

MALTA:  
A STUDY OF GERMAN STRATEGY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN  
JUNE 1940 TO AUGUST 1942

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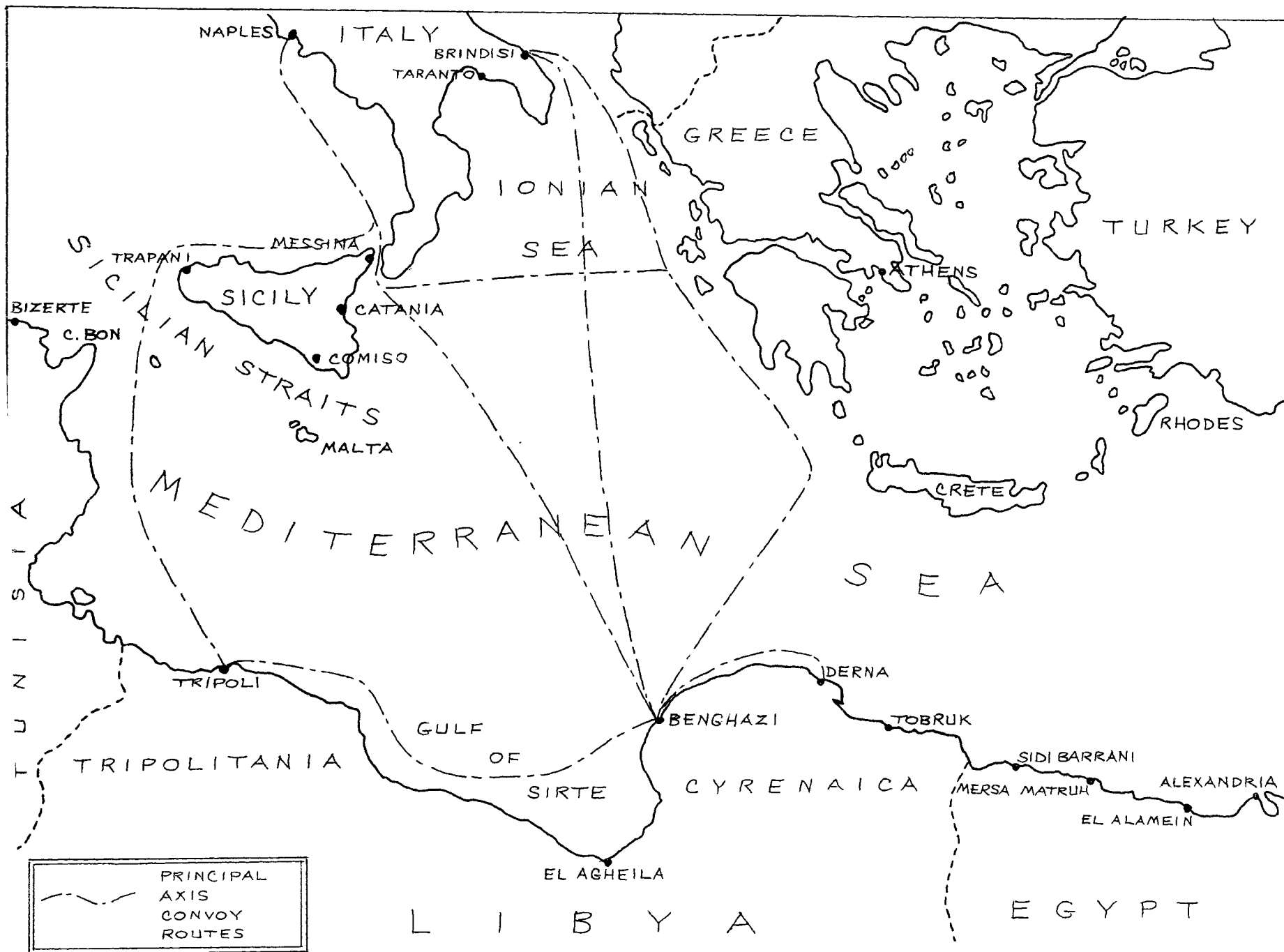
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER:	PAGE
I        INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II       THE MEDITERRANEAN <u>KRIEGSSCHAUPLATZ</u> . . . . .	14
III      THE LUFTWAFFE NEUTRALIZES MALTA . . . . .	34
IV      OPERATION HERKULES . . . . .	60
V       "THE HOUR OF DECISION" . . . . .	83
VI      CONCLUSION . . . . .	107
MAP 1:   THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SHOWING PRINCIPAL AXIS CONVOY ROUTES . . . . .	i
MAP 2:   MALTA SHOWING AIRFIELDS IN APRIL 1942 . . . . .	66
APPENDIX A:   AXIS SHIPPING LOSSES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN 1941 AND 1942 . . . . .	120
APPENDIX B:   THE SUPPLY OF MALTA . . . . .	122
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	123



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

An examination of German strategy in the Mediterranean during World War II raises many questions. Probably the most perplexing is why Germany failed to capture the island of Malta, which, as a British air and naval base, consistently hampered Axis efforts in the area. Such a conquest could have secured the central Mediterranean for the Axis, a necessary condition for the safe passage of Axis convoys from Italy to Libya. Perhaps more than in any other theater of war, victory in North Africa depended on logistics. The chronic problem of the Afrika Korps in its attempt to defeat the British 8th Army and capture Suez was lack of supplies, and the capture of Malta was the key to its solution.

Germany's prewar strategy encompassed no plan for the conduct of Mediterranean operations beyond limited aid to her Italian ally. Germany relegated the Mediterranean to Italy, and it was only when the failures of her Axis partner in the Balkans jeopardized the success of German continental strategy and threatened Italy's allegiance to the alliance that Germany intervened and assumed a major role in determining Mediterranean strategy. Moreover, Hitler's concern for the Duce's prestige as a war leader at times affected German participation in the Mediterranean war, and thus a study of German strategy in the area necessitates an examination of the Italian role in shaping, aiding, or

hindering the formation and execution of that strategy.

The major Mediterranean goals for the Axis during World War II were Gibraltar and Suez. The former depended upon Spain's cooperation, but Franco successfully evaded any such commitment. The capture of Suez was a prize worthy of a total Axis effort, but one in which the primary requisite would be a secure supply line to Italy, and this necessarily involved the capture of Malta. After a study of German strategy in the Mediterranean and the strategic decisions which led to the defeat of the Afrika Korps at El Alamein, one can only conclude that the failure to secure Malta was one of Germany's major strategic blunders of the war.

What was the reason for this failure? A perfunctory explanation is that Hitler and the German Supreme Command held a singular, continental outlook and a reluctance for operations across water. Yet in May 1941 German airborne forces assaulted and captured the heavily defended island of Crete, an operation of far less strategic value for the future conduct of Mediterranean operations than the proposed capture of Malta.

Another partial explanation often advanced for Germany's failure to capture Malta is the problem of Axis cooperation. Relations between the Axis military staffs were consistently poor. Although the personal relationship between Hitler and Mussolini varied during the war years, there was a basic mistrust which jeopardized the possibilities for complete Italo-German agreement in the Mediterranean theater of war. Only once during World War II did the Axis powers form a joint military staff for a combined military operation. This unique undertaking in the summer of 1942 was intended for a single operation--the capture of Malta, codenamed Operation Herkules.

The Axis powers never implemented Operation Herkules. After several delays and postponements, the plan was finally cancelled. Although Hitler blamed the lack of Italian cooperation for the German decision to cancel Herkules, a study of the operational and logistical planning for the capture of Malta reveals that Italy was fully committed to the operation, and that the problems of Axis cooperation were apparently overcome. The Italians blamed General Rommel's advance into Egypt in the summer of 1942 as the deciding factor in the cancellation of Operation Herkules, while Rommel held O.K.W.,<sup>1</sup> and indirectly Hitler, accountable for the failure to capture the island. Which, if any, of these reasons caused cancellation of Operation Herkules?

First of all, any would-be invader of Malta has to consider certain geographical features of the island. The Maltese Islands lie between Europe and Africa in the Sicilian Straits, which connect the eastern and the western basins of the Mediterranean Sea. The group consists of the islands of Malta, Gozo, and Comino, and the uninhabited rocks of Cominotto and Filfla. Malta, the largest and most important island in the archipelago, is 17.5 miles long and 8.5 miles wide, with a total area of 94.9 square miles. It lies 58 miles south of the Sicilian coast and 180 miles east-southeast of Cape Bon in Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> In June 1940 the total population of the islands was approximately 300,000.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, the Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces. It is generally referred to as O.K.W.

<sup>2</sup>"Malta," Chambers Encyclopaedia, 1966, IX, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup>Ian Cameron, Red Duster, White Ensign (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), 15.

Structurally, Malta consists of a limestone base with significant outcroppings producing a gently undulating topography and sparse vegetation. The south and west coasts of the island are largely harborless with steep cliffs rising to 400 feet in elevation, while on the north and east the interior is easily accessible to an invader, with good harbors such as St. Paul's Bay, Valetta, and Marsa Scirocco.<sup>4</sup>

Although Malta has long been recognized as a valuable strategic prize because of its location in the central Mediterranean, historically the island has never been considered impregnable. Originally settled by Phoenician traders, the island has changed ownership many times. Malta first became an important naval base under Roman rule. After the decline of Rome, Malta passed to Arab control, which lasted for 200 years, until the Norman conquest returned the island to Christian rule. Malta regained its importance as a naval base under the Angevin kings, and became a sally port for Christian adventurers in the Crusades.<sup>5</sup>

In the sixteenth century Malta became part of the empire of Charles V. In 1530 Charles transferred control of the island to the knights of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in recognition of their long service to Christendom. The knights built up the island's fortifications and accumulated wealth by pirating against the Turks and their North African allies. The Turks, under Suleiman the Magnificent, decided to end this affront, capture the island, and

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<sup>4</sup>Them. Zammit, Malta, the Islands and Their History (Valetta, Malta: The Malta Herald Office, 1926), 4-8. Hereafter cited as Zammit, Malta.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 69-90.



exterminate the offenders. Mustapha Pasha began the Great Siege of Malta in May 1565. By September, however, the defenders were victorious and had checked the advance of Muslim power in the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> Any German strategist in 1940 could read from this lesson that, properly fortified, Malta was defensible against a far superior force.

The rule of the knights ended in June 1798, when Napoleon captured the island on his way to Egypt. Long tired of the knights' oppression, the Maltese at first welcomed the French invader. Napoleon hoped to make Malta a center of French trade and naval strength in the Mediterranean, but his hopes were shortlived. The island's populace, disenchanted with the French Revolutionary reforms, revolted against the French on 2 September 1798 and requested the support of the British war fleet. After the surrender of the French garrison, the Maltese requested British sovereignty over the island.<sup>7</sup> The Congress of Vienna confirmed Britain's control of Malta in 1815.

Britain recognized the strategic importance of the island, and during the nineteenth century developed its capabilities as a naval fortress. In World War I Malta was the Allies' chief naval base in the Mediterranean, serving as a depot for the dispatch of both men and supplies. During the postwar years, however, Malta's defenses fell into disrepair. Unwilling to pay the cost of even homeland defense, Britain had little left over for Malta's needs.

Britain's prewar military and naval position in the Mediterranean

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<sup>6</sup>Ernie Bradford, The Great Siege (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 15-20.

<sup>7</sup>Zammit, Malta, 243-86.

rested upon three pillars of strength. Gibraltar guarded the western entrance to the sea, Alexandria secured the eastern basin and the Suez Canal, while Malta, if properly armed, dominated the central Mediterranean narrows and east-west maritime traffic. The confrontation between Britain and Italy over the Ethiopian crisis in 1935, however, forced Britain to reconsider her Mediterranean defenses. The British government was concerned that Mussolini's irritation at British intervention in the dispute through the League of Nations might cause the Duce to take some military action against Britain in the Mediterranean. Although British officials generally referred to this possibility as the "mad dog act," the threat of an Italian attack, particularly by the Regia Aeronautica,<sup>8</sup> could not be discounted.<sup>9</sup> The most obvious place for such an attack was Malta, headquarters for the Mediterranean fleet and situated only half an hour's flight from the Sicilian airfields.

The advent of aerial warfare changed Malta's defensive outlook, which in the past had been directed seaward. The greatest threat to the island in 1935 came not from the sea but from the air. To face this new challenge, however, Malta was without a single anti-aircraft battery, and its aircraft were few and outdated compared with those of the Regia Aeronautica. Alerted to the Italian danger, the British foreign ministry recommended the immediate shipment to Malta of anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, and any available aircraft. In considering this recommendation, the Chiefs of Staff made a complete study of the island

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<sup>8</sup>The Royal Italian Air Force.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony Eden, Facing the Dictators (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 282, 296.

and agreed that its air defenses were inadequate, but took no action to rectify the situation.<sup>10</sup> Instead, rather than expose the fleet at Malta to the danger of aerial attack, the Admiralty ordered the ships to Alexandria.<sup>11</sup>

By the late 1930s, however, some measure of improvement had been gained against a possible Italian attack. Modernization of the port began in July 1937 with the construction of boom defenses, underground storages, and a new airfield at Luqa. The Committee of Imperial Defence approved the addition of 112 heavy and 60 light anti-aircraft guns, 24 searchlights, and four fighter squadrons.<sup>12</sup> However, the armed forces debated whether such improvements could enable the island to withstand a concentrated attack.

The Admiralty took the lead in urging that Malta's defenses be increased to insure its availability as a naval base in the event of a Mediterranean war. The naval staff considered Alexandria a poor second choice as headquarters for the fleet because its location in the eastern basin limited its effective range of operations and because its harbor facilities were far less adequate than those at Malta. On the other hand, the air ministry advised evacuation of the island. It believed that in a Mediterranean war Malta could not be adequately defended against the Italian Air Force, and hesitated in committing air units to

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<sup>10</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, 279, 284.

<sup>11</sup>I. S. O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I: The Early Successes Against Italy; Vol. II: The Germans Come to the Help of Their Ally; Vol. III: British Fortunes Reach Their Lowest Ebb (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954-60), I, 31.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 29-30.

the island.<sup>13</sup>

The result of this indecision was that only half measures were taken to provide adequate defense. None of the air squadrons and only one-quarter of the anti-aircraft batteries determined as necessary by the Council of Defence in 1937 reached Malta before the start of World War II. British prewar leaders decided that in the event of a war with both Germany and Italy, the central Mediterranean could not be defended. Malta would probably have to be abandoned and the Mediterranean sealed off at Gibraltar and Suez, which action would mean the employment of the long Cape route for British convoys.<sup>14</sup> British naval forces based at Alexandria would control the eastern basin, while the French Navy would be responsible for the securing of the western basin.<sup>15</sup>

British prewar strategy failed to recognize that Malta's primary offensive role was not to provide a base of operations for the British Mediterranean fleet, as the naval staff proposed. Malta's importance rested more on its capability as an air and submarine base against enemy shipping in the central Mediterranean. Malta-based aircraft could also provide the vital air support necessary for British naval operations in

<sup>13</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, I, 30.

<sup>14</sup>Raymond de Belot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, trans. by James A. Field Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), 54-55. A comparison of the Mediterranean and Cape routes:

<u>Distance</u>	<u>Via the Cape</u>	<u>Via the Mediterranean</u>	<u>Difference</u>
London-Alexandria	11,608 miles	3,097 miles	8,511 miles
London-Bombay	10,800 miles	6,280 miles	4,520 miles
London-Singapore	11,750 miles	8,250 miles	3,500 miles

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 9.

the area and strike at Italian bases in Sicily.<sup>16</sup> With a central supply base in the heart of Italian convoy routes, submarines based at Malta could gain a tremendous advantage. Yet British lack of foresight in the 1930s accounted for the failure to provide submarine pens against aerial attack or underground hangars for its aircraft--a relatively simple task due to the limestone structure of the island. In preparation for a Mediterranean war, Malta's defense rather than its abandonment deserved closer attention. Only a few prior to 1940 recognized the real strategic importance of the island as the "unsinkable aircraft carrier."<sup>17</sup> But if British planners overlooked the importance of Malta, their Italian counterparts did likewise.

Geographically, Italy's position made her extremely dependent on sea communications, particularly because of the inadequacy of her own raw materials and the needs of her North African empire. Since she was preparing for war with the world's greatest naval power, it was vital that Italy at least secure the Mediterranean at the Sicilian Straits. What appeared to be a relatively simple action would divide the Mediterranean in two, so that the Italian Navy would not have to worry about fighting the combined Allied fleet.<sup>18</sup>

The Italian Navy recognized Malta's decisive importance to the conduct of war in the Mediterranean. In 1938 naval advisers proposed to

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<sup>16</sup>Donald Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964), 28.

<sup>17</sup>Winston S. Churchill, Their Finest Hour (New York: Bantam Books, 1949), 378-80, 428-30.

<sup>18</sup>Marc'Antonio Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, trans. by Gale Hoffman (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1957), 19-20.

Commando Supremo<sup>19</sup> a plan for the capture of the island based on close air support. Mussolini rejected the plan when air strategists expressed a reluctance to cooperate in a combined land-sea operation. The Duce preferred the air force argument that the island's offensive capabilities could be eliminated by air attack alone. The Italian Navy was unwilling to undertake the task without full cooperation from the Regia Aeronautica, and the plan was shelved.<sup>20</sup> More concerned with military glory than with strategy, the Duce had grandiose dreams of conquest that were too expansive to be overly concerned with the small thorn in the Sicilian Straits. Mussolini wanted an empire, not an island.

Such hopes did not seem unrealistic in 1939. With Germany as her partner, Italy was allied with a nation believed by many to be potentially the strongest power on the continent, a nation whose interests appeared to be no challenge to her own. Hitler expressed no territorial ambitions or special interests in the Mediterranean. Germany's attention was directed eastward, and although the Western powers opposed German policy, Hitler's success at Munich seemed to open the way for further German aggression.

Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. Two days later, their ultimatums having expired, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Italy, unprepared for a major conflict, adopted a policy of non-belligerence, and the war temporarily remained a northern struggle.

After the fall of Poland, the Wehrmacht paused until the spring

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<sup>19</sup>The Italian Supreme Command.

<sup>20</sup>Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, 19-20.

of 1940, when Denmark, Norway, and the Low Countries succumbed to the German Blitzkrieg. Allied forces could not stem the German tide, and by early June 1940 France was near total collapse. On 10 June 1940 Mussolini belatedly joined his German ally, and the war became an Axis effort. In making his decision, the Duce declared that Italy could not remain "gli eterni traditori" (the eternal traitors).<sup>21</sup> His strategy, however, sprang from the belief that the war was nearly over and that a token effort could gain Italy a seat at the peace table, and not from his concern for fulfillment of the terms of the Axis alliance.<sup>22</sup>

To resist the expected Italian assault in June 1940, Malta's defenses consisted of five battalions of infantry (less than 4,000 troops), four outdated aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, accidentally left behind when the fleet evacuated the island, and 14 coastal anti-aircraft batteries to defend more than 100 miles of shoreline.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of an adequate defensive capability was not the only problem that caused many British political and military leaders to consider the retention of the base an impossible task. Because of its heavy population, the island relied on imports to supplement its productive capacity, which amounted to only 30 per cent of the required food-stuffs and 50 per cent of the other essential requirements, such as fuel. At the time of Italy's entrance into the war, Malta's stockpile

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<sup>21</sup>Belot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 51.

<sup>22</sup>F. W. Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, Mussolini, Hitler and the Fall of Italian Fascism (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 11. Hereafter cited as Deakin, The Brutal Friendship.

<sup>23</sup>Cameron, Red Duster, White Ensign, 17.

of supplies was dangerously low. Only a few hundred tons of reserve food rations, stored in underground caches, were available to withstand a siege of the island.<sup>24</sup> Although the strategic situation of Malta prompted plans to abandon the central Mediterranean, Winston Churchill, after taking office as Prime Minister, expressed his determination to hold Malta at all costs.<sup>25</sup>

This, then, was Malta's strategic situation when the war in the Mediterranean began in the summer of 1940. Britain, although faced with the threat of imminent German invasion of the home islands, decided to reinforce her central Mediterranean fortress. Italy entered the war with no predetermined plans for the capture of Malta, and relied on the efforts of the Italian Air Force to neutralize the threat of British employment of the island as an offensive air and naval station. Mussolini based Italian strategy on his conviction that the success of the Wehrmacht would bring the war to a speedy conclusion.<sup>26</sup>

For Germany, the Italian declaration of war against Britain and France opened a possible new theater of operations. On the threshold of complete victory, however, Hitler disregarded the possibilities of a Mediterranean front for Germany, and chose instead the alternative--a direct cross-channel confrontation with Britain. The Mediterranean, Hitler decided, was of little consequence to a successful termination of the war, and the area became an Italian theater of operations with

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<sup>24</sup>Cameron, Red Duster, White Ensign, 15.

<sup>25</sup>Churchill, Their Finest Hour, 428, 430. Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940.

<sup>26</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 11.



limited German technical assistance. The error of this decision became apparent with the British victory in the Battle of Britain, the prolongation of the war, and the Italian failure to achieve any success in the Mediterranean. Indeed, it was the failure of the Italian war effort that finally forced German intervention in the Mediterranean war.

The intervention of the Wehrmacht, however, was limited to the immediate goal of preventing an Italian collapse. Hitler remained peculiarly blind to the political and military consequences of a British defeat in the Mediterranean; hence, the German Supreme Command developed no long range policy concerning the Mediterranean theater of operations.<sup>27</sup> Based on limited objectives, German strategy in the Mediterranean, therefore, was unplanned, uncoordinated, sporadic, and conditional on developments elsewhere. The failure of this strategy is particularly noticeable concerning German policy toward Malta.

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<sup>27</sup>Anthony Martienssen, Hitler and His Admirals (London: Secker and Warburg, 1948), 123-24.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MEDITERRANEAN KRIEGSSCHAUPLATZ<sup>1</sup>

The German decision to leave the Mediterranean theater of war to Italy originated in prewar diplomatic negotiations. Hitler had informed Mussolini in September 1936 that he regarded the Mediterranean as an Italian sea and would give free rein to the Duce's ambitions in the area.<sup>2</sup> As no German interests were involved in the south, Hitler could afford to be generous. The Fuehrer had also realized that the possibility of acquiring British and French Mediterranean colonies was an attractive lure for Italian and Spanish cooperation with Germany in challenging the Western powers.

Italy tied her ambitions to Germany in the "Pact of Steel," an offensive and defensive alliance concluded on 22 May 1939.<sup>3</sup> After Britain and France declared war on Germany in September, the terms of the pact obliged Italy to join her German ally. However, her complete unpreparedness for any major conflict forced her to renege on the

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<sup>1</sup>The word "Kriegsschauplatz," theater of operations, is used here to indicate that this chapter is primarily directed from the German view.

