enemy hands, it was no longer possible to fly in to Malta single-engined fighters, such as Spitfires, from the east. Inserting these aircraft from the west meant using aircraft carriers and this would require a special naval operation.

With the rapid advance of the *Afrika Korps* and the consequent loss of airfields in Cyrenaica, further convoys to Malta from the Eastern Mediterranean would be very difficult to mount because the Desert Air Force would be unable to provide much by way of fighter protection for the Mediterranean Fleet, itself now denuded of all its aircraft carriers. The loss of these airfields also meant that the Desert Air Force's ability to interdict Axis supply lines was restricted to the use of the few long-range bombers available. It was fortunate, therefore, that the small number of RAF long-range bombers was augmented by a small detachment of United States Army Air Force (USAAF) Liberators, the Halverson Project, which had recently arrived in the Middle East and, with the agreement of Washington, were held in the area from June 1942 until early the following year. Having carried out a raid on the Roumanian oil refineries at Ploesti, these USAAF aircraft were used to support Operation "Vigorous" and subsequently to carry out long-range bombing missions against Axis supply ports in North Africa.¹⁵

The Prime Minister thought that the loss of Malta '...would be a disaster of [the] first magnitude to the British Empire, and probably [would be] fatal in the long run to the defence of the Nile Valley.'¹⁶ The heavy losses suffered during the June Mediterranean convoys and the small quantity of cargo delivered in no way weakened the Government's or the Admiralty's resolve to keep Malta supplied. Both were determined to attempt a further resupply operation, even if further heavy losses were incurred. Though it might be noted that the British Chiefs of Staff were of the opinion that it was finely balanced whether the correct

Squadrons of reconnaissance-torpedo-bombers and 2 FAA Squadrons (one each of Swordfish and Albacores). Air Historical Branch, 'The RAF in Maritime War,' Vol. VI, 'The Mediterranean and the Red Sea,' (First Draft, n.d.), NHB, p. 423.

¹³ 'The June Convoys to Malta (Operations "Harpoon" and "Vigorous"): Enquiry from Commander L.J. Pitcairn-Jones, RN,' [Squadron Leader Mervyn Mills, 24 January 1956], in, 'Selected Convoys: Mediterranean, 1941-42, Revised Battle Summaries, Nos. 18, 32,' Folder, NHB.

¹⁴ I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney and T.P. Gleave, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London: HMSO, 1960), pp. 315-316.

¹⁵ 'War Cabinet, WM(42) 73rd Conclusions, Confidential Annex,' 11 June 1942, CAB 65/30. These US Army Air Force Liberators had been *en route* to China with the object of bombing Japan. However, the Japanese closure of the supply routes into China from Burma forced the abandonment of this project. Gordon R. Sullivan, 'Egypt-Libya, 11 June 1942 – 12 February 1943 [Halverson Project (Halpro)],' US Army Campaigns of World War II, United States Army Center of Military History.

¹⁶ Churchill, quoted in: S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 302.

decision was to continue the stout defence of the Nile Delta region or to switch resources to counter the potential threat to the Iraq oil fields from a German eruption into that area following their advances into the Caucasus.¹⁷

Operation “Pedestal” – The Plan

Experience of the June convoys to Malta made it clear that any attempt from the east was almost certainly doomed to failure, given the weakness of the Mediterranean Fleet and the loss of the RAF airfields in Cyrenaica (from which air protection could be provided for the passage of the convoys to Malta) due to the advance of Rommel’s *Afrika Corps* to within 90 miles of Alexandria.¹⁸ Instead, the plan for an August convoy, WS 12S, codenamed Operation “Pedestal”, was for a more than usually powerful escort to be assembled to escort a single convoy of 14 fast merchant ships, which would include the fast tanker *Ohio*, through to Malta from the west during the moonless period in the middle of the month. A small diversionary convoy, Operation “Ascendant”, would be run part of the way from the Eastern Mediterranean. With this considerable naval force being assembled for “Pedestal” it was not possible to run an August convoy to Russia simultaneously.¹⁹

Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, on his way home from the successful operations which resulted in the occupation of the Vichy French base at Diego Suarez in May 1942, was ordered to disembark at Takoradi in West Africa and fly home directly. Once in the UK he learned that he was to command “Pedestal”, and on 13 July 1942 planning started in earnest for the operation. The key was the provision of adequate air protection for the convoy and three fleet carriers were to be allocated to Operation “Pedestal”.

To gather these carriers together it was decided to withdraw one of the three carriers in Admiral Somerville’s Eastern Fleet, because the Admiralty assessed that the risk of a Japanese foray into the Indian Ocean, similar to that of the previous Spring, was unlikely after the American victory at Midway and the drawn battles around the Solomons. As a result, *Indomitable* was withdrawn after completing the operations to capture Madagascar from its Vichy French garrison. Also, after the loss of two thirds of the ships from the Arctic Convoy PQ 17 in July, it had been decided to temporarily suspend these convoys. This released the heavy ships of the Home Fleet to take part in “Pedestal” and, in particular, the carrier *Victorious*. HMS *Eagle* was already, so to speak, in situ as part of Force “H” at Gibraltar. Thus elements of world-wide deployed forces were to be concentrated to execute Operation “Pedestal”.

