

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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KNOW THE ENEMY WELL

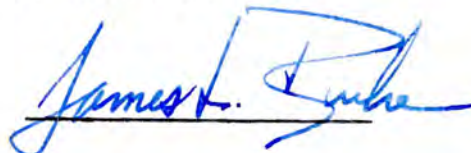
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of  
KNOW THE ENEMY WELL

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An analysis of the gap between the peacetime reputation and subsequent wartime performance of the navy of fascist Italy. The analysis suggests that pre-war British foreign policy with regard to Italy was unduly compromised by a failure to properly assess the effectiveness of the Italian Navy. An analogy is made between that time and the present balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. It is suggested that we must better assess Soviet capabilities and weaknesses if we are to determine the proper plans, strategies, and weapons of tomorrow as well as the proper perspective to be held with regard to the potential adversary.

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# KNOW THE ENEMY WELL

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Today, the employment of the fleets of the two super-powers gives rise to a debate over their relative strength. In the discussion over which nation is the most powerful at sea, it is hard to remember that only a relatively short time ago one was clearly predominant. The rapid emergence of Soviet seapower is, for two reasons, one of the most profound developments in the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. First, the sea arena is one in which the United States, despite its strength, is highly vulnerable because of its dependence on overseas supplies; hence on control of the sea lines of communication. Second, the sea arena is one in which the Soviet Union is relatively invulnerable even if it were to lose a war at sea with the United States because of its relative independence from overseas markets and supplies.

The relatively sudden development of a powerful and potentially hostile navy is the cause of great concern; even alarm to the West. Critics of Western defense readiness cite with justification impressive statistics concerning the Soviet naval order of battle. However evaluation of the relative effectiveness of the U.S. and the Soviet navies presents a

more difficult and more important problem. Once, very simple comparisons of numbers and types of ships, quantities and calibers of guns, and thickness of armor plate and speed provided apparent indicies of relative strength, although, even in earlier times, more sophisticated writers recognized that naval effectiveness consisted of more than mere order of battle comparisons.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, it is very much more difficult to make comparisons amid loud debates over the worth of the very building blocks in the order of battle. Theoriticians argue whether or not the aircraft carrier is obsolete, or soon will be, with the development of new weapons and reconaissance systems. Others debate the value of amphibious assault forces in an era which will see even third world countries armed with sophisticated weapons. While one school may claim that the future belongs to the submarine, another predicts that the oceans will be made "transparent" with the development of future ocean surveillance systems. Future war scenarios range from all out nuclear exchange to war at sea in the traditional sense.

Regardless of these very tangible issues, all of which are beyond the scope of this paper, it should be evident that effectiveness in this technological age is highly dependent, as never before, on factors which are not manifest such as the reliability of very sophisticated equipment, the training and technical proficiency of naval and support personnel, and,

as always, on intelligent and aggressive direction and employment of naval forces in conjunction with the necessary facilities to support those forces. A current German writer, Edward Wegener, lists three elements which he believes comprise modern seapower; a fleet, tailored to the requirements of the strategy to be undertaken; a naval strategic-geographic position to operate from; and a sea-oriented mentality, especially on the part of those with authority to direct events.<sup>2</sup>

The present writer believes that there has been a "ten foot tall" syndrome in evaluating the effectiveness of Soviet seapower. With regard to their fleet, the most visible element and the source of the present alarm, it should be reasonable to impute to it some of the same problems which we ourselves have experienced in developing, operating, and maintaining sophisticated systems for and in the hostile sea environment. Yet the impression is easily formed that Soviet systems always work, weapons always hit the target, and the great numbers of systems which they shoehorn into their hulls, to great visual effect, present no maintenance problem despite an inadequate logistics train and minimal overseas bases.

Concerning Wegener's second requisite, a naval strategic-geographical position, the Soviet situation can be dismissed in one word: inadequate. A change to this factor would require either a successful war or a fundamental political realignment in the world.

Finally, with regard to a sea-oriented mentality, the Soviets in their naval development appear to be shaking off a centuries old preoccupation with land warfare. The depth and breadth of this change in thinking is difficult to gauge, and, especially in totalitarian states, a concept as untraditional as seapower is to the Soviets may fall victim to traumatic changes in government and policy.