<sup>2</sup>Conversation between the Duce and Herr Frank, 23 September 1936. Malcolm Muggeridge, ed., Ciano's Diplomatic Papers, trans. by Stuart Hood (Long Acre, London: Odhams Press Limited, 1948), 43-48.

<sup>3</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 5-6.

agreement.<sup>4</sup> Mussolini's decision had little effect on German military strategy; indeed, the Italian alliance often appeared to the German Supreme Command as more of a handicap than an advantage. Hitler expected Italy to enter the war only in the event of great German successes. The alliance, then, would be of no significant advantage to Germany if, as expected, Italy's need of war supplies proved a drain on the Reich.<sup>5</sup>

Other problems created by the Axis pact were more immediate. A successful combined war effort demanded mutual trust and cooperation. The Axis pact included neither. The Duce had no intention of entering the conflict to achieve only German war aims, while Germany distrusted the validity of total Italian commitment to an Axis victory. This distrust was instrumental in discouraging joint military conferences on the operational level, and such meetings as were arranged involved little more than an exchange of information on technical matters and questions of training. The Axis powers reached no agreement on basic strategic policy.<sup>6</sup>

The Axis alliance was also more of a personal agreement between Hitler and Mussolini than a pact between the two nations. Only the Duce

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<sup>4</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 8. Mussolini informed Hitler one week after the pact was signed that Italy could not fulfill the terms of the alliance until her war preparations were completed. This is generally known as the Cavallero Memorandum.

<sup>5</sup>Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing with the German Navy, 1939-1945, 26 January 1940, 4. Hereafter cited as Fuehrer Conferences.

<sup>6</sup>Eberhard Weichold, Axis Naval Policy and Operations in the Mediterranean 1939 to May 1943 (Office of Naval Intelligence, U.S. Navy Department, May 1951), 1-2. Hereafter cited as Weichold, Axis Naval Policy.

could guarantee Italian commitment to the Axis.<sup>7</sup> The maintenance of his personal prestige as a war leader, therefore, became a German concern, and at times interfered with the freedom of German military planning. Such an instance occurred in early 1940 when Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, recommended to the Fuehrer that he extend submarine warfare to the Mediterranean. Hitler refused; he did not want to jeopardize the Axis pact by obvious German encroachment in what the Duce considered "mare nostrum."<sup>8</sup> In such a manner political considerations outweighed military strategy.

Both sides recognized the alliance as an unequal agreement, with Mussolini as the junior partner in the enterprise.<sup>9</sup> Thus, to increase Italian prestige and to stress Italy's role in the final victory, the Duce devised the concept of "parallel war." This policy meant that the Axis powers would fight the war against the Allies separately, each in its own area. Hitler in the north and Mussolini in the south would set the pace and accept responsibility for the leadership of operations.<sup>10</sup> As the Fuehrer consistently underrated the importance of the Mediterranean, this concept fitted in well with German strategy. The dictum that the Alps separated the theaters of operations seemed a convenient excuse

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<sup>7</sup>Bernhard von Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab, Bericht eines Generalstabsoffiziers (Hamburg: H. H. Nolke, 1950), 95. Hereafter cited as Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab.

<sup>8</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 23 February 1940, 13-14.

<sup>9</sup>Ivone Kirkpatrick, Mussolini, A Study in Power (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1964), 465. Hereafter cited as Kirkpatrick, Mussolini.

<sup>10</sup>Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab, 95.

to avoid the combined war planning which neither side desired.<sup>11</sup>

The Mediterranean campaign began on 10 June 1940 with a weak and ineffectual assault by the Italian Army against an almost defeated France. No long term action was undertaken or planned. The Fuehrer expected Italy's entrance into the war, which Mussolini had insisted could not be delayed, to begin with a carefully planned and executed operation against Malta or some other point of strategic importance.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the Duce offered to Germany several idle Italian Air Force units for participation in the Battle of Britain. Hitler politely refused, suggesting that Italy undertake some action against Britain in the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup>

With the exit of France as a belligerent, the only hostile territory in the central Mediterranean was the island of Malta. Because of its strategic importance, both Britain and Germany expected the Italian General Staff to undertake an immediate and vigorous assault on the island in the first days of the war. Commando Supremo, however, limited its operations to a few sporadic air raids. In the summer of 1940 Mussolini considered the war nearly over, a British defeat inevitable, and the capture of Malta therefore superfluous. The suspension of British merchant shipping in the central Mediterranean convinced the Duce that Britain intended to abandon the area. He completely misjudged

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<sup>11</sup>Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab, 95.

<sup>12</sup>Kirkpatrick, Mussolini, 465-66.

<sup>13</sup>Mussolini to Hitler, 26 June 1940, and Hitler to Mussolini, 13 July 1940. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D: The War Years, Vol. X, Doc. Nos. 126 and 166; 27 and 209-11. The offer was accepted, however, in October 1940.

the situation.<sup>14</sup>

The failure to capture Malta was one of the major Italian blunders of the war. Without air support and with its forces severely reduced for home defense, the British Mediterranean fleet could not successfully have challenged an invasion of the island. Britain defended her Mediterranean fortress with three aircraft, significantly named Faith, Hope, and Charity.<sup>15</sup> It was apparent that Britain intended to hold Malta when on 2 August air reinforcements arrived from Gibraltar.<sup>16</sup>

In the first summer of the Mediterranean war, the German Supreme Command concentrated on the Battle of Britain and preparations for Operation Sea Lion, and attached little importance to the failures of Italian planning. Whether Malta was taken or not hardly justified the attention of the Wehrmacht. Only the naval staff held a "southern outlook" and consistently presented the possibilities of German intervention in the Mediterranean. But as supreme war commander, Hitler held the final decision for the conduct of the war, and he preferred to ignore the Mediterranean as a German theater of operations.

Hitler recognized the existence of three theaters of war in the summer of 1940. The first was the area around Britain from Trondheim-Stavanger in the north to the Gironde estuary in the south. The second

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<sup>14</sup>Vice Admiral Friedrich Ruge, Der Seekrieg, trans. by Commander M. G. Saunders (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1957), 130.

<sup>15</sup>Cameron, Red Duster, White Ensign, 45. These names were assigned by the Maltese people to Britain's three aircraft. Originally there were four Swordfish fighters available. One crashed before the Mediterranean war began and was cannibalized for spare parts.

<sup>16</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 10.

was the submarine combat area in the Atlantic. And the third was the Mediterranean. He had no desire to assume control of the southern theater, in spite of the arguments of his naval advisers.<sup>17</sup>

A principal advocate of extending German operations to the Mediterranean was Admiral Weichold.<sup>18</sup> As head of the German Naval Liaison Staff in Rome, Weichold repeatedly advised his superiors that the outcome of the Mediterranean war was as much a German concern as an Italian one. He particularly emphasized the importance of capturing Malta, which, as an aerial reconnaissance station, jeopardized the activities of the Italian Navy in protecting its communications with Libya:

Under these circumstances, the elimination of Malta as a British naval and air base becomes imperative. Going by present experiences this task cannot be left to the Italian air force alone. Moreover, the use of naval forces is essential if a combined attempt to seize the island is to be made.<sup>19</sup>

Weichold suggested the transfer of German forces to support a full scale Italian assault, which included minelaying in the Sicilian Straits, air attacks on the island's defenses, and finally a landing operation.<sup>20</sup> The admiral's report received little attention at O.K.W.

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<sup>17</sup>Conversation between Hitler and Ciano, 8 July 1940. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, X, Doc. No. 129; 149.

<sup>18</sup>Vice Admiral Eberhard Weichold was the German Naval Liaison Officer in Rome from June 1940 to March 1943. After November 1941 he was also in command of all German naval forces operating in the Mediterranean.

<sup>19</sup>Weichold, The War at Sea in the Mediterranean (Office of Naval Intelligence, U.S. Navy Department, n.d.), 13. Hereafter cited as Weichold, The War at Sea.

<sup>20</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 12.

headquarters, as the proposed movement of German forces to the Mediterranean implied a major shift in strategy--an action which could be approved only by the Fuehrer.

In September 1940 Admiral Raeder recommended to Hitler that he transfer the main German war effort to the Mediterranean, as an alternative to Operation Sea Lion. The capture of Suez and Gibraltar, Raeder argued, could be of decisive importance to the defeat of Britain. By securing the Mediterranean, the Axis powers could assure themselves of unlimited raw materials and could gain new bases in the Near East for further operations against the British Empire. But to guarantee success Germany should assume operational control of the southern theater, in spite of expected Italian objections. Raeder added that the ineffectiveness of Italian arms was obvious. Since she had not even attempted to capture Malta, Italy could hardly be expected to take the Suez Canal without German support.<sup>21</sup>

Raeder also emphasized the political consequences of a British defeat in the Mediterranean. Turkey would fall under German influence, Spain would enter the war, and the Soviet Union's aggressive tendency, as evidenced by her actions against Finland and Romania, would be dissuaded by the presence of a large German force on her southern flank.<sup>22</sup>

Hitler generally agreed with Raeder's comments, but he had other ideas regarding the extension of the war. He believed that Britain continued the war only in the hope of intervention by another power. In

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<sup>21</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 7 September 1940, 19-25.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



considering this possibility, the Fuehrer believed that the United States would not enter the war and that even if she did, it would be too late to threaten Germany's European hegemony. The only threat to German domination of Europe, then, and Britain's last hope, was the Soviet Union. By the fall of 1940 Hitler planned on Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, to end the war. The Fuehrer considered the Mediterranean an ancillary theater, useful in tying down British forces but not strategically important in determining final victory. Hitler's continental strategy changed, however, by the fall of 1940, when the Italian Army's defeats in North Africa and Greece threatened the collapse of his Axis partner and required immediate German aid.<sup>23</sup>

On 13 September 1940 Italy began her long-awaited offensive against Egypt. After brief success, supply problems and stiff British resistance halted the Italian advance at Sidi Barrani.<sup>24</sup> Mussolini, rather than attempt to reinforce the North African campaign, undertook on 28 October the conquest of Greece. This invasion, which endangered German continental strategy, was a fiasco, and the Greeks' counterattack succeeded in repelling the invader with heavy losses.

Hitler was extremely displeased with Mussolini's Greek escapade, especially since the Duce had not informed him of the operation until after it had begun.<sup>25</sup> German leaders saw no military reason for extending the war into the Balkans. On the contrary, a Balkan front

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<sup>23</sup>Martienssen, Hitler and His Admirals, 123-24.

<sup>24</sup>Belot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 73.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 77.

threatened the preparations for Barbarossa. If Mussolini wanted a new area for operations, they asked, why had Italy not attacked Malta, where Axis interests were obviously concerned?<sup>26</sup>

The Duce's decision was not based on military considerations. Mussolini sought a prestige victory to compensate for Italian defeats in East Africa and Cyrenaica. He saw no great glory in capturing a small island on Italy's own doorstep. Moreover, the Duce considered the capture of Malta a hazardous task which would involve specialized equipment and training. Germany could provide the tactical air support necessary for an amphibious operation, but Mussolini wanted no German intervention in the Italian theater of war. He believed that once the Germans arrived, they would never leave.<sup>27</sup> Germany, however, had no desire to intervene. Although German advisers in Rome consistently recommended the Wehrmacht's cooperation in capturing Malta, Hitler was unwilling to commit Luftwaffe units to the Mediterranean. The Italian debacle in Greece changed the strategic outlook for the Axis. Mussolini reluctantly requested German aid and Hitler entered the Mediterranean war to prevent an Italian collapse.

Germany limited her commitment to the Mediterranean theater at first to the transfer of Fliegerkorps X, a veteran air group of the Norwegian campaign that was well trained in operations at sea against enemy shipping. The first unit, a German transport squadron, arrived at

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<sup>26</sup>Adolf Heusinger, Hitler et l'O.K.H. (Paris: Editions Berger-Levrault, 1952), 66; and Walter Gorlitz, ed., The Memoirs of Field Marshal Keitel, trans. by David Irving (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 127. Hereafter cited as Gorlitz, ed., Keitel.

<sup>27</sup>Belot, The Struggle for the Mediterranean, 93.

Foggia Air Base in late October, and by ferrying troops and supplies from Italy to Albania, played an important part in halting the Greek offensive.<sup>28</sup> The remaining units of Fliegerkorps X arrived in early December. Field Marshal Milch, Inspector-General of the Luftwaffe, informed Mussolini that by the Fuehrer's order the Fliegerkorps could not participate directly in the Greek campaign. Its primary objectives were to secure the Libyan convoy route and, in particular, to neutralize the island of Malta by air attack.<sup>29</sup>

Hitler's order recognized that Britain, not Greece, remained the major enemy in the Mediterranean. The Fuehrer believed it was vital to stop the British advance in North Africa, which threatened to capture all of Libya.<sup>30</sup> The British, if they gained control of Tripolitania, could secure the passage of the central Mediterranean for British merchant and naval ships and establish Libya as a base for major air attacks on Sicily and southern Italy. Even more important, if Malta were well supplied and operationally capable, the British could extend their attack into the heartland of Italy and use the island as a staging base for the invasion of the continent itself.

German strategy in the Mediterranean at the end of 1940 was thus

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<sup>28</sup>Report No. A-578, "The German Air Force in Italy," 12 July 1945 (unpublished, USAF Records Center, Maxwell AFB), 1. The transport group's activities never violated Greek territory.

<sup>29</sup>Conversation between Field Marshal Milch and the Duce, 11 December 1940. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XI, Doc. 494; 844. Milch was Inspector-General of the Luftwaffe and Ministerial Secretary (Staatssekretaer) of the Air Ministry.

<sup>30</sup>The Italian offensive in North Africa halted at Sidi Barrani on 16 September 1940. Britain launched her counteroffensive on 9 December 1940, and in a few weeks recaptured all of Cyrenaica.

concentrated on securing the central Mediterranean for Axis convoys and eliminating Malta as an enemy base by air attack. Hitler did not take into account the opportunities for total Axis victory in the area but limited German intervention to preventing an Italian defeat. His employment of the Wehrmacht in the Mediterranean was no more than a holding action of limited scope, direction, and duration.

Hitler assigned Fliegerkorps X on a temporary basis. The Fuehrer intended to withdraw it for use elsewhere at the beginning of February 1941, by which time, he believed, its mission would be accomplished.<sup>31</sup> The Luftwaffe force in Italy was organized as a special command under the direct orders of Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief Hermann Goering and subordinate only to Mussolini in the Italian chain of command. Its operations, therefore, were under German direction with little Italian control.<sup>32</sup>

Along with the Luftwaffe went the Fuehrer's advice for its employment. Hitler advocated employing the same tactics used by the Luftwaffe over Britain--the continuous bombing of the same target for a long period of time--against Malta and British Mediterranean shipping. Based on the Douhet theory,<sup>33</sup> Hitler believed such a strategy would cause Britain to abandon Malta and to suspend maritime traffic in the

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<sup>31</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 5 December 1940. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XI, Doc. No. 452; 789.

<sup>32</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 23.

<sup>33</sup>Giulio Douhet was one of the first prophets of the use of terror bombing in warfare. As early as 1909 he warned of the potentialities of air power, particularly the psychological effect of continuous mass bombing on the civilian population.

central Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup>

The force assembled for Operation Mittelmeer, the codename for the assignment of the Luftwaffe to the Mediterranean, had a formidable appearance. Under the command of General Hans-Ferdinand Geisler and Chief of Staff Colonel Harlinghausen, Fliegerkorps X occupied bases in southern Italy and Sicily at Catania, Gerbini, Comiso, Castel, Vetrano, and Trapani. In January 1941 the air corps comprised 186 aircraft, including two bomber groups, one dive bomber group, and two fighter groups. Auxiliary units included a reconnaissance and minelaying squadron and related ground organization.<sup>35</sup> To oppose this force, the best that Malta could muster at the end of 1940 was approximately 44 operational aircraft.<sup>36</sup>

The Luftwaffe launched its first attack on 10 January 1941 against a British convoy bound for Malta. It achieved notable success and severely damaged the aircraft carrier Illustrious, which managed to escape to Malta.<sup>37</sup> On 16 January Malta underwent its first massive air raid. Approximately 60 dive bombers concentrated on the dockyard, particularly the crippled Illustrious, but damage was minor. Two days later the Luftwaffe turned its attention to Malta's airfields in an attempt to eliminate the British challenge in the skies above the

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<sup>34</sup>Conversation between Hitler and Mussolini, 19 January 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XI, Doc. No. 672; 1130.

<sup>35</sup>Report No. A-578, "The German Air Force in Italy," 2.

<sup>36</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 44.

<sup>37</sup>S. W. Roskill, The War at Sea, Vol. II: The Period of Balance (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), 421.

island.<sup>38</sup> The primary targets were the airfields at Luqa and Hal Far. In surprise raids, the Luftwaffe destroyed a number of aircraft on the ground, and its constant bombing inflicted considerable damage on the runways and supply depots. At one time the island's defenders had no more than six operational aircraft.<sup>39</sup> The Illustrious managed to escape on 23 January, but Malta's trial had only begun.

The total attacking force at the end of January numbered 212 bombers. The island's defenders, accustomed to the ineffective and occasional sorties of the Regia Aeronautica, found the Luftwaffe attack of a different nature. Launched with great skill and daring by veterans of aerial warfare, the air raids hammered incessantly at the island's defenses. Docking facilities were destroyed, and submarines were forced to remain submerged during the day and surface for repairs only at night. British Swordfish and outdated Gladiator aircraft were no match for the ME-109s.<sup>40</sup> Only the Hurricanes could challenge the aerial supremacy of the Luftwaffe, and there were few available for Malta's defense.<sup>41</sup> Anti-aircraft batteries accounted for some German losses, but not enough to

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<sup>38</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 53.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Swordfish were single engine biplanes used as torpedo bombers or fighters with a maximum speed of 139 m.p.h. and a range of 528 miles. Gladiators were single engine biplanes used as fighters with a maximum speed of 245 m.p.h. and a range of 523 miles. ME-109s were twin engine monoplane fighters with a maximum speed of 395 m.p.h. and a range of 650 miles.

<sup>41</sup>Roskill, The War at Sea, II, 400. Fifteen Hurricanes were based on Malta on 15 January 1941. These aircraft were single engine monoplanes used as fighters with a maximum speed of 342 m.p.h. and a range of 970 miles with auxiliary tanks.

deter the attackers.<sup>42</sup>

In February, however, the Luftwaffe slackened its assault on Malta because of the transfer of some of its units to Libya to support the Italian Army. O.K.W. considered it necessary to prevent another Italian defeat and the loss of all of Cyrenaica. During February the Luftwaffe launched only two large scale raids on the island.<sup>43</sup> In the question of priorities, Malta consistently ranked a poor second in both German and Italian strategy.

To strengthen further the Italian forces in North Africa, a German expeditionary force under the command of General Erwin Rommel followed the arrival of the Luftwaffe in North Africa. No British forces opposed the crossing from Sicily to Libya, as the presence of Fliegerkorps X dissuaded enemy intervention from Malta.<sup>44</sup> The arrival of Rommel's force, which became known as the Afrika Korps, increased the need for cooperation between the Axis powers.

Hitler outlined his views on the employment of the Afrika Korps in a letter to Mussolini. He informed the Duce that the transfer of the German armored division presupposed that Italy intended to hold Tripolitania and not, as the Duce had indicated, only the area around Tripoli itself. The Fuehrer believed that such a decision would make supply by sea impossible, render ineffective the conduct of an air war, and handicap an Axis offensive to retake Cyrenaica. Hitler also expressed

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<sup>42</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 53-54.

<sup>43</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 26.

<sup>44</sup>Roskill, The War at Sea, II, 424-25.

concern over sea communications between Italy and Libya, adding, "I consider it likewise indispensable to destroy completely the British air and naval base at Malta." Hitler added that O.K.W. was studying plans for such an operation at the present time and that he would make available further Luftwaffe forces if necessary to insure success.<sup>45</sup>

The formation of the Afrika Korps and the Fuehrer's pronouncement on Malta seemed to indicate that Hitler now recognized the importance of the Mediterranean theater and was willing to accept a major role in the area. But Hitler had no such intention. On the same day that he had authorized the Afrika Korps to O.K.W., the Fuehrer informed Admiral Raeder that Germany's position in Europe was so firmly established that even the loss of all of North Africa would not be to her disadvantage.<sup>46</sup>

Hitler was no doubt overstating the situation. He realized the consequences of a British victory in the Mediterranean, if only because of the psychological and political repercussions. The remark, however, is indicative of Hitler's almost total lack of understanding of the strategic importance of the Mediterranean war as related to the final outcome. His views on the importance of Malta and North Africa, as expressed to Mussolini, were designed for Italian consumption only. Between the Battle of Britain and the commencement of Barbarossa, Germany could afford the commitment of limited forces to the Mediterranean for political reasons, if for no other. Hitler expected a rapid

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<sup>45</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 5 February 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XII, Doc. No. 17; 29.

<sup>46</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 9 January 1941, 4.



termination of the Luftwaffe assignment against Malta before its transfer for duty elsewhere.

General Rommel and Admiral Raeder, among others, opposed Hitler's policy regarding Malta. They realized that the success of German strategy--based on neutralization by air attack rather than a landed invasion--depended on constant bombing of the island. If the Luftwaffe raids ended before achieving complete neutralization, they argued, Malta's defenders needed only supplies to regain an offensive capability which could threaten the supply route of the newly arrived German Panzer division.

The naval staff again took the lead in proposing a final solution to the problem. On 18 March 1941 Admiral Raeder urged Hitler to consider the capture of Malta. He argued that Axis control of the island could simplify supplying the Afrika Korps. Moreover, rather than being used for escort purposes, Italian naval ships would be freed for operational uses against the British fleet. The naval chief added that the Luftwaffe supported his proposal and had already acknowledged the possibility of capturing the island with airborne troops. Hitler replied that the possibility was under consideration.<sup>47</sup>

Goering had no intention, however, of committing Luftwaffe forces to such an undertaking. The Reichsmarschal informed the Fuehrer that such an operation appeared more difficult than anticipated because the island's terrain, divided by numerous small walls, would make it

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<sup>47</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 18 March 1941, 30.

difficult for airborne troops to operate.<sup>48</sup> The possibilities of a seaborne invasion received no consideration by the Supreme Command.

General Rommel also requested in the spring of 1941 that O.K.W. solve the supply problem of the Afrika Korps by capturing Malta. When O.K.W. informed him that no forces were available for such an operation, he offered to take the island with his own troops, but the Supreme Command refused his request. The safety of the Libyan convoy route remained dependent on the success of the Luftwaffe air attack on Malta.

