Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Royal United Services Institution. Journal

ISSN: 0035-9289 (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19

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To cite this article: Captain S. W. Roskill Retd. D.S.C., R.N. (1957) Naval Operations in the Red Sea, 1940–41, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 102:606, 211-215, DOI: 10.1080/03071845709429595

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071845709429595

NAVAL OPERATIONS IN THE RED SEA, 1940-41

By CAPTAIN S. W. ROSKILL, D.S.C., R.N. (RETD.)

" History has shown from time to time the fatal results of basing naval and military strategy on an insecure line of communications. Disaster is certain to follow."—ADMIRAL SIR JOHN JELLICOE (1ST SEA LORD) TO SIR EDWARD CARSON (1ST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY), 27TH APRIL, 1917.

WITH the attention of the world again focused on that notorious storm centre generally described—if somewhat vaguely—as the Middle East, it may be of interest to recall what happened on the last occasion when the sea routes from western Europe by way of the Suez Canal were seriously threatened. On the outbreak of the 1939–45 War the British position in the Middle East depended chiefly on the mandate for Palestine, granted by the League of Nations in 1920, and on the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936. The Palestine mandate provided naval and military bases which were well placed to control the coastal waters of the Levant, and to keep watch on the overland routes to the west from the oil-bearing Mesopotamian countries; while the 1936 Treaty gave Britain the right to station forces in the Suez Canal Zone for 20 years, and for the Mediterranean Fleet to use Alexandria harbour. Taken together the two agreements assured a reasonably firm hold over waters through which ran shipping routes which were second only to the North Atlantic in importance to Britain. With Port Said, Suez, Haifa, and Alexandria available to her fleet—as well as the more remote bases of Malta and Aden—it was reasonable to suppose that, in the event of war with Germany, British maritime control could be adequately maintained. It was, however, considered probable that, if Italy joined her Axis partner, the through-Mediterranean route would have to be closed, and the main flow of shipping diverted round the Cape of Good Hope. This, however, would greatly increase the importance of maintaining control of the Red Sea, on which the supply and reinforcement of the whole Middle East theatre depended, against the Italian naval and air forces stationed in Eritrea.

In terms of geography the Italian position appeared strong; for they possessed quite good bases close off the flank of a shipping route from which virtually no deviation was possible. But geography is by no means the only consideration which influences the strength or weakness of a strategic position, and in other respects the cards were heavily stacked against the Italians. By his Abyssinian adventure of 1935 Mussolini had landed his country with a heavy military commitment, whose support depended entirely on a supply route which would certainly be cut on the day that his country went to war with Britain. When Italian troopships were pouring through the Suez Canal in 1934–35, to an accompaniment of mocking derision directed against the impassively watching crews of British warships, this writer protested to his captain regarding allowing passage to such plainly potential enemies. The captain (who later became a distinguished Flag Officer) replied, " Don't forget that every man Mussolini sends south of the canal will never fight us to the north of it." The events of 1940–41 were to fulfil that prescient remark very accurately; for Mussolini had in fact placed many thousands of his best troops, and an appreciable portion of his Navy and Air Force, in a position where they were merely hostages to British fortunes.

In 1939 the Red Sea was still part of the Royal Navy's East Indies Station, whose commander was Vice-Admiral R. Leatham. His forces comprised three

modern 6-inch cruisers, and seven escort vessels, four of which belonged to the Indian Navy.[1] As he was also responsible for the whole Indian Ocean, for the very important oil traffic from the Persian Gulf, and for the rapidly increasing number of ships bringing supplies to Suez up the East African coast his forces were certainly not excessive. Admiral Leatham's main base was at Trincomalee in Ceylon; but subsidiary bases were available, though very little developed, at Durban, Mombasa, Aden, and Bahrein, and useful fuelling points could be established in such islands as the Seychelles and Mauritius. The two main threats to the shipping in this vast area were German warship or disguised raiders operating in the ocean spaces, and the Italian surface ships, submarines, and aircraft stationed in Eritrea. It is with the latter that we are here chiefly concerned. The Italian Navy had seven fleet destroyers[2], two smaller destroyers[3], four escort vessels, eight submarines[4], and a number of motor torpedo-boats based on Massawa. There were 325 Italian aircraft of all types in East Africa, but 142 of them were in reserve and only a small proportion (about 36) consisted of modern bombers. Although air reinforcements could be flown in from Libya, stocks of fuel and spares were low; and once serious war operations started it was obviously going to be difficult to maintain efficiency and avoid a high rate of wastage. These favourable factors (from the British point of view) were, however, considerably offset by our weakness in the air. At Aden there were only one bomber, one fighter, and one reconnaissance squadron—and all of them were ill-equipped and under strength. Rather greater force was available in the Sudan, and the South African Air Force was slowly building up in Kenya; but it was certain that most of these aircraft would be needed to support the land operations, and it was optimistic to expect many to be diverted to a maritime rôle. Nor was it reasonable to look for reinforcements from the main theatre in Egypt, where the shortages were every bit as serious as in the south. The British Middle East commanders were, indeed, gravely concerned over the safety of the Red Sea route; for it was obvious that the Italian naval and air forces could do much damage to slow moving convoys, which had to traverse 1,300 miles of narrow waters from Aden to Suez, and whose movements could be so easily watched by the enemy that there could be no concealment.