The three aircraft carriers which would form part of the close protection of the convoy were: *Victorious*, Flag of Rear Admiral Lyster, Rear Admiral (Aircraft Carriers, Home Fleet) (and the architect and executor of the Taranto attack in 1940), *Indomitable* and *Eagle*. Between them, they were to carry 72 fighters (Hurricanes, Martlets and Fulmars) as well as 28 Albacores for surface search, antisubmarine protection and as a small striking force.²⁰ The main naval forces were split into:

¹⁷ See, for example: ‘Middle East – Review of Situation,’ A.F. Brooke, Dudley Pound, C. Portal, Chiefs of Staff, WP(42)335, 2 August 1942, CAB 66/27.

¹⁸ M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 80.

¹⁹ ‘The War at Sea, Vol. III, January – December 1942, Preliminary Narrative,’ Historical Section, Tactical, Torpedo and Staff Duties Division, 1945, NHB, pp. 248-249.

²⁰ The aircraft complements were: *Victorious* - 16 Fulmars, 6 Sea Hurricanes, and 12 Albacores; *Indomitable* - 10 Martlets, 24 Sea Hurricanes, and 16 Albacores; *Eagle* - 16 Sea Hurricanes. All-told this amounted to 72 fighters and 28 reconnaissance/strike aircraft. Naval Historical Branch, ‘History of Naval Aviation,’ Vol. III, ‘Mediterranean and Far East,’ (Draft Naval Staff History, 1968), Section 39.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

Force “Z” comprising the battleships *Nelson* (Flag VA Syfret) and *Rodney*, the three carriers each with an attendant cruiser for A/A protection and 12 destroyers; and,

Force “X” made up of the cruisers *Naiad* (Flag RA Burrough, RA 10th Cruiser Squadron), *Nigeria* and *Manchester*, the A/A cruiser *Cairo* and 12 destroyers.

There were also oilers, with their own corvette escorts, to provide refuelling for the convoy escorts.²¹

As this force approached Malta they would be met by minesweepers from the Island to take them in though the enemy minefields sown to seaward of Grand Harbour.²² Meanwhile, the subsidiary diversionary convoy operation codenamed “Ascendant” was also planned under the cover provided by the main convoy to bring out the two merchant ships which had arrived in Malta from the “Harpoon” convoy.²³ At the last moment, the carrier *Furious* was included in the convoy. She was to fly off 38 Spitfires to Malta (this formed Operation “Bellows”) before returning to Gibraltar. Air defence of the convoy would be provided by the three carriers until the Convoy was close enough to Malta for Air Vice Marshal Keith Park (of Battle of Britain fame) to despatch first RAF long-range Beaufighters and then single-engined fighters to take over the protection of the convoy. At the same time, Park would have some of the Island’s torpedo-bomber striking force on standby to attack the Italian fleet should it close the convoy.

Throughout the operation, more distant protection was provided by eight RN submarines deployed off the north coast of Sicily and further east. These submarines were to spend some of their time on the surface, in order that enemy aircraft would report their position and, hopefully, deter the intervention of the Italian fleet.²⁴ During the “Vigorous” operation British and French commandos had been landed from a submarine on Crete with the intention of raiding the airfields there from which the enemy could attack the convoy. Some aircraft, bombs and petrol destroyed. A similar attempt was made to lessen the weight of enemy attack before the arrival of “Pedestal”, but it was unsuccessful.²⁵

Operation “Berserk” – Operation “Pedestal” Work-up

On 31 July 1942 the first of the ships sailed from Scapa Flow. This force included the aircraft carrier *Argus* which was to take part in the work-up, “Berserk”, but then played no part in the main operation. “Berserk” was then carried out in the area to the west of the Gibraltar Straits and involved all four carriers (i.e. including *Argus*) especially in Fighter Direction exercises.

Before the operations began, these ships, along with a fifth carrier, *Argus*, and the rest of the force consisting of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, corvettes and oilers, carried out a series of exercises, known as Operation “Berserk”, to the west of Gibraltar on 5-10 August 1942.

²¹ M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 81-81.

²² J.R.M. Butler, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. III, Part II, *June 1941 – August 1942* (London: HMSO, 1964), pp. 656-657; M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 81-82.

²³ M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 82.

²⁴ M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 82.

²⁵ I.S.O. Playfair, F.C. Flynn, C.J.C. Maloney and T.P. Gleave, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, *British Fortunes reach their Lowest Ebb (September 1941 to September 1942)* (London: HMSO, 1960), p. 328.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

“Berserk” consisted of two main events: (1) fighter direction and inter-carrier training; and (2) refuelling-at-sea practice.²⁶

Furious sailed rather late:

Owing to technical difficulties connected with the [RAF Spitfire] aircraft’s propellers, and *Furious*’s humped flying deck....²⁷

Nevertheless, when she joined the force, it was, Syfret remarked ‘...the first occasion when five HM aircraft carriers have ever operated in company at sea simultaneously.’²⁸