In March 1941 Fliegerkorps X returned to large scale raids over Malta. The January attack had nearly neutralized the island; the March raids promised to finish the job. No large convoy reached the island after the arrival of the Luftwaffe, forcing the British defenders to ration their diminishing supplies. By the end of March the Luftwaffe dominated the skies; the Libyan convoy route was nearly secured.

Germany lost her attempt to achieve total neutralization of Malta, however, when the Wehrmacht launched Operation Marita, the invasion of the Balkans.<sup>49</sup> To support Marita, Hitler transferred the majority of Fliegerkorps X from the central Mediterranean to support the Greek campaign, and thus ended the pressure of the constant German air raids on Malta just as the Luftwaffe neared final victory.

The German forces that swept into Greece in April 1941 forced

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<sup>48</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 18 March 1941, 30. Raeder's statement of Luftwaffe support for an airborne assault probably came from Luftwaffe Chief of Staff Hans Jeschonnek, who favored capture of the island and was a firm advocate of interservice cooperation.

<sup>49</sup>Hitler's War Directive No. 20, 13 December 1940. Walther Hubatsch, ed., Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegfuehrung 1939-1945 (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1962), 81-83.

the British expeditionary force to evacuate to Crete.<sup>50</sup> During the Greek campaign, Hitler asked Operations Section of O.K.W. to prepare a report indicating which occupation was more important for the future of Mediterranean strategy, that of Crete or that of Malta. The members of the planning staff, including officers from the three services, without exception advocated the capture of Malta.<sup>51</sup> Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of O.K.W., and Colonel-General Alfred Jodl, his Chief of Operations, concurred. Both men recognized that Malta was the greater strategic prize. The only objection came from the Luftwaffe: Goering favored Crete, and Hitler supported the Reichsmarschal over the objections of his top Wehrmacht advisers.<sup>52</sup>

Goering chose Crete because he considered it the easier of the two objectives for his Luftwaffe forces. As either operation would be entirely a Luftwaffe affair, Hitler gave special attention to Goering's argument.<sup>53</sup> Yet it was the Fuehrer who had to make the final decision, and he remained unconvinced of Malta's importance. Hitler believed that the capture of Crete would insure the safety of Germany's southeastern flank for the implementation of Barbarossa and prevent British bombers from attacking the Romanian oil fields at Ploesti.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Roskill, The War at Sea, II, 444.

<sup>51</sup>Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, trans. by R. H. Barry (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 131.

<sup>52</sup>Gorlitz, ed., Keitel, 142.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Karl Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete," in Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View, ed. by H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, trans. by Edward Fitzgerald (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 99-132.

The capture of Crete at the end of May opened new opportunities for Germany to extend the Mediterranean war. General Kurt Student, the Commander of the airborne units at Crete, advocated a follow-up assault on Cyprus or Malta, and then perhaps a German attack on the Suez Canal itself.<sup>55</sup> But the extremely high casualties incurred in the Cretan operation<sup>56</sup> dissuaded the Fuehrer from further massive airborne operations. As Hitler explained to Student, "Crete proved that the days of the parachute troops are over. The parachute arm is one which relies entirely on surprise. In the meantime the surprise factor has exhausted itself."<sup>57</sup> In any case, Hitler had no intention of extending his Mediterranean success, for in May 1941 his attention remained focused eastward with preparations for the coming campaign against the Soviet Union.

Germany transferred the remaining units of Fliegerkorps X to Crete and Greece on 22 May. This meant that the Italian Air Force alone had to continue to neutralize Malta and to secure the convoy route to North Africa for Axis shipping. From January to March 1941--that is, during the period of the Luftwaffe attack--the Libyan convoys had had little difficulty in reaching their destination. During the summer of 1941, however, the efforts of the Regia Aeronautica proved no more successful in neutralizing Malta than they had been the previous year.

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<sup>55</sup>B. H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1948), 160-61. Student commanded Fliegerkorps XI at Crete and was considered an expert in airborne operations. He later headed the planning for Operation Herkules.

<sup>56</sup>In the German invasion of Crete, the airborne forces had over 6,000 casualties, which was about 25 per cent of the invading force. At the time, these figures were considered extremely high.

<sup>57</sup>Gundelach, "The Battle for Crete," 131.

After the loss of Crete, the British recognized that it was more important than ever to hold Malta, and they immediately reinforced the island.<sup>58</sup> Increased British air and submarine operations from Malta accounted for the steady increase in the toll of Axis shipping losses on the North African convoy route. As the British increased Malta's offensive strength, the amount of supplies arriving in Libyan ports decreased.<sup>59</sup>

After June 1941 Hitler and O.K.W. were totally committed to the Eastern front; no forces were left for the Mediterranean. Rommel's frequent communiques to Berlin concerning the supply problem were largely ignored. Until late in the year Malta and the war in the Mediterranean remained in the backwater of German strategy.

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<sup>58</sup>In March 1941, just after the Luftwaffe was partially transferred for Marita, the first convoy arrived. Convoys thereafter faced decreasing opposition. By June nearly all damage had been repaired and the island was considered fully capable for offensive operations.

<sup>59</sup>See Appendix A for chart of Axis shipping losses compared with total amount leaving Italian ports.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LUFTWAFFE NEUTRALIZES MALTA

The concentration of German strength on the Eastern front had serious effects on the Mediterranean war. Hitler withdrew Fliegerkorps VIII and the major part of Fliegerkorps X for support of Operation Barbarossa. With their strength considerably reduced, the remaining Luftwaffe units could provide little support for the Afrika Korps and none for the Libyan convoy route.<sup>1</sup> Based on Greece and Crete, Fliegerkorps X limited its activities to the eastern Mediterranean basin, where Hitler intended to maintain the Luftwaffe's offensive role by bombing Alexandria and aerial minelaying in the Suez Canal. Germany left the defensive assignment of suppressing Malta and protecting the convoy route to North Africa to the Regia Aeronautica.<sup>2</sup>

The departure of the Luftwaffe in May 1941 from the central Mediterranean gave Britain the opportunity to repair Malta's defenses. Without massive Luftwaffe support the Italian Air Force could offer no serious challenge to the flow of reinforcements. Although Italian air raids continued against the island, the arrival of British Hurricanes

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<sup>1</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 50. The remaining units of Fliegerkorps X included eight bomber groups, three fighter groups, and five reconnaissance squadrons.

<sup>2</sup>Report No. A-578, "The German Air Force in Italy," 2.

bolstered Malta's defensive capabilities and the Regia Aeronautica experienced decreasing success. By the summer of 1941 the British again operated Malta as an air and submarine base against Axis shipping and Britain regained the initiative in the battle of supplies, jeopardizing the Italo-German commitment in North Africa.

The success of the Afrika Korps depended on the free flow of reinforcements and supplies from Italy to Libya. Rommel launched his first desert offensive with Malta rendered impotent by the German Air Force,<sup>3</sup> but after June hardly a convoy passed unchallenged and the supply situation for the Axis in North Africa steadily worsened. Shortages of fuel, ammunition, weapons, and equipment forced Rommel to appeal to O.K.W. for redress of the situation.<sup>4</sup> The German Supreme Command, however, left the solution of the convoy problem to Italy.

Although the Italian Navy in the summer of 1941 was superior in numbers to the British naval forces in the Mediterranean, Italy was unable to achieve effective control of the central Mediterranean basin.<sup>5</sup> The air and submarine operations from Malta accounted for the difference. When the Supreme Command transferred its Mediterranean air units from Sicily, Comando Supremo requested that a few Luftwaffe units remain,

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<sup>3</sup>Ninety per cent of the cargo loaded for North Africa in February and March 1941 arrived safely. On 1 April Rommel launched his campaign.

<sup>4</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 139.

<sup>5</sup>A comparison of British and Italian naval forces in the Mediterranean between June and September 1940: Italy--five battleships, three heavy cruisers, seven light cruisers, 34 destroyers, and 46 submarines; Britain--three battleships, eight light cruisers, 21 destroyers, and 29 submarines. The Italian battleships were also more modern than the British, while Italy's cruisers had greater firepower and speed than those of the Royal Navy. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, II, 338-39.

particularly a minelaying squadron, as such units were extremely effective in blocking Malta's ports. Hitler, however, could spare no forces for Malta after the inauguration of Barbarossa.<sup>6</sup>

The ineffectiveness of the Italian effort in providing supplies for Libya forced Mussolini, in July 1941, to request another extension of German aid. The Duce emphasized to Hitler that the solution of the supply problem was an Axis rather than an Italian concern. Hitler offered encouragement and advice to the Duce, but not military forces. The Fuehrer cited immobilization of Malta as an important goal of Italian strategy for the success of future Axis operations, but for the present Germany was totally committed to the Eastern offensive.<sup>7</sup>

Hitler also offered his advice on solving the chronic problem of transporting supplies to North Africa. His proposal to the Duce was to reroute the Axis convoys to Libya via Greece and Crete, avoiding the Sicilian Straits and bypassing Malta.<sup>8</sup> The Fuehrer's plan, however, failed to consider the entire strategic situation and to take into account the more basic problems which handicapped Germany's Axis partner in supplying the Axis forces in North Africa.

The first problem was shipping. Italy had entered the war with a large proportion of her merchant fleet in foreign ports outside the Mediterranean, which oversight caused a serious loss of cargo space for

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<sup>6</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 51.

<sup>7</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 20 July 1941, and Mussolini to Hitler, 26 July 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XIII, Doc. Nos. 134 and 156; 190-95 and 221.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.



convoy duty to North Africa.<sup>9</sup> Another problem was fuel oil. Germany had promised to make up this deficiency when Italy entered the war, but the needs of the Wehrmacht left little for the Italian armed forces. The long, roundabout route to Tripoli via Crete meant a considerable increase in fuel consumption, which Italy could ill afford, and also exposed the convoys and their escorts to attack for longer periods of time.<sup>10</sup> The crux of the problem was that Malta could not be bypassed because of its position as a watchtower over the Italian routes.

Malta's reconnaissance aircraft immediately sighted Italian convoys passing through the Straits of Messina. Surface ships based at Alexandria, informed of the convoys' course and speed, had little difficulty in intercepting, and British submarines from Malta prowled the convoy area with increasing success.<sup>11</sup>

Hitler considered the Cretan route the more natural supply line to North Africa. The Fuehrer advocated use of the Cyrenaican ports of Benghazi and Derna rather than Tripoli, but again German strategy did not appreciate the situation. Only at Tripoli were there proper facilities for handling cargo, storage, and transportation to the front. After repeated British attacks, the port of Benghazi was inadequate--docks were destroyed and the harbor littered with half-sunken ships. At Derna there was a lack of native manpower to unload the ships. Throughout

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<sup>9</sup>Belot, The War in the Mediterranean, 10. When Italy went to war, 218 ships of approximately 1,200,000 tons remained abroad. This amounted to nearly one-third of the merchant fleet and also were some of Italy's most modern ships.

<sup>10</sup>Ruge, Der Seekrieg, 249.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

the war, much to Rommel's disappointment, Tripoli was to remain the major port for Axis supplies.<sup>12</sup>

German encouragement and advice to her Axis partner did not alleviate the situation. Commando Supremo informed O.K.W. in July 1941 that due to increased shipping losses, Italy could no longer adequately supply the Italo-German forces in North Africa. The Italian General Staff considered the Cretan route inoperable without air support. The source of the supply problem, they declared, came from the inability to secure the primary route across the Sicilian Straits to Tripoli, and until this situation was corrected, they advised that Rommel abandon the siege of Tobruk and retreat to defensive positions within Libya.<sup>13</sup>

Rommel did not agree with Commando Supremo's judgment that the supply problem was unsolvable, and he intended to maintain the offensive posture of the Afrika Korps. While he criticized the reluctance of the Italian Navy to provide adequate escort, Rommel believed that the primary responsibility for relieving the supply situation belonged to O.K.W. The Commander of the Afrika Korps urged Hitler to consider the return of the Luftwaffe and the elimination of Malta as an enemy base rather than the alternative--the loss of all of North Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Hitler's concern, however, was with the Eastern front and the Battle of

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<sup>12</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 138. Rommel required, in the summer of 1941, 1,500 tons of supplies, including water, to reach the front each day just to maintain his position.

<sup>13</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 51.

<sup>14</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 191.

Moscow rather than with North Africa and the siege of Tobruk.<sup>15</sup>

By the fall of 1941 the Afrika Korps' offensive capability was severely reduced due to the lack of supplies. In August British forces sank 35 per cent of Rommel's supplies; in September the toll reached nearly 40 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Because of the rapidly deteriorating situation on the North African front, Hitler reluctantly recognized that the Mediterranean front would not wait for the conclusion of Barbarossa.

On 14 September 1941 Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe forces in the eastern Mediterranean to accept responsibility for the safe conduct of Axis convoys. This meant the redirection of Fliegerkorps X to a defensive rather than an offensive mission. Goering opposed the order. The Reichsmarschal argued that protection of the central Mediterranean meant the transfer of a major part of Fliegerkorps X to Sicilian air bases which the Italian Air Force had already reoccupied. Withdrawal from the eastern basin, Goering stated, meant that the Luftwaffe would be unable to support the Afrika Korps in its drive to Suez.<sup>17</sup>

Goering's argument surprised General Rommel. As its assignment was against Suez and Alexandria, Fliegerkorps X provided little direct assistance to the Afrika Korps in Cyrenaica, and Rommel's advance depended upon the solution of the supply problem. It appears that Goering had other reasons for opposing the Fuehrer's directive. The

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<sup>15</sup>Rommel reached the defensive perimeters of Tobruk on 4 May 1941 and thereafter maintained a limited siege of the fortress until 10 December 1941.

<sup>16</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 56.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 55.

Reichsmarschal had no wish to return to the attack on Malta with only one reduced air unit, and as there was no glory to be won in the skies over Malta, Goering wanted the Luftwaffe in position to participate in the capture of Suez. He had no intention of being left out of such a prestigious operation.

During the desert campaign in 1942, Rommel wrote that Goering continually interfered in the strategic planning for the Mediterranean theater, expecting that easy victories would be won in the area. He was concerned, Rommel wrote, only in advancing his own prestige and winning laurels for the Luftwaffe.<sup>18</sup> Beset by the problems of inter-Axis and interservice quarreling, Rommel considered Goering his worst enemy.<sup>19</sup> The Reichsmarschal's opposition to the Fuehrer's order increased the bitterness between the Commander of the Afrika Korps and the Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief.

Goering successfully evaded Hitler's order and the Luftwaffe limited the German air cover to the area from Greece to Cyrenaica and along the coast to Derna and Benghazi, leaving the main convoy route from Italy to Tripoli and Tripoli to Benghazi unprotected.<sup>20</sup> Absorbed with the Russian campaign, Hitler offered no objection to the limitations imposed on his original order.

Goering's effrontery, however, did not go unnoticed. The naval staff objected adamantly to the Luftwaffe's evasion of the Supreme

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<sup>18</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 366-67.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>20</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 55.

Command directive. From Rome Admiral Weichold urged the employment of Fliegerkorps X in full strength against Malta, and the increase in British attacks from the British fortress on Italian ports and supply ships reinforced the Navy's argument. The German Naval Staff warned O.K.W. on 20 September:

Unless the operational orders of X Fliegerkorps are modified to conform with the original directives of the Supreme Command, or reinforcements are sent forthwith (preferably to Sicily), regardless of weakening the Russian front, it will be too late to do anything.<sup>21</sup>

Admiral Raeder continued the argument with Hitler. He advised the Fuehrer that since the Italian air and naval forces alone could not provide adequate escort, Germany would again have to take responsibility for the leadership of operations in the Mediterranean. Raeder urged that all political and military measures to improve the convoy situation be undertaken immediately.<sup>22</sup> Hitler remained reluctant to reinforce the Mediterranean front, but he approved the transfer of six U-boats to the area, over the objections of Admiral Doenitz.<sup>23</sup> The Fuehrer made no change in the Luftwaffe assignment. Fliegerkorps X continued to operate from Greece and Crete, but protection of the "back door" route proved ineffective in solving the supply problem. Lack of close cooperation between the Italian Navy and the Luftwaffe added to the problem. The planned rendezvous off Greece of Italian convoy ships and German air cover often did not occur, forcing the ships to proceed without air

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<sup>21</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 55.

<sup>22</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 17 September 1941, 47.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 35-36.

support and resulting in increased convoy losses.<sup>24</sup> Only one-third of the troops and one-seventh of the supplies required by the Afrika Korps arrived in Libya during September.<sup>25</sup>

Britain, meanwhile, continued to extend Malta's offensive capability. On 21 October two cruisers and two destroyers from the British home fleet, known as Force K, arrived at Valetta harbor, considerably increasing the British threat to the Libyan convoy route. Axis convoy losses during October neared 70 per cent of the total leaving Italy. By the end of the month the Italian Navy considered the direct route to Tripoli completely closed, while the Benghazi route remained only partially open.<sup>26</sup> Expecting an imminent British offensive, Rommel appealed directly to the Fuehrer for aid.

In answer to Rommel's request, Hitler agreed to the transfer of a few long range night fighter squadrons to the Mediterranean. These units, he expected, could inflict considerable damage by surprise raids on aircraft landing at night on Malta. In addition to the night fighters, Hitler ordered another 25 U-boats to the Mediterranean.<sup>27</sup> But he remained reluctant to undertake full scale commitment to the Mediterranean. His offer of a few air units was a token gesture and one that could not be expected to reverse the situation. Instead, Hitler attempted to increase the Italian effort, and he again offered his

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<sup>24</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 55-56.

<sup>25</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 155.

<sup>26</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 56-57.

<sup>27</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 29 October 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XIII, Doc. No. 433; 714-15.

advice to the Duce. In a letter to Mussolini, Hitler urged total commitment of the Italian Air Force in neutralizing the island of Malta. The Fuehrer also suggested tightening the blockade of the island.<sup>28</sup>

The threat of a British offensive required that another attempt be made to send a large Axis convoy through to North Africa in November. On 8 November reconnaissance aircraft from Malta reported an Axis convoy off Cape Spartivento. The convoy, including seven merchant ships escorted by 10 destroyers and two cruisers, was heading for Libya via Greece and Crete. Force K sailed from Valetta to intercept. In the following action the British sank two Italian destroyers and all seven of the merchant ships. This disastrous loss seriously hampered Rommel's plan for an Axis offensive to offset obvious British preparations and caused even greater Italian reluctance to continue such convoys.<sup>29</sup> The battle of supplies was no longer a battle--it was a rout. Italy could not remedy the situation, and since it was apparent that German aid would not suffice, the Duce again appealed to Hitler.

Mussolini emphasized to the Fuehrer that the situation was urgent. British operations from Malta--air, submarine, and now surface ships--made it necessary to protect Axis convoys with large naval escorts. He stated that the passage of a convoy to North Africa was a major military operation and required more than naval protection. Although the increased activities of the Italian Air Force were having some effect, Mussolini stressed that German aid was required. The Duce

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<sup>28</sup>Conversation between Hitler and Ciano, 26 October 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XIII, Doc. No. 424; 688.

<sup>29</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 103-04.

concluded:

I am convinced that the dispatch of an additional German air corps to southern Italy will give us an overwhelming superiority over the enemy and will also result in the neutralization of Malta.<sup>30</sup>

On 21 November Hitler finally agreed to make a major commitment of Luftwaffe units to the Mediterranean, but his decision was a result of the British offensive in North Africa and not Mussolini's request. The British 8th Army launched its attack on 18 November, anticipating Rommel's offensive by three days. The Fuehrer's decision to transfer German forces to the Mediterranean came too late to change the immediate situation, and Rommel retreated across Cyrenaica.<sup>31</sup> With the success of the British Army, Royal Air Force units began to operate from Cyrenaican bases and gained even greater control of the Axis supply route. Axis convoy losses for November were almost 75 per cent of the total bound for Libya. Only 8,400 tons of supplies arrived in Libya during the month, the lowest delivery of the Mediterranean war.<sup>32</sup>

To lessen British domination of the central Mediterranean, Hitler planned a significant increase in German air strength, but Germany's attempt to regain the initiative began at sea. On 17 November the German submarine U-81 sank the British aircraft carrier Ark Royal; a week later U-331 torpedoed and sank the battleship Barham. The U-boats continued their success with the sinking of two British cruisers off

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<sup>30</sup>Mussolini to Hitler, 6 November 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XIII, Doc. No. 454; 752-53.

<sup>31</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 173.

<sup>32</sup>Andrew Browne Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1951), 420.



Alexandria in December, vindicating Hitler's decision to transfer German submarines to the area. A further reduction of British naval strength occurred with the loss of the battleships Queen Elizabeth and Valiant from an attack by Italian two-man torpedo teams in Alexandria harbor.<sup>33</sup> Britain's position in the Mediterranean, which appeared formidable in early fall 1941, had changed drastically by November. The return of the Luftwaffe portended further reverses for British strategy, particularly concerning the British naval base at Malta.

On 28 November 1941 Hitler appointed Field Marshal Kesselring Commander-in-Chief South (Oberbefehlshaber Süd).<sup>34</sup> The Fuehrer ordered Fliegerkorps II, under the command of General Loerzer, withdrawn from the Eastern front and combined with Fliegerkorps X to form the 2nd Air Fleet. The reorganized air fleet included three bomber squadrons, two dive bomber groups, three fighter groups, plus reconnaissance aircraft and anti-aircraft units. Hitler stated that these units were to "establish a center of strength for the Axis powers in the central Mediterranean."<sup>35</sup> He informed the Duce that the Mediterranean was to be the main theater of operations for the Wehrmacht. But the Fuehrer relied on a limited commitment of the Wehrmacht, similar to German policy in the previous year. German strategy again did not plan to take advantage of the situation and achieve total victory. Hitler's goal was to prevent a

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<sup>33</sup>Kurt Assman, Deutsche Schicksalsjahre (Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus, 1951), 353.

<sup>34</sup>Albert Kesselring, Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, trans. by Lynton Hudson (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1954), 116.

<sup>35</sup>Fuehrer's Directive No. 38, 2 December 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XIII, Doc. No. 535; 938-39.

collapse of the Mediterranean front.