A maxim of war, written in blood, is never to underestimate the enemy. However, it is also debilitating and demoralizing to overestimate the opponent. One writer has said with regard to the Soviet navy,

"Crude statistics are quoted...with little attention to qualitative evaluation or the likelihood of the contingencies to which they are applied. As a result the debate tends to be polarized between extremists; believers in the sinister omnicompetence of the Soviet Navy so exasperate their critics, that the latter are sometimes driven to discount a threat of which they have correctly perceived the distortion."

The dearth of information caused by effective Soviet secrecy about such matters as their ship and equipment reliability, maintenance techniques, personnel competence, and the commitment and belief of Soviet power players in an offensive naval and maritime strategy make an analysis of Soviet capability, along the lines these matters suggest, beyond the competence of the present writer, although such an analysis might be fertile ground for the intelligence community to plow. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that in

another case in a different era, qualitative differences which were not apparent in time of peace made a decisive difference in time of war. The time is the period 1922 to 1943; the case is the rise of the Italian Navy under a totalitarian, expansionist dictatorship in the Mediterranean Sea, previously under the dominion of the Royal Navy. It was a period when Great Britain, which had long been predominant at sea, and tired after a long war, had allowed her once overwhelming navy to be reduced in size and found herself willing to embrace peace at almost any price, despite the growth of potentially hostile seapower on her very lifelines. It was a time not altogether unlike our own.

Chapter II, "Mussolini's Navy in Peace," is a narrative, briefly describing the diplomatic successes achieved by employment of the navy.

Chapter III, "Mussolini's Navy in War," selects a few examples illustrative of the navy's deficiencies which led to its defeat.

Chapter IV, "Conclusions," analyzes the failure of the British to take a correct measure of the potential enemy in time of peace, and makes generalizations for extrapolation into the present consideration of Soviet naval power and effectiveness.



## CHAPTER II

### MUSSOLINI'S NAVY IN PEACE

This chapter is primarily a narrative of significant events concerning the employment of the Italian Navy in support of an aggressive foreign policy between Mussolini's rise to power in 1922 and Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940. Most of the incidents are discussed very briefly; only the Abyssinian crisis of 1935 -- 1936 is discussed in any detail because this incident alone found Italy in direct and successful confrontation with Great Britain, Europe's greatest naval power.

The discussion of the peacetime employment of naval forces in support of a national policy implies the existence of such a policy. In the case of fascist Italy there is risk involved in implying the existence of a national policy, at least in terms of a coherent, systematic ordering of national goals and relationships with other powers. Mussolini had risen to power on a wave of resentment following the settlement of the First World War. The promises made by Britain and France to entice Italy into the war on the side of the Entente were mainly forgotten in the euphoria of victory and the idealism of Wilson and his Fourteen Points. Italy felt cheated but was powerless to do anything about it. Mussolini did not have a clearly defined policy, although he had visions of the glory of Rome and vague notions of a new empire. The Italian Foreign

Ministry, the Palazzo Chigi, remained in the hands of career diplomats and civil servants, who gave some stability to the conduct of foreign relations despite the rule of a volatile and romantic dictator. Mussolini's policy, such as it was, was opportunism. In describing the first ten years of fascist foreign relations one writer has said,

"The story would always be the same. Mussolini took an idea into his head. He charged ahead blindly. He met an obstacle. He drew back. But in drawing back he sang paeans of triumph. And, having learned nothing, he did the same thing again next time."<sup>1</sup>

During this period it can be said that Britain and France did not take Italy and her leader very seriously, especially before 1927. Italy was regarded still as an ally and Mussolini the man who had saved Italy from bolshevism. Hitler had not yet come to power and war was not regarded as likely for the foreseeable future. The incidents of this period should be regarded in this light.

The Corfu Crisis of 1923. Mussolini's first adventure in diplomacy was the seizure of the Greek island of Corfu in 1923. The incident was precipitated by the murder of the entire Italian deligation on the Interallied Commission for the Delimitation of the Albanian Frontier. The murder occurred on 27 August near the frontier, but in Greek territory, and numbered among the victims was a popular general officer. The nationality of the terrorists was never determined.