During this phase there were several irritating changes of detail to the operational plan, which meant considerable signalling within the fleet at sea and with the shore authorities. Not the least of these changes was brought about by the inclement weather in the Atlantic, which prevented many of the ships from refuelling from the attendant tankers and this resulted in those ships being sent into Gibraltar to top up with fuel. It was especially important to fuel the ships as they entered the Mediterranean, for Malta had no fuel to spare.²⁹

“Pedestal” – The Operation

Passage of “Pedestal” to Malta – Monday, 10 August 1942

The main Convoy had sailed from the UK on the night of 2/3 August. It entered the Straits of Gibraltar in the early hours of 10 August and by 0800 each Merchant skipper opened the sealed envelope they had been given at the convoy conference. It contained a goodwill message from the First Lord wishing them all “God Speed”. ‘This act of courtesy and encouragement,’ Syfret’s report says, ‘was very highly appreciated.’³⁰

At dusk a diversionary convoy sailed into the Eastern Mediterranean in two parts, one from Port Said and the other from Haifa. This convoy, escorted by cruisers and destroyers from the Mediterranean Fleet, was planned to turn back in the early hours of 11 August.³¹

Passage of “Pedestal” to Malta – Tuesday, 11 August 1942³²

On the following morning a further fuelling programme was undertaken and three cruisers and 26 destroyers were topped up from the two RFA tankers accompanying the convoy. This took most of the day to complete.

²⁶ Naval Historical Branch, ‘History of Naval Aviation,’ Vol. III, ‘Mediterranean and Far East,’ (Draft Naval Staff History, 1968), Section 39, and, Thomas A. Adams and James R. Smith, *The Royal Fleet Auxiliary: A Century of Service* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2005), p. 69.

²⁷ ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

²⁸ ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633. It may be noted that, at this stage of the war, the USN had only operated two carriers together.

²⁹ ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

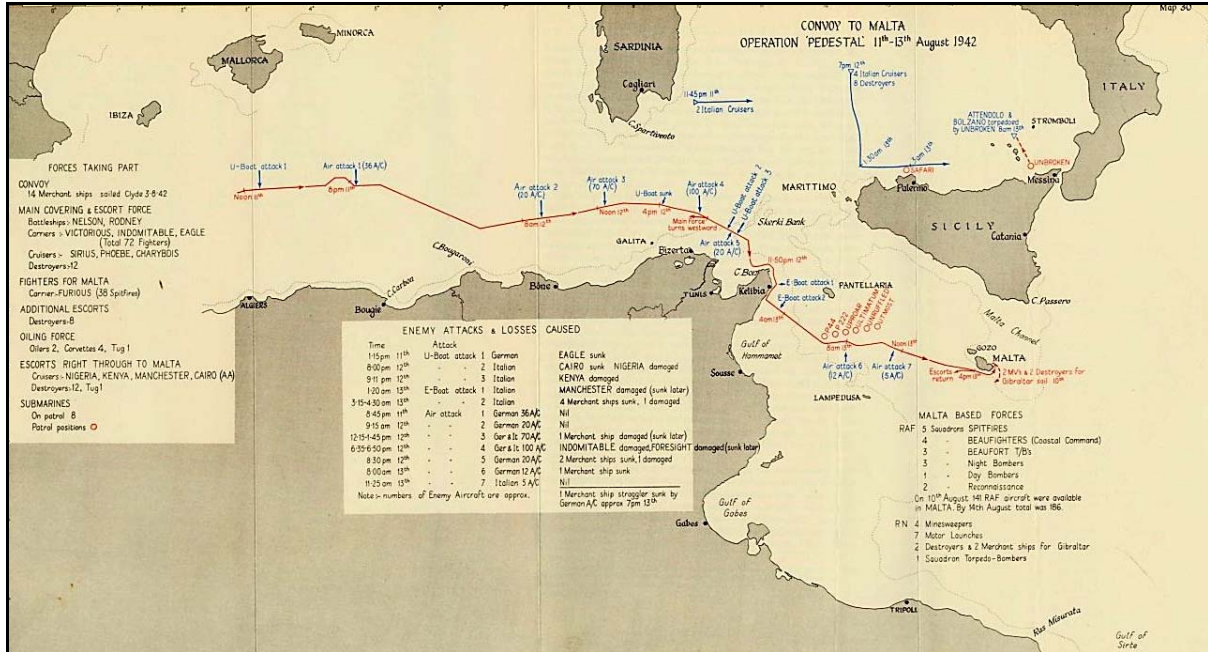
³⁰ ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

³¹ ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

³² M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 85-86; ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

Meanwhile, German reconnaissance aircraft were detected by the ships' radar soon after daylight and these aircraft maintained a continuous surveillance of the convoy for the rest of the day, this was despite of the efforts of the carrier-borne fighters. The problem was that the Ju88 aircraft flew too high and were too fast for the fighters to easily intercept. Nevertheless, five interceptions were made and one of the enemy machines was shot down and two others damaged, for the loss of two fighters.



Operation "Pedestal", from S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 305.