Kesselring's main task was the elimination of Malta by air attack. Neutralization of the island meant the securing of the Sicilian Straits for Axis convoys and interdiction of British east-west maritime traffic. The German Supreme Command, however, had no plans to capture the island in November 1941. Kesselring asked the Fuehrer, after his appointment as CIC South, if Malta was so important to the Mediterranean war, why shouldn't Germany follow up the air attack and occupy the island? Hitler replied that there were no forces available for such an operation.<sup>36</sup>

Kesselring's appointment gave him command of all German air units in the Mediterranean. Theoretically, he was subordinate only to the king and the Duce in the southern theater of operations. Commando Supremo resented this intrusion, but Kesselring was willing to cooperate with the Italian staff rather than assert his authority. He exercised direct control only over the Luftwaffe and those air and naval forces assigned to him by Commando Supremo. Rommel, although subject to General Bastico<sup>37</sup> and Commando Supremo, retained his own command and answered directly to O.K.W. and the Fuehrer.<sup>38</sup>

The 2nd Air Fleet opened its attack on 21 December with a raid on Malta's airfields. Kesselring's plan was first to eliminate the island's fighter defenses, either on the ground in surprise attacks or

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<sup>36</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 116.

<sup>37</sup>General Ettore Bastico succeeded General Gariboldi as CIC Armed Forces in North Africa on 12 July 1941.

<sup>38</sup>Report No. A-578, "The German Air Force in Italy," 3.

by aerial combat. The second phase involved mass bombing of Malta's three airfields to handicap the arrival of any reinforcements. The final attack would be concentrated against the harbor area. It took time, however, to build up the necessary ground organization and supply network before inauguration of large scale raids. Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe flew protection for supplies to Libya.<sup>39</sup>

The British Cyrenaican offensive ended on 12 January 1942. Rommel halted his retreat at El Agheila and both armies awaited further supplies. Air and submarine operations from Malta gave Britain the edge in logistic operations during the fall of 1941, but the return of the Luftwaffe soon reversed the situation. Between 30 December and 5 January, more than 400 aircraft attacked Malta's airfields.<sup>40</sup> When a large Axis convoy of fuel and tanks arrived safely at Tripoli without challenge on 5 January, Rommel commented that this convoy was "as good as a victory in battle."<sup>41</sup> With his supply line apparently secured by the presence of the Luftwaffe, Rommel launched his counteroffensive on 21 January. Meanwhile, Kesselring undertook his primary mission--the neutralization of Malta.

The Luftwaffe raided the island both day and night. Junker 88 bombers combined with divebombing Stukas for alternate high and low

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<sup>39</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 139.

<sup>40</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 125.

<sup>41</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 180.

level attacks.<sup>42</sup> The initial raids succeeded in destroying many British aircraft before they could take to the air. Those which became airborne faced overwhelming odds. Heavy bombing cratered the island's three airfields, and the frequency of the raids hampered the attempts of work crews to repair the damage. During January there were 262 raids, which Kesselring classified as "minor," designed merely to prepare the way for the massive attacks planned for early spring. The preliminary raids succeeded in reducing Malta's total fighter defense to 28 operational aircraft at the end of January; the number dropped to 11 by 15 February.<sup>43</sup> The arrival of the Luftwaffe had completely changed the situation in the central Mediterranean. In January 1942 not a single ship was lost on the Libyan convoy route.

The success of the Luftwaffe attack depended on halting any further supplies from reaching the island. By constantly patrolling the sea lanes to Malta, Kesselring intended to prevent relief to the beleaguered fortress. The British attempt to force through a convoy to the island on 18 February failed. Not a single ship reached Valetta.<sup>44</sup>

Hitler and O.K.W. realized that if the Luftwaffe could achieve effective blockade of the island, Malta would not have to be captured--it would fall to the Axis without a shot. The Commander of the British garrison, Lieut. General Sir William Dobbie, acknowledged that after the

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<sup>42</sup>Junker 88 bombers were the conventional "glide bombers." They were twin engine monoplanes with a maximum speed of 295 m.p.h. and a bombload of 2,200 lbs. The Stukas, JU-87s, were the "dive bombers." They were single engine monoplanes with a maximum speed of 245 m.p.h. and a bombload of 1,100 lbs.

<sup>43</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 126.

<sup>44</sup>Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, 442-43.

failure of the February convoy, Malta was reduced to siege level. Dobbie anticipated that the island's defenders could hold out no later than the end of June without further supplies.<sup>45</sup> The continued effectiveness of the Luftwaffe, however, was the major question to Axis military strategists. Once before, from January to March 1941, the island had appeared "neutralized," yet once the pressure of continual air raids ended, Malta had regained the offensive. Many Axis advisers, including Field Marshal Kesselring, argued that air attack alone was not enough.

Kesselring consistently advised the German Supreme Command that the final solution of the supply problem to Libya required the capture of Malta. He considered failure to follow up the air attack with a landed invasion a strategic error.<sup>46</sup> General Cavallero,<sup>47</sup> Commando Supremo Chief of Staff, supported Kesselring's argument. For once it was the Italians who took the initiative.

Cavallero and Commando Supremo began to study the possibilities of an invasion of Malta soon after the arrival of the Luftwaffe. In January 1942 the Italian General Staff actually began training its forces for a combined sea and air invasion of the island. Cavallero believed that Italian troops alone could capture the island, with the

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<sup>45</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 160-61. Dobbie estimated 15,000 tons of supplies had to arrive each month in order to maintain the stocks at the present level.

<sup>46</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 150-51.

<sup>47</sup>General Ugo Cavallero was appointed Chief of Staff in December 1940, succeeding Marshal Badoglio. Cavallero was promoted to Marshal in July 1942. He was regarded as an excellent organizer and a pro-German. His removal by the Duce in January 1943 caused discomfit in Berlin.

support of the Luftwaffe. But Commando Supremo did not plan for an immediate assault. Special landing craft had to be devised to cope with the island's rocky coast, and airborne units needed special preparations. Cavallero expected that the assault force would be ready by about the first of June.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe must complete its neutralization of the island's defenses. A number of different plans were considered by Commando Supremo, including one submitted by the Japanese, who had proven by January 1942 to be experts at amphibious operations.<sup>49</sup>

The air raids on the island steadily increased during February. At the end of the month Kesselring reported to Reichsmarschal Goering that due to the Luftwaffe success against Malta, the convoy route was secured. He noted that Axis shipping passed within 100 miles of the island with little danger. The Commander-in-Chief South, however, continued to press for a commitment of the Wehrmacht to an invasion of the island. At a conference with Hitler in February, the Field Marshal appeared to have won the Fuehrer's approval:

Hitler ended the argument by grasping me by the arm and telling me in his Austrian dialect: "Keep your shirt on, Field Marshal Kesselring, I'm going to do it!"<sup>50</sup>

But Hitler had no such intention in February 1942. As in the previous year, German intervention in the Mediterranean sought no long term objectives. The precarious situation in North Africa had dictated

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<sup>48</sup>Enno von Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse (Leins: 1951), 165. In March 1942 the Prince of Piedmont was selected to head the operation.

<sup>49</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 175.

<sup>50</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 123-24.

the dispatch of the 2nd Air Fleet to Sicily. The losses of Axis shipping on the North African convoy route had been an immediate problem requiring immediate German attention. It was the Eastern front that had remained Hitler's overriding concern in the winter of 1941-42. His announcement to Mussolini that the Mediterranean theater would become the major concern of the Wehrmacht had been no more than a sop to his Axis partner and not to be taken seriously. German military strategists, however, objected to the Fuehrer's short term policy.

Admiral Raeder advised Hitler in February 1942 that since the Axis ruled both the air and the sea in the central Mediterranean, Germany should develop the situation to her advantage. The naval commander emphasized that such favorable conditions would not be repeated. He urged Hitler to consider a full scale attack on Egypt and Suez.<sup>51</sup> In focusing on Suez, Raeder hoped to win Germany's commitment to a Mediterranean victory and turn the Fuehrer's attention from the Eastern front. Raeder's argument offered the Suez Canal as a major strategic prize worth total German commitment. Malta was not mentioned. Although Raeder considered the capture of Malta vital to the success of a Suez operation, it was far easier to argue for Suez than for Malta. Hitler, however, did not believe such an undertaking possible without a further transfer of German units, and this he remained unwilling to consider.<sup>52</sup> Hitler continued to rely on the Luftwaffe to solve the more immediate problem of Malta.

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<sup>51</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 13 February 1942, 10.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

The second phase of the air attack began in March, by which time the 2nd Air Fleet comprised 335 operational aircraft. Mass air raids reduced the island's air bases to rubble. The Luftwaffe flew nearly 5,000 sorties in March, as compared with 2,500 in the previous month, but Malta's defenders continued to inflict considerable losses on the attackers. One reason was that certain features of the island made conventional air raids difficult. Kesselring reported:

There were natural shelters hewn out of the [lime-]stone rock on the perimeter of the airfields and around the harbour where aircraft and stores could be safeguarded and against which even the heaviest delayed-action bombs could not have a really devastating effect.<sup>53</sup>

Low level attacks were often necessary, giving British anti-aircraft batteries exceptional opportunities.

Although the Luftwaffe raids pounded the island's military installations, Britain recognized that Malta's greatest concern was lack of supplies. General Dobbie estimated that food would last a few more months, and the British desperately needed ammunition for anti-aircraft defenses and fuel for the few remaining aircraft. To relieve the fortress, Churchill decided to attempt another convoy run. The British convoy that approached the island on 20 March was sighted by German reconnaissance aircraft from Sicily. Kesselring ordered it destroyed, and assigned 326 bombers and fighters of the 2nd Air Fleet to the task. Only two ships with a total of 5,000 tons of supplies reached Malta, but these two delivered the much-needed ammunition and fuel oil and enabled Malta's defenses to remain functioning.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 140.

<sup>54</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 136-39.



The March convoy proved that Britain had no intention of surrendering the island and that the Luftwaffe alone could not completely blockade the island. In view of these facts, Admiral Raeder again advised Hitler in March 1942 not to abandon the Mediterranean until a final decision was won by the Axis forces. Raeder emphasized that because of the recent air attacks, Malta's defenses offered no serious risk to an invasion attempt by Axis troops and with Malta secured Suez could then be taken. If Axis troops were not available for such a task, Raeder argued, it was vital to retain the Luftwaffe in Sicily at full strength, or Britain could regain the offensive.<sup>55</sup>

In considering Raeder's advice, Hitler replied that a combined Axis operation was doubtful. One reason was that he distrusted Italian support in a combined invasion of Malta and did not believe that Commando Supremo would actually carry out its invasion plan. Hitler acknowledged that capture of the island would greatly facilitate a Suez offensive, but only if the Luftwaffe was not required for other duty, either on the Eastern front or to oppose a British challenge in the west.<sup>56</sup>

Field Marshal Kesselring and General Rommel supported Raeder's argument. In March 1942 Kesselring prepared a report for the German Supreme Command on the possibility of German forces joining the Italians already in training. O.K.W., however, showed little interest in a combined operation to take Malta, and expressed doubt that the Italians

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<sup>55</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 12 March 1942, 18.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

alone could carry out the operation, even with Luftwaffe support. As late as the end of March 1942 Keitel wrote to Kesselring:

One cannot very well tell the Italians that they might as well cancel their preparations for the invasion of Malta because they will not get Malta anyway . . . but they should be told now that when Luftflotte [air fleet] 2's bombing of the island has been successfully completed, one reconnaissance Staffel [squadron], two bomber Gruppen [groups] and three fighter Gruppen will have to be withdrawn.<sup>57</sup>

Keitel added that the remaining forces of the 2nd Air Fleet could assist the Italians and perhaps, with the Fuehrer's approval, one or two airborne regiments, if the Italians actually undertook an invasion of the island.<sup>58</sup> O.K.W., Kesselring, and Commando Supremo all agreed, however, that completion of the Luftwaffe's mission--the neutralization of Malta--must precede any invasion attempt.

The third phase of the Luftwaffe's attack began in April. Field Marshal Kesselring directed the main force of the attack to the island's harbor areas. More than three times the total of bombs fell on the island in April than in the previous month. The Luftwaffe flew over 500 sorties on 7 and 8 April alone, with Grand Harbor, the main British naval base, as the major target. The air raids destroyed docking facilities, warehouses, harbor defenses, and repair yards. In less than three weeks more than 2,000 sorties were flown against Grand Harbor, with approximately 1,900 tons of bombs dropped on the dockyards and adjacent areas. Bombing raids nearly destroyed the city of Valetta. The British evacuated most of the population to the interior of the

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<sup>57</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 77.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

island. Only work crews remained. During April Malta underwent the heaviest concentrated bombing of the war until that date,<sup>59</sup> while the Luftwaffe lost only 35 aircraft during the month.<sup>60</sup>

The April raids were disastrous for the island's defenders. The Malta Defence Committee estimated at the end of the month that only 34 days' supply of basic foodstuffs remained. Anti-aircraft ammunition was nearly exhausted. Although Malta desperately needed the arrival of a convoy, the Defence Committee admitted that this was impossible until the air supremacy of the Luftwaffe could be challenged.<sup>61</sup> General Dobbie appealed to London for aid.

Prime Minister Churchill recognized the island's precarious situation and saw that the first task was to reinforce Malta's air defenses. In April Churchill requested from President Roosevelt the loan of the U.S. aircraft carrier Wasp to ferry British Spitfire aircraft<sup>62</sup> to Malta. Because of its size, Wasp could deliver as many aircraft in one mission as could a British carrier in three trips. Roosevelt immediately agreed, and on 20 April Wasp reached the Mediterranean. The carrier launched 47 aircraft, 46 of which landed safely at

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<sup>59</sup>Prior to the April raids on Malta, the Coventry raid was considered to have delivered the greatest concentrated bombing attack. Later, of course, the massive raids over Germany, e.g. Dresden, Hamburg, etc., far exceeded the bombing of Malta.

<sup>60</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 139-41.

<sup>61</sup>Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 261-62.

<sup>62</sup>Spitfires were single engine monoplane fighters with a maximum speed of 375 m.p.h. and a range of 480 miles.

the hastily repaired airfields on Malta.<sup>63</sup>

The Luftwaffe, however, had not been caught unaware. Ninety minutes after the Spitfires' arrival, the Luftwaffe attacked. The surprise raid destroyed three-quarters of the newly arrived aircraft on the ground and ended the British attempt to redress the balance of air supremacy. Britain paid heavily for her prewar failure to construct adequate underground hangars.

Although the Luftwaffe played the dominant role in neutralizing Malta, the German Navy also participated. German E-boats<sup>64</sup> systematically mined Malta's ports and the access routes to the island. In the spring of 1942 the E-boats, often working in close proximity to shore defenses, laid 23 minefields with a total of 557 mines. The effectiveness of the minefields forced the removal of the British 10th Submarine Flotilla to Alexandria on 26 April.<sup>65</sup> German U-boat operations in the Sicilian Straits also contributed to the closing of Malta's sea approaches, while in addition, German submarine activities in Cyrenaican waters disrupted British coastal traffic and contributed significantly to the success of the Afrika Korps.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe gained an increasing ascendancy in the skies above Malta.

After inspecting the results of the air raids on Malta during

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<sup>63</sup>Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 266-67.

<sup>64</sup>E-boats were light, fast craft utilized as minelayers and also for group attack on British merchant ships. During Rommel's 1942 campaign, they often supported Axis coastal shipping. The E-boats arrived in the Mediterranean via the Rhine and the Rhone.

<sup>65</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 74.

<sup>66</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 117-18.

the first part of April, Kesselring considered that his mission was nearly accomplished. He reported to Hitler:

The planned air attack on Malta between 1-9 April has in my opinion, eliminated Malta as a naval base. The shipyards and dock installations have been so badly damaged that there can be no question of using Malta as a base for a long time to come.<sup>67</sup>

Kesselring, however, continued to argue for a German commitment to an invasion of the island, which he considered to be the natural conclusion to the Luftwaffe's achievement. He proposed a slackening off period before the final air attack on the island in support of an Axis invasion. The question was whether the Fuehrer would agree to German participation in the operation...

Kesselring's argument, supported by the naval staff, had caused O.K.W. by April 1942 to reconsider the proposal, and, convinced that the Italians were willing to cooperate in a combined operation, Field Marshal Keitel recommended to Hitler the capture of Malta. On 21 April Hitler tentatively gave his approval of German support to an Axis invasion of Malta, but at the same time he expressed his doubts as to the availability of the Wehrmacht for the task. If German forces were needed elsewhere, he declared, Germany could spare no forces for Malta.<sup>68</sup>

Having gained Hitler's approval, O.K.W. ordered two German parachute regiments to Viterbo to begin joint training with the Italians. The German Supreme Command assigned General Kurt Student, an expert in airborne operations, as the German Commander and approved the formation

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<sup>67</sup>Martienssen, Hitler and His Admirals, 127.

<sup>68</sup>Andreas Hillgruber, ed., Kriegstagesbuch des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht 1940-1945 (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1963), II, Part 1. Hereafter cited as Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W.

of a combined Axis staff headed by General Gandin, under Commando Supremo, to carry out the operational planning.<sup>69</sup>

Hitler's interest in the Mediterranean theater of war had steadily increased since the return of the Luftwaffe to Sicily in the fall of 1941. His approval of the combined Axis staff to study preparations for the capture of Malta, the first and only such Axis planning board of the entire war, indicates this increased concern for the future conduct of Mediterranean operations. Yet the Fuehrer's consent was conditional. Kesselring's report of the effectiveness of the Luftwaffe raids suggested to Hitler that perhaps air attack alone could solve the problem, rather than risking an invasion of the island, as Kesselring had intended. Rommel's request to the Fuehrer for approval to undertake a major desert offensive at the end of May 1942 further increased Hitler's doubts as to the wisdom or the necessity of undertaking an invasion of Malta, which would involve an extensive commitment of the Wehrmacht.

Hitler hesitated in reaching a final commitment on the capture of Malta. The decision for a combined Axis operation could not be taken lightly. Before reaching a final decision, Hitler agreed to the Duce's request for a political meeting to be held at Salzburg on 29 April, to be followed the next day by a military summit meeting on Mediterranean strategy at Berchtesgaden. The fate of Malta depended upon the outcome of the conference.

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<sup>69</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 165. General Aldo Gandin was a General Staff Officer of Commando Supremo who was formerly secretary to the Italian Chief of Staff.

## CHAPTER IV

### OPERATION HERKULES

The military summit conference of the Axis leaders at Berchtesgaden, scheduled for 30 April 1942, was one of a small number of such meetings held by Germany and Italy to outline Axis strategy. These infrequent sessions were the only opportunity for a direct exchange of information on military matters between the Axis partners. No combined operational staff or Axis war planning board existed before April 1942, primarily because of the basic mistrust between the two allies.<sup>1</sup> Always dominated by the charismatic and forceful figure of Hitler, the conferences were often no more than an exposition of German views with Mussolini adding his approval of Hitler's intentions.

Mussolini operated at an obvious disadvantage in such discussions. The failure of Italian arms forced an increasing dependence on German strength by the spring of 1942, and an end to the myth of "parallel war." To prevent the collapse of his tottering colonial empire in Africa, Mussolini reluctantly acknowledged that massive German aid was required. It was to gain an extended commitment of the Wehrmacht to the Mediterranean theater of war that Mussolini requested a meeting

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<sup>1</sup>Warlimont, "The Decision in the Mediterranean 1942," in Decisive Battles of World War II, 188. Hereafter cited as Warlimont, "The Decision in the Mediterranean."

with the Fuehrer. The Duce's primary objective was to secure Hitler's final agreement to a combined Axis invasion of Malta.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hitler on 21 April gave his tentative approval for a combined Axis invasion of Malta, codenamed Operation Herkules, he remained skeptical about actually undertaking such an operation.<sup>3</sup> He believed that the Italians were unreliable, and that their apparent willingness to carry out an invasion of Malta was probably transitory. Hitler welcomed Mussolini's request for a meeting, however, for he considered it necessary to resolve the objectives and the timetable for Axis summer operations in the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> The Fuehrer expected that the Berchtesgaden conference could resolve these problems and arrive at a final decision on the proposed invasion of Malta.

The Berchtesgaden conference was preceded by a political conference between Mussolini and Hitler at Schloss Klessheim, near Salzburg, Austria, on 29 April.<sup>5</sup> At Klessheim Hitler reviewed the entire political spectrum. Concerning the Mediterranean theater of war, Hitler announced that because of Franco's hesitation in joining the Axis, the proposed operation to capture Gibraltar was no longer feasible. The Fuehrer reported that a more favorable situation existed with respect to Turkey, which appeared ready to join the Italo-German war effort, while

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<sup>2</sup>Warlimont, "The Decision in the Mediterranean," 188.

<sup>3</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 166.

<sup>4</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 236.

<sup>5</sup>The conferences of 29 and 30 April are often recorded as being one conference, held at either Berchtesgaden or Salzburg. They were, however, two separate conferences. At Schloss Klessheim only Mussolini, Hitler, Ciano, and Ribbentrop were present.



in French North Africa the political situation appeared stable. Mussolini interjected that the use of Bizerte as an Axis port could significantly improve the problem of transporting supplies to North Africa. Hitler acknowledged this possibility but gave no encouragement to Mussolini's ambitions for French territory.<sup>6</sup> With the conclusion of the political discussion, the meeting adjourned to Berchtesgaden, where the German and Italian military staffs awaited the arrival of the Axis leaders.

The Berchtesgaden conference opened on 30 April.<sup>7</sup> The main subject of the meeting and the only military operation discussed in detail was the capture of Malta. General Cavallero, representing Commando Supremo, argued that Operation Herkules was essential to the continued prosecution of the Mediterranean war, and urged that the Axis consider it as its immediate objective. Until Malta was eliminated, he argued, the Axis could not win a decisive victory in the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> Although the Italian staff insisted that Malta should be the immediate objective of the Axis, Cavallero acknowledged that the Italian preparations for undertaking Operation Herkules could not be completed for another three months.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Conversation between Hitler and Mussolini at Schloss Klessheim, 29 April 1942. The Department of State Bulletin, Vol. XV, No. 367 (14 July 1946), 57-63.

<sup>7</sup>The principal figures at the meeting, besides Hitler and Mussolini, were Field Marshal Keitel, General Jodl, Field Marshal Kesselring, Captain Junge, General Cavallero, General Gandin, and probably Admiral Riccardi. Rommel did not attend.

<sup>8</sup>Kirkpatrick, Mussolini, 510.

<sup>9</sup>Warlimont, "The Decision in the Mediterranean," 188.

O.K.W., represented by Field Marshal Keitel and General Jodl, supported Operation Herkules and was prepared to commit the necessary aid to insure its success, upon the Fuehrer's approval. Field Marshal Kesselring reported that the success of the recent air offensive on Malta had opened the way for an Axis invasion of the island.<sup>10</sup> Captain Junge, representing the naval staff, agreed that capture of Malta was a necessary prerequisite for an Axis advance to the Suez Canal, which was the ultimate objective of Axis strategy in the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> Hitler, however, expressed his doubts concerning the necessity of such an operation.

