

# PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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## TARANTO: OPERATION JUDGEMENT

Just after sunset on 11 November 1940, Fairey Swordfish torpedo-bombers took off from the British aircraft carrier *Illustrious* and headed for the principal Italian naval base at Taranto. At 2258 hrs, the first wave of twelve Swordfish located their primary targets, Italy's six battleships, and dropped their torpedoes. Around midnight, a second wave of nine Swordfish arrived over the harbour to complete the operation. In the wake of their attack, the British had sunk the battleship *Conte di Cavour* and left the battleships *Littorio* and *Caio Duilio* heavily damaged.

Although overshadowed by the later and far larger carrier battles in the Pacific, it was this action by the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy that first demonstrated the pivotal role that air power was to play in naval warfare and signaled the end of the era of the battleship as the dominant force in naval warfare.

The origins of the attack on Taranto began in the 1930s as Mussolini increasingly preached aggressive Italian nationalism and the creation of a New Roman Empire. He ordered the enlargement and modernisation of the Italian military, especially the navy (*Regia Marina*), to directly challenge Britain's dominance of the Mediterranean. When Italy entered World War II it possessed the fourth largest navy in the world.

Mussolini began his bid for an Italian Empire in October 1935 with a brutal invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), the last independent country in Africa. The League of Nations condemned Mussolini's aggression and Britain began preparations for peace enforcement operations against Italy. The Australian Government made available to the British two RAN ships that were currently in the Mediterranean, the heavy cruiser *Australia* and the light cruiser *Sydney*. The Royal Navy's plans for military action against Italy centered on an attack on Taranto using

carrier based aircraft. Planning for the attack required the gathering of intelligence on the harbour, harbour defences and the ships at anchor.

HMAS *Australia* carried the new Supermarine Seagull V amphibious reconnaissance aircraft, regarded by the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm as superior to any comparable type then in service. The Seagull V was an aircraft built in Britain by the Vickers Company to

specifications drawn up by the RAAF in 1926, although the design proved so successful when the prototype was flown in mid-1933 that it was subsequently introduced into British service in 1935 as well, under the name 'Walrus'.

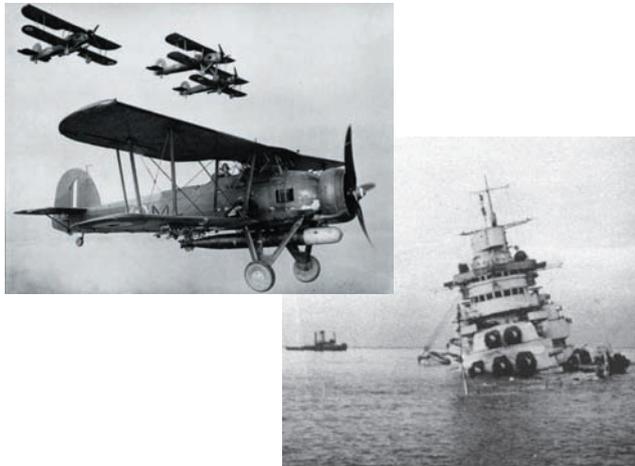


*Mediterranean theatre*

The RAN's aviation support was provided by the RAAF's No. 101 Fleet Cooperation Flight. Throughout the Abyssinian Crisis, Flying Officer James Alexander (later Air Commodore) flew reconnaissance missions, with an RAN observer and an RAN telegraphist/air gunner, in support of the Royal Navy's preparations for an attack on Taranto. Ultimately, the League of Nations settled for the imposition of economic sanctions, rather than military action, against Italy. British naval planners, however, continued to draw up options for war in the Mediterranean, including an attack on Taranto; the plan developed in 1935-36 was updated, especially at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938, and became the basis for the attack actually carried out two years later.

After Italy formally entered World War II on 10 June 1940, the Regia Marina had several clashes with the Royal Navy, including a large but inconclusive action involving several battleships off the coast of Calabria in July. Following these initial contests, the Italians rarely ventured out to directly contest control of the Mediterranean, but instead concentrated their ships at

Taranto—one of the most heavily fortified anchorages in the world. The mere existence of the Italian fleet posed an ever-present threat (or Persistent Effect) to Britain’s vital supply lines through the Suez Canal. To counter this threat, Britain was impelled to utilise warships and resources badly needed elsewhere. The greatest need of British commander, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, was to neutralise the Regia Marina at Taranto.



*Top: Fairey Swordfish Torpedo-Bombers*

*Bottom: The Battleship Conte di Cavour after the attack*

In August 1940, the newly completed aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* joined the carrier HMS *Eagle* in the Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria. Arriving with the *Illustrious* to take command of the fleet’s carriers was Rear-Admiral Lumley Lyster, Fifth Sea Lord and Flag Officer Carrier Training, who had been developing and refining the plan for a carrier attack on Taranto since the Abyssinian Crisis.

Lyster’s plan, Operation *Judgement*, called for a surprise attack at night by his torpedo-bombers. A night attack was essential to the plan as the Fleet Air Arm’s obsolete Fairey Swordfish biplane torpedo-bombers could not make more than 80 knots when burdened with their torpedoes. The anti-aircraft guns of the ships and harbour defences and the fighters of the Italian Air Force (*Regia Aeronautica*) made a daylight attack at this speed suicidal. Achieving surprise was also critical in ensuring that an alerted Italian fleet did not sally forth to give battle. This would not only make it more difficult for the aircraft to locate and hit their targets, but the Italian battleships would pose a very real threat to the vulnerable carriers.

Attacking ships at anchor in the shallow waters of Taranto harbour posed another considerable challenge. Special modifications were made to the torpedoes for use in the shallow waters within the confines of the harbour and tests were carried out that determined that the torpedoes needed to be dropped at a height of 30 feet. To achieve this at night and under fire presented the Fleet Air Arm with no easy task, but Cunningham and Lyster made the decision to proceed.

After the attack, the Royal Navy—in a single night and using obsolete aircraft—had succeeded in halving the Italian battleship fleet. The loss of the three battleships was keenly felt by the Italians four months later when they were decisively defeated at the Battle of Cape Matapan, where the Fairey Swordfish again played a decisive role, after which the Regia Marina never again ventured into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Taranto changed many naval experts’ thoughts regarding air power and the potency of surprise air-launched torpedo attacks on ships at anchor. Prior to Taranto it was widely believed that deep water was absolutely necessary to successfully drop torpedoes. Operation *Judgement* forever changed this notion. Ominously for the Allies, the Taranto raid was thoroughly studied by the Japanese. The officers of the Imperial Japanese Navy, particularly Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku and Captain Genda Minoru, studied the battle in minute detail in planning the strike on Pearl Harbor.

- *The fundamental change that air power brought to naval warfare was first demonstrated at Taranto.*
- *RAAF Seagull V aircraft played an important role in the preliminary planning for the attack.*
- *Japanese naval officers studied Taranto in refining plans for the carrier strike on Pearl Harbor.*

*For good or for ill, air mastery is today the supreme expression of military power and fleets and armies, however vital and important, must accept a subordinate rank.*

— Prime Minister Winston Churchill



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