Just after noon, *Furious* hauled out of the convoy, taking with her an escort of destroyers, and began flying off the embarked RAF Spitfires for Malta, some 580 miles to the eastward. However, after two flights, each of 8 aircraft, had departed the programme was rudely interrupted when HMS *Eagle* was torpedoed by the German U-boat *U-73*. She was hit by four torpedoes and sank in eight minutes. At a stroke this event robbed the fleet of 25% of its air strength with the loss of 12 Sea Hurricanes (the remaining 4 being on air patrol at the time and later landing on the other carriers).³³

About an hour and a half later, the Operation "Bellows" programme restarted with the remaining Spitfires flown off to Malta. All told 38 aircraft were flown off, of which 37 arrived safely. That evening *Furious* detached to Gibraltar, escorted by a division of "spare" destroyers which had joined the main force that afternoon. One of these destroyers, *Wolverine* (under Lt Cdr Peter Gretton) rammed and sank an Italian U-boat which threatened the carrier during the passage to Gibraltar. Meanwhile, that evening the main convoy was coming under heavy air attack by enemy bombers and torpedo aircraft. No ships were lost and three enemy aircraft were shot down.

Passage of "Pedestal" to Malta – Wednesday, 12 August 1942 ³⁴

By dawn on 12 August the convoy was within enemy fighter range, so further air attacks would be made by escorted bombers. As was now standard, the enemy reconnaissance

³³ 927 of *Hermes'* ship's company were rescued by fleet destroyers.

³⁴ Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), pp. 302-308; M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 87-88; 'Report on Operation "Pedestal",' Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force "F", HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

aircraft continued to shadow the convoy, and at dawn the first of the fleet's fighters were flown off. From then onwards "there were few moments", to quote Admiral Syfret, "when neither aircraft, submarines, torpedoes nor asdic contact were being reported." During the first of the air attacks, some 20 Ju88's struck at the fleet, but were intercepted some 25 miles out by carrier-borne fighters and 8 of them were shot down. Two more were lost to the ships anti-aircraft guns. At the same time the screening destroyers probably foiled a U-boat attack. It was, however, at midday, that the enemy's main air attacks started, with some 70 German and Italian bomber aircraft heavily escorted by fighters. During this attack the first of the merchant ships was damaged (for a full list of merchant ship casualties, see Annex C).



HMS Eagle blazes furiously after being torpedoed by U73. She sank in just eight minutes, taking 131 officers and men down with her.

That afternoon the convoy was concerned with dodging a series of potential attacks by the main U-boat concentration. By the evening as the convoy passed out of the range of enemy aircraft from Sardinia and drew within range of those on Sicily the heavy air attacks started again north of Bizerta. During these attacks, by some 100 aircraft, *Indomitable* was hit by three bombs which put her flight deck out of action, leaving *Victorious* as the only carrier with the force. Up to this point, the 60-odd fighters remaining with the force, after *Eagle* was sunk, had shot down some 30 enemy aircraft in combination with the ships' guns. Thirteen fighters had been lost. Shortly after these latest air attacks ceased, the heavy ships of Force "Z" hauled round and headed westwards, leaving Admiral Burrough with Force "X" to take the convoy through the Sicilian Narrows on the last stage of the passage to Malta.

Casualties quickly followed, with Burroughs's Flagship, *Nigeria*, and the A/A cruiser *Cairo* both being torpedoed by a U-boat. *Nigeria* headed back to Gibraltar, but *Cairo* was sunk, depleting the remaining escort's anti-aircraft capability. Worse, both ships were air direction ships, so that the remaining fighter protection from shore based aircraft in Malta was less effective. At this stage the *Ohio* was hit for the first time, but managed to remain with the convoy.

Shortly afterwards, as the convoy changed formation to pass through the Narrows, the enemy again attacked and two of the merchant ships were sunk. The convoy was now

somewhat scattered as a result of the formation change and avoiding action against the sub-surface and air attacks.

Passage of “Pedestal” to Malta – Thursday, 13 August 1942 ³⁵

By midnight as the convoy passed Cape Bon, they entered the territory of enemy motor torpedo-boats, or E-boats. In the early hours the cruiser *Manchester* was hit and brought to a stop. The captain decided that his ship could not be salvaged and ordered her to be sunk, with the crew making their way to the Tunisian coast.³⁶ Also five of the merchant ships were hit, four of them sinking during the night. As the Official Historian remarks: “...it was a cruel blow suddenly to suffer such large casualties, after the convoy had come so far with such success.”³⁷