Hitler preferred bypassing Malta and launching an Axis invasion across Egypt to Suez. He regarded Egypt as "ripe for revolution" and expected that the Egyptian government would welcome an Axis victory. Moreover, Hitler indicated that because of the Luftwaffe success in intercepting British attempts to supply Malta, perhaps Britain should be allowed to retain the island, for in this manner Malta would serve as a steady drain on British Mediterranean resources. Hitler emphasized also that an invasion of Malta would require extraordinary preparations because in the event of failure, the operation could not be repeated.<sup>12</sup> O.K.W. advised the Fuehrer that the preparations and planning for the operation appeared more than adequate for success. In the spring of 1942 Hitler still listened to his advisers, and in the face of what

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<sup>10</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 236.

<sup>11</sup>Erich Raeder, My Life, trans. by Henry W. Drexel (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1960), 365.

<sup>12</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 101.

appeared to be unanimous agreement, he reluctantly gave his approval for Operation Herkules. He emphasized, however, that in the event of a British attack in the west, the Luftwaffe units in the Mediterranean would have to be transferred to meet the challenge.<sup>13</sup>

In reply to a question by Cavallero, Hitler promised large scale German participation in the attack on Malta. Besides the Luftwaffe forces already in the Mediterranean and the parachute battalion assigned there on 21 April to train with Italian troops, Germany would provide at least an air transport fleet, landing craft, and tanks. The details were left to be worked out by the recently organized Axis planning staff headed by General Gandin.<sup>14</sup>

Hitler's approval of Operation Herkules and the promise of extensive German aid concluded the basic question before the conference. The next issue to be settled was when the operation would take place, and here the brief unanimity of the Axis ended. The problem concerned the timetable for Rommel's offensive, which the Commander of the Afrika Korps believed could not be delayed beyond the end of May.<sup>15</sup> His request to Hitler in mid-April, before the conference convened, for a transfer of Luftwaffe units to North Africa in support of his desert campaign upset Italian plans to hold all Axis air strength in Sicily and Italy for the preliminary air attack on Malta before undertaking the

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<sup>13</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 101. Hitler had already transferred two groups of JU-88s and two groups of ME-109s to the west. Replacement was to be made by Italian bombers and fighters to keep Malta suppressed.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 193-94.

final assault--Operation Herkules.

Rommel's request to launch an offensive in Cyrenaica was not intended to forestall the capture of Malta. On the contrary, the Commander of the Afrika Korps was a firm advocate of such an operation, and had repeatedly urged O.K.W. to capture the island since his arrival in Libya, more than a year before. Constantly beset by supply problems, Rommel realized more than any of the Axis strategists at Berchtesgaden the importance of capturing Malta. But in April 1942 Rommel faced the immediate prospect of a British offensive. Determined to maintain the initiative, Rommel prepared to offset the intentions of the British 8th Army by attacking first, and, if possible, to capture the Tobruk garrison which guarded the eastern land route to Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Rommel insisted, however, that air support was vital to the success of the proposed desert campaign. It was the question of Luftwaffe support that most concerned the Axis leaders at Berchtesgaden.

The military advisers at the conference realized that the Luftwaffe could not perform both assignments--Operation Herkules and support of the Afrika Korps--simultaneously.<sup>17</sup> One must precede the other. General Cavallero argued that the Axis should undertake Herkules before the Afrika Korps launched any major desert offensive. Only then, he insisted, could the supply line to North Africa finally be secured.<sup>18</sup> O.K.W. recognized, however, that such a schedule, because of the

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<sup>16</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 18.

<sup>17</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 102.

<sup>18</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 166.

admitted Italian delays, would mean a surrender of the Axis initiative in the Mediterranean theater until at least July, when Italy completed her preparations for Herkules. Field Marshal Kesselring believed that the Axis forces should capture Malta before Rommel's attack in Cyrenaica, but if Operation Herkules could not be undertaken before the first of June, then the desert campaign must begin.<sup>19</sup>

The Italian staff was, of course, forced to accept the German argument. Cavallero, however, hoped to limit the objectives and the duration of the desert campaign, for he feared that an extended attack would end the German commitment to the capture of Malta. On this final point the German and Italian staffs reached a compromise agreement: Rommel would begin his offensive at the end of May, and in a campaign of about two weeks, would attempt to capture Tobruk. In no case was he to advance beyond the Libyan-Egyptian border.<sup>20</sup> Hitler and Mussolini approved the decisions of the military staffs, and the conference adjourned.

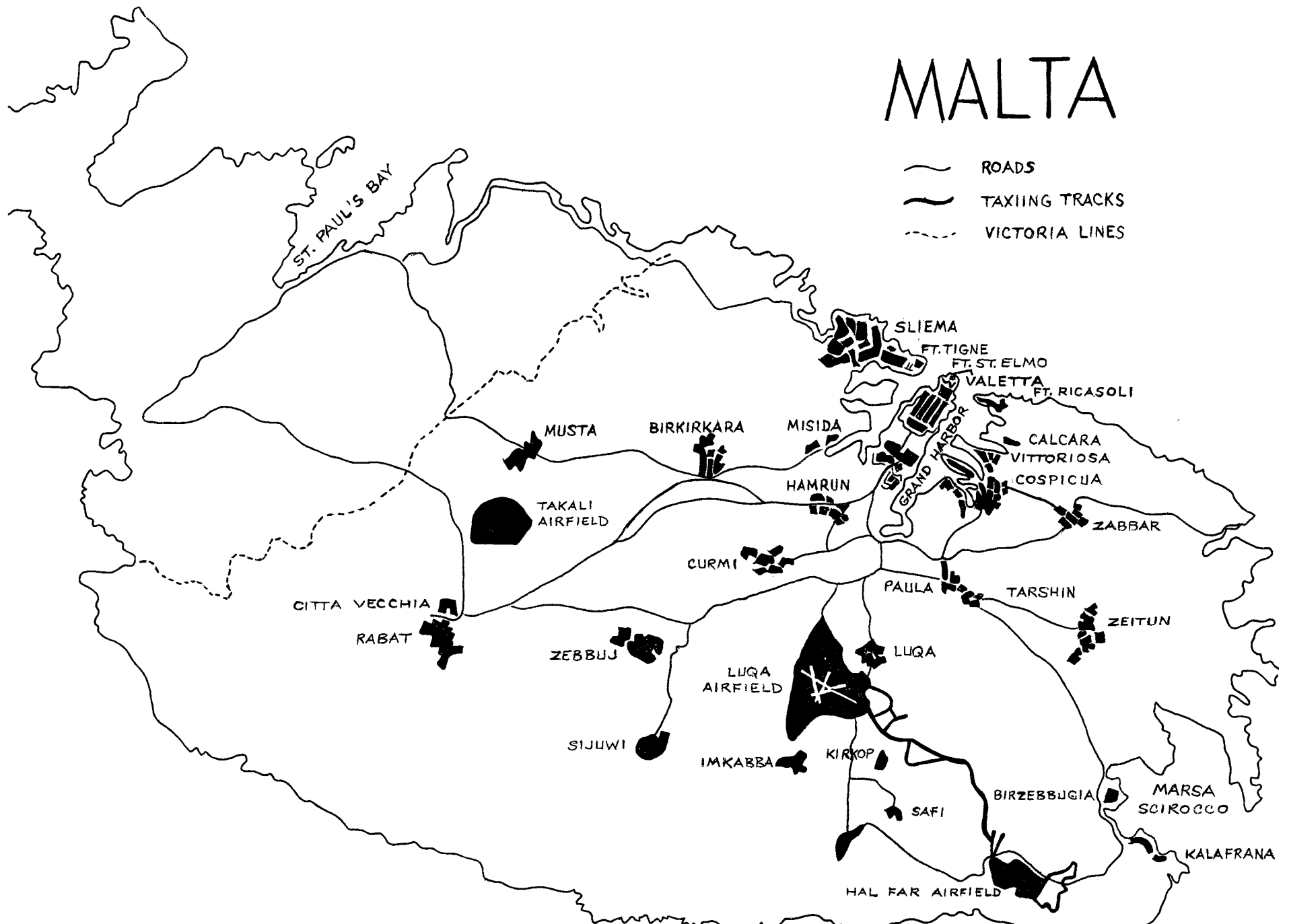
Much of the preparation for Operation Herkules had already been completed by the time of the Berchtesgaden conference. The Italians had begun their training for the assault in January 1941, but it was not until April that O.K.W. had taken an interest and, with the Fuehrer's tentative approval, ordered the commitment of troops to joint training at Viterbo. Hitler's final commitment to the operation at Berchtesgaden allowed the combined Axis planning staff to prepare the details of the

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<sup>19</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 166.

<sup>20</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 102.

# MALTA



invasion plan. Between April and June 1942 this staff undertook the preparations for the capture of Malta.

In considering German strategy toward Malta, one must study Operation Herkules. The plan dominated German policy toward the island between April and June 1942. An analysis of the logistical and operational preparations to capture the island allows a critical evaluation of the problems of Axis cooperation, German commitment to the operation, and what chances the plan had for success.

With the approval of Commando Supremo, O.K.W. assigned General Student as the operational commander of Operation Herkules. His second in command was General Ramcke, while General Gandin headed the Axis planning staff.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the German airborne units already in training at Viterbo, O.K.W. ordered the transfer of auxiliary ground units and air transport forces to southern Italy, which by May 1942 included two parachute divisions, an artillery and a flak regiment, a machine gun battalion, one or two heavy mortar batteries, and an engineer battalion. Hitler also offered 12 Panzer IVs for use in the capture of Malta and at least 10 Russian tanks captured in the first summer offensive against the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> The Axis staff estimated that between 35,000 and 40,000 Italian and German troops would be employed in the operation.

The Italian airborne force assigned to the operation was the 2nd Parachute Division, the "Folgore," an elite force trained in airborne

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<sup>21</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 165-66.

<sup>22</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 103.

operations by General Ramcke and very highly regarded by its German counterparts.<sup>23</sup> The main Italian force, however, would land from the sea. Commando Supremo approved the commitment of five Italian Army divisions and six battalions for the amphibious phase of the operation, while Supermarina<sup>24</sup> during the spring and early summer of 1942 collected together an assortment of auxiliary equipment which included 725 launches and assault boats, 25 motor boats, 80 landing barges, and 64 miscellaneous craft for ferrying purposes.<sup>25</sup>

For the support of the amphibious operation and for the success of the entire operation, the Axis planning staff insisted that the cooperation of the Italian Navy was vital. The Axis did not anticipate that the British fleet would sit idly by while the Italo-German forces undertook a full scale invasion of Malta, but expected that Britain would make every attempt to retain her central Mediterranean base. To insure a vigorous and aggressive countering action by the Italian Navy, Hitler agreed to provide 40,000 tons of fuel oil to Supermarina, along with a further 12,000 tons of aviation fuel for the Italian Air Force, which would provide the air cover for the Italian naval forces.<sup>26</sup> Germany did not intend to allow the usual argument of Supermarina--the lack of fuel--to interfere with its capability to undertake aggressive action against the Royal Navy. As a further precaution against the

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<sup>23</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 149, f.n.

<sup>24</sup>The Italian Naval Staff.

<sup>25</sup>Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, 168, f.n. Much of this naval equipment came from German sources.

<sup>26</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 194.



expected intervention by the British fleet, Admiral Raeder agreed to position a flotilla of German submarines in the sea approaches to Malta, both east and west of the island.<sup>27</sup>

An additional problem which concerned the Axis planners was transport aircraft for the airborne assault. Major Conrad Seibt, assigned to the Headquarters Staff of the German XI Air Force, reported to General Student that between 370 and 470 transport aircraft, seven to eight groups of JU-52s with two to three groups of HE-111s,<sup>28</sup> would participate in the operation, while Italian Savoia aircraft would transport the 2nd Italian Parachute Division.<sup>29</sup> The major question, however, concerned the use of gliders.

In the initial study of the possibility of capturing Malta, undertaken by Germany in the spring of 1941, the use of gliders had been discounted due to the island's topography. Aerial reconnaissance had revealed that numerous stone walls divided the fields of the island into small and irregular patches, an obvious hazard in the employment of glider aircraft. In reconsidering the problem of landing airborne forces for Operation Herkules in May 1942, the Axis staff recognized

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<sup>27</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 194.

<sup>28</sup>JU-52s were triple engine monoplanes used as transport and cargo aircraft with a maximum speed of 165 m.p.h. and a range of 530 to 790 miles. The HE-111s were converted from bombers to transport aircraft for the operation. They had a maximum speed of 240 m.p.h. and a range of 1,510 miles. The Italian Savoia aircraft, S-82s, were triple engine monoplanes used as bombers or transport aircraft with a maximum speed of 205 m.p.h. and a range of 2,200 miles.

<sup>29</sup>"Preparations for the Capture of Malta," prepared by Major Conrad Seibt (unpublished report, MS #D-094), Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.

that the only open areas for air transport planes to land would be the airfields and adjacent parking areas. But as the Luftwaffe planned a massive raid on these areas just prior to the invasion, the damage to the landing strips would prevent the Axis from using the airfields for conventional transport planes. Gliders once again appeared to be the solution.

The use of gliders meant that the stopping distance required by power-driven aircraft would be greatly shortened. To decrease further the required length of open area for the gliders to land safely, the gliders would carry spin chutes to increase the drag resistance. Major-General Gerhard Conrad, the Commander of the XI Air Force, reported to General Student that approximately 300 DFS-230 and GO-240 gliders would be available for the operation.<sup>30</sup>

The logistical problem of the XI Air Force in moving supplies for the nearly 40,000 men to be employed in the operation and the relocating of the large number of transport aircraft and gliders for Operation Herkules was enormous. As the XI German Air Force would be responsible for logistical operations, General Conrad assigned Major Seibt to examine the facilities available for concentrating the assault force in southern Italy and to provide for the formation of supply

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<sup>30</sup>"Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and Other Airborne Units in the Projected Invasion of Malta," prepared by Major-General Gerhard Conrad (unpublished report, MS #D-065), Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C. The DFS-230 was a light glider which could carry 10 men with light equipment; the GO-240 was a larger glider which could carry a 77mm anti-tank gun and crew, or 20 to 25 men.

depots on the basis of 10 days' fighting.<sup>31</sup>

From his experience in the Cretan operation, Major Seibt recognized that it was essential to place the supply depots as near to the intended objective as possible. Seibt expected that by the second day of fighting there would be a considerable need of supplies by the combat troops and transport units would have to fly several daytime sorties. He concluded that it would be necessary to locate the depots in Sicily or southern Calabria.<sup>32</sup>

In his report Seibt noted that the concentration of forces at the jump-off point in Sicily would require 32 to 35 days. He stated that rail facilities for the movement of supplies were adequate as far south as Naples, but in southern Calabria there was only a single track railroad, while further difficulties arose at the Straits of Messina, where the railroad ferries had a capacity of only 400 cars daily. There was also the problem of a shortage of airfields in southern Italy and Sicily. After reconnoitering the area, Seibt reported that in Calabria only two airfields were available and that only one of these, Crontone, could be expanded to receive the concentration of aircraft for the operation. Because of the mountainous topography of Calabria, few airfields could be added. The airfields on Sicily, Seibt added, were numerous, but the bomber and fighter groups of the 2nd Air Fleet occupied the majority of them. However, on the Catania plain, south and

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<sup>31</sup>Seibt, "Preparations for the Capture of Malta."

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

southeast of Etna, German engineers could clear temporary fields.<sup>33</sup>

The obvious inadequacies mentioned in Seibt's report, particularly concerning the lack of air strips, caused discomfit at the headquarters of the XI Air Force. Although General Conrad anticipated the addition of the temporary fields in Catania, the logistical preparations seemed inadequate. As it was General Conrad's mission to direct the air transport groups in the commitment of the parachute and airborne units to Operation Herkules, the Commanding General of the XI Air Force decided to inspect the preparations himself. He found that the recently constructed airfields in Catania were nothing more than newly harvested fields with no facilities for quartering troops, impossible to camouflage, and without a water supply, repair shops, or communications equipment. Conrad continued his misgivings in a report to General Student:

The airfields impressed me as being not very suitable because a great amount of dust would be swirled up during the dry summer. Moreover because some of the auxiliary fields were located extremely close to each other and laid out along an east-west axis, so that during takeoffs into east winds, the planes--and especially the tow trains--would endanger one another.<sup>34</sup>

The problems of concentration and supply were difficult but not insurmountable. O.K.W. and Commando Supremo were satisfied with the initial preparations and confident that the logistical preparations could be accomplished well before the operation began. Axis cooperation in the preparation of Operation Herkules presented few problems, and the

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<sup>33</sup>Seibt, "Preparations for the Capture of Malta."

<sup>34</sup>Conrad, "Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and Other Airborne Units in the Projected Invasion of Malta."

combined planning staff functioned smoothly. In developing the operational plan for the capture of Malta, General Student benefited from his previous experience on Crete.

In the Cretan operation, Student had favored "oil spot tactics," a random dispersal of parachute and airborne troops in different areas without a definite point of concentration. This technique, however, had nearly proven disastrous for the German airborne units.<sup>35</sup> For the capture of Malta, Student intended to employ the Italo-German forces in a concentration of strength, a Schwerpunkt, at one or two points. From these bastions the entire island would be secured.

Student envisaged an operational plan which would include a parachute assault to capture the southern heights of the island, preceded by a massive air raid against Malta's airfields and anti-aircraft batteries.<sup>36</sup> Because of the rugged terrain and steep cliffs on this part of the island, Student expected that the British defenders would be taken by surprise. After securing the southern heights, the Italo-German assault force would advance to the airfields at Luqa and Hal Far. Student's plan to attack from the south would bypass the Victoria lines, the British defense perimeter guarding the north and west approaches to Valetta.<sup>37</sup> With the successful capture of Malta's airfields, the gliders could land safely and discharge their cargo of men and supplies.

Student was aware of the difficulties in the proposed commitment

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<sup>35</sup>Hanson W. Baldwin, Battles Lost and Won (New York: Avon Books, 1968), 145.

<sup>36</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 149.

<sup>37</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 194.

of parachute and airborne troops, especially since the parachute forces would have to jump in a daylight attack, as the Italians were not trained for a night jump.<sup>38</sup> The gliders were an added problem. In reply to his commanding general's query about the method of approach, General Conrad stated that as soon as the attack on the air bases ended, the airborne glider units, towed by HE-111s and holding to a precisely calculated timetable, would come out of the sun from a point southeast of Malta. In case a smoke screen should cover the island, he added, special reconnaissance aircraft, Pioneers, would mark an approach line on the water by means of floating smoke markers.<sup>39</sup>

General Student intended that the amphibious attack would be launched at night against the eastern coast of Malta, south of Valetta. A daylight parachute attack, simultaneous with the landing on the southern coast, would secure beachheads for the Italian forces. The first amphibious wave of 8,300 men would be accompanied by artillery and tanks and followed by further transport and supply ships.<sup>40</sup> The Axis plan included a diversionary attack by Italian naval forces against the British defensive positions along the bay of Marsa Scirocco. The Italian Navy would also bombard British coastal positions and interpose itself between the invaders and the expected intervention by the British fleet.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 194.

<sup>39</sup>Conrad, "Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and Other Airborne Units in the Capture of Malta."

<sup>40</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 194.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

The main objective of the invasion force would be Valetta. Student expected that a ten-day campaign would be sufficient to capture the island.<sup>42</sup> Although he expected that Malta would be more heavily defended than Crete had been, Operation Herkules was more carefully planned, and considerably more forces assigned to its success, than the Luftwaffe's previous airborne raid.<sup>43</sup>

In the spring of 1942 British Army and Air Forces on Malta numbered approximately 30,000. Although Student expected "fanatical resistance," Britain organized its main defenses against invasion along static lines, with a resultant loss of mobility.<sup>44</sup> The Axis staff concerned with the planning of Operation Herkules based its invasion plan on a bold and vigorous operation. By avoiding the Victoria lines, Student intended to capture the airfields and advance on Valetta before the island's defenders could react to the situation and effectively challenge the invaders. Britain depended on the natural barriers on the southern coast to forestall an invasion from the south. On the eastern coast, her defenses consisted of a series of redoubts at strategic points, usually lightly defended pillboxes, which if successfully bypassed by an invader, would be rendered ineffective in the further

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<sup>42</sup>Seibt, "Preparations for the Capture of Malta."

<sup>43</sup>For the Cretan operation, Germany had approximately 25,000 troops as opposed to 42,000 British Empire and Greek troops. Against Malta, Germany planned to employ nearly 40,000 Axis troops against 30,000 British troops. The capture of Crete was also undertaken without adequate reconnaissance or planning: only one month was spent in preparation for the assault. Plans for the capture of Malta, however, had been under study for at least a year.

<sup>44</sup>R. T. Gilchrist, Malta Strikes Back (Aldershot: Gate and Polden Ltd., 1945), 2-3.

course of the battle.<sup>45</sup> Although the western defense line could be shifted to protect Valetta from a southern invasion thrust, the British defenders could suffer heavy losses in a daytime movement along Malta's few primary transport routes if the Luftwaffe, as expected, dominated the sky.

The Axis planners depended on the availability of the Luftwaffe to achieve aerial domination over Malta for the success of the operation. However, as Student and Commando Supremo expected that preparations for Herkules would not be completed until July, they offered no objection to the temporary transfer of Luftwaffe units to North Africa in support of the Afrika Korps. In conjunction with the timetable reached at Berchtesgaden, O.K.W. and the Italian General Staff agreed that Operation Herkules would commence during the July full moon period, or at the latest, by the middle of August.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Rommel's offensive would begin.

The O.K.W. directive of 5 May 1942 to General Rommel affirmed the decisions made at the Axis conference. Rommel would launch his offensive, Operation Aida, no later than the beginning of June.<sup>47</sup> Rommel approved of the Axis timetable, and although he considered it unfortunate that Malta could not be captured first, the attack of the Afrika Korps could not be delayed. He believed that if the 8th Army recaptured the Cyrenaican airfields, the British could again jeopardize

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<sup>45</sup>Gilchrist, Malta Strikes Back, 2-3.

<sup>46</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 102.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.



the central Mediterranean convoy route and employ the Royal Air Force to relieve the pressure on Malta.<sup>48</sup>

German estimation of British intentions in April and May 1942 was correct. Prime Minister Churchill planned for a major British offensive in late spring to recapture Cyrenaica for the primary purpose of relieving the German air attack on Malta. Churchill emphasized to General Auchinleck the British government's determination to hold Malta:

The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee, and the War Cabinet have again considered the whole position. We are determined that Malta shall not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by your whole army for its retention.<sup>49</sup>

Churchill undertook a more direct measure to relieve the beleaguered fortress when he once again employed the U.S. aircraft carrier Wasp to ferry aircraft to Malta.<sup>50</sup> On 9 May, 60 Spitfires launched from the Wasp landed without challenge on Malta's airfields. Determined not to repeat the errors of the previous ferry operation from the Wasp, the British ground crews immediately refueled the aircraft as they landed. Within minutes the Spitfires returned to the skies over the island and awaited the expected appearance of the Luftwaffe.<sup>51</sup> Only a few Axis aircraft raided the island on the evening of 9 May, however, and there were few losses on either side.

