

# SEMAPHORE

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## HMAS QUIBERON, 1942 – SEA CONTROL & LOGISTICS

*'Communications dominate war; broadly considered, they are the most important single element in strategy, political or military.'*

Captain A.T. Mahan, USN, 1900

At its heart the naval war in the Mediterranean (1940-43) was a struggle for communications. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, transport is the stem from which victory blooms, since without supplies no army is good for anything.<sup>2</sup> Commanders engaged on both sides of the North African campaign were ultimately dependent upon sea transport for the troops, airmen, equipment, food, ammunition and fuel they needed to fight. As such, the battle for Sea Control, and in its wake the destruction or safe arrival of men and stores, correlated closely with the operational outcomes ashore. The results remain instructive if not readily predictable, for the Axis leadership never placed sufficient emphasis upon sea power.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) had been active in the Mediterranean since the war's beginning and its individual and combined actions against the ill-prepared Italian Navy did much to ensure the enemy never achieved either moral or materiel ascendancy. Even after the opening of the Pacific War in December 1941, the strategic importance of the Mediterranean meant that our ships regularly operated there until after the Italian armistice. In late 1942 the flag was borne by the destroyer HMAS *Quiberon*, under Commander H.W.S. Browning, RN. Only commissioned in July, she was about to undertake the most intensive and diverse operations of her life.



*HMAS Quiberon in July 1942*

Joining the Royal Navy's formidable Force 'H' in October 1942, *Quiberon* became part of the main covering force for Operation TORCH, the Allied landings in French North Africa. Aimed at securing the western and central Mediterranean and opening up Italy for subsequent invasion, the TORCH landings were the first large-scale amphibious assaults since Gallipoli, and significant both for their success and for the great distances involved. *Quiberon* sailed with Force 'H' from Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, while for those forces coming direct from the US it was the farthest an American expeditionary force had yet been projected. Hence, integral to the assault plans were overwhelming escort and covering forces. Almost 50

Axis submarines operated in the Mediterranean or eastern Atlantic approaches, but their attacks caused minimal damage to the 1000 vessels in transit and did nothing to hamper the Anglo-American invasion. The initial landings at Oran and Algiers on 8 November 1942 were followed by smaller landings at Bougie, Djidjelli and Bone. Once Vichy resistance had crumbled, Allied mobile forces stood poised, waiting to cross the border into Tunisia.

Despite advanced warnings, the enemy's response to TORCH was lethargic and often half-hearted. Caught off-guard, the Axis supreme commands elected to establish a 400-mile defensive line and to prevent Allied troops from pushing farther eastward rather than attempt to push them back. Supplies and reinforcements were rushed to Tunisia by sea, but were too little, too late. Lack of balance in the Axis force structure further hampered reaction. Starved of fuel and air support the heavy units of the Italian Fleet could do little against Allied air and naval superiority. This not only placed responsibility for convoy protection solely on minor units, but also meant an unwarranted reliance on German and Italian aircraft and submarines to reduce Allied opposition to an acceptable level.

The first Italian convoy to Bizerte arrived on 12 November 1942 and with Allied forces still consolidating, convoys faced little interference until the end of the month. By then 13,300 military personnel and 30,309 tonnes of supplies had been safely delivered, yet this remained far short of the actual monthly requirement for 150,000 tonnes and 60,000 men.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Allied convoys also continued to run. Most notably the 'Stoneage' convoy, which reached Malta safely on 20 November, having endured continuous air attacks and heavy weather. Its arrival marked the final and effective relief of that besieged outpost. Adequately supplied with aviation fuel and submarine torpedoes, Malta again became an effective raiding base. Together, the possession of Malta and Bone would enable the Allies to dominate the Sicilian Channel and effectively seal off the ground war in North Africa.

On 25 November *Quiberon* transferred to Force 'Q', a new striking force of three cruisers and three destroyers operating out of Bone and tasked with preying on Axis sea communications. Close to enemy aerodromes in Tunisia Bone was frequently bombed, but the heavy barrage put up by Force 'Q' prevented much damage. Nevertheless, a near miss on the night of 27 November put one destroyer temporarily out of action. Air attacks continued into the next day, but the two remaining destroyers, *Quiberon* and HMS *Quentin*, hit back when they sank the Italian submarine *Dessie*, which had been detected patrolling outside the anchorage. In all, Italian submarines sank only a dozen or so Allied ships off the Algerian coast, at the cost of eight of their own boats.

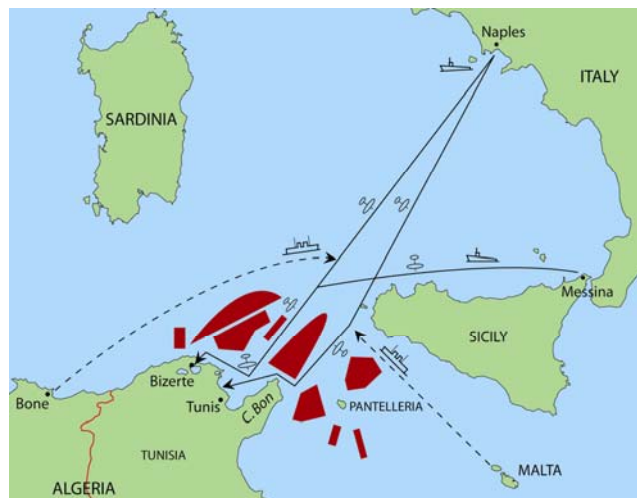
At 1730 on 1 December, Force 'Q' sailed from Bone on its first sortie against the Tunisian convoys. Allied intelligence



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and air reconnaissance was excellent, allowing the force to steam at 27 knots through a supposed enemy minefield to make the intercept. But Axis intelligence was also good, and on hearing that Force 'Q' was in the area Italian authorities recalled two of the four convoys then at sea and redirected another. Only Convoy 'H' continued on towards Tunis. Escorted by three Italian destroyers and two torpedo boats, it consisted of two cargo and two troopships totalling approximately 15,000 tonnes. Force 'Q' made radar contact with Convoy 'H' just before 0100 on 2 December and went straight into action.