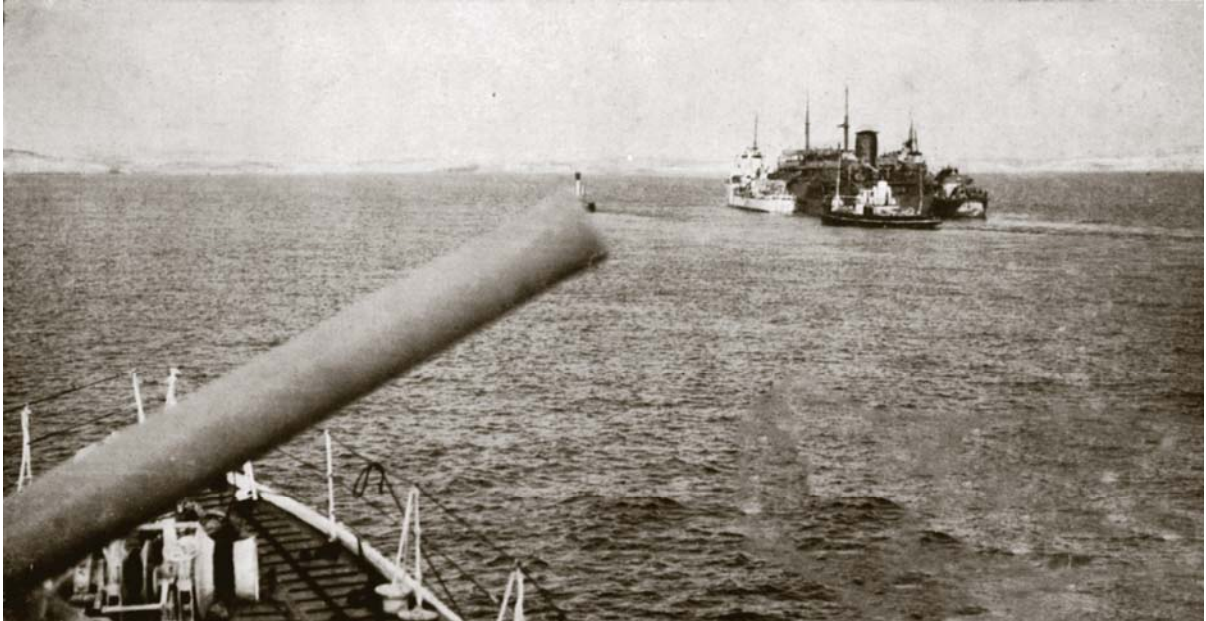
Soon after daylight the enemy bombers reappeared and another merchant ship was hit and blew up, and the tanker *Ohio* was again damaged, this time by the aircraft attacking her crashing into the ship! Although by late morning RAF Beaufighters and long-range Spitfires were patrolling overhead, *Ohio* was again hit and this time disabled, while two other merchant ships were seriously damaged. There were only three surviving merchant ships, *Port Chalmers*, *Melbourne Star* and *Rochester Castle*, each struggling towards Malta, now under the protection of the short-range Spitfires from the Island. They entered harbour at about 1630 that afternoon. Three more damaged ships, *Ohio*, *Dorset* and *Brisbane Star* were still some distance from Malta but great efforts were being made to get them in. Some of these attempts were frustrated, for *Dorset* was again hit and later sank. *Brisbane Star* however managed to struggle into Malta.

The destroyer *Penn*, and the minesweepers *Rye* and *Ledbury* took it in turns to fight off further enemy attacks and to tow *Ohio* to Malta. Their efforts were met with success when the tanker finally entered Grand Harbour on the morning of 15 August 1942, by which time four other merchant ships from the convoy had been brought in. This day was traditionally known in the Island as the feast of Santa Maria, and the “Pedestal” convoy has been called the “Convoy of Santa Maria”.

³⁵ Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), pp. 302-308; M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 87-88; ‘Report on Operation “Pedestal”,’ Acting Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret, Flag Officer Commanding Force “F”, HMS *Nelson*, (Original in M.011161/42), 25 August 1942, ADM 116/4633.

³⁶ The Captain subsequently faced a court martial, which concluded that his decision to abandon the ship was premature. See: Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 306 fn 2.

³⁷ Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 306.



Aided by Royal Navy destroyers strapped to her and tankers, the battered tanker SS Ohio is helped towards Malta

Role of Ohio

The arrival of the four surviving ships of the “Pedestal” convoy ensured that Malta had the supplies to maintain her defences for another few months. But more significant to the overall situation in the Mediterranean was the arrival of the tanker *Ohio*. Her cargo was the critical to the future of Malta’s strategic value as a striking base.³⁸

The fuel which she carried enabled air strikes to be restarted from Malta just when Rommel was preparing for the offensive intended to drive the Allies finally out of Egypt. The enemy’s shipping losses to air attacks at once increased, and the offensive had to be postponed because of shortage of supplies.³⁹

For this reason, the fame of the tanker *Ohio* is rightly centred on her role in the “Pedestal” convoy. However, she has a further claim. At the beginning of 1942, it was apparent to the British that, although oil stocks in the country stood at a wartime high, the tempo of future operations would rapidly run down these stocks. It seemed, however, imprudent to ask the Americans for help, for if they were to refuse, it would be doubly difficult to change such a decision at a later date. For this reason the British bided their time. But by the late Spring, it was apparent that help would be needed if British oil stocks were not to be depleted to a dangerous level by the end of the year. Assistance was sought from the Americans, who proved extremely generous (particularly so, given their own straightened circumstances in the Pacific theatre). By the end of June 45 tankers had been assigned to assist the British oil imports and by mid-July 36 had sailed. This group was known as the “Red Gap”.⁴⁰ The first of these tankers to load in Houston, Texas and proceed independently at high speed across the Atlantic, was the *Ohio*. She arrived in the Clyde on 21 June 1942.

As a fast tanker, *Ohio* was thus well placed geographically and operationally suited to meet the needs of a fast tanker to accompany the 16-knot “Pedestal” convoy which was then being planned in detail in the Admiralty. There was some disquiet about this plan, however,

³⁸ Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 211.