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<sup>48</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 18.

<sup>49</sup>Churchill to General Auchinleck, 10 May 1942, in Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 269.

<sup>50</sup>Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 267. Spitfires had been flown in to Malta from the British carrier Eagle in April, but due to her size the Eagle could ferry only 16 at a time, and in May was undergoing repairs.

<sup>51</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 142.

Although the arrival of the Spitfires meant a significant increase in British defensive strength on Malta, it also meant an increased demand for military supplies. For this reason, the British minelayer Welshman, reconditioned as a supply ship because of its speed, sailed from Gibraltar to Malta with a vital cargo of war material. The British Admiralty scheduled the supply ship's arrival to coincide with the arrival of the Spitfires. On 10 May the Welshman fought its way through to Valetta, with British aircraft from Malta covering the final stage of the journey, and delivered much-needed cargo of anti-aircraft ammunition and spare parts for the Spitfires. The Luftwaffe attempt to intercept the Welshman met, for the first time in many months, a superior British force, resulting in the loss of 12 German aircraft as against only three Spitfires.<sup>52</sup>

The arrival of the Spitfires should have served as an ominous warning to the German war leaders concerned with the Mediterranean theater that Malta was far from subdued and that Britain had no intention of abandoning her Mediterranean garrison. Yet on 10 May, the day after the Spitfires' arrival, Field Marshal Kesselring informed Hitler that due to the Luftwaffe's massive raids on Malta during the first week of May, the island's military installations were completely neutralized. Malta, Kesselring informed the Fuehrer, no longer functioned as an air and naval base.<sup>53</sup>

It appears that Kesselring probably made this premature

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<sup>52</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 142.

<sup>53</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 141.

announcement concerning Malta because of the Fuehrer's impatience for completion of the Luftwaffe mission against the island. After receiving Kesselring's report, Hitler immediately authorized Goering, who consistently opposed the attack on Malta, to transfer part of the 2nd Air Fleet for the summer offensive on the Eastern front.<sup>54</sup> Hitler also reiterated to Kesselring his intention to withdraw additional units from the attack on Malta if developments elsewhere should require a strengthening of German forces. Kesselring offered no objections to the Fuehrer's strategy. He expected that Malta could be suppressed with the limited forces in his command.<sup>55</sup>

The transfer of air units to the Russian front was followed by a further reduction in Kesselring's air command when units of the 2nd Air Fleet left Sicily to participate in Rommel's forthcoming offensive. By the middle of May 1942 the decreasing strength of the Luftwaffe attack against Malta gave Britain the opportunity to repair the island's defenses. In the air battle over the island the Spitfires took an increasing toll against the attackers, particularly against the dive-bombing Stukas.<sup>56</sup> Britain's ability to challenge Luftwaffe supremacy in the central Mediterranean, even though she was far from achieving it for herself, caused concern in O.K.W. headquarters.

Hitler's attitude toward Operation Herkules, to which he had given his "final" approval only a few weeks before, expressed a growing

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<sup>54</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 236-37.

<sup>55</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 141.

<sup>56</sup>J. F. C. Fuller, The Second World War 1939-45, A Strategical and Tactical History (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1949), 173.

disenchantment with his own decision. His skeptical remarks to the operations staff of O.K.W. on the possibility of capturing Malta renewed the question of German strategy in the Mediterranean. Because a large German force of elite troops was already concentrated in Sicily undergoing training for Operation Herkules, O.K.W. requested a final clarification of Hitler's intentions. Before replying to O.K.W.'s request, Hitler agreed to consult with the German commander of the proposed operation, Colonel-General Student.<sup>57</sup>

On 21 May Student appeared before the Fuehrer for a verbal report on the progress of Herkules and its chances for success. In reply to Hitler's questions, Student reported that he was quite satisfied with the preliminary preparations and was confident of a successful operation. But Hitler was not satisfied with Student's report, for it was in opposition to his own views.<sup>58</sup> At a meeting between Hitler and O.K.W. later that same day, Field Marshal Keitel and the operations staff of O.K.W. supported Student's view that Operation Herkules should be carried out as planned. General Jodl, Chief of O.K.W. Operations Staff, reviewed the strategic reasons for capturing Malta that had resulted in German commitment to the operation at Berchtesgaden. But Hitler disregarded the opinion of O.K.W. and advanced a new series of arguments why Germany should not attempt the capture of Malta.<sup>59</sup>

General Walter Warlimont, the head of Section L of O.K.W.'s

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<sup>57</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 237.

<sup>58</sup>Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk, 161.

<sup>59</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 237.

operational staff,<sup>60</sup> recorded the Fuehrer's argument:

that once Rommel had reached the Libyan-Egyptian frontier again, supplies for North Africa could be routed past Malta to Tobruk; that we had no need of Malta and should therefore merely prepare for the landing operation "in theory" so as to throw dust in the eyes of the Italians.<sup>61</sup>

Unprepared for Hitler's change of mind, General Jodl could offer no alternate argument, and Operation Herkules, at least temporarily, was shelved. Hitler ordered, however, that the German troops assigned to the project were to remain in southern Italy and that preparations were to continue on paper.<sup>62</sup> Mussolini and Commando Supremo were not informed of the Fuehrer's decision regarding Malta.

Hitler based his strategy concerning Malta and the transportation of supplies to Libya, as expressed at the conference with Student and O.K.W., on the outcome of the desert campaign in North Africa. He reverted to his earlier view that Malta could be bypassed and that capture of the island would be unnecessary if the Axis held all of Cyrenaica. Thus, German strategy toward Malta at the time of the Afrika Korps' summer offensive depended upon Rommel's success in driving the British Army beyond the Libyan-Egyptian border and capturing Tobruk. Rommel did both.

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<sup>60</sup>Warlimont headed Section I until 1944. He was immediately subordinate to Jodl.

<sup>61</sup>Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, 237.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER V

### "THE HOUR OF DECISION"

In accordance with the decisions reached at Berchtesgaden on 30 April 1942, the German and Italian General Staffs intended that the Afrika Korps' summer offensive would be a "spoiling attack" with limited objectives. The primary purpose of the attack would be to offset British preparations for an offensive by the 8th Army against Rommel's position at the Gazala-Bir Hacheim line west of Tobruk.<sup>1</sup> O.K.W. and Commando Supremo expected a campaign of approximately three weeks, in which Tobruk would be the main objective. With the conclusion of the desert campaign, the major Luftwaffe support would be transferred from North Africa to Sicily for implementation of Operation Herkules--the capture of Malta.<sup>2</sup>

During the period of the massive air raids on Malta, from January to the beginning of May 1942, a steadily increasing, almost uninterrupted flow of Axis supplies had arrived in Libya. The successful neutralization of the island's offensive capability had allowed the Afrika Korps to amass a month's supply quota, the largest stockpile of supplies received by the Italo-German forces during the North African

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<sup>1</sup>The Gazala-Bir Hacheim line had been the front for the opposing armies since Rommel's January counteroffensive.

<sup>2</sup>Hillgruber, ed., K.T.B. des O.K.W., 101-02.

campaign. Supermarina, with the cooperation of the German Naval Staff in Rome, had partially solved the problem of transporting supplies to the front at Gazala by improvements in the unloading capacities at Benghazi and Derna.<sup>3</sup> Although Rommel's supply base appeared adequate for a limited offensive, his success would depend upon a rapid defeat of the enemy forces. Both Rommel and his superiors recognized that a battle of attrition could prove disastrous for the Afrika Korps.

On 26 May 1942 the Afrika Korps launched its desert offensive against the British at Gazala. Rommel began the first stage of the attack with his favorite gambit--a feint at the center of the British lines and a flanking movement to the south in an attempt to roll up the enemy's flank before driving into the interior British defenses.<sup>4</sup> Although Rommel's initial attack was only partially successful, the British counterattack failed, and on 10 June the Afrika Korps captured Bir Hacheim, the southern redoubt of the British defensive perimeter. Having gained the initiative in the attack, Rommel proceeded to exploit it. On 16 June the German attack forced the British Army to abandon El Adem, the last strongpoint before Tobruk. Encircling the fortress, the Afrika Korps drove the 8th Army to the Egyptian border. With the British Army routed from Cyrenaica, Rommel paused and regrouped his forces before launching his attack on the Tobruk garrison.<sup>5</sup> From Rome,

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<sup>3</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 82. In April 1942 only 2,400 tons of stores had been unloaded at Derna. In May the amount rose to 7,500 tons and in June reached 11,000 tons. Similar improvements were made at Benghazi.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Carver, Tobruk (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1964), 176.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 210-27.

however, came the warning that the capture of Tobruk, although a worthy prize, must not become an extended campaign. Commando Supremo intended to carry out the original Axis timetable, which scheduled the capture of Malta as the next objective for the Axis.<sup>6</sup>

The Italian General Staff had not been informed of Hitler's intention to cancel, or at least to postpone, Operation Herkules if Rommel succeeded in capturing Tobruk. Hitler's expectation that Malta could be bypassed once the Axis held all of Cyrenaica was not shared by the Duce and Commando Supremo. Mussolini and General Cavallero were not satisfied with Field Marshal Kesselring's announcement in May that Malta was eliminated as an enemy air and naval base. The Italians believed, on the basis of past experience, that not until the Axis captured the island would the Axis convoy route to North Africa be secured. They viewed with alarm the reduction of Luftwaffe strength in Sicily for duty on the Eastern front, and were adamant that the air forces allocated for the North African offensive would be on a temporary basis.<sup>7</sup> The Duce and the Italian General Staff were more correct in their assessment of the strategic situation in the central Mediterranean than their German partner, as proven by continued British attempts to reinforce Malta.

The offensive capability of the island, which the Luftwaffe raids had nearly destroyed at the end of April, began to increase with the arrival of Spitfire aircraft ferried from the Wasp and other aircraft carriers. During May and June a total of 196 aircraft reached the

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<sup>6</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 168.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 166-67.



island. The reduction of the Luftwaffe forces based on Sicily lessened the air supremacy formerly achieved by the 2nd Air Fleet and encouraged the British to attempt sending another convoy through to the island in June.<sup>8</sup> By reinforcing Malta, Britain hoped to strike at the weakest link in Rommel's chain of operations--the Axis supply route to North Africa.

To provide the greatest chance for success, the British Admiralty decided to send two simultaneous convoys from Gibraltar and Alexandria to Malta.<sup>9</sup> On 12 and 13 June the respective convoys sailed. The westward convoy, Operation Harpoon, which included 11 merchant ships, underwent heavy German air and submarine attack, and with the threat of intervention by the Italian Navy, was forced to return to Alexandria. The eastward bound convoy, Operation Vigorous, included six merchant ships heavily escorted by units of the British fleet. After a hard-fought voyage, only two of the cargo ships reached Valetta.<sup>10</sup>

The June convoy appeared to be a disastrous failure for the British in their attempt to provide succor for the Malta garrison. Of the 17 merchant ships which had sailed in the dual convoys, only two had reached the island. Axis air power accounted for the greatest British losses, which included the sinking of six merchant ships, four destroyers, one cruiser, and the damaging of many other merchant and naval vessels. In the air battle the Luftwaffe had lost 14 aircraft, while

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<sup>8</sup>Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 263.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 83-84. The two ships delivered 15,000 tons of supplies.

the Regia Aeronautica had lost 22.<sup>11</sup>

But although Britain suffered high losses in the June convoy, she had achieved a strategic victory. The supplies that had reached the island in the two successful merchant ships enabled Malta to recover further its offensive and defensive posture. The successful penetration of the Sicilian Straits, even at heavy cost, had proven once again that Britain had no intention of surrendering her position in the central Mediterranean. Commando Supremo recognized the danger to Axis efforts in Cyrenaica if Malta-based forces increased the attacks on Axis shipping, and their fears were shared by the German Naval Staff.

Although Hitler on 21 May had indicated his intention to abandon the plan to capture Malta, the German Naval Staff, headed by Admiral Raeder, continued to press for Operation Herkules. Raeder did not consider the Fuehrer's earlier decision as irrevocable, and by a carefully prepared argument he hoped to win Hitler's approval again for an Axis invasion of the island.<sup>12</sup> Admiral Raeder began by reemphasizing the importance of capturing Malta to the land battle in North Africa. Hitler replied that he was aware of the importance of capturing the island, but that he did not believe that the allocation of German forces to the task was feasible while Germany was committed to the Eastern front. The Fuehrer considered that an extensive commitment of the Wehrmacht, beyond those forces that had already been assigned to the operation, would be necessary to insure success. Hitler was especially reluctant

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<sup>11</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 84.

<sup>12</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 15 June 1942, 95.

to transfer the necessary transport aircraft for Operation Herkules from duty in the East. He also expressed his doubt as to the ability of the Italian troops to carry out such a difficult assignment, while the cooperation of the Italian Navy he considered dubious at best.<sup>13</sup>

Admiral Raeder and his staff admitted that the capture of Malta would be a difficult operation, but they advised the Fuehrer that from a naval point of view, Operation Herkules appeared both feasible and necessary for the future conduct of the Mediterranean war. Admiral Raeder sought to remove Hitler's doubts by presenting an alternate argument on the Italian role in the proposed undertaking. Raeder expected that the transfer of German air transport units from the Eastern front would be unnecessary, as Italian air units were available and appeared adequate for the task. The naval chief added that if the Italian troops intended for the mission were under the overall direction of German commanders, an exceptional performance could be expected. Although Raeder shared Hitler's doubt as to the aggressiveness of the Italian Navy in supporting the invasion, he advised the Fuehrer that in the opinion of the Naval Staff the British Navy would not risk its capital ships, battleships, and heavy cruisers in the narrow waters of the Sicilian Straits to oppose an Axis invasion of Malta. Raeder believed that the danger of aerial attack from Sicilian-based aircraft would dissuade such an intervention by the capital ships of the Mediterranean fleet. Therefore, Raeder argued, the Italian Navy would not have to employ its battleships, as Supermarina feared, but merely hold them

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<sup>13</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 15 June 1942, 87.

in reserve.<sup>14</sup>

Raeder, however, did not dismiss the threat of British destroyers, aircraft carriers, and light cruisers from both Gibraltar and Alexandria in challenging the Axis invaders. But if the Luftwaffe could intercept the British naval forces, Raeder argued, the transportation of men and supplies to the island by sea, once the bridgehead had been established, did not appear too difficult a task. In summary of his report to the Fuehrer on the naval view concerning Operation Herkules, Raeder concluded:

The operation is difficult and risky. However in the long run the Naval Staff considers it still more risky not to carry out the operation. From the standpoint of strategy, the Naval Staff considers the occupation of Malta as an absolute necessity . . . to continue shipping supplies to Africa, to protect our position in North Africa, and later hope to launch an attack against Suez. And we must keep in mind that conditions for taking Malta will in all probability never again be as favorable as they are this summer.<sup>15</sup>

Hitler, however, did not accept the advice of his Naval Staff. Instead, he offered his favorite solution to the Axis convoy problem: bypassing Malta and routing the convoys to Cyrenaican ports via Crete. Hitler expressed his belief to Raeder that this route would be especially successful if Rommel succeeded in capturing Tobruk. The Fuehrer also reiterated his impression that perhaps the enemy should be allowed to retain Malta, since British attempts to supply the island presented the Luftwaffe an exceptional opportunity to inflict considerable losses on British merchant ships and their naval escorts. Hitler then resurrected the idea of capturing the island by announcing that "once Malta has been

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<sup>14</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 15 June 1942, 95.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 95-96.

bled white by the continuous air raids and the total blockade we could risk the attack."<sup>16</sup>

An attempt to examine the Fuehrer's attitude concerning Malta as expressed at the conference with Admiral Raeder on 15 June 1942 is a frustrating endeavor. At the beginning of the conference, Hitler acknowledged the importance of capturing the island, but offered doubt as to the availability of German forces for the operation and his distrust of Italian cooperation. After listening to an extended argument to the contrary, as presented by Admiral Raeder, the Fuehrer then indicated that the capture of the island was unnecessary, that it could be bypassed, and that it even served a useful purpose as a target for the Luftwaffe attack on British shipping. This reasoning was then followed by Hitler's pronouncement that the Axis might capture the island after all once Malta had been "bled white" by Luftwaffe air raids.

If Hitler intended once again to inaugurate the mass air raids necessary to neutralize Malta prior to its invasion by the Axis, then the Luftwaffe forces temporarily assigned to North Africa would have to be returned to Sicily upon conclusion of the Cyrenaican offensive. This was the plan agreed upon by the Axis leaders at Berchtesgaden on 30 April, denounced by the Fuehrer on 21 May, and the subject of the mixed pro and con argument on 15 June. It appears that Hitler's intention was to await the outcome of Rommel's desert campaign, particularly concerning Tobruk, before reaching another "final" decision.

On 20 June Rommel launched his attack on Tobruk. Seven months

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<sup>16</sup>Fuehrer Conferences, 15 June 1942, 87.

before, capture of the fortress had eluded him, but in the summer of 1942 the Afrika Korps had massive Luftwaffe aid and sufficient logistical support to complete the mission. After brief but fierce resistance, the garrison capitulated on 21 June.<sup>17</sup> Rommel captured over 30,000 British troops at Tobruk and a vast store of supplies. With the road to Egypt apparently open and with the supplies captured at Tobruk, Rommel prepared to continue his offensive, destroy the retreating British Army, and secure Egypt for the Axis. He disregarded the previous Axis plan, which called for a halt after capturing Tobruk for implementation of Operation Herkules, and ignoring the orders of his Italian superiors, he advanced the Afrika Korps toward the Egyptian border. For authorization of his drive into Egypt, Rommel appealed directly to the Fuehrer.<sup>18</sup>

The surrender of Tobruk had significant meaning for the war in North Africa and brought into the open the divergent strategic views of the Axis allies. Both Axis leaders viewed the victory of the Afrika Korps as a turning point in the desert campaign, but Mussolini, showing the cautious approach which always characterized the Italian war effort, hoped to secure what had already been won, while Hitler saw the fall of Tobruk as the signal for an all-out effort to destroy completely the British forces in North Africa.

On the day that Tobruk surrendered, Mussolini wrote to Hitler

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<sup>17</sup>Carver, Tobruk, 248.

<sup>18</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 86. Rommel's immediate superior in North Africa was General Bastico. His chain of command included General Cavallero and the Duce, but Rommel often bypassed his Italian superiors in favor of O.K.W. and the Fuehrer. Rommel did not wait for confirmation of his intentions from Hitler but continued operations on his own responsibility.

that Operation Herkules must be the next objective for the Axis Mediterranean forces. The Duce emphasized to Hitler that the elimination of Malta as an offensive base against Italian shipping was the key to the Italian strategic plan in the Mediterranean war. Mussolini informed the Fuehrer that he intended to withdraw air units from North Africa for the assault on Malta, which the Duce believed should be undertaken in July or at the latest in August. Otherwise, he wrote, because weather conditions were suitable only during the summer months, the operation would have to be postponed until 1943, with serious consequences for Axis hopes on the Mediterranean front. The Duce concluded his remarks concerning Malta to the Fuehrer:

Besides solving the problem of Mediterranean traffic, the operation against Malta would allow us to dispose freely once more of our air forces, which today are tied to the Mediterranean sector and will remain so as long as the enemy has Malta. The freeing of the air forces . . . would mean that our freedom of manoeuvre would be restored--a factor of prime importance for victory.<sup>19</sup>

The following day, 22 June, without waiting for the Fuehrer's permission and at the urging of General Cavallero, Mussolini ordered Field Marshal Rommel<sup>20</sup> not to advance beyond the Egyptian border. The Duce also ordered the immediate withdrawal of several air units from North Africa to Sicily. Informed of the Duce's order, Rommel stated to General Bastico that, in spite of Commando Supremo's judgment, he

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<sup>19</sup>Mussolini to Hitler, 21 June 1942, quoted in Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 18.

<sup>20</sup>Immediately after the capture of Tobruk, Hitler promoted General Rommel to the rank of Field Marshal (Generalfeldmarschal). Shortly thereafter the Duce promoted General Cavallero to the rank of Marshal in order for the head of Commando Supremo to keep pace with his German subordinate.

intended to continue his advance beyond the Egyptian border and drive to the Persian Gulf.<sup>21</sup> At the same time that Rommel disobeyed his Italian superiors, General von Rintelen informed Commando Supremo that he had received orders from O.K.W. supporting Rommel's intentions.<sup>22</sup>

With the rapid and successful advance of the Afrika Korps in North Africa and the capture of Tobruk, the German Supreme Command was not inclined to follow the cautious, if not regressive, policy of Commando Supremo. On the contrary, O.K.W., like Rommel, intended to exploit the recent gains of the Cyrenaican offensive as far as possible. From Rommel's report on the situation, it appeared to O.K.W. that the rout of the British Army from Cyrenaica could be continued to the Nile. The German General Staff needed no prompting from the Fuehrer to disregard previous Axis plans for Rommel to stand on the defensive while the Axis reorganized its forces for the capture of Malta. Despite the warnings from Field Marshal Kesselring, the proposed invasion of the island once again faded into the background of German planning.<sup>23</sup>

Rommel's request to the Fuehrer for permission to complete the destruction of the British 8th Army allowed Hitler to revert to his decision of 21 May that Operation Herkules was unnecessary for the success of future Mediterranean strategy. To insure Italian cooperation with what Hitler regarded as a dramatic turn of events, the Fuehrer wrote to Mussolini outlining the consequences of the Afrika Korps'

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<sup>21</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 169.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. General Erno von Rintelen was the military attache and German general at the headquarters of the Italian Armed Forces in Rome.

