

1984

Central Mediterranean Sea Control and the North African Campaigns, 1940-1942

Rowena Reed

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Reed, Rowena (1984) "Central Mediterranean Sea Control and the North African Campaigns, 1940-1942," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 37 : No. 4 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol37/iss4/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Central Mediterranean Sea Control and the North African Campaigns, 1940-1942

Rowena Reed

With the Italian declaration of war on Great Britain in June 1940, the narrow Sicilian Channel in the Central Mediterranean became one of the most important bodies of water in the world. Through it, from north to south ran the shipping lanes from Italy to North Africa and, from west to east, the main British supply route to Malta. The logistical problem facing the belligerents in the Mediterranean differed in one important respect. While the allied armies in the Middle East could be maintained via the long route around the Cape of Good Hope, all supplies for Axis forces in North Africa had to be shipped across the Mediterranean.

When Benito Mussolini decided to plunge into war on Germany's side, Italy was not prepared. Two hundred and eighteen ships—one third of her merchant fleet representing about 1.2 million tons of shipping—became vulnerable outside of the Mediterranean and were captured, interned in neutral ports, or scuttled.¹ The Italian Navy, whose primary responsibility was to control the Central Mediterranean, was strong in modern capital ships. In speed, communications, and gunnery, it was superior to the British Mediterranean Fleet; but even its most modern warships lacked sonar and radar, and their crews were not trained for night fighting.

An even more serious problem affecting all Italian naval operations was the poor cooperation of the Italian Air Force with the fleet. Unlike the British, the Italians had no fleet air arm and the Navy was forced to get their air support for each mission through headquarters at Rome.² On those occasions when support was properly coordinated, Italian pilots were not adequately trained to strike small mobile targets at sea, a problem that persisted until well into the war.³ Air tactics, at least in the early months of the war, consisted of high altitude drops using 660-pound bombs. While the precision of these attacks impressed Admiral Andrew Cunningham, British Naval Commander in the Eastern Mediterranean, they produced little damage.⁴ Air reconnaissance was a continuing problem for the Italian fleet. When information of important

Professor Reed is on the faculty of Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

British convoys or fleet movements was available, it was often sketchy or inaccurate.

Although the Italian Ministry of Supply estimated that accumulated stores and stocks of fuel in Italy would last into the fall of 1941, there were no reserves in North Africa.⁵ As early as the third day of the war the Italians found it necessary to send supplies to General Rudolfo Graziani's forces in Libya. Admiral Cunningham could do little to oppose these convoys. The passage of British warships into the Central Mediterranean required refueling at Malta, exposing the fleet for a full day to submarine and air attack.⁶ The few British submarines available at Alexandria were too large—about 1700 tons surface displacement—to operate in the shallow waters close to shore.⁷ Only from the island of Malta, strategically located at the eastern approach to the Sicilian Narrows, could effective attacks by submarines, cruisers, and destroyers on the Libyan convoys be carried out.

“Geography and British foresight in rushing reinforcements to the Middle East early in the war . . . kept the British from being driven out of the Middle East and prevented Hitler from linking his southern flank.”

When the British decided, in May 1940, to reroute all shipping to the Middle East around the Cape of Good Hope,⁸ the assumption was that Malta would be untenable in the event of Italian belligerency. It was not until actions with the British fleet had revealed the inadequacies of Italian naval and air forces that Malta was reinforced at the beginning of September with anti-aircraft guns, naval and RAF stores and fuel oil. Her garrison was increased to 25,000 men, she acquired 85 modern planes, and her warships (Force K) and submarines (10th Flotilla) began to attack Italian shipping in the Narrows.⁹

As Graziani prepared to launch his offensive toward Egypt, the supply traffic to Libya grew heavier. Although the British inflicted no losses on the Libyan convoys until November, the threat from Malta forced the Italians to protect their shipping with larger escort forces. In addition to the Sicilian Channel Force of minelayers, submarines, and motor torpedo boats organized at the outbreak of war, thirty-five destroyers (one third of the Italian destroyer strength) and many auxiliary vessels were now permanently assigned to escort duty.¹⁰