³⁹ Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, Vol. II, *The Period of Balance* (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 306.

⁴⁰ D.J. Payton-Smith, *Oil: A Study of Wartime Policy and Administration* (London: HMSO, 1971), pp. 298 and 302; ‘Saturday, 20 June 1942,’ in, ‘War Diary (Naval), 20-30 June 1942,’ Vol. 98, NHB.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

as her sister ship, *Kentucky*, had been lost in the “Harpoon” convoy. Some Americans also felt that the largest, fastest tankers should be retained for American use. However, after some negotiation the United States Maritime Commission duly requisitioned *Ohio* from her owners, Texaco, and delivered her on bareboat charter to the British Ministry of War Transport, to be operated by the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company under British flag.⁴¹ For his courage in bringing his ship into Malta her Captain Dudley Mason was later awarded the George Cross. In addition, Chief Engineer James Wyld, was awarded the DSO, while Chief Officer Douglas Gray, Second Officer Hector McGilligan, Third Officer Joseph Stephen and Junior Engineer Henry Sless were each awarded the DSC. Seven other members of the *Ohio*'s crew were awarded the DSM.⁴²

Operation “Pedestal” – The Results

Effect on the Middle East and Mediterranean Theatre

The most significant outcome of “Pedestal” was well captured by a joint RN/RAF historical study conducted in the autumn of 1950 in which it was observed that:

The cost of Operation “Pedestal” was very high indeed, as was to be expected with a convoy of such vital consequence to the future of the Axis forces in the Mediterranean being run for days on end within easy reach of enemy land-based aircraft. ...

The arrival of the tanker *Ohio* at Malta meant that the island's gravely depleted stocks of aviation petrol could be replenished. The effect was immediate. Two days later, a success against Rommel's supply line was scored when the *Rosolinao Pilo* (8,326 tons) was crippled by Malta-based Beauforts and was subsequently sunk by a British submarine, by the light of flares dropped by a Wellington aircraft. ...

The Battle of Alam el Halfa was launched on the night of 30/31 August 1942, with the two German Panzer Divisions holding only 20% of their necessary supplies of fuel. By the morning of 2 September Rommel's offensive had been paralysed by shortage of petrol.

...On 7 September, a message was sent from the Deputy Chief of the German Naval Command in Italy to the Chief of the Naval Staff:

“There is no doubt that, towards the end, continuation of the offensive in North Africa collapsed because of inadequate supply services. The fear that this would happen has unfortunately been realised.

After the offensive had been broken off, it depends on the supply question whether the Panzer Army will be capable of holding their own, even on the defensive, in face of the ever-increasing enemy.... The supply problem must therefore be solved at all costs.... Even if we can increase the defences against submarines, we have no means at our disposal at present to meet the far-superior abilities of the RAF in night operations at sea. This last danger has grown to such an extent that it must lead to a catastrophe, if no relief is found. I see to-day more clearly than ever before that there can be only one possibility and that is by a strategic offensive. The RAF in the Mediterranean, i.e. in Malta, must be eliminated. Fresh operations must be launched immediately in this area....”⁴³

⁴¹ “Bareboat charter” simply meant that while ultimate ownership remained with Texaco, the ship was in every other aspect (crew, insurance, etc) operated by the British company. Michael Pearson, *The Ohio & Malta: The Legendary Tanker that Refused to Die* (London: Leo Cooper, 2004), pp. 28-29.

⁴² Michael Pearson, *The Ohio & Malta: The Legendary Tanker that Refused to Die* (London: Leo Cooper, 2004), p. 129.

⁴³ ‘Maritime Defence Historical Survey in the Mediterranean during the Second World War (1939-1945),’ Report of Joint Admiralty/Air Ministry Historical Sub-Committee, 28 September 1950, in Addendum to ‘Maritime Air Defence Joint Historical Sub-Committee Report: Atlantic and Mediterranean, 1939-1945,’ 23 August 1950, NHB, Section IV.

NAVAL HISTORICAL BRANCH INFORMATION BRIEF

In a lecture by Dr E.C. Bullard, a member of Professor P.M.S. Blackett's staff as Chief Advisor on Operational Research in the Admiralty in May 1943, he said that:

From captured documents and other sources it is now possible to give a fairly complete picture of the enemy's efforts to supply his armies from 8 November 1942 the day of the Allied Landings in North Africa, till 13 May 1943, when the campaign ended.

During this period 26% of the supplies sailing have been sunk or turned back through damage. During November there were not sinkings, in December 31 was sunk and in January and February 23% and 21%, after that sinkings rose to 37% in March, 45% in April and 78% in May. ...

Aircraft and submarines have been the principal causes of sinking, but since the end of December the submarines have been deprived of their most profitable area by intense A/S measures in the Sicilian channel. Minefields prevented much interference by our surface ships during January to March. ...

In addition to the supplies by sea about 40,000 tons arrived by air. Nearly all of this was transported in Ju 52's carrying 2 tons each, or Me 323's carrying 10 tons. [Smaller proportions were carried by Italian aircraft]....⁴⁴

In the lecture, Bullard also noted that while the air offensive against the Axis communications was conducted by aircraft from several theatres, just under half (45%) were from Malta and these sank half of the enemy shipping.