<sup>23</sup>Warlimont, "The Decision in the Mediterranean," 191.



recent success and his views on future Mediterranean operations. Referring to "the hour of decision" and without even mentioning Malta, Hitler wrote that since the British 8th Army was practically destroyed, the main military objective of the Axis must be to exploit the decisive events in North Africa as totally and rapidly as possible. He emphasized to the Duce that the situation required a total effort to continue the drive into Egypt. If the Axis hesitated, Hitler warned, the present favorable circumstances could change radically to the disadvantage of the Italo-German war effort. "Destiny has offered us a chance which will not be repeated in the same theater of war."<sup>24</sup>

Hitler sought to overcome the Duce's fears concerning the problem of transporting supplies to support the North African offensive. The capture of Tobruk with its port installations nearly intact, he wrote, presented Italy with an excellent harbor for Axis convoys. Hitler added that a railroad from the port ran to the Egyptian border, allowing the rapid transfer of supplies to the front.<sup>25</sup>

The Fuehrer also presented to Mussolini his views on the consequences of a British defeat in Egypt. Such a victory, Hitler concluded, would be of worldwide importance, and if the drive through Egypt coincided with Germany's Eastern offensive into the Caucasus, it could bring about the collapse of the British Empire in the Middle East. Hitler ended his letter to the Duce with a personal and dramatic plea for total Italian cooperation:

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<sup>24</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 23 June 1942, quoted in Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 19.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

Therefore Duce, if in this historic hour, which will not be repeated, I can give you a piece of advice from my eager heart, it would be: Order operations to be continued until the British forces are completely annihilated. . . . The goddess of fortune passes only once close to warriors in battle. Anyone who does not grasp her at that moment can very often never touch her again.<sup>26</sup>

Mussolini could not resist the Fuehrer's optimistic outlook. The Duce, who preferred the optimism of a grand strategy to the realities of tactical weakness, quickly gave his agreement to Hitler's grandiose plans. Caught up in the excitement of the moment, the Duce preferred to trust in Hitler's judgment rather than heed the warnings of Commando Supremo and Field Marshal Kesselring that the supply situation was inadequate for an extended offensive across the Egyptian desert.<sup>27</sup>

On 24 June Marshal Cavallero ordered postponement of Operation Herkules until the beginning of September, but few actually believed the invasion would be undertaken at that time. Hitler and O.K.W. considered that if the Afrika Korps advanced to the Nile, Malta would be isolated far behind the front lines and its capture by the Axis would thus be unnecessary. In June 1942 Hitler based his strategy concerning Britain's position in the Mediterranean and Middle East, as indicated in his letter to Mussolini, not only on Rommel's desert offensive but also on the success of the summer offensive into the Caucasus.<sup>28</sup>

Hitler conceived of a "Great Plan" to smash the British forces in the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Fuehrer envisaged a giant pincer movement, the western arm of which would be Rommel's advance

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<sup>26</sup>Hitler to Mussolini, 23 June 1942, quoted in Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 19.

<sup>27</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 149-50.

<sup>28</sup>Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, 21.

through Egypt to Suez, while the eastern arm would be an advance by the German Army out of the Caucasus into the Middle East. Hitler believed that once poised on the Anatolian highlands, the German Army would not be denied passage by the Turkish government. Suez, then, could be taken both from the east and from the west. And the joining of these two armies could destroy Britain's empire in the Middle East, an event that Hitler believed would be welcomed in the Arab world.<sup>29</sup>

This, then, was Hitler's "Great Plan" in the summer of 1942, a strategy that allowed him to ignore the central Mediterranean and concentrate his attention on the expected link-up of the German armies at Suez. The eastern phase of the "Great Plan" depended on the capture of Stalingrad and the drive through the Caucasus. The western phase relied on Rommel's success at El Alamein, the last stronghold before the Nile delta.

With the supplies captured at Tobruk, Field Marshal Rommel was confident of reaching the Nile. Although he realized that it was a gamble, it was an irresistible one and, besides, as military commander in the field, Rommel considered the pursuit and destruction of the enemy a tactical necessity.<sup>30</sup> On 22 June the Afrika Korps captured Bardia; Sollum fell to the German drive on 23 June; and on 28 June Mersa Matruh capitulated. But on 30 June the British defensive line at El Alamein,

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<sup>29</sup>Fuehrer's Directive No. 32, 11 June 1941. Documents on German Foreign Policy, Ser. D, XII, Doc. No. 617; 1014. Also, conversation between the Fuehrer and the Duce, 29 April 1942. The Department of State Bulletin, XV, No. 367 (14 July 1946), 61-62.

<sup>30</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 233.

the last fortress before Alexandria, halted Rommel's drive.<sup>31</sup>

The rapidity of Rommel's advance into Egypt removed the doubts of those who had previously advocated halting the Afrika Korps at Tobruk and undertaking Operation Herkules. Optimism was high at O.K.W. headquarters, and the German General Staff expected the imminent destruction of the 8th Army. Commando Supremo also was confident of wresting Egypt from the British, and at the end of June the Duce arrived in Libya with the Sword of Islam, preparatory to riding through the streets of Cairo as the great conqueror he so often dreamed of being.<sup>32</sup> Even Field Marshal Kesselring gave his support to an extended drive by the Afrika Korps and promised Rommel that the Luftwaffe would ferry troops and supplies from Sicily to the North African front at El Alamein.<sup>33</sup>

The Afrika Korps renewed its attack on 1 July, but stiff British resistance repelled the assault. For two days the battle went from attack to counterattack, until on 3 July Rommel broke off the engagement and ordered the Afrika Korps to assume defensive positions.<sup>34</sup> Once again, as so often happened in the North African war, the campaign settled into a logistical struggle between the opposing armies. Without adequate supplies, the position of the Afrika Korps would be untenable. The three-day battle at El Alamein dangerously reduced Rommel's stockpile of supplies, and the situation which only a week previously had

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<sup>31</sup>Martienssen, Hitler and His Admirals, 130.

<sup>32</sup>Rintelen, Mussolini als Bundesgenosse, 172.

<sup>33</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 90.

<sup>34</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 248.

appeared so favorable again renewed the doubts of certain success.

Although troops and a few supplies could be transported by air to the North African front, the bulk of the required stores had to be brought by sea. During July, however, the situation at sea steadily deteriorated for the Axis. The ports of Benghazi, Derna and even Tobruk lay far behind the front at El Alamein. Axis use of the port of Mersa Matruh, which had few defenses, was jeopardized by frequent attacks from British surface ships based at Alexandria and Suez.<sup>35</sup> The railroad from Tobruk also underwent constant British air attack and further diminished the amount of supplies reaching the Afrika Korps.<sup>36</sup> British activities during July against the supply line of the Afrika Korps from Egyptian bases east of El Alamein were matched by renewed efforts from the once impotent air and submarine base at Malta.

The decision to postpone the capture of Malta in favor of the Afrika Korps' advance into Egypt was taken with the assurance of Field Marshal Kesselring that Malta could be suppressed with the limited forces at his command. But British air reinforcements to Malta during May and June 1942 again posed a threat to Axis convoys in the central Mediterranean, while reconnaissance aircraft from the island kept close watch on Italian shipping bound for Cyrenaica via Greece and Crete. This renewed activity forced the Luftwaffe to undertake once more the

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<sup>35</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 92. The British Navy temporarily moved the fleet from Alexandria to Suez when Rommel first reached El Alamein. During the period from 11 to 22 July British naval forces made five raids at Mersa Matruh and sank three supply ships.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. On 17 July a British air raid destroyed the Luftwaffe oil depot at Tobruk.

neutralization of Malta.

The summer air offensive against Malta, the so-called "Malta Blitz," began on 4 July. Reichsmarschal Goering personally assured the Fuehrer that the air attack could once again eliminate the island as a British air base. The Luftwaffe forces available to Field Marshal Kesselring for the task, however, were not equal to the number employed in the previous concentrated attacks against the island.<sup>37</sup> During July, 59 additional British aircraft arrived at the island, bringing the total at the end of the month to nearly 250.<sup>38</sup> In the first month of the "Malta Blitz" the Luftwaffe dropped over 700 tons of bombs on the island but at the cost of 65 aircraft, while the British lost 36 planes in the air with 17 more destroyed on the ground.<sup>39</sup> The Axis failure to achieve definite air superiority over the island permitted the return of the 10th Submarine Fleet to Valetta on 20 July, substantially increasing the threat to Axis shipping.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Rommel remained frustrated in his attempt to break through the British lines at El Alamein.

Field Marshal Rommel realized that he was being outsupplied by the British, who were secure in their supply line to Cairo and Alexandria, while the supplies promised to him by Commando Supremo and

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<sup>37</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 90-91. The Luftwaffe had 301 operational aircraft available at the beginning of July, as compared with 418 at the beginning of April.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 91. This figure includes all types of aircraft. British sources acknowledge only 80 operational fighters.

<sup>39</sup>Macintyre, The Battle for the Mediterranean, 165.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

Kesselring fell far below the requirements of the Afrika Korps.<sup>41</sup> The efforts of the Italo-German forces in repulsing the increased British attacks required an increase in both men and supplies. In place of the requested supply increase, Rommel received more assurances from his superiors. He did receive, however, over 35,000 additional troops during July and August--the same troops who for the last several months had been in training for Operation Herkules.<sup>42</sup>

The transfer of the forces intended for the capture of Malta forced the final cancellation of Axis plans to capture the island with serious consequences for the Mediterranean war. The fortunes of the seesaw battle in the North African desert campaign had very often in the past two years been directly related to the ability of the Axis to neutralize the British forces on Malta. This was not pure chance but rather reflected the overall strategic situation in the Mediterranean theater of war. Victory in North Africa depended upon mobility, mobility depended upon supplies, and supplies, of course, depended upon the safe arrival of Axis convoys from Italy. Britain's supply bases at Alexandria and Cairo depended on her supply lines to Britain and North America via the Suez Canal, and although it was many thousands of miles longer than the Axis convoy route across the Mediterranean, the supply line was nearly unchallenged along its entire length. But on the other hand, to supply Malta, Britain faced an extremely hazardous task.

The British government and Chiefs of Staff had long recognized

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<sup>41</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 266-67.

<sup>42</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 150.

Malta's unique position and the advantages of retaining the island at all costs. For this reason Britain had taken every opportunity to supply the island. Churchill considered Egypt's first line of defense to be the British air and naval units at Malta. German military strategists, including Hitler, recognized in varying degrees the importance of Malta to the land campaign in North Africa, but in the late summer of 1942 they relied on the "Malta Blitz" to achieve neutralization of the island's military capability. By August, however, the situation in the central Mediterranean began to shift in favor of the British. The British government and the Chiefs of Staff decided to attempt to secure this advantage by sending a heavily reinforced convoy from Gibraltar to Malta.<sup>43</sup> Britain intended that this operation, codenamed "Pedestal," would be given priority over all other demands, for they considered that "on the success or failure of 'Pedestal' . . . would hang the fate of Malta and hence in all probability of the Nile Valley."<sup>44</sup>

Alerted to the British preparations to challenge once again the Axis in the central Mediterranean, Field Marshal Kesselring ordered a regrouping of all available air strength on Sicily and Sardinia for a massive air attack on the British convoy.<sup>45</sup> With the cooperation of Supermarina and Commando Supremo, six Italian and three German submarines guarded the approach routes between the Balearic Islands and the

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<sup>43</sup>Churchill, The Hinge of Fate, 439.

<sup>44</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 316.

<sup>45</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 93. German sources list approximately 540 German and Italian aircraft participated in the attack. British claim 600 to 1,000.



Algerian coast, while 12 other Italian submarines were positioned just north of Bizerte. To intercept any ships that reached the central Mediterranean, the Italian Navy intended to employ six cruisers and 11 destroyers against the British forces.<sup>46</sup>

On 10 August the British convoy sailed from Gibraltar. The task force included 14 merchant ships and the largest naval escort ever assembled for a Malta convoy operation. To insure adequate air cover, four aircraft carriers accompanied the group.<sup>47</sup>

The attack on the convoy began at noon of the second day, when the German submarine U-73 torpedoed and sank the aircraft carrier Eagle. By 12 August the convoy was within range of German and Italian aircraft, but in the extended air attack of that day, Britain lost only one merchant ship and one destroyer. As the British task force approached the Sicilian Straits, however, the British capital ships and aircraft carriers turned back to Gibraltar. Britain could not risk her heavier ships in the confined area of the Mediterranean Narrows, and the merchant ships with only light escort continued on for Valetta.<sup>48</sup>

On the evening of 12 August, Italian submarines sank a merchant tanker and three light cruisers, considerably reducing the convoy's naval escort. The Luftwaffe sank two merchant ships on the same evening, while German and Italian E-boats sank four others. By the morning of 13

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<sup>46</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 94. No battleships could participate because of lack of fuel oil.

<sup>47</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, 317-18. Britain also created a diversionary sailing from Alexandria composed of a few empty merchantmen.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 319.

August, only six supply ships continued toward Malta, guarded by two light cruisers and eight destroyers. British aircraft from Malta arrived at noon to protect the remaining ships of the convoy, although the Luftwaffe recorded a final success in sinking another of the supply ships before ending its attack. By the evening of 13 August, the remaining five merchant ships docked at Valetta.<sup>49</sup>

The Axis failure to destroy entirely the British effort was not only because of strong British air and sea defenses but because of the failure of Axis cooperation. The striking force of the Italian Navy assembled to attack the convoy south of Pantelleria on the morning of 13 August never participated in the battle. Their participation required a screen of fighter aircraft to protect the Italian ships from Malta-based aircraft. Field Marshal Kesselring, however, ordered all German and Italian fighter aircraft in his command to protect the bombers of the 2nd Air Fleet. The Italian Naval Staff appealed to the Duce to allow fighter protection for the naval force, which meanwhile had already sailed. Mussolini decided in favor of Kesselring, and the Italian naval force returned to port. On the return voyage, however, a British submarine from Malta torpedoed two of the Italian cruisers.<sup>50</sup>

The "Pedestal" convoy was the hardest fought convoy of the Mediterranean war. It was a test of strength in which Britain had again

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<sup>49</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 319-22. In the battle the British lost 18 aircraft in the air plus 16 lost with the Eagle. The Axis lost 35. The five ships delivered a mixed cargo of 47,000 tons.

<sup>50</sup>Weichold, Axis Naval Policy, 94-95. The two cruisers reached harbor but never saw action again.

gambled and won. The August convoy was also the last to be seriously challenged by the Axis forces.<sup>51</sup> Although the cost of supplying Malta had been extremely high, there were no longer any doubts that Britain could retain the island.

By August 1942 the final attempt to neutralize Malta by air attack had failed. The task of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean in the summer of 1942--constant attack on Malta, protection of the North African convoys, and tactical support of the Afrika Korps--proved too great a commitment for the limited forces available. At El Alamein Rommel suffered the consequences of the Luftwaffe's inability to secure the central Mediterranean.

Although in July British forces sank only six per cent of the total supplies leaving Italy for North Africa, in August this figure rose to 25 per cent of the general military cargo and 41 per cent of the fuel oil intended for the Afrika Korps.<sup>52</sup> These figures, however, are even more important when one considers that each loss suffered by the Italian merchant fleet could not be replaced. The tonnage shipped from Italy during July and August was barely enough for the Afrika Korps to maintain its position. Any loss was therefore prohibitive. Rommel, aware that his military situation grew worse each day, planned to launch a large scale attack at the end of August against the British lines at El Alamein.

Rommel's greatest shortage, particularly for a mobile attack,

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<sup>51</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 323.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 327.

was fuel oil for his motorized units. Commando Supremo promised to alleviate this deficiency before the Afrika Korps attacked by shipping 10,000 tons of fuel oil, half for the Panzer Army and half for the Luftwaffe. Of the seven ships which sailed for Tobruk with this cargo, British air and submarine attacks from Malta sank four.<sup>53</sup> Rommel, however, believed that the battle could no longer be delayed, and on 30 August the Afrika Korps attacked.

The attack of the Afrika Korps on 30 and 31 August failed; two days later Rommel returned to the defensive. Only 60 miles across the bay lay Alexandria and the Nile, but for Rommel it remained an unreachable goal. The British 8th Army slowly amassed a tremendous stockpile of war material during the fall of 1942, and General Montgomery prepared for a battle which Britain could not lose and the Afrika Korps could not win. But for Rommel the "Hour of Decision" had arrived at the end of August with the failure of his offensive. Only the caution of the British delayed the final decision.

In reviewing the strategic decisions in the Mediterranean which led to the final defeat at El Alamein, Rommel attributed the blame for the Afrika Korps' defeat to the supply failure. Rommel believed that above all Malta should have been captured, thus securing the North African convoy route. He considered O.K.W. chiefly responsible for this failure because of its consistent inattention to the needs of the Afrika Korps until the very end, when the Nile delta lay in sight. For 18 months he had consistently recommended the capture of Malta to his

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<sup>53</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, 382.

superiors in Berlin, but their preoccupation with the Eastern front and their expectation that no great accomplishments could be won in the North African desert caused the German Supreme Command to adopt a pessimistic attitude concerning the Mediterranean front until El Alamein.<sup>54</sup>

But Malta, the "unsinkable aircraft carrier," could not be bypassed nor suppressed, and after the initial stalemate at El Alamein, British air and submarine units from the central Mediterranean bastion complemented the efforts of the Egyptian-based forces in preventing an Axis victory. After the defeat in North Africa, Rommel wrote:

With Malta in our hands, the British would have had little chance of exercising any further control over convoy traffic in the central Mediterranean. Malta has the lives of many thousands of German and Italian soldiers on its conscience.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, 191-92.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 288-89.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In reviewing German strategy concerning Malta, one must first consider the Reich's concept of the overall Mediterranean war and the basis for the decisions which by the fall of 1942 led to the defeat at El Alamein and eventually the loss of the entire North African littoral. Although O.K.W. shared in, and at times determined, German war strategy, as the supreme war commander Hitler must bear the ultimate responsibility for the decisions of the German High Command.

Until the summer of 1942 Hitler regarded the Mediterranean theater of war as no more than a sideshow in relation to the continental war. The southern theater of operations, Hitler decided, did not justify a total commitment of the Wehrmacht, and he readily agreed to Mussolini's concept of "parallel war" which acknowledged Italy's dominant role in the conduct of Mediterranean operations. Germany had no desire to play a major role in the area, but by the end of 1940 the Italian reverse in Greece exposed the weakness of the Italian Armed Forces and forced a reluctant Hitler to come to the aid of his ally.

Although Germany was forced to accept an increasing responsibility for the formation of Mediterranean strategy and the leadership of operations, it was Hitler's intention to maintain the facade of Italian leadership in the area as long as possible. Hitler believed that

Mussolini's prestige as a war leader must be preserved, for without the personal figure of the Duce the Axis alliance would collapse.

The problems of Axis cooperation were apparent once the myth of "parallel war" had been shattered. When Germany entered the Mediterranean war in November 1940, there existed no plans for the conduct of joint operations, no Axis military staff, and no basis for mutual trust, a primary requisite for implementing a joint military effort. On the contrary, Germany's entrance into the Mediterranean theater of war increased the mistrust between the Axis military leaders, a mistrust which considerably hindered the advantages of a united commitment and endangered the hopes for success.

These three reasons, then--Hitler's judgment of the Mediterranean as an ancillary theater, his concern for the personal prestige of the Duce, and the problems of Axis cooperation--explain in great part German Mediterranean strategy from June 1940 to May 1941. During this period Germany sought to achieve limited goals and developed no grand strategy for the complete elimination of British forces in the area. Although Hitler authorized the formation of the Afrika Korps in February 1941, this was a limited force with the limited objective of holding Libya for the Axis. It was a defensive measure to prevent a British victory and from which Hitler expected no great success.

For the Luftwaffe units assigned to the south, however, Hitler had an offensive assignment--the elimination of Malta as a British naval and air station. Hitler thus recognized the strategic importance of the island, but he again sought a limited, temporary solution rather than the invasion and capture of the island. Hitler's decision in the spring

of 1941 to invade the Balkans justified the temporary transfer of the Luftwaffe from Sicily to Greece, but with the conclusion of Operation Marita the German air units in the Mediterranean received an additional assignment--Operation Marita, the capture of Crete.

The German invasion of Crete has been described as "the wrong battle in the wrong place at the wrong time."<sup>1</sup> Certainly the capture of Crete was a Pyrrhic victory for Germany. Crete never assumed the strategic importance for the Mediterranean war that the proponents of the operation had claimed. Instead, it served as a drain on German resources which the Wehrmacht could ill afford. The more logical assignment for the Luftwaffe in the spring of 1941 would have been the capture of Malta.

Hitler's primary reason for choosing Crete rather than Malta was his concern for the securement of the southern flank prior to the invasion of Russia. The German timetable did not allow for the retransfer of forces to Sicily for the capture of Malta before the opening of Operation Barbarossa. Hitler believed that the campaign against the Soviet Union would end the war and therefore attached little strategic importance to the central Mediterranean. The Fuehrer intended the capture of Crete to be the culmination of German operations in the Mediterranean, and immediately after the conclusion of the battle O.K.W. assigned the major part of the Luftwaffe's Mediterranean forces to Barbarossa. Crete, an island of little strategic value, saved Malta, the objective of real decisive importance for Axis hopes in the Mediterranean.

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<sup>1</sup>Baldwin, Battles Lost and Won, 151.



The summer of 1941 was an interim period for German operations in the Mediterranean, and the area once again became an Italian concern. The total commitment of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front meant that few reinforcements were available for the Mediterranean theater. Once free of the Luftwaffe attack, British air and submarine forces from Malta again interdicted the Axis convoys to North Africa, but not until the situation approached the disaster stage did Hitler reluctantly agree to the return of the Luftwaffe to Sicily.

The second phase of German intervention in the Mediterranean was on a far larger scale than the first phase. But the return of the Luftwaffe did not change the basic format of German strategy toward Malta. Once again Hitler relied on air attack alone to neutralize the island and alleviate the problem of the Axis convoys in crossing the Sicilian Straits with supplies for the Afrika Korps.

In his decision to neutralize Malta by air attack, Hitler ignored the lessons of the previous year--that once the air raids had ended, Malta would again gain its offensive capability. But Hitler again sought no long term objectives in the Mediterranean theater. The heavy losses sustained by the airborne units at Crete certainly deterred the Fuehrer from further operations of this nature, but the primary reason for a limited policy toward Malta was that Hitler was unconvinced that the island warranted such an extensive commitment of the Wehrmacht. Hitler chose to ignore the argument of those, such as General Student, who believed that much had been learned at Crete that would be of value in reducing the casualties in similar airborne operations. Instead, the Fuehrer relied on a rapid termination of the Luftwaffe assignment

against Malta before its withdrawal for duty elsewhere.

The German air attack on Malta during the winter and spring of 1942 temporarily neutralized the island as an offensive base. The effect on the desert campaign was immediate, and by January 1942 the situation in the central Mediterranean had changed entirely. Rommel took the offensive in Cyrenaica while Malta fought for its survival. In any war, logistics is a prime necessity for victory; in North Africa this was emphatically the case. Throughout the North African war the success of the Afrika Korps operated in direct relationship to the strength or weakness of British forces operating from Malta.