*Axis convoy routes from Italy to Tunisia.*

At a range of just 1500 yards the German military transport *K1* became the first target for the three British cruisers. The remaining merchant ships immediately began to scatter, while the Italian escorts put up a dense smoke screen. Following in the cruisers' wake, *Quiberon* sighted an Italian destroyer to port, breaking through the smoke and turning to fire her torpedoes. Increasing speed, Commander Browning hauled *Quiberon* out of line and likewise turned to engage, opening fire at 5000 yards. The Australian's 4.7-inch gunfire was accurately directed, and her second salvo hit forward of the enemy's after superstructure. Badly damaged, the Italian turned back into the smoke. Moments later the two enemy torpedo-boats appeared out of the smoke screen to make their own attack. *Quiberon* avoided the torpedoes by going hard over, but they passed uncomfortably close. Rejoining the cruisers to avoid fouling their range, *Quiberon* added her fire to that directed at the blazing *K1*. Still steaming at 25 knots Browning observed that he was passing through some 1500 enemy troops already struggling in the water.

Over the next thirty minutes *Quiberon* found and sank another burning troopship in conjunction with *Quentin* and scored hits on a second destroyer already dead in the water. Browning watched as yet another destroyer was set afire from end to end after a single salvo from the cruiser HMS *Sirius*. Heavier firepower and radar direction proved a decisive advantage. Despite the spirited Italian defence and the short engagement ranges, Force 'Q' suffered no damage during the 50 minute action.

Accounts vary on the total 'bag' for the night, but the Italians admit to the destruction of the entire convoy, together with the destroyer *Folgore*. Another destroyer, *De Recco*, was so badly damaged that it had to be towed back to Sicily. The next day a second Italian convoy was decimated by a combination of torpedo aircraft and

destroyers operating out of Malta. These initial encounters were a serious blow, and unwilling to risk further troopships, practically all Axis troops were thereafter ferried to Tunisia either by air or in destroyers. Yet even the latter could only carry some 300 passengers at a time, and with 11,400 men lost on passage the Italians rapidly christened the Sicilian Channel the 'Route of Death'.

Even more debilitating to Axis plans was the ongoing destruction of stores and equipment. Between November 1942 and the end of the campaign in May 1943, a third of all enemy supplies crossing the short passage to Tunisia succumbed to Allied action, nearly 65 per cent achieved by the ships, submarines and aircraft of the Royal Navy. Notwithstanding their paper numerical superiority (14 vs. 9 divisions), large numbers of Axis troops were immobilised due to a lack of vehicles and fuel, while those transported by air often reached Tunisia only to find that their heavy equipment had been sunk below them. The direct effects of the Allied interdiction campaign were compounded by the indirect or 'soft' effects. Thus, uncertainties created by shortages and delays in the logistics system led to inefficient loading in attempts to prevent complete losses in essentials.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast with the Allied logistics system could hardly have been starker. More heavily escorted than the trans-Atlantic trade convoys, those destined for North Africa and the Mediterranean consistently delivered men and materiel with minimal losses. From the US, only one ship belonging to the fast 14.5 knot convoys was ever damaged, while from the slow 9.5 knot convoys just fourteen ships were sunk and two damaged out of 11,119 convoyed.<sup>5</sup> In all more than 225,000 troops were delivered to the Mediterranean virtually without loss; just a small proportion of the war's more than 10 million administrative movements of Allied personnel by sea. In effect, sea power allowed the Allies to bring to bear the full potential of their war resources, when and where required, in a way the Axis could not. While Allied ground forces still had to endure stubborn and bloody fighting to achieve victory in North Africa, they did so in the context of a campaign that had already been shaped to their advantage. At the final surrender, more Axis prisoners were taken than at Stalingrad.

Too late, the North African campaign taught the Axis leadership the value of sea power, but there remain enduring lessons for future military planners. It is never enough to simply possess the sea and air lift capacity to project troops and equipment at a distance. To survive and remain effective any expeditionary force needs to seize and retain control of the multi-dimensional battlespace through which it must transit and through which its logistic sustainment must follow. The battle for Sea Control may be complex, difficult and costly, but far more dangerous is to ignore the need to achieve it.

- 1 J. Hattendorf (ed), *Mahan on Naval Strategy*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1991, p. xix.
- 2 P. Tsouras (ed), *Dictionary of Military Quotations*, Greenhill Books, 2000, p. 274.
- 3 J. Mallman-Showell, *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945*, Greenhill Books, 1990, p. 313; BR 1736, 'Op. Torch', Admiralty, 1948, p. 104.
- 4 S. Prince, 'North Africa to Normandy' in D. Stevens & J. Reeve (eds), *Sea Power Ashore and in the Air*, Halstead Press, forthcoming.
- 5 BR 1736, 'Defeat of the Enemy Attack upon Shipping 1939-1945', Admiralty, 1957, p. 36.