The incident was ready made for Mussolini, who had been in office for less than a year and was spoiling for a chance to demonstrate Italian prowess. Greece had just been defeated in a war with Turkey and its government had collapsed. It was not in a position to offer resistance to Italy. Mussolini charged Greece with responsibility for the murder of the Italian delegation and issued a humiliating ultimatum to Greece which involved, among other things, the payment of an indemnity of 50 million lire to Italy. When the Greeks responded in a conciliatory manner granting some, but not all of the demands, Mussolini ordered the fleet to occupy the island of Corfu.

The occupation was accomplished on 31 August, after a short bombardment by heavy naval guns which resulted in a number of civilian casualties. This heavy handed action might have been a diplomatic disaster had not Mussolini's timing been so perfect. France, which was herself engaged in an illegal occupation of the Ruhr to force the Streseman government to make concessions on the subject of reparations, did not want the subject of illegal occupations to surface at the League of Nations. Great Britain, disposed at first to slap Mussolini's hand, desisted partly because of the attitude of France and partly because her fleet was already committed to another crisis in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> So the great powers "solved" the crisis by inducing the victim to give into the demands of the aggressor, an unfortunate precedent for future appeasement.

"The tragedy of the Corfu crisis was not that the dispute was solved outside of the machinery of the League, but that it in no way denied Mussolini the fruits of his aggression. The Duce retired from this perilous adventure unscathed and with his prestige enhanced. The incident furnished him with his first real success on the international scene.... In a dramatic way it was an announcement that a vigorous Italy under a new and dynamic leadership had begun to play a more important role in world affairs."<sup>3</sup>

The Tangier Incident of 1927. Another incident, on a smaller scale, which illustrates the changing position of Italy in the European power structure is given by the Tangier incident of 1927. Italy had been excluded from the convention of 1923 when Great Britain, France and Spain agreed to a new statute for the international zone of Tangier to replace the obsolete Algeciras Act of 1906. The 1923 convention was not a happy one and the Spanish government pressed for a revision to the agreement. Italy did not wish to be excluded again from an agreement partly because she had a number of Italian nationals residing in Tangier but also on the grounds of prestige. Accordingly, a squadron of Italian warships called at Tangier on 27 October 1927, under the command of the Prince of Udine, a cousin of the King, who proclaimed that the visit was

"...an acte de presence and a reminder, at the juncture when negotiations are about to be re-opened in Paris between the French and Spanish Governments on the subject of Tangier, that the Italian Government maintains its policy of non-recognition of the existing status, and will accept no settlement of the question that has been arrived at without its consultation and co-operation."<sup>4</sup>

Italy's determination not to be excluded was taken seriously, and the new Tangier Statute of 1928 was a four power instrument which included Italy.

Albania 1924 -- 1939. Italy's relations with Albania, its neighbor across the Adriatic, offer examples of her increasingly aggressive foreign policy and use of seapower. Albania was one of the areas which Italy had expected to gain at the Paris conference after the war but had been disappointed. In 1924 Italy concluded a treaty of commerce and navigation with Albania, a very poorly developed country, and doubtless anticipated establishing an economic suzerainty over the region. Ahmed Bey Zogu, who had been expelled earlier from Albania and had set up an opposition group hiding in Yugoslavia, was fomenting a rebellion from that sanctuary. In early December, 1924 Zogu led his followers into Albania. Italy countered by sending a small squadron of warships, three destroyers, to Durazzo. However, this demonstration was unsuccessful and Zogu took power on 24 December. President Zogu, later King Zog I, took an independent line with regard to his recent benefactor, Yugoslavia, although he did settle the outstanding boarder disputes with that country. Zogu signed a treaty in 1926 with Italy which pledged Albania not to enter into political engagements with other countries which might be prejudicial to Italy. In return he received economic aid.