From the outbreak of war until June, 1940, the East Indies Command was concerned mainly with the German surface raiders; but the disasters of June, 1940, in Europe wrought great changes in those distant waters as well as in every other theatre, and as it became clearer that France was about to drop out of the war and Italy to come in, attention at once became concentrated on the security of the Red Sea. On 24th May all sailings were stopped until convoys could be formed, and a division of four modern destroyers[5], the anti-aircraft cruiser *Carlisle*[6], and three sloops with good A.A. armaments came south through the Suez Canal to join the cruisers *Leander* (New

[1] The modern cruisers were soon transferred to other stations, and were gradually replaced by older ships. When Italy entered the war on 11th June, 1940, the East Indies Command had a polyglot fleet of Indian, Australian, and New Zealand warships as well as Royal Navy units.

[2] *Pantera, Leone, Tigre* (1,526 tons, eight 4.7-inch guns, four torpedo tubes), and *Battisti, Nullo, Sauro,* and *Manin* (1,058 tons, four 4.7-inch guns, four torpedo tubes).

[3] *Orsini* and *Acerbi* (669 tons, six 4-inch guns, four torpedo tubes).

[4] *Archimede, Ferraris, Galilei, Torricelli, Galvani, Guglielmotto, Macalle, Perla.*

[5] The *Kandahar, Kimberley, Khartoum,* and *Kingston* (1,690 tons, six 4.7-inch guns, 10 torpedo tubes).

[6] The *Carlisle* was one of the first British ships to be fitted with a search radar set for air warning purposes.

Zealand Navy), *Liverpool*, and *Hobart* (Australian Navy). Together they formed the Red Sea Escort Force based on Aden, under Rear-Admiral A. J. L. Murray. Precautions were taken at the same time to deal with any attempt to block the Suez Canal.

As soon as the Red Sea forces had been strengthened an experimental convoy of one ship was sailed from Suez to Aden, and another in the reverse direction. As this trailing of the British coat aroused no enemy response, the organization and sailing of larger convoys were at once approved.

The flow of shipping towards Suez was meanwhile increasing enormously. Fighting men from Australia and New Zealand were carried to Bombay in the 'monster liners,' and there transferred to smaller ships to join BN (Bombay-Suez) convoys; and in August the famous series of WS convoys started to bring men and supplies out from Britain via the Cape at six-week intervals. But the strain on British shipping was acute; and as the Red Sea had been declared a 'Combat Zone' by President Roosevelt, thus forbidding the entry of American ships, no easement could be looked for from across the Atlantic. None the less contemporary statistics show that between August, 1940, and the end of the year some 126,000 men (76,000 from Britain and 49,000 from Bombay or beyond) were safely carried to Egypt.

On 16th June the Italian submarine *Galileo Galilei* drew first blood by sinking a Norwegian tanker in the Gulf of Aden. For two days she was pursued by escort vessels and aircraft, and when they were diverted to other duties a diminutive trawler, the *Moonstone*, was left on patrol. On the 19th the submarine surfaced and attempted to sink her last tormentor. The trawler, however, replied vigorously and successfully, hitting the *Galilei* in the conning tower and killing her captain. The submarine thereupon surrendered, and was towed into Aden in triumph.[7] The valuable haul of documents recovered from her revealed the dispositions of four other Italian submarines, two of which were quickly accounted for. On 22nd June, Red Sea escort forces sank the *Torricelli*, and next day the sloop *Falmouth* destroyed the *Galvani* which was lying in ambush for tankers coming down the Persian Gulf. The *Macalle* had meanwhile run aground off Port Sudan and became a total loss. The four surviving submarines were thereupon recalled to Europe and reached German-occupied Bordeaux in May, 1941. The underwater threat to the Red Sea convoys was thus quickly eliminated. There remained the surface and air forces.

The early British convoys received a certain amount of attention from the Italian bombers, but their high-level attacks were singularly ineffective. Between June and December, 1940, the R.A.F. provided air escort to 54 convoys, in which only one ship was sunk by bombing and one other damaged. It was the small strength of the surface escort forces, which necessitated their running almost continuously, and the appalling heat of the Red Sea which produced the severest trials. Ships were relentlessly overdriven, and cases of exhaustion, and even of death from heat-stroke, were not uncommon among the crews. None the less they carried on. In August four convoys passed in both directions, in September five, and in October seven, comprising 158 ships, went safely through.