On 13 September, the Italian offensive in the Western Desert opened. Five days later, after occupying Sollum and Sidi Barrani just over the Egyptian frontier, Graziani stopped to regroup his forces and deal with his transport problems. Supplies were still pouring into Tripoli and Benghazi, but the Italians lacked motorized transport and failed to take advantage of the forward ports to get supplies to the front.¹¹ The British counterattack in

October cut off the garrisons in Bardia and Tobruk, and thereby increased Italian logistical difficulties. Submarines and small armed merchant vessels operating from Benghazi were used to bring in stores until Bardia fell on 5 January 1941.¹² Nevertheless, the Italians were able to ship 197,742 tons of dry cargo and fuel to Libya from October 1940 through January 1941 at a loss of only 3.9 percent.

While the capture of Benghazi in November allowed the British to use this port to base naval and air forces closer to the Axis shipping route, the rapid advance of General Archibald Wavell's army from the Egyptian border created a similar supply problem for the British. Fuel, ammunition, and stores had to be brought along the coast from Alexandria. The port of Benghazi had been demolished by the Italians and could handle only a small quantity of shipping.¹³

If the capture of Cyrenaica, Italy's east Libyan province, created logistical difficulties for the British, it spelled disaster for Italy. With the Italians removed from the bulge of Cyrenaica, Malta could be supplied from the east with relatively little risk. Any increase in the island's strength, combined with land-based planes in the forward areas, endangered Italian supply traffic in the Narrows and it seemed only a matter of time before the life line was cut altogether. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was already making plans to send an invasion force to Sicily with the Italian collapse in Libya. However, the British failed to take immediate advantage of this situation, and sinkings on the Axis convoy routes remained low.

The attacks of the Italian Air Force, Regia Aeronautica, on Malta and the convoys sent to the island prior to January 1941 were similarly ineffective. An August 1940 convoy landed 40,000 tons of stores and equipment at Malta at the cost of one merchant ship damaged. An additional three merchantmen arrived in November with 20,000 tons of supplies, having sustained no loss or damage.¹⁴ These convoys sailed under medium to heavy escort provided by Admiral Sir James Somerville's Force H based at Gibraltar and fleet units from Alexandria, whose anti-aircraft defenses dealt successfully with sporadic Italian fighter and bomber attacks.

The Germans had been watching the operations of their ally in the Mediterranean with apprehension for some months and, in January 1941, the O.K.W. (German High Command) decided to send General Erwin Rommel with two armored divisions to North Africa to prevent the loss of Libya's western province, Tripolitania.¹⁵ Fliegerkorps X, comprising four to five hundred fighters, dive bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft, was sent to Sicily under the command of a former German naval officer to protect Axis communications with Libya, and to prevent British convoys from reaching Malta.¹⁶

Instead of merely protecting shipping, Fliegerkorps X took the offensive. The effect was immediate. The January convoy to Malta was heavily

attacked by German dive bombers. Although three merchantmen arrived safely with 10,000 tons of stores, the armored-decked carrier *Illustrious* and a cruiser were badly damaged and another cruiser was sunk.¹⁷ Because heavy ships were no longer safe in the Central Mediterranean, the British decided to use only light forces to protect future convoys in the Narrows.¹⁸

Although Rommel had been instructed to conduct only defensive operations in Libya, the easing of the Axis supply situation brought about by the Luftwaffe's command of the air over the Central Mediterranean encouraged him to launch an offensive to recover Cyrenaica. By April 1941, his advanced units had reached the Egyptian frontier. But since the British still held Tobruk, Rommel could not use this port, so his supplies had to be transported overland from Tripoli and Benghazi. This caused a breakdown in overcommitted transports, large expenditures of fuel and long delays. An advance to Mersa Matruh, only 200 miles west of Alexandria—which would bring the Suez Canal within striking distance of the Luftwaffe—was impossible unless Tobruk could be opened to Axis shipping.