Difficulties between the two countries developed, and Albania refused to renew the 1926 accord when it expired in 1931. King Zog expelled the Italian military instructors in 1934, while he endeavored to improve his relations with Yugoslavia. Italy decided to bring her protege to heel and sent a naval force of 19 ships to Durazzo. The force entered Albanian waters without diplomatic notice or clearance and did not salute the Albanian flag. This unambiguous gesture was not lost on Zog, who later agreed to the return of the military mission, reopening of Italian schools, and admission to Albania of Italian immigrants who desired to settle there. King Zog apparently understood the gesture better than the British who, if an article in The Times is to be taken at face value, accepted Italy's explanation that a telegram to Albania clearing the visit of the warships had been "overlooked" by the Italian minister in Albania.<sup>5</sup>

The Albanian question was eventually resolved to Italy's satisfaction when, on Good Friday, 1939 the Italian Navy landed troops without warning, deposed King Zog, and annexed the country. By that time, however, the great powers had more pressing problems.

The Abyssinian Crisis of 1935--1936. In 1934 Mussolini decided that the time was ripe to conquer Abyssinia. An impoverished piece of earth which, in Churchill's phrase, "...no

conqueror in four thousand years ever thought it worthwhile to subdue....", Abyssinia lay between the Italian colonies of Somaliland and Eritrea.<sup>6</sup> That Mussolini would risk a war for so poor a prize is somewhat of a mystery:

"Abyssinia was an old object of Italian ambition, and the scene of her catastrophic defeat at Adowa in 1896. Revenge for Adowa was implicit in Fascist boasting; but no more urgent in 1935 than at anytime since Mussolini came to power in 1922. Conditions in Italy did not demand a war. Fascism was not politically threatened; and economic circumstances in Italy favoured peace, not the inflation of war. Nor does Italy's diplomatic position in regard to Abyssinia seem to have been endangered. Though Abyssinia had been admitted to the League of Nations in 1925, this had been done on Italian initiative--to check supposed British encroachments there.... Both Great Britain and France recognized Abyssinia as Italy's 'sphere of interest'...."?

Whatever Mussolini's attraction for Abyssinia may have been, his timing was again excellent. In rare complete agreement with the professionals of the Palazzo Chigi, Mussolini sensed that the re-emergence of Germany under Hitler provided Italy with wider room for maneuver. Mussolini had shown the value of his partnership to France and Great Britain in July, 1934 when a premature attempt by Austrian Nazis to seize power in Vienna was frustrated by Italy. In January 1935 a Franco--Italian agreement was concluded which assured Italian assistance against German expansion through Austria. This agreement, which made France dependent on Italy, had the effect of ruling out the possibility of concerted Franco--British

action against Italy over the African question.<sup>8</sup>

Tension had been increasing between Italy and Abyssinia for some time. On 5 December 1934 a battle took place at the wells at Wal--Wal, some 40 miles inside Abyssinian territory. The Abyssinians lost about 130 men killed and appealed to the Council of the League of Nations against Italian aggression.<sup>9</sup> Great Britain found herself in a dilemma. More than France, Britain supported the League and the principle of collective security; like France she desired to conciliate Italy in case of future war with Germany. There was no question that Italy was in the wrong, but what to do about it divided the government as the crisis dragged on through 1935. It came down to a problem of imposing sanctions against Italy, which was highly dependent on overseas supplies, especially oil. Agreement with France seemed to depend on designing a set of sanctions which would not hurt Italy, but this would fatally wound the League.

The preliminary stage seemed to come to head on 11 September 1935 when the British Foreign Secretary delivered a ringing speech at Geneva in favor of collective security and simultaneously the British fleet was concentrated in the Mediterranean. It appeared that Britain had made up her mind. Such a display of determination might have had some effect had it not been for behind the scenes maneuvering. Hoare of Britain and Laval of France agreed that any sanctions



against Italy would be applied "cautiously," and that her oil would not be interfered with. Laval kept Mussolini informed.<sup>10</sup> These gentlemen also drew up a plan for the partition of Abyssinia which effectively would have given Mussolini half of the empire he sought without a fight. Lord Perth, the British ambassador in Rome assured Mussolini that the fleet concentration was not an aggressive gesture, but was the result of the "...violence of the campaign against the United Kingdom which had been conducted in the Italian Press during the last few weeks...."<sup>11</sup> The Royal Navy was mobilized, not against Italy, but against the Italian press! When the Hoare -- Laval Plan was leaked there was so much indignation in Britain that the Foreign Secretary had to resign and for a while it looked as if the Prime Minister might go as well.