Operation "Pedestal" did not, however, achieve the long-term salvation of Malta and the Governor continued to press for further re-supply. He was probably unaware of the precise timing of the Allied landings in North West Africa, Operation "Torch" planned for early November 1942. Still worried over the continuing drain on the Island's supplies, he signalled just over a month after the arrival of "Pedestal" that what he needed were:

Only absolutely essential articles of food and fuel...with small allocation of civil and service stores.

The 'Object,' he added

...would be to put off target date until early January.⁴⁵

The parallel assessment outline above from the enemy is most telling. The stalling of Rommel's offensive due to a lack of supplies, gave time for the final build-up of British forces opposite the *Afrika Korps* and, then, for the opening of the Battle of El Alamein which opened on 23 October 1942 and led to the clearance of Rommel's forces from the Western Desert. Further westwards, other, greater, events were also moving to a climax. The continued starvation of supplies for Axis forces in North Africa in which Malta's striking forces played a major part, helped the subsequent Allied invasion in Morocco and Algeria – Operation "Torch" which took place on 8 November 1942.

Once the Allied forces landed during "Torch" had taken Tunisia and had joined up with the Eighth Army advancing from the east after the Battle of El Alamein had cleared the North African coast, the safety of Malta was at last guaranteed.

⁴⁴ 'Enemy Supplies to Tunisia,' [E.C. Bullard], CAOR, May 1943, 'Lectures,' Folder No. 7, NHB.

⁴⁵ Governor Malta to Admiralty, Hush Message 1430B/27 September 1942, 'Hush Signals, August to October 1942,' Microfilm, NHB [emphasis added]. The "Target Date" was the date on which surrender of the Island was considered inevitable.

Protection of a Naval Force in a Multi-Threat Environment

Operation "Pedestal", along with the other convoys run through to Malta were all made in a multi-threat environment. Some six months after the operation, the Naval Staff concluded that:

Operation "Pedestal" demonstrated conclusively the great strides made in fleet fighter direction with large numbers of fighters, and the experience so gained proved invaluable. It proved, that, in case of necessity, and given reasonable conditions, a fleet could, by its own efforts, force a passage through narrow waters in the face of very heavy enemy air opposition.⁴⁶

This point was later expanded in the (unpublished) Naval Staff History on Naval Aviation, in which the Historical Section of the Naval Staff drew the conclusion that:

Operation "Pedestal" provides an example of the effectiveness of the fighter protection so provided, and also of the disastrous results accruing from lack of it and the break up of the convoy formation. The very heavy air attacks from Sardinia by over 100 escorted bombers throughout daylight hours of 12 August, when the convoy was protected by a total of 60 carrier-borne fighters, only succeeded in damaging one merchant ships and two of the escorting ships. The [FAA] fighters attacking at a distance from the convoy were usually able to break up the enemy formations sufficiently for the A/A guns of escort and convoy to be able to deal with those that got through. That evening, after the carriers had withdrawn and when the convoy, in some disorder after the submarine attack which robbed it of both its fighter direction ships (one of them it's A/A ship), was protected in the air by only six Beaufighters, about 20 Ju88s hit three merchant ships with torpedoes. The convoy then became completely disorganised; five stragglers (in addition to HMS *Manchester*) fell victims to MTBs. Three merchant ships in convoy were hit by bombs next morning while there was still no fighter direction; and ships which had become detached suffered further damage in the course of the day.⁴⁷

The other convoys which were conducted in a multi-threat were those through the Arctic to Russia. Similarities and differences have been noted.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the Arctic and Mediterranean convoys was that they both had to face multiple, and sometimes simultaneous, threats from air, surface and subsurface enemies. Of these threats, that from the air proved in both areas to be the single most deadly attack: the proportion of ships sunk by aircraft was 81% in the Mediterranean and 55% in the Arctic (where enemy aircraft had further to fly, in worse weather conditions, and without fighter protection). The effect from the other threats on the convoys in the two areas, however, was not the same. A third of the ships sunk in the Arctic were due to U-boat action, but submarines sank none in the Mediterranean convoys. Nearly a fifth of the sinkings in the Mediterranean were caused by motor torpedo boats but none of these craft operated in far northern waters. Mines, too, posed a constant threat in both theatres, though they caused relatively few casualties. During the period where these two Battle Summaries overlap, the losses in warships was heavier in the Mediterranean convoy operations, though a heavy toll was taken of anti-submarine escorts towards the end of the war in the Arctic when U-boats were able to counter attack with homing torpedoes.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ 'Naval Aircraft Progress and Operations, Periodical Summary, No. 6, Period Ended 31 December 1942,' Naval Air Warfare and Flying Training Division, Naval Staff, CB 3053(6), AWD.98/42, February 1943, Admiralty Library, p. 23.

⁴⁷ Malcolm Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Mediterranean Convoys: A Naval Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 101.

⁴⁸ M. Llewellyn-Jones (ed.), *The Royal Navy and the Arctic Convoys: A Staff History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. xvi.