The realization of Malta's importance to the Mediterranean theater of war led to Britain's determination to maintain the island as a naval and air station, while on "the other side of the hill" German military advisers, particularly the Naval Staff, sought to win the Fuehrer's approval for the capture of the island. The arguments of Admiral Raeder and Field Marshal Kesselring, however, were offset by the latter's encouraging reports on the success of the Luftwaffe in achieving the neutralization of Malta, which to Hitler seemed to justify the policy of neutralization by air attack. Kesselring's intention, however, was for the Wehrmacht to follow up the Luftwaffe's success by a land invasion. The Commander-in-Chief South was aware that Malta could be suppressed only so long as the Luftwaffe continued its massive air raids, a situation which he realized was impossible to maintain because of the need of air support in other areas, particularly on the Eastern front.

The German High Command showed little interest when, in January 1941, the Italians began preparations to capture the island. Field

Marshal Keitel and General Jodl, who in the spring of 1941 had been firm advocates of capturing the island, were reluctant to cooperate with Commando Supremo in a combined operation, and, aware of Hitler's opinion on the subject, they did not care to champion the proposal to him. It was not until April 1942 that O.K.W. became convinced of Italy's determination to carry out the invasion and added its support to the arguments of the Naval Staff and Kesselring that Germany should participate in the operation with her Axis partner. Although Hitler did not agree with his military advisers on the importance of capturing Malta, he gave his approval at the Berchtesgaden conference on 30 April.

Hitler's commitment to Operation Herkules meant a basic change in German policy in the Mediterranean. For the first and only time during the war, the Axis began joint planning for a combined operation. At Berchtesgaden, however, the Axis leaders had also decided that the next major objective of the Mediterranean theater would be Rommel's summer offensive. This decision placed Malta in a secondary position in the Axis timetable, but because of the unpreparedness of the Axis forces assigned to capture the island, no other decision could be reached. Rommel was disappointed that the Axis could not capture the island before the Afrika Korps' attack, but he had been disappointed in this respect ever since his arrival in Africa. Rommel did not intend for his offensive to upset the planning for Operation Herkules. More than any other military leader, he saw the necessity for capturing the island and continually urged O.K.W. and Commando Supremo to undertake such an operation. Yet in the spring of 1942 the Commander of the Afrika Korps had no choice but to take the offensive before the British 8th Army took

the initiative.

This first postponement of Operation Herkules, in favor of the desert offensive, met little opposition from German advocates of the capture of Malta. O.K.W., Admiral Raeder, and Field Marshal Kesselring all approved the decision reached at Berchtesgaden. It was only later, when Rommel decided to continue his advance into Egypt, that the major controversy arose. The question became Malta or Suez, and Hitler chose the latter. This second postponement of Operation Herkules ended the chance to capture the island. With Alexandria and the Nile only 100 land miles away, Rommel reached a stalemate at El Alamein, and by the end of July Operation Herkules was finally cancelled.

It is ironic that Commando Supremo, and certain German military advisers such as Field Marshal Kesselring, should blame Rommel for Germany's failure to capture Malta. The Italian General Staff had warned of the danger of launching an extended offensive without first securing the Axis supply line across the Mediterranean by capturing Malta. Although Rommel would have been the first to agree with Commando Supremo, he faced an immediate tactical situation after the fall of Tobruk. The pursuit and destruction of the enemy's forces was a basic military principle, the violation of which could have jeopardized the tactical gains of the Afrika Korps and reversed all previous German military doctrine. While it is true that Rommel overextended his position, he did so in the belief that the necessary supplies would be forthcoming. Once he realized that his hopes were unfounded, he requested permission to withdraw. But Hitler and Mussolini refused his request.

For 18 months Rommel had pleaded for the capture of Malta as the solution to the supply problem of the Afrika Korps. In March 1941 he had even offered to capture the island with his own forces, but O.K.W. refused his offer. Although Rommel gambled in his attempt to reach the Nile in July 1942, it was his intention to prevent the enemy from regaining the initiative and not to forestall the capture of Malta. Kesselring's observation that Hitler postponed the capture of Malta because he was "under the hypnotic influence of Rommel"<sup>2</sup> is far from the truth, for Hitler had already decided that Operation Herkules would not be carried out.

Hitler's commitment to Operation Herkules on 30 April 1942 lasted exactly three weeks. No sooner had he agreed to the plan than he offered a new series of arguments why the operation should not be carried out. In conference with his military advisers, Hitler based his decision on the reluctance and inability of Italy to perform such a hazardous operation. He distrusted the aggressiveness of the Italian fleet, the fighting quality of the Italian soldier, and the ability of the Italian General Staff to maintain secrecy.

Although Hitler was convinced that the vicissitudes of the Italian Armed Forces could seriously handicap a combined operation, the reasons he advanced for postponing Operation Herkules were more excuses than strategic reasoning. The problems of Axis cooperation in the capture of Malta had largely been overcome through the efforts of Field Marshal Kesselring and General Student. At the conference with Hitler

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<sup>2</sup>Kesselring, A Soldier's Record, 147.

in May 1942, Student had expressed his belief that the Italian troops appeared more than adequate for the task, and these same troops, the Folgore regiment, proved their quality at El Alamein. Admiral Raeder had also deemphasized the need for vigorous action by the Italian fleet to insure a successful operation. Hitler, however, chose to ignore their arguments. As for secrecy, Britain was aware that such an undertaking was in the offing, and there was little possibility that such a mammoth operation could achieve surprise in any case. More basic reasons prompted Hitler to abandon Operation Herkules.

The primary reason why Germany never captured Malta was Hitler's belief that the island could be bypassed, that it was unimportant in the grand strategy of the "Great Plan." Hitler considered Suez the main goal of Axis efforts in the Mediterranean. However, he believed that Suez and the entire Middle East could be secured in a pincer movement from both the east, through the Caucasus, and the west, from Cyrenaica. to the Nile. The linking up of the Afrika Korps and Army Group South at Suez would complete the destruction of Britain in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In comparison with such grandiose dreams, the capture of Malta appeared insignificant.

It cannot be said that Hitler simply did not realize the strategic importance of Malta and the effect of British operations from the island on the land battle in North Africa; he acknowledged the island's importance by directing the massive Luftwaffe raids to its neutralization. But the Fuehrer did not appreciate the total situation. He believed that Malta held strategic importance only if Britain held Cyrenaica, forcing Axis convoys to sail to Tripolitania and thus within

range of British air and naval units operating from Malta. The Fuehrer considered that once the Afrika Korps controlled Cyrenaica, Malta no longer held any strategic importance.

Hitler's basic mistake was his belief that Malta could be bypassed. This judgment did not take into account the geography of the area. The great majority of Italian shipping sailed from the western coast of Italy south through the Sicilian Straits, or passed through the Straits of Messina before heading across the Mediterranean to Libya. Other convoys sailed east along the Greek coast, then south to Crete and Cyrenaica. Whatever course the convoys took, they were sighted in their initial departure, or soon after, by reconnaissance aircraft and submarines from Malta. Even if the island's offensive capability were reduced by air attack, the island always maintained itself as a reconnaissance station, a watchtower, over the sailings of Italian shipping and informed British naval and air units based in Egypt of enemy movements. Neutralization by air attack was not enough to offset Malta's strategic importance. Only if the island could be starved into submission by a complete blockade could such a policy be successful. And the Luftwaffe was unable to prevent supplies from reaching the island.<sup>3</sup>

Although the primary reason for Hitler's decision not to capture Malta was his reliance on the "Great Plan," the Fuehrer probably would not have attempted the capture of Malta for a number of other reasons. Hitler expected that the capture of the island would be "fanatically"

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<sup>3</sup>See Appendix B.

resisted, and the near disaster of Crete was not forgotten. Goering, a constant critic of invasion of Malta, warned Hitler that heavy casualties could be expected and that success was far from certain. Hitler was not prepared to accept heavy losses in the capture of Malta, when such units, particularly the Luftwaffe, were in constant demand on the Eastern front. The Russian campaign always held the major attention of the Fuehrer, and in the question of priority Malta and the Mediterranean theater in general ranked a poor second. Hitler's temporary decision to capture the island in April 1942 was probably taken to satisfy Mussolini's request for a final settlement of the convoy problem to North Africa. At the first opportunity, Hitler reneged on his commitment and ordered Operation Herkules to be continued only on paper. Rommel's success in Cyrenaica presented an alternative to the capture of Malta.

The fall of Tobruk, then, only gave the Fuehrer the opportunity to postpone the capture of Malta with the approval of his Axis partner. Hitler needed no urging from Rommel to approve the advance of the Afrika Korps; and Mussolini, O.K.W., and the German Naval Staff all expressed their approval of Hitler's decision. Only Kesselring, Weichold, and Cavallero expressed their disagreement, and this opposition did not concern the advance from Tobruk, but rather only how far the advance into Egypt should continue. At El Alamein, however, the opportunity to capture Malta passed forever.

To say that the failure to capture Malta caused Rommel's defeat at El Alamein is an oversimplification. The Afrika Korps' drive to the Nile was first of all halted by stiff, determined British resistance. It was only later, when the initial battle became a stalemate and when



Hitler refused to allow Rommel to retreat, that the final outcome became dependent on the supply factor. In the last analysis, logistics made El Alamein a battle that Rommel could not win and that Montgomery could not lose. Malta, like the legendary Phoenix, arose from its ashes and proved to be the decisive factor in interdicting the Axis supply route to North Africa, and thus in the ultimate defeat of the Afrika Korps.

In considering the possibilities of the Axis to capture Malta, one must conclude that Italy could have secured the island in the first days of the Mediterranean war with little difficulty. Britain, with only three aircraft to defend Malta, could not have prevented an Italian victory. Germany repeated the error of her Axis partner when, in the first phase of her intervention into the Mediterranean, Hitler relied on air attack alone to neutralize the island. Hitler then compounded his error by capturing Crete, rather than Malta. In the third and final opportunity to capture the island, Hitler again relied on the Luftwaffe attack on Malta to secure the central Mediterranean. Although Hitler reversed this strategy in April and the decision was made for a land invasion, the most favorable opportunity had already passed.

For a successful invasion of Malta, total air superiority was a primary requisite. This situation had been achieved during the first week of April, before the training for Operation Herkules had been completed. The Axis was not prepared to execute the operation until the first of July and in this interim--between the time of the neutralization of Malta's air forces and the proposed date of invasion--the balance of air superiority had already begun to shift in favor of the British. Because of this situation, Malta could not have been captured

by a coup de main in the period between the fall of Tobruk and the first of July, as the Axis timetable had originally planned. Malta's recovery during the summer of 1942 had been substantial, as indicated by the failure of the final "Malta Blitz." The decision to capture Malta had come too late to coincide with the main force of the Luftwaffe attack.

The lack of cooperation between the Axis partners, the failure to take advantage of the opportunities for complete victory in North Africa, and, above all, the failure to capture Malta, forestalled Axis hopes in the Mediterranean and insured an inevitable defeat.

# APPENDIX A

## NUMBER AND TONNAGE OF ITALIAN AND GERMAN MERCHANT SHIPS ENGAGED IN CARRYING SUPPLIES TO NORTH AFRICA SUNK AT SEA OR AT THE PORTS OF LOADING OR UNLOADING, JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1941<sup>1</sup>

(Compiled from Italian post-war and German war records)

Month	By Submarine	By Aircraft	By Mine	From Other Causes	Total
June	3 - 3,107	2 - 12,249		1 - 1,600	6 - 16,956
July	3 - 8,603	4 - 19,467			7 - 28,070
Aug.	2 - 14,145	7 - 20,981			9 - 35,126
Sept.	4 - 41,534	6 - 23,031	1 - 389		11 - 64,954
Total	12 - 67,389	19 - 75,728	1 - 389	1 - 1,600	33 - 145,106

## CARGOES DISEMBARKED IN NORTH AFRICA AND PERCENTAGE LOST ON PASSAGE

Month	Type	Cargo Disembarked in North Africa (Tons)	Percentage Lost on the Way
June	General Military Cargo	89,226	6
	Fuel	35,850	-
July	General Military Cargo	50,700	12
	Fuel	12,000	41
Aug.	General Military Cargo	46,700	20
	Fuel	37,200	1
Sept.	General Military Cargo	54,000	29
	Fuel	13,400	24

<sup>1</sup>The first table is taken from Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, II, 281. The second table is taken from Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, Appendix, and Playfair. The average monthly total of Axis shipping losses from June to September is double that of the first five months of the year, and thus reflects the withdrawal of the Luftwaffe.

NUMBER AND TONNAGE OF ITALIAN AND GERMAN MERCHANT SHIPS OF OVER 500 TONS  
SUNK AT SEA OR IN PORT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN  
JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1942<sup>2</sup>

(Compiled from Italian post-war and German war records)

Month	By Surface Ships	By Submarine	By Aircraft	By Mine	By Combined Naval and Air Action	Total
June	-	2 - 2,565	3 - 16,701	1 - 750	-	6 - 20,016
July	2 - 3,877	1 - 792	4 - 10,919	-	-	7 - 15,588
Aug.	-	7 - 40,036	3 - 12,020	1 - 4,894	1 - 8,326	12 - 65,276
Sept.	-	5 - 13,249	5 - 20,948	-	2 - 2,737	12 - 36,934
Total	2 - 3,877	15 - 56,642	15 - 60,588	2 - 5,644	3 - 11,063	37 - 137,814

CARGOES DISEMBARKED IN NORTH AFRICA AND PERCENTAGE LOST ON PASSAGE

Month	Type	Cargo Disembarked in North Africa (Tons)	Percentage Lost on the Way
June	General Military Cargo	26,759	23
	Fuel	5,568	17
July	General Military Cargo	67,590	6
	Fuel	23,901	
Aug.	General Military Cargo	29,155	25
	Fuel	22,500	41
Sept.	General Military Cargo	46,165	
	Fuel	31,061	20

<sup>2</sup>Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 327, and Bragadin, The Italian Navy in World War II, Appendix. These statistics provide an analysis of the Axis convoy shipments and arrivals during the critical period of Rommel's advance through Cyrenaica and stalemate at El Alamein. These tables do not include ships of less than 500 tons.

# APPENDIX B

## THE SUPPLY OF MALTA<sup>1</sup>

January 1941 to August 1942

Date of Arrival	Convoy or Ship	Supply Ships		Cargo Unloaded in Tons
		Started	Arrived	
1941				
10 Jan.	During Op. Excess	3	3	78,000
23 Mar.	M.W.6	4	4	
21 Apr.	Breconshire	1	1	7,000
(Apr.)	Parracombe	1	-	0
10 May	During Op. Tiger	7	7	40,000
21 July	Op. Substance	6	6	40,000
19 Sep.	Empire Guillemot	1	1	6,000
24 Sep.	Op. Halberd	9	8	50,000
	Empire Pelican	2	-	0
	Empire Defender			
18 Dec.	Breconshire	1	1	7,000
1942				
7 Jan.	Glengyle	1	1	7,000
18 Jan.	M.F.3	4	3	21,000
27 Jan.	Breconshire	1	1	7,000
(Feb.)	M.F.5	3	-	0
23 Mar.	M.G.1	4	3	7,500
10 May	Welshman	1	1	300
15 June	Op. Harpoon	6	2	15,000
15 June	Welshman	1	1	300
(June)	Op. Vigorous	11	-	0
16 July	Welshman	1	1	300
14 Aug.	Op. Pedestal	14	5	47,000
Total		82	49	334,400

<sup>1</sup>This table is taken from Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, III, 324. Although there are many such figures available, those by Playfair appear to be the most accurate. During this period there were also 31 supply trips by submarine, the cargoes of which were small and are not indicated in this table. Of the 33 ships which sailed for but did not arrive at Malta, 10 turned back and 23 were sunk at sea.

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Although the documentary evidence for German military strategy in World War II is extensive, there are few sources which are devoted exclusively to the conduct of the Mediterranean theater of war. The documentary sources for a study of German strategy toward Malta are often fragmentary. A major exception is Admiral Weichold's Axis Naval Policy in the Mediterranean, an excellent account of the interrelation-

ship of the war at sea and the North African desert campaign. Weichold's thesis is that German leaders were consistently land-minded and ignored the significance of naval strategy in their conduct of the war. Although Weichold at times overstates his case, his account of the Mediterranean war is generally fair, accurate, and was of great aid in the writing of this paper. The second monograph by Weichold, The War at Sea, is not as complete and is often written more from memory than from recorded data.

The Kriegstagesbuch des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht is an excellent source for the decisions of O.K.W.; however, for the year 1942 it is incomplete with many gaps in time. Much of the original data for this year was destroyed, but part of the evidence has been replaced from other sources. For Hitler's War Directives, both Hubatsch's Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegsfuehrung and Trevor-Roper's English-annotated edition, Blitzkrieg to Defeat, have been used. Unfortunately, however, both works are incomplete and neither includes Hitler's directive for Operation Herkules. Lossberg's Im Wehrmachtfuehrungsstab gives occasional glimpses of German strategy in the Mediterranean and the problems of the Axis alliance, as does Heusinger's Hitler et l'O.K.H.

One of the most important sources for German strategy toward Malta is the Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing with the German Navy. At these conferences Admiral Raeder consistently presented the possibilities for Germany to capture Malta, and it is one of the few sources which gives detail on the subject. The Rommel Papers is, of course, extremely important for the North African campaign. Written in the most part by Rommel himself, with valuable annotations by Liddell Hart, it emphasizes that Rommel's major problem was lack of supplies. The



Department of State Bulletin provided translations of important conferences between the Axis leaders. The record of the meeting at Schloss Klessheim was especially helpful. Documents on German Foreign Policy, although politically oriented, was most useful in Volumes XII and XIII of Series D, the war years, for the correspondence between Hitler and Mussolini.

The unpublished material provided valuable information for the chapter on Operation Herkules and in assessing Germany's commitment to the invasion of Malta in the spring of 1942. Seibt's report on "Preparations for the Capture of Malta" dealt with logistical preparations, while Conrad's "Preparations for the Commitment of Parachute and Other Airborne Units" dealt with the problems of an airborne operation.

The multivolume works, Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression and Trials of the Major War Criminals, provide a wealth of information on German policy, but not for the Mediterranean theater of war. Little use was made of these works in writing on German strategy in the Mediterranean. The Halder Diary also provided little information on the Mediterranean theater but dealt almost exclusively with the offensive against the Soviet Union. Hitler's Secret Conversations, an account of the Fuehrer's intimate digressions, also has little application for a study of the war on the southern front but provides interesting sidelights on Hitler's character and outlook on various subjects. Hitler Directs His War is a record of selected conferences of the Fuehrer but often deals more with political philosophy than with military strategy.

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The diaries, personal accounts, etc., of the various participants in World War II are often of much value to the war historian. One of the most valuable for writing of German strategy in the Mediterranean is Kesselring, A Soldier's Record. Kesselring's memoirs as Commander-in-Chief South provide details on the Luftwaffe assault on Malta and the operational planning for Operation Herkules. Although sometimes biased, as Kesselring attempts to prove that he was only a soldier doing his duty, the book is a good account of the Luftwaffe's role in the Mediterranean and for the disputes concerning Malta or Suez. Another excellent personal account is Warlimont's Inside Hitler's Headquarters, which describes the relationship of Hitler to O.K.W. It provides a good account of decision making in the German High Command. Warlimont is critical of Hitler's Mediterranean strategy and at times of his O.K.W. superiors, Keitel and Jodl, also.

Admiral Raeder's My Life is a good account of the building of the German Navy in the 1930s and of the development of naval strategy in World War II. Although this work was used sparingly, since the Fuehrer Conferences provided most of the necessary information, the book was valuable for Raeder's opposition to the Fuehrer's naval policy. Admiral Doenitz's Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days is primarily concerned with the submarine warfare in the Atlantic until 1943 when he succeeded Raeder as CIG Navy. It is a most interesting account by the master of "wolf pack" tactics, but since Doenitz had little interest in the Mediterranean, it is not important for German strategy in that area.

The Ciano Diaries provides a day-by-day account by the Italian Foreign Minister in World War II. Although the work is biased in favor

of the author's personal views, it is an important source for a study of Italian war strategy. Unfortunately, Ciano makes almost no mention of Malta, probably an unpleasant subject. Mussolini's Memoirs begins in October 1942 and therefore is of little value in studying strategy in the first two years of the Mediterranean war. The Memoirs of Field Marshal Keitel, an interesting and informative account by the former Chief of O.K.W., if not always objective, is valuable for the relationship of O.K.W. to Hitler and the three services. Keitel deals little with the Mediterranean, although he favored an extension of the Wehrmacht to that theater.

Rintelen's Mussolini als Bundesgenosse is of primary importance in a study of German Mediterranean strategy. As German Liaison Officer in Rome from 1936 to 1943, Rintelen's account of the problems of the Axis alliance, the cooperation of Italy in the war effort, and the failures of German strategy provide a clear, informative, and generally unbiased account of the war in the Mediterranean. Rintelen is sympathetic to Germany's Axis ally, but this does not detract from the veracity of his account.

Adolf Galland's The First and the Last is a personal account of the air war by one of the Luftwaffe's top aces. Galland participated in the "Malta Blitz" in the summer of 1942 and is highly critical of Goering's constant intervention in the tactical mission of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean. The attack on Malta, however, receives little attention. Cunningham's A Sailor's Odyssey deals almost exclusively with the Mediterranean war and is a personal, well written, and highly informative account of the sea war from the British viewpoint. Cunning-

ham typifies the indomitable, doughty British admiral, who believed that for Britain the Mediterranean was the "sea of decision."

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The secondary works on World War II, many by noted war historians, have often been an important aid in examining German strategy in the Mediterranean. One of the more important for the purposes of this paper was Deakin's The Brutal Friendship. This excellent, extremely well documented account of the relationship between Hitler and Mussolini and the development of Axis strategy has been most valuable. It is well written, clear, and unbiased, and represents a major addition to the history of World War II. Kirkpatrick's Mussolini, the companion volume to Bullock's Hitler, is valuable in its analysis of the Duce and the origin and structure of Italian fascism. Bragadin's The Italian Navy in World War II is generally unreliable because of the author's bias, but

it explains in detail the problems of the Italian Navy and its statistics on the losses of the merchant fleet are fairly accurate.

Belot's The Struggle for the Mediterranean is generally fair, accurate, and written primarily from documentary evidence. It was of special value as it is written primarily from the German and Italian view. Assman's Deutsche Schicksalsjahre is written from the point of view of the German Navy and covers the entire war at sea. A portion of the work is devoted to the Mediterranean theater, which the author feels was slighted by the German High Command. Ruge's Der Seekrieg also expresses the naval view in the conduct of the sea war and adds the author's criticism of the Supreme Command for the opportunities lost in the Mediterranean theater