Unsuprisingly, Mussolini was not deterred. On 3 October Italy invaded Abyssinia, and the League, led by Britain, imposed sanctions. However, when the list of sanctions was devised it did not include commodities such as oil which Mussolini required for his war in Abyssinia.

Britain, still of at least two minds on what to do, conducted serious negotiations with the French between January and March with a view toward naval cooperation against Italy in the event of war, but the French response was not encouraging. Then, on 7 March 1936, Hitler reoccupied the the Rhineland. This took the wind out of the sails of those who felt

that stronger action against Italy was required.

"The Rhineland crisis focused attention on the German naval threat in home waters and confirmed the Admiralty in its view that we must recover our relations with Italy...."<sup>12</sup>

In May the Italians completed the conquest of Abyssinia. Sanctions were lifted in July and the British fleet returned to its normal posture. The crisis was over.

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that British policy was immobilized by a number of factors, including a raw overestimation of Italian military and naval strength. Although her navy was significantly outnumbered by the British, Italy's position was regarded as favorable in the central Mediterranean. She had excellent bases throughout the area to support both fleet operations and land based air cover. Her ships were faster than the British, although not so well armored, and might be able to select the time and place of battle. Although the British had more ships, they also had more commitments tending to reduce the numbers available. Losses the Royal Navy might incur in a war with Italy would affect the naval balance she had to maintain against Germany and Japan. In concentrating solely on their own problems, to the exclusion of those of the enemy which were considerable, Britain's admirals saw only difficulties and gave poor advice to a government torn between its obligation to

the League and vocal advocates of pacifism.

"The government...received a report from their naval advisors to the effect that the British navy in the Mediterranean, though reinforced by the entire Home Fleet, was no match for the combined Italian navy and airforce....

"Hence the successors of Nelson put their names to a craven opinion which would have earned them instant dismissal from an earlier Board of Admiralty."<sup>13</sup>

The mere existence of Italy's naval and air power, although smaller than that of Britain, was enough to assure the success of an operation highly dependent on use of the sea. When war did finally come, Britain was to learn how much she had overrated the enemy, but the factors unmasked by war were not readily apparent in peace.

The Spanish Civil War 1936 -- 1939. The conflict in Spain is not very significant to this paper, except that Italy's support of Franco caused naval circles in Britain and France concern that, should Franco win, Mussolini might obtain a naval base in the Balearic Islands. Such a base would threaten French communications with North Africa, and British control of the western Mediterranean based at Gibraltar might be diminished. So, at a time when Britain and France earnestly desired a rapprochement with Italy, they found themselves for this as well as other issues ranged on opposite sides of a new crisis. In November 1936 Mussolini proclaimed the Rome -- Berlin Pact with Hitler. The overcautious policy which had

been followed in order to align Italy with Britain and France against a resurgent Germany was bankrupt.

In late 1937 "unidentified" but certainly Italian submarines started sinking Russian ships resupplying the Spanish Republic. Britain and France responded with a naval patrol and a declaration of intention to sink all unidentified submarines found in the patrol area. The sinkings stopped. "Here was a demonstration, never repeated, that Mussolini would respect a show of strength."<sup>14</sup>

This has been a narrative of the employment and effectiveness of the fascist Italian Navy between the world wars. All things considered it was successful in support of an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy. Its success ended with the war that followed.

## CHAPTER III

### MUSSOLINI'S NAVY IN WAR

This chapter briefly addresses the Italian Navy's experience in the Second World War. The selection of events are a few highlights of 39 months of war. These highlights were chosen to illustrate some of the difficulties which crippled Italian naval operations, and not to denigrate Italians or the Italian Navy. For example, the heroic exploits of the Italian frogmen are not mentioned because they did not influence the outcome.

Mussolini's decision to enter the war, just days before the fall of France, was a political one, postponed until it seemed that the war might end without Italian participation. Mussolini was not alone in underestimating the will and capacity of Great Britain to carry on alone.