On the night of 20th–21st October four Italian destroyers attacked convoy BN.7 when it was about 150 miles east of Massawa, but the escort, which consisted

[7] In *Che ha fatto la Marina?* Captain M. A. Bragadin says that the crew of the *Galilei* were overcome by poison fumes. This may well have been so, but it is certainly incorrect to say, as he does, that the *Moonstone* found her adrift.

of the 6-inch cruiser *Leander*, one fleet destroyer, and four sloops, struck back hard and vigorously. Early on the 21st action was joined, and the *Francesco Nullo* was driven ashore, to be subsequently destroyed by bombing. The convoy suffered no losses but the destroyer *Kimberley* was hit by shore batteries during the pursuit and had to be towed into Aden.

In January, 1941, the British land offensive against the Italian East African empire started from Kenya and the Sudan, and met with rapid success. Warships of the East Indies Station, and others which were on passage to the Mediterranean, joined in a series of combined operations by which valuable bases were seized as the Army advanced.

In February the ports of Kismayu and Mogadshu in Italian Somaliland were captured almost intact, and this simplified the task of supplying the advancing armies. Of the 16 Axis merchantmen sheltering in Kismayu all but one (the German ship *Tannenfels*) were captured, or scuttled themselves on interception; and many British Merchant Navy prisoners, who had been landed there by raiders, were released. On 16th March an amphibious force, which had been mounted at Aden, assaulted Berbera in British Somaliland, which the Italians had overrun in August, 1940. After a short preliminary bombardment by the cruisers and destroyers the landings were entirely successful, and within a few days supplies were pouring in through the port, primitive though its facilities were.

On the last day of March three of the remaining six Italian destroyers put to sea from Massawa to raid Suez roads. The *Leone*, however, ran aground and sank, whereupon the others returned. On 2nd April all five surviving ships sailed to attack Port Sudan. Their departure was reported by aircraft from Aden, and torpedo-bombers, which had just flown to Port Sudan from the aircraft carrier *Eagle* at Alexandria, at once attacked. They and R.A.F. bombers sank the *Sauro* and *Manin* on the 3rd; while the *Pantera* and *Tigre*, which had been located south of Jeddah, were destroyed after being run aground and abandoned. The fifth ship, the *Battisti*, had meanwhile developed a defect, and scuttled herself. Thus all the seven large Italian destroyers were accounted for[8], and the solitary success achieved by the Italian surface ships was a torpedo hit by an M.T.B. on the old cruiser *Capetown*. She was safely towed into Port Sudan.

On 8th April Massawa fell, and three days later President Roosevelt declared the Red Sea to be no longer a 'Combat Zone.' Although the campaign did not end until the Italian surrender at Amba Alagi on 16th April, the main British objects had been achieved about a month earlier. The Red Sea traffic thereafter flowed to and fro virtually unhindered except for German bomber raids on Suez and attempts to mine the canal. After those threats had been countered the only further attempt to interrupt the traffic arose when German and Japanese submarines arrived in the southern approaches to the Red Sea early in 1944. They caused more serious losses than any previous enemy action; but they were finally defeated by the convoy escorts and by the location and destruction of the German U-boat supply ships *Charlotte Schliemann* and *Brake* in the southern Indian Ocean in February and March, 1944.

Though the Red Sea operations of 1940–41 were on a small scale compared with the campaigns in many other theatres, they merit attention for the lessons they contain. In the first place the stakes were, from the British point of view, very

[8] The two small destroyers *Orsini* and *Acerbi* were scuttled in Massawa harbour before its capture.

ıigh. As serious interruption to the traffic would have brought complete disaster n the Middle East, it would have been well worth the enemy's while to concentrate ıis maximum effort against these convoys. The geographically strong Italian ɔosition was, however, greatly vitiated by the grave weakness of the communications ɔn which their forces all depended ; and it was the collapse on land which led to the inal elimination of the danger at sea. On the British side the operations showed a :lassic adherence to historic principles. The air and naval forces, though slender, vere correctly disposed, and they grasped their opportunities with relish and letermination. Reinforcements, such as the additional destroyers at the beginning ınd the *Eagle's* torpedo-bombers at the end, were sent at exactly the right moment, ınd provided just what was needed. The flexibility of maritime power was thus ully exploited. The bases at Aden, Suez, and Port Sudan were sufficiently secure :o support and supply the forces which relied on them ; the balance between all :he different instruments of maritime power—surface guns, flotilla vessels, reconnais-ɜance and strike aircraft—was correctly struck. The sea transport needed to support the land operations with men and supplies was adequate to its task ; and co-operation ɒetween the three Services involved was never marred by what Sir Julian Corbett :alled " the corrupting blight " of disagreements between commanders. Finally, the campaign demonstrated how, even in circumstances which initially appeared none too favourable for its application, the convoy system provided the answer to the need to carry great numbers of men and vast quantities of stores through waters over which maritime control was in dispute. The collapse of the Italian position in East Africa came hard on the heels of the failure of their offensive against Greece in November, 1940, and of Graziani's heavy defeats in the Western Desert in the two following months. Those three Allied successes together brought about the intervention of Germany in the Mediterranean theatre, which culminated finally in the surrender in Tunisia in May, 1943 ; and that led to Mussolini's abdication just before the Salerno landings in the following September. It is no exaggeration to say that had control of the Red Sea ever been lost, that pattern of victory could never have been achieved.