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## Six Victories: North Africa, Malta, and the Mediterranean Convoy War, November 1941–March 1942

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ethical, moral, individual, societal, and policy issues surrounding AI. It is the book's discussion of the enduring nature of these issues that will be of value and greatest significance to the national-security community.

THOMAS CULORA



*Six Victories: North Africa, Malta, and the Mediterranean Convoy War, November 1941–March 1942*, by Vincent P. O'Hara. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019. 322 pages. \$34.95.

In his latest book, Vincent P. O'Hara adds to his previous works on the Mediterranean during World War II by analyzing the period between November 1941 and March 1942. He considers six decisive actions that changed the tide of the naval war in the Middle Sea, three of which went in favor of the British (the actions of Force K, the battle of Cape Bon, and the first battle of Sirte [Sidra]) and three in favor of the Italians (Alexandria, the loss of Force K, and second Sirte).

The author's detailed narrative reminds the reader that the Mediterranean war was one of naval attrition around the sea-lanes crossing the theater.

An essential question in *Six Victories* is the influence of intelligence on naval operations. According to O'Hara, while ULTRA provided critical data on many occasions, information often was untimely and was offset by Italian counterintelligence. O'Hara's thesis is not entirely new; Italy's leading scholar working on ULTRA, Alberto Santoni, reached similar conclusions in his 1981 study *Il vero traditore*, which is not among the author's references. O'Hara claims that the higher ratio of Axis

attacks against British convoys demonstrates that ULTRA did not affect the operations significantly. The argument is captious, since possessing intelligence does not mean necessarily that it is possible for one to attack; that possibility was reduced severely for Britain in the latter three of the "six victories." However, when the British had the means, as during the operations of Force K, ULTRA allowed them to maximize the effectiveness of their limited forces, which were numerically inferior to the enemy's and had fewer bases available to them in the central Mediterranean. Finally, the British ratio of success for attacked convoys was better than that of the Axis.

*Six Victories* also puts great emphasis on the consequences of the three Italian victories. The destruction of Force K ended a nightmare period for the Italian convoys, while Alexandria allowed the Axis to achieve preeminence in the central Mediterranean. The pinnacle was the second Sirte battle, defined as an Italian victory—correctly reversing the judgment of some British naval historians. Also, according to O'Hara, the battle proved that the Italian surface fleet was a credible deterrent, discouraging further British attempts to resupply Malta (p. 254). Yet while the author's conclusion that second Sirte was an Axis victory is persuasive as far as the destruction of the enemy convoy goes, it is not so with respect to its consequences. The action did not discourage further British attempts to resupply Malta; instead, it encouraged the Royal Navy to think that light surface forces were sufficient to meet the Italian fleet, preparing the way for the disaster of HARPOON-VIGOROUS in June 1942.

Here the major shortcoming of the book becomes apparent: not putting the Italian actions into the

broader context of the Mediterranean naval war. If that war's object was communications, the Germans achieved the majority of the tactical successes that produced operational and strategic consequences. Even according to O'Hara's data, 82 percent of Allied losses during the period of *Six Victories* resulted from German actions (p. 259). Second Sirte is a clear example of this; the delay the Italian surface forces imposed was not decisive, because it was German aircraft that sank the enemy ships. Despite this, O'Hara concludes that the three Italian victories led to Axis maritime control of the central Mediterranean up to November 1942, broken only by the coming of American naval reinforcements (p. 257).

This conclusion is not convincing. First, it seems to confound surface predominance with maritime control. During summer–fall 1942, intelligence, air, and underwater predominance—critical elements of maritime control during World War II—were in the hands of the British, enabling them to disrupt Axis communications despite enemy surface predominance. Second, this trend already was emerging during the first period considered by *Six Victories* (fall 1941). Current Anglo-American and Italian scholarly work agrees that the increased security of Axis transports during early 1942 depended on the decline of Malta as an operative base, itself caused by increasing German air attacks. O'Hara seems unable to shake this argument, because he only identifies a chronological connection in the improved situation of the Axis convoys after the three Italian victories (p. 127), possibly mistaking correlation for causation. Surface preponderance, the main result of the

Italian victories, could not stop air and submarine attacks against Axis convoys, Britain's primary weapons against enemy communications, which indeed regained their momentum when German airpower shifted from the central Mediterranean to assist Rommel.

In conclusion, O'Hara's book offers a detailed reconstruction of the naval actions described, deserving credit for proving that the effectiveness of the Italian navy at a tactical level was better than Anglo-American studies usually have acknowledged. Less convincing is the analysis of the operational and strategic consequences of the six "victories," owing to an over-emphasis on surface warfare, which was only a part—and possibly not the most important one—of the Mediterranean naval scenario in 1941–42. Readers searching this book for lessons relevant to modern antiaccess warfare will need to bear this in mind.

FABIO DE NINNO



*On War and Politics: The Battlefield inside Washington's Beltway*, by Arnold L. Punaro, with David Poyer. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016. 249 pages. \$29.95.

*On War and Politics* is a remarkable autobiography. It explores the life and professional careers of Arnold L. Punaro, a U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (USMCR) major general and congressional insider; it also is a remarkable portrayal of the day-to-day workings of Congress and the Pentagon, so it will appeal to a broad range of readers interested in national-security affairs. Punaro spent over thirty-five years as a USMCR officer and worked closely with the chairman of the Senate Armed