The entrance of Italy into the war found her with few offensive plans.<sup>1</sup> Her land forces were to hold what they had, while the navy was to keep supplies moving to Africa and to interdict British sea lines of communication to her forces fighting in the Mediterranean basin; other lifelines vital to British survival were removed from the Italian sphere of action. Italian success in the Mediterranean would hurt but not cripple Britain. The reverse was not true.

The Italian naval campaign revolved around continuous

convoy across the central Mediterranean to Africa. The presence of British air power at Malta, astride the convoy routes, was a great handicap to these operations, but the Italian Navy was prevented from conducting a desired amphibious assault against the island because it could not obtain dedicated air support for such an undertaking. In spite of periodic air raids by German and Italian air forces, Malta, like the Egyptian phoenix, kept rising from its ashes to plague and to eventually destroy the supply lines to Africa.

On 9 July 1940 occurred the first engagement between British and Italian capital ships. A British squadron of battleships and cruisers pursued a similar but smaller force of Italian ships within 25 miles of the coast of Italy. The engagement was indecisive, although an Italian battleship was damaged. The British force was attacked by the Italian Air Force as it retired but did not receive a single hit. Unfortunately the air force also attacked their own ships, with similar results. Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister, observed that the "...battle ...was not a fight between British and Italians but a dispute between our sailors and our aviators."<sup>2</sup>

This first engagement illustrates the types of problems which were to be increasingly evident. There was ineffective co-ordination between the navy and the air force, even in a

fight only a few miles off the coast. When the air force finally appeared it was unable to hit the target, or even to distinguish friend from foe. The air force had only high altitude bombers; no dive bombers or torpedoe planes. The Italian commander at sea was under tight rein from Supermarina, the Italian naval headquarters ashore, throughout the engagement. His first plan was countermanded by the ministry, which continued step by step planning with him throughout the action. Italian reconnaissance provided no information concerning the enemy's whereabouts, but the British were able to track the Italians. The lack of efficient aircraft reconnaissance demonstrated above incurred a heavier penalty on the night of 12 November 1940 when a British aircraft carrier approached within striking range of Taranto harbor and sank three battleships.

Further illustrations of these problems are given by the Battle of Cape Matapan on 28--29 March 1941. Although both sides had strong forces, the Italians were proceeding under a hastily arranged plan which involved German and Italian air support. There was poor co-ordination and the promised air cover did not materialize. When a British reconnaissance aircraft discovered the force, the mission was compromised so that the desired result, interdiction of British supplies and troops, was probably precluded by the loss of surprise.

As the force was exposed to enemy air and naval attack far from its own bases, and without effective air protection of its own, the commander believed that the mission should be aborted, but he took no action other than to await orders from Supermarina.<sup>3</sup> The Italian admiral had received an aircraft reconnaissance report on the 27th that the British combatants were still in port, but he received no further intelligence until he encountered the enemy ships at sea.

In contrast, the British commander had a carefully worked out plan for the eventuality that the Italian ships might appear. He had only to execute it when he received a report from his own reconnaissance that the enemy had been sighted. From his flagship he was able to arrange air strikes on the enemy ships, not only from an aircraft carrier, but from Royal Air Force planes in Greece and other Royal Navy planes on Crete.<sup>4</sup> During the night action which followed he had another advantage of which the Italians had no inkling -- Radar.

The Italians lost three cruisers, two destroyers, and had a battleship torpedoed; in all, 2,800 men were killed. The British lost one man, a pilot, during an attack on the Italian ships.

The value of advance planning and preparation, air power, co-ordination among diverse forces, adequate command and control, initiative of the commander, and the impact of technological developments can all be seen in an examination of this



engagement. The impact of this battle on the Italian Navy was significant:

"Never again in this war was the Italian fleet to venture forth at night. We were like a powerful, well trained boxer who has lost his eye-sight. All our skill, all our stamina, all our strength were useless."<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly fuel oil supplies became critical to the Italian fleet. The problem was so severe that by mid-1942 Italy essentially had to tie up her capital ships. With Allied success in North Africa, air supremacy in the central Mediterranean was lost for good. The Italian fleet's heavy units were confined to home waters and based in the North. The fleet was unable to intervene even when the Allies invaded Sicily in July, 1943.