While the British continued to pour men and supplies into Tobruk using small coastal vessels from Alexandria, their attacks on the Axis supply line to Tripoli produced meager results. The only important loss to Axis convoys during this period occurred on 16 April when five Italian merchant ships escorted by three destroyers were caught and sunk in heavy seas by four destroyers of Force K.¹⁹ In a desperate attempt to block Tripoli, the Admiralty on 15 April ordered Admiral Cunningham to bombard the port and to sink the battleship *Barham* and a cruiser in the approach to the harbor. This directive was accompanied by a personal message from the First Sea Lord stating that "every possible step must be taken by the Navy to prevent supplies reaching Libya from Italy and by coastwise traffic even if this results in serious loss or damage to H.M. ships."²⁰ The admiral was reluctant to sacrifice a capital ship and as insurance to his naval bombardment group the RAF conducted intensive bombing strikes two hours in advance. Italo-German air reconnaissance failed to report the approach of the British fleet and the shore batteries at Tripoli were taken completely by surprise. Cunningham's battleships opened fire at 0430 on 21 April and departed a half hour later, after setting fire to a large fuel depot, destroying one third of the port installations, and sinking most of the shipping in the harbor. No British ships were damaged.²¹

Meanwhile Rommel was growing impatient with the meager quantity of supplies, especially fuel, reaching the Afrika Korps. Although there were plenty of supplies in Tripoli and Benghazi, Rommel could not get them forward by road. The Italians began to use submarines, gunboats, destroyers, and other small craft to bring in oil, and the Germans organized an Air Transport Wing to carry fuel from Benghazi to the front.²² While such improvisations succeeded in supplying the minimum needs of the Afrika

Korps, the Italo-German efforts to neutralize Malta—as many as three to four air strikes a day in April and May—were having little effect. In addition to the March convoy which discharged 45,000 tons of supplies with no casualties, during the next three months 224 Hurricane fighters were flown in from Admiral Somerville's Force H carriers. Supplies also reached Malta from the east.²³

With both sides supplying their forces under trying conditions, two events in the spring and summer of 1941 influenced the military situation in the Central Mediterranean. First, General Wavell, having relieved Tobruk, had pushed on to recover Cyrenaica. While he was building up for an attack on Tripolitania in May, he received orders to transfer the bulk of his forces to Greece. Next, the futile campaigns in the Aegean were a heavy burden to the British maritime services. The German occupation of Greece forced the British to withdraw to Crete and later to Egypt. By the end of May, 200,000 tons of supply and transport shipping were sunk or abandoned in evacuation ports, and nine naval vessels were sunk and seventeen heavily damaged in the Crete battle alone.²⁴ Equally damaging was the German occupation of Crete from which westbound convoys to Malta were now vulnerable to Luftwaffe attacks.²⁵ Fortunately for Wavell, the impending attack on Russia prevented the Axis from reaping the full rewards of this victory as the main Luftwaffe units were moved out of the Mediterranean. Although the Italian Air Force had a strength of 5,300 planes at the beginning of June, cooperation with the navy had not improved and the Italians still lacked torpedo planes and antishipping dive bombers.

With the occupation of Cyrenaica, British attacks on the Libyan convoys intensified. The Italians had already lost most of their fast medium-sized merchant ships. In July, they tried transporting their troops and equipment in fast liners, but because of their size, these were easily spotted and sunk.²⁶ Medium-sized (1300-ton) British T-class submarines based at Alexandria attacked Axis shipping in the Aegean and along the North African coast where eight supply ships and tankers were sunk in June.²⁷ (Rommel required 40-50 thousand tons of supplies, including fuel, a month; the Italian units needed another 20,000. There were 50,706 tons of stores plus 12,000 tons of fuel oil delivered in July, and 46,755 tons of stores and 37,201 tons of fuel oil in August.) Axis tankers were hit especially hard and losses of fuel oil averaged 20 to 30 percent of the amount shipped each month from July through October 1941. At the time that the Luftwaffe was transferring units from the Mediterranean, Britain was increasing Malta's air power and the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi were bombed almost nightly. Many ships were sunk in harbor and port installations damaged, further delaying the transport of supplies to the battle areas.²⁸

In August 1941, a Luftwaffe unit, Fliegerkorps II, was sent to Sicily and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring was given command of all German air and sea forces with orders to regain control of the Sicilian Channel. In September, U-boats, and two flotillas of German MTBs and motor minesweepers—sent via French canals and rivers—entered the Mediterranean. The Italians constructed a number of 700-ton transports and naval ferry barges of German design.²⁹ These measures resulted in some improvement in the Axis supply situation by December 1941, although losses were still considerable. Meanwhile, the Afrika Korps had fallen back to El Agheila because of Rommel's troublesome logistical situation.³⁰ The beginning of December 1941 also saw the intensification of attacks on Axis shipping from the forces based on Malta.