Ships Taking Part in Operation “Pedestal”

	Command		Ships
Force “F”	Vice Admiral E.N. Syfret		
Force “Z”	Rear Admiral A.L.St.G. Lyster	Aircraft Carriers:	<i>Victorious, Indomitable and Eagle</i>
		Battleships	<i>Nelson and Rodney</i>
		Cruisers	<i>Sirus, Phoebe and Charybdis</i>
		Destroyers	<i>12</i>
Force “X”	Rear Admiral H.M. Burrough	Cruisers	<i>Nigeria, Kenya and Manchester</i>
		A/A Cruiser	<i>Cairo</i>
		Destroyers	<i>12</i>
		Carrier	<i>Furious</i>
		Destroyers	<i>8</i>

**Royal Navy Ship Casualties during Operation “Pedestal”
(contemporary assessment taken from Admiral Syfret’s report)**

Ship	Date/Time	Details
<i>Eagle</i>	1315/11	Torpedoed by U-boat. Hit by 3 or 4 torpedoes. Sank in 8 minutes.
<i>Wolverine</i>	0100/12	Ramming U-boat. Extensive damage forward. Returned to Gibraltar.
<i>Ithuriel</i>	1649/12	Ramming U-boat. Damaged bow. Returned to Gibraltar.
<i>Indomitable</i>	1847/12	Dive bombing. 3 hits by large bombs; 3 or 4 near misses. Flight deck out of action and 1 group of 4.5”. Extensive hole in ship’s bottom after and ports side abreast Wardroom.
<i>Foresight</i>	1905/12	T/B attack. Flooded aft and unable to steer. Sunk by <i>Tartar</i> .
<i>Nigeria</i>	1956/12	Torpedoed by U-boat. 13° list. Forward boiler room flooded. Extensive damage below upper deck. Returned to Gibraltar at 16 knots.
<i>Cairo</i>	1955/12 (about)	Torpedoed by U-boat. Stern blown off. Sunk by own forces.
<i>Kenya</i>	2111/12	Torpedoed by U-boat. Forefoot blow away. Proceeded with convoy and returned to Gibraltar at 20 knots.
<i>Manchester</i>	0120/13	E-boat or mine. After engine room flooded. Listed 20. Scuttled 0400/13.

The enemy, it was assessed just after the operation, lost: 2 U-boats (one German and one Italian); 2 E-boats sunk and 4, or more, damaged; one Italian cruiser was damaged and one possibly sunk.

**Merchant Ship Casualties during Operation “Pedestal”
(contemporary assessment taken from Admiral Syfret’s Report)**

Ship	Date/Time	Details
<i>Ohio</i>	2000/12	Mined or torpedoed in the Skerki Channel. Near missed am and pm on 13th. Reached Malta.
<i>Brisbane Star</i>	2058/12	Torpedoed by T/B aircraft in the Skerki Channel. Reached Malta.
<i>Rochester Castle</i>	0330/13	Torpedoed by E-boat off the Tunisian coast. Reached Malta.
<i>Melbourne Star</i>		No damage. Reached Malta.
<i>Port Chalmers</i>		No damage. Reached Malta.
<i>Empire Hope</i>	2030/12	Bombed and set on fire. Abandoned. Torpedoed and sunk by <i>Penn</i> after picking up survivors.
<i>Waimarama</i>	0730/12	Bombed and blew up. <i>Ledbury</i> picked up 42 survivors of which 23 were from <i>Melbourne Star</i> , next astern from <i>Waimarama</i> , who jumped overboard thinking their own ship had been hit. Number of survivors recovered from <i>Waimarama</i> was 19 out of 120. The senior survivor was the 3rd Radio Officer.
<i>Clan Ferguson</i>	2055/12	Bombed and blew up. No known survivors.
<i>Glenorchy</i>	0400/13	Master of <i>Brisbane Star</i> states that she was torpedoed and sunk possibly by E-boat. No known survivors.
<i>Deucalion</i>	1230/12	Near missed by bomb. Proceeded independently escorted by <i>Bramham</i> . Torpedoed and set on fire by T/B aircraft at 2120/12.... Survivors picked up by <i>Bramham</i> . Blew up at 2300/12.
<i>Santa Eliza</i>	0500/13	Torpedoed by E-boat off Tunisian coast and set on fire. Ship abandoned. Ship was bombed at 0530/13, blew up and sank in 5 minutes. Survivors were picked up by <i>Penn</i> and <i>Bramham</i> at 0600/13.
<i>Dorset</i>	1100/13	Dive bombed and hit, which started a fire. Engine room flooded and Nos. 4 and 5 holds partially flooded. Ship was abandoned. At about 1800/13 ships were again attacked by Ju88’s and hit forward which started another fire. Ships sank by the stern at 1920/13.... Survivors picked up by <i>Bramham</i> .
<i>Wairangi</i>	0315/13	Torpedoed by E-boat. Engine room and No. 3 hold flooded. Engines put out of action. Abandoned ship. Survivors picked up by <i>Eskimo</i> at 0845/13. <i>Wairangi</i> ’s poop was still awash and Master is quite certain she could not remain afloat.
<i>Almeria Lykes</i>	0315/13	Torpedoed by E-boat, just previously to <i>Wairangi</i> , with whom she was in company. Scuttling charges fired at daylight on 13th. Survivors picked up by <i>Somali</i> .