So it came to pass on 10 September 1943, that the Italian fleet, what remained of it, sailed into Malta harbor, a place it could not gain in war, in order to join its former enemy in accordance with the terms of the armistice. Mussolini's showboat navy, which had weighed so heavily in the peacetime scales of power came to Malta nearly two years before the Second World War would finally end.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

"The value of history in the art of war is not only to elucidate the resemblance of past and present, but also their essential differences."

Sir Julien Corbett, 1854-1922

The proceeding two chapters were intended to show that the Italian Navy was an effective instrument of the pre-war diplomacy of fascist Italy, but when war came it did not live up to the reputation which it had attained. It is not enough to simply state that the Italian Navy had been overrated.

There were, for example, in those pre-war days, acknowledged differences between the Italian and British navies. A perceptive qualitative analysis of those differences was very difficult to make at the time because many of the factors which bore on the issue were uncertainties to the naval leaders of the day. Take, for example, air power. We all know that until there were graphic demonstrations of the vulnerability of surface ships to air power, there were many who did not realize that the traditional capital ship was in eclipse. However, even among the believers in air power, there was a bitter dispute about how air power should be organized and employed. In the period between the wars the fight over air power led to integrated air arms in the British and American navies, but it was a near run thing, especially in the Royal Navy. Germany and Italy established separate air forces many

years ahead of the United States. In keeping with a more uncompromising approach to air power, their establishment excluded separate fleet air arms. Given Italy's favored geographical position in the central Mediterranean and the currency of the debate over air power, who could have been certain that Mussolini's boast that Italy was an unsinkable aircraft carrier was bombast? Who could have foretold the problems in co-ordination which developed? The problem was not yet in perspective.

Look for a moment at the command and control arrangements briefly alluded to in the previous chapter. Italian admirals at sea in contact with or in proximity to the enemy were regularly receiving instructions from Supermarina. The net result was a very inefficient and awkward employment of forces and an occasional appalling lack of initiative on the part of the commander at the scene. Perhaps today, with plans for world-wide, command, control and communications systems, some technological frontier has been crossed which will make centralized control of distant forces in contact with the enemy a viable reality. However, it would be folly to completely disregard the lessons of history, especially that the routine capability to pass the buck higher tends to reduce the initiative and responsibility of subordinate commanders at the scene while the higher level which will take

inevitably delayed action may not fully appreciate essential circumstances which are obvious at the scene.

In the Second World War the Allies were particularly fortunate in a technological lead over the enemy. The development of radar gave the British a critical advantage over the Italians, as it did the United States over Japan. In an age of rapidly expanding technology, it goes without saying that we appreciate this factor more than our predecessors did. But we must be sure that the awareness that we have concerning an opponent's technological development is reasonable and accurately reflects his capabilities lest we be too timid or too bold. The Italians never operated at night against the British after Matapan; the Japanese, however, although handicapped by the lack of radar, conducted some brilliant night actions against the United States.

It was known before the war that Italy was highly dependent on overseas supplies, especially oil. In the Abyssinian crisis Britain and France paled at the idea of cutting off Italian oil because to do so would mean war. Yet, without oil Italy could not wage war, at least not for long. The full significance of Italy's fuel oil problem was not appreciated.

Returning to Wegener's three elements of sea power, it can be seen that although Italy had a fleet, it was a "flawed cutlass," blind and naked from above. She had a strategic-geographical position, but being unable to control the sea with

her fleet, this was merely a highway on which the enemy could advance. As far as a sea-oriented mentality is concerned, regardless of how good certain Italian admirals may or may not have been, Italy was a dictatorship, and, in such a regime, the will, knowledge, and foresight of one man, or perhaps a small group of men, is all important.