The British were now employing a new route for their own convoys through the Narrows, passing along the south coast of Sicily, one which the Italians were slow to discover. The September convoy landed 85,000 tons of supplies at Malta with the loss of one merchant ship.³¹ By the end of the year, through the ingenuity of British pilots and crews, torpedo planes from Malta had increased their range from 130 to 160 miles and the Italians were forced to make wide detours with smaller convoys, increasing the strain on their already overworked escort ships.³²

But again two events played heavily on the shipping situation in the Central Mediterranean. In mid-December, four Force K cruisers, while moving to intercept an Axis convoy to Tripoli, ran onto a minefield laid in deep water.³³ All ships were either sunk or badly damaged, and the British were left with only their destroyer force plus three cruisers in the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁴

It finally became apparent to the Germans that the key to their North African logistics was Malta. Hitler's Directive 38 issued to Kesselring on 2 December 1941 instructed the Luftwaffe to "gain control of the air and sea between southern Italy and North Africa" and "to prevent the resupply of Tobruk and Malta." He emphasized that "in this connection the neutralization of Malta is especially important."³⁵ Because of increased German air offensives, the British were unable to keep up their heavy attacks on Axis shipping. Losses on the Libyan supply route quickly dropped from 18 percent in December to zero in January 1942.³⁶ The Afrika Korps was thus able to halt the British offensive that began in mid-November and, by the end of January, Rommel controlled the whole of Cyrenaica. With desert airfields again in Axis hands, the British supply line from Alexandria to Malta was effectively cut.

Rommel had arrived at El Agheila without any stores. Although Axis losses in the Narrows were very small, many supply ships were sunk in port while waiting to be unloaded. Attempts to get the Italians to change their methods of scheduling and unloading failed; so in a counter move, Kesselring urged the construction of very small vessels and barges to ferry valuable cargo, and issued an order that tanks were to be sent only in flat-bottomed boats carrying a

maximum of six. Such small craft were rarely detected by the British and many of these barges were heavily armed with anti-aircraft guns. The Luftwaffe also provided an escort of antisubmarine bombers and fighters for the Libyan convoys, and Italian MTBs operating in the Narrows were equipped with depth charges.³⁷ While the Italian naval headquarters was optimistic with the improvement in logistics, the navy's reserves of fuel oil were extremely low. There was less than 100,000 tons in inventory in February 1942 and shipments from Germany were negligible. The larger Italian ships were already immobilized for lack of fuel and operations with light forces, other than convoy protection, were severely limited. But, fortuitously, the British Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean was especially weak.³⁸

The heavy losses sustained by the fleet in 1941 forced Admiral Cunningham to devise complex plans involving all three services in the protection of the Malta convoys. Only a small quantity of supplies carried in individual ships and submarines had reached Malta since September 1941. In March, a group of four merchantmen assembled at Alexandria with an escort of five cruisers and seventeen destroyers. The plan involved a feint by the army toward Axis airfields in the desert, an RAF attack on air bases in Crete and Cyrenaica, and the bombing of Derna by Number 826 Naval Air Squadron. In addition, RAF fighters and reconnaissance planes were to accompany the convoy to the limit of their 300 mile range.³⁹ Despite these elaborate precautions, the British ships were quickly discovered and attacked. An inconclusive engagement of Admiral Philip Vian's escort force with Italian warships delayed the convoy, which was still east of Malta when daylight brought heavy attacks by German torpedo-bombers. All four merchantmen were sunk, two of them shortly after reaching Malta and only 1,000 tons of supplies were unloaded.⁴⁰

Increasingly heavy air raids on Malta toward the end of March sank four submarines of 10th Flotilla and, for this reason, the remaining submarines and destroyers based on Malta were transferred to Alexandria in mid-April. This was a serious loss for the British, as submarines had been especially effective against Italian shipping in the Narrows.⁴¹ During the same period, German planes and MTBs laid new minefields in the waters around Malta.⁴²

The beginning of May 1942 was the high point of Axis strength in the Mediterranean. Losses to the Libyan supply traffic had dropped to less than one percent and a record amount of 150,380 tons of supplies, including 48,031 tons of fuel oil, reached Africa in April. Rommel's army was fully supplied and had even built up a reserve. In early May, the route adjacent to Cape Bon used by unescorted British ships to approach Malta was discovered, and the Italians began to concentrate MTBs and surfaced submarines in the area with notable success.⁴³ After a sustained and heavy bombing assault beginning on 2 April, Malta was neutralized and, by 10 May, Kesselring regarded the main task of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean as finished.⁴⁴ The next step was determined by Hitler and the Commando Supremo, the Italian Supreme Command.

The Italians had long recognized Malta's strategic importance. As early as 1938, when war against Great Britain was considered possible, the Italian Navy stated that the occupation of Malta was an indispensable condition for waging war in the Mediterranean. Plans for occupying the island were submitted to the Commando Supremo in 1940, but at that time, the Italian Air Force was confident that Malta could be forced to surrender by bombing alone.⁴⁵ By the time Mussolini decided to occupy Malta the island had been reinforced to the point where a major invasion was necessary. In December 1941, a combined Italo-German staff was formed and preparations began in February 1942.⁴⁶

The basic plan involved an offensive by Rommel to clear the British out of Cyrenaica and to open the port of Tobruk, to be followed by a combined sea and airborne assault on Malta. The timetable for this plan was complicated. Luftwaffe units assigned to support Rommel's desert forces must be transferred to Sicily before July, the latest date that sea conditions favored landings on Malta. But on 21 May, Hitler, encouraged by the success of Rommel's advance, began to have doubts about the Malta operation.

Rommel had convincing arguments for continuing his drive beyond the Egyptian frontier. The British were continually strengthening their forces in Egypt; only if the Axis took Cairo and the Suez Canal could further buildup be prevented. Once the British lost their bases in Egypt, Malta would fall. Meanwhile, the Afrika Korps could receive supplies from Crete via Tobruk, bypassing Malta. There was no guarantee that Malta would be an easy victim. Her defenses, protected from the bombs by underground shelters, were still largely intact; her garrison, although short of food and ammunition would resist to the end; and the British would concentrate all available naval and air forces to oppose the landings. Rommel underlined these arguments with the warning that this was the last chance for the Axis to win in North Africa.

The postponement of the Malta operation had an added advantage which Hitler and the O.K. W. were quick to recognize. Luftwaffe units assigned to Kesselring for the bombing of Malta and to support the landings could be transferred in time for the summer campaign on the Russian front. Therefore, after the capture of Tobruk, at a conference of the Commando Supremo with Rommel and Kesselring at Sidi Barrani on 26 June, it was decided to postpone the attack on Malta until Rommel had taken Cairo.⁴⁷

The Italian maritime services cannot be blamed for Rommel's failure to defeat the British at El Alamein in July 1942. Although the Afrika Korps was short of fuel and ammunition by the third day of the battle, it was the old story of Rommel's desert campaigns—plenty of supplies in the rear areas but none at the front. The speed of Rommel's advance⁴⁸ prevented the supply of his army from the ports of Tobruk and Mersa Matruh, the latter having been completely destroyed by the retreating British.⁴⁹

It is interesting that Rommel himself did not attribute his defeat primarily to lack of supplies. After his failure to take the Alam Halfa ridge, key to the Alamein position, he wrote: "The fact of British air superiority (over the battlefield) threw to the wind all the tactical rules which we had hitherto applied with such success. There was no real answer to the enemy's air superiority except a powerful air force of our own."⁵⁰ The inability of the Axis to reestablish the balance of power in the air caused a rapid deterioration of the supply situation. At the end of July, the RAF began to concentrate against Rommel's motorized supply columns and to shoot up the barges and small coastal vessels bringing stores from Tobruk and Benghazi. Losses of fuel oil were especially heavy; in August all tankers sent from Tripoli to Cyrenaica were either sunk or badly damaged. The Italians organized a shuttle service from Benghazi to the reopened port of Mersa Matruh using cruisers, destroyers and submarines to transport fuel oil and ammunition. The sixty-five landing ships scheduled to carry the invasion force to Malta⁵¹ were especially valuable for this duty because they could land and discharge cargoes on open beaches close to the front.⁵²