"Mussolini had some inkling of the importance of seapower, but he surely failed to grasp many of its principles. Nor did he properly understand the maritime strategic factors inherent in the geo-politics of the Mediterranean Sea.... Before the initiation of hostilities he was not sufficiently impressed by the reasoning of his Naval High Command or by the Navy pleas for necessary preparatory measures.... There was also a lack of understanding of the tools required by a Navy to discharge its maritime duties in war, notably an adequate air arm of its own. The result of this, as far as the Italian Navy was concerned, was the imposing of an initial and continuing handicap on Italian naval forces vis-a-vis the Allies; in the broader sense, Mussolini's overall war aims suffered from the frustrations and reverses at sea.<sup>1</sup>

Leaving now the story of the Italian Navy, what generalizations, if any, can be extrapolated from the past to the present, keeping in mind the quotation at the head of this chapter. It must be recognized that this is an entirely different era, with weapons of unprecedented destructiveness, making total war an unthinkable concept to sensible men and imposing, therefore, constraints on the conduct of operations unknown in the Second World War, or in the period preceding that conflict. The world today has fewer great powers, which may be more advantageous than less. The Soviet Union is not

vulnerable at sea the way Italy was, and the United States is threatened at sea by the Soviet Union in a way Great Britain was not threatened by Italy. The two situations are not very similar in many key respects, but surely there are some insights of timeless, general nature which can be gleaned from a study of this tale.

The British did not know their enemy; they overstated his strengths and underestimated his weaknesses to the detriment of their foreign policy. How well do we know our opponent? As discussed in Chapter I, we concentrate heavily on a count of ships and systems, but we seem to have much less knowledge of their reliability and effectiveness, and the quality of the personnel assigned. At times we seem to credit the enemy with more than we reasonably expect from ourselves.

Soviet operations seem to indicate a high degree of co-ordination and control from Moscow. Some would argue this to be an advantage, but it is to be wondered if Soviet commanders and commanding officers, most of whom have never seen combat, have the same flexibility, initiative and instincts which we might expect from our own.

What are the effects of a political infrastructure, which has a hierarchy all its own, on command in the Soviet Navy? What effects might we expect on an enemy offensive naval strategy from a totalitarian, bureaucratic dictatorship

with a historical preoccupation with land warfare and defensive naval strategies? Just how flexible is the leadership? Totalitarian states have displayed incredible wartime inefficiencies imposed by the nature of their systems. Without suggesting that these questions provide a tool useful at the tactical level in real time situations, it is suggested that we must all have a feeling for the types of difficulties which the enemy has and the problems which he faces if we are to avoid a weakened and demoralized attitude which will cloud our judgement and deprive us of our initiative. At higher levels, in the long term, qualitative knowledge of the enemy may provide the course to be followed in developing tomorrow's strategy, tactics and weapons. We must avoid, at any cost, forging shackles for ourselves as the British did in 1935 -- 1936. It is wrong to merely count the enemy's guns and believe his propaganda. We must do better. We must know the enemy well.

## NOTES

### Chapter I

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2. James Barros, The Corfu Incident of 1923, Mussolini and the League of Nations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 180.

3. Ibid., p. 313.

4. Survey of International Affairs, 1929 (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 194.

5. "A Diplomatic Oversight," The Times (London), 27 June 1934, p. 15:2

6. Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War, Vol. 1, The Gathering Storm (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 173.

7. A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 87--88.

8. David H. Popper, "Strategy and Diplomacy in the Mediterranean," Foreign Policy Reports, 1 June 1937, p. 66.

9. Salvemini, op. cit., pp. 172-- 173.

10. Taylor, op. cit., p. 91.

11. Salvemini, op. cit., p. 307.



12. Arthur Marder, "The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935 -- 1936," The American Historical Review June 1970, p. 1352.

13. Taylor, op. cit., pp. 92 -- 93.

14. Ibid., p. 127.

### Chapter III

1. Giuseppe Fioravanzo, "Italian Strategy in the Mediterranean," United States Naval Institute Proceedings, September 1958, p. 65.

2. Raymond De Belot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 1939 -- 1945 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 67 -- 68.

3. Franco Maugeri, From the Ashes of Disgrace (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1948), p. 23.

4. De Belot, op. cit., p. 106.

5. Maugeri, op. cit., p. 28.

### Chapter IV

1. Robert B. Carney, "Foreword," to Marc' Antonio Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1957), p. vi.

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