Although the preoccupation of the Luftwaffe in support of Rommel's army brought relief to the garrison and people of Malta, Axis attacks on British convoys to the island continued to produce heavy losses. The powerful escort service provided by Force H was ineffective because most of the attacks now took place in the Narrows after the escort force had turned back toward Gibraltar. The first June convoy (Operation "Harpoon") lost four of its six merchantmen and discharged only 25,000 tons of supplies at Malta. Because of desperate shortages on the island, Admiral Cunningham decided to risk sailing another convoy from Alexandria. This second June convoy (Operation "Vigorous") of eleven merchantmen, escorted by light forces only, was heavily attacked by Axis dive bombers and submarines and was forced to turn back, having lost two merchantmen and several escort ships.⁵³

An entire battle fleet—two battleships, four aircraft carriers, seven cruisers, thirty-three destroyers, two tugs, and four corvettes—providing escort for fourteen merchantmen left Gibraltar for Malta as Operation "Pedestal" in August. The Italians had devised an elaborate plan of attack: "Five successive barriers were to be raised against the British convoy: (1) submarines and U-boats deployed along the route between the Balearics and Tunisia; (2) a group of submarines concentrated northwest of Cape Bon, to operate in conjunction with a bombing mission planned for that area; (3) a series of temporary minefields to be laid in the passage close off Cape Bon, which up to then had not been mined because one of the Libyan convoy routes passed through there; (4) twelve motor torpedo boats and six of the new large torpedo boats (the first units of this type had entered into service only a few days previously) to be concentrated on the British route between Cape Bon and Pantelleria; (5) lastly the intervention, south of

Pantelleria, of three heavy cruisers from the 3rd Division and three light cruisers from the 7th Division with eleven destroyers.”⁵⁴ The plan was a brilliant success. Nine merchantmen were sunk, four of them by Italian MTBs in the Sicilian Channel, and three more were damaged. The submarine *U-73* sank the aircraft carrier *Eagle* while heavy bombing attacks from Axis bases in Sardinia damaged another carrier, the *Indomitable*. Two cruisers went down. Despite these losses, however, 55,000 tons of badly needed supplies reached Malta, and the island began to recover rapidly.⁵⁵ This was the last serious threat to the Malta convoys.

While Rommel held on at El Alamein, the Axis supply situation steadily deteriorated. In a series of desperate attempts to break through the British defenses, the Afrika Korps quickly exhausted the small quantities of fuel reaching the front.⁵⁶ The Italian naval headquarters tried every means, including hospital ships and motor boats, to transport oil directly to Rommel. A British cruiser squadron, two destroyer flotillas, and submarines returned to Malta in September and renewed their attacks on the main supply line to Tripoli. As the sinkings continued on the shipping routes from Italy, stores other than fuel began to run low. By the end of the month, the Italian merchant marine was down to one million tons of shipping.⁵⁷

General Bernard Montgomery, now in command of the British Eighth Army in Egypt, had built up tremendous stocks of materiel for his big offensive against Rommel at El Alamein, which began on 23 October 1942. The American merchant marine provided extra tonnage by rushing supplies around the Cape to Alexandria, and units of the US Air Force joined the RAF in attacks on the Italian supply traffic.⁵⁸ Allied superiority was so great by the fall of 1942 that no amount of stores or materiel could have prevented an Axis defeat in North Africa.

In the face of so many difficulties, the Italian supply service to Libya was remarkably effective. In spite of losses of 35.5 percent during the last six months of 1942, 337,409 tons of supplies were unloaded in Africa, compared with 441,878 tons delivered during the first six months when Axis power in the Mediterranean was at its height and losses on the Libyan supply route amounted to only 6.2 percent. Even after Rommel's retreat into Tunisia and allied landings in Algeria had reduced the Axis life line to a narrow corridor between Sicily and Tunis—vulnerable to attack from both east and west—the Italians managed to ship 225,189 tons of supplies to Africa, at a loss of 21 percent, between November 1942 and February 1943.⁵⁹

In summary, it can be seen that two factors played a major role in the control of the Central Mediterranean in World War II. The first was air power. When the Axis controlled the air, as they did in early 1941 and again from January to June 1942, Malta could not be used as a base for attacks on the Libyan convoys, and the British were able to supply the island only

marginally and then at heavy cost. The second factor, equally vital, was control of the coast of Cyrenaica. Unless the Axis could unload supplies at Tobruk and Benghazi, they were unable to advance into Egypt, and British occupation of Cyrenaica brought the Italian sea route to Tripoli within range of RAF bombers.

While the amount of stores and equipment reaching Africa by sea naturally affected the campaigns in the Western Desert, the main supply problems for the Axis armies seemed to be the lack of adequate overland transport and the vulnerability of their motorized columns to attack along the coast road. During his retreat into Tunisia, noting that a railroad was being constructed from Tunis to the Libyan frontier, Rommel observed: "It was greatly to our disadvantage that the Italians had not built a line along the North African coast before the war, as a supply route several hundred miles long is really only tolerable if the bulk of the goods can be carried by rail or sea."⁶⁰ The British must be given credit for considerable initiative in destroying port facilities, sinking Axis shipping at the docks in North Africa, and disrupting Italian coastal traffic.

Geography and British foresight in rushing reinforcements to the Middle East early in the war, when their resources were heavily strained and the home islands were threatened with invasion, kept the British from being driven out of the Middle East and prevented Hitler from linking his southern flank. In the long run, this strategic situation, more than any local factor determining control of Mediterranean waters, probably decided the fate of North Africa.

Appendix⁶¹

Italian Supply Traffic to Africa

Shipped to Libya	Unloaded (tons)	Sunk
June-September 1940	148,817	0%
October 1940-January 1941	197,742	3.9%
February-June 1941	447,815	6.6%
July-December 1941	356,294	26.8%
January-June 1942	441,878	6.2%
July-December 1942	337,409	35.5%
Total	1,929,955	14.0%
Shipped to Tunisia		
November 1942-February 1943	225,189	21.0%
March-April 1943	81,582	42.0%
Total	306,532	27.9%

Axis Merchant Shipping Losses in the Mediterranean

Year	No. Ships	Gross Tons
1940	74	166,198
1941	278	638,497
1942	260	498,727
1943 (to 8 September)	712	803,099
Total	1,324	2,106,521

Escorted Maritime Traffic

	Materiel Shipped (tons)	Materiel Lost (tons)
From Italy to Libya	2,245,381	315,426 (14%)
From Italy to Tunisia	433,169	119,637 (28%)

Submarines accounted for 60 percent of Axis supply losses in the Central Mediterranean from June 1940 to November 1942. The RAF and British naval aircraft accounted for 37 percent and the remaining 23 percent of the losses were caused by surface ships, mines, and accidents at sea.

Casualties on the Libyan supply route were high; 11,400 men were lost on Italian naval and merchant vessels up to February 1943. Sixty percent of the Italian merchant shipping available in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the war was destroyed.

Malta Convoys

Date	Code Name	Cargoes Discharged (approx. tons)
August 1940	Hats	40,000
November 1940	Collar	20,000
January 1941	Excess	10,000
March 1941	M.C.9	45,000
July 1941	Substance	65,000
September 1941	Halberd	85,000
March 1942	M.G.1	less than 1,000
June 1942	Harpoon	25,000
June 1942	Vigorous	Nil
August 1942	Pedestal	55,000

Unescorted ships sailing in the Mediterranean alone often fared better than heavily escorted convoys. This was especially true on the run to Malta where 68 percent of the ships travelling in convoy were sunk compared with 40 percent of the ships sailing alone. This is the reverse of the situation in the Atlantic and the Arctic where large heavily escorted convoys were far less vulnerable to attack than individual ships. In the narrow confines of the Central Mediterranean, with air and submarine bases close at hand, convoys were certain to be quickly discovered and attacked whereas single ships could often slip along the coast in bad weather unobserved.

Notes

1. Friedrich Ruge, *Sea Warfare, 1939-1945* (London: Cassel, 1957), p. 102.
2. Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, said in July 1940 that "the real controversy in the matter of naval conflicts is not between us and the British but between our aviation and our Navy." Quoted in Hugh Gibson, ed., *The Ciano Diaries* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1946), p. 275.
3. Raymond DeBelot, *The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 1939-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 39-43.
4. Andrew B. Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), pp. 259, 337.
5. *The Ciano Diaries*, p. 286.
6. Cunningham, p. 272.
7. The main Italian supply route to Libya ran from the west of Sicily along the shallow Kerkenah Bank to Tripoli, then along the coast to Benghazi.
8. This added 8,511 miles to the distance of 3,097 miles from London to Alexandria via the Mediterranean, making a total distance for the Cape route of 11,608 miles.
9. Ian S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, vol. I (London: H.M.S.O., 1954), pp. 216-217, 203.
10. Marc' Antonio Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, 1957), pp. 34-35.
11. DeBelot, pp. 72-73; Cunningham, p. 273.
12. Bragadin, p. 57.
13. Cunningham, p. 298.
14. Ian Cameron, *Red Duster, White Ensign* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 258-259.
15. The only remaining port open to Italian shipping was Tripoli. At the time of the Franco-German armistice Mussolini refused the suggestion of his naval advisors to occupy the French ports in Tunisia and these remained under the control of Vichy until after the allied landings in North Africa in November 1942.
16. Ruge, p. 117; DeBelot, p. 95.
17. The *Illustrious* limped into Malta's Grand Harbor where she was repeatedly bombed while under repair. She eventually made it to Alexandria and was sent on to the United States to complete repairs.
18. Ruge, pp. 148-150.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Cunningham, pp. 342-343.
21. Winston S. Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. 241.
22. Albert Kesselring, *A Soldier's Record* (New York: Morrow, 1954), p. 128.
23. Churchill, p. 60.
24. S.W. Roskill, *A Merchant Fleet in Air: Alfred Holt & Co., 1939-1945* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 145.
25. Cunningham, p. 391.
26. Ruge, pp. 164-166.
27. Cunningham, p. 401.
28. Bragadin, p. 129.
29. Ruge, p. 177.
30. B.H. Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953), p. 155.
31. Cunningham, p. 410.
32. DeBelot, p. 154.
33. Prior to this time, the Italians had mined only the shallow waters of the Kerkenah Bank; these new deep-water mines were of German manufacture.
34. W.M. James, *The British Navies in the Second World War* (London: Longmans Green, 1946), p. 119.
35. DeBelot, p. 142.
36. Bragadin, pp. 154-155.
37. Kesselring, pp. 131-135.
38. *Ciano Diaries*, p. 445.
39. Cunningham, pp. 449-450.
40. Cameron, pp. 258-259.
41. See Appendix.
42. Bragadin, p. 167.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 154-155.
44. Kesselring, pp. 140-141.
45. Overestimating the effectiveness of strategic bombing was a common error in World War II. The Luftwaffe assault on England failed because it was not followed up by an invasion, and the results of the massive Anglo-American bombing campaign against Germany were disappointing to the allies.
46. Bragadin, pp. 8, 19-20.

47. *Rommel Papers*, p. 203; Kesselring, pp. 136-152.
48. Tobruk fell on 21 June; on the 24th he was at Sidi Barrani; on the 28th at Mersa Matruh; and he reached El Alamein on 1 July.
49. Bragadin, pp. 197-198.
50. *Rommel Papers*, p. 286.
51. The operation against Malta was cancelled at the end of July.
52. Bragadin, pp. 202-203, 215.
53. Cameron, pp. 258-260.
54. Bragadin, p. 207.
55. Roskill, pp. 198-199.
56. *Rommel Papers*, p. 280.
57. *Ciano Diaries*, pp. 519, 525-526. James, p. 157.
58. DeBelot, p. 173.
59. Bragadin, pp. 356-357.
60. *Rommel Papers*, p. 391.
61. The figures included in the Appendix are taken from Bragadin, Cameron, and Cunningham.



Too frequently history is viewed as a flat, featureless, and lifeless plain. That's not history. History is mountains, ravines, cliffs, crevices, impenetrable thickets, forests, deserts, swamps, seemingly impassable rivers; therein live lions, elephants, wolves, cockroaches, mosquitoes, and puppy dogs.

Frank Uhlig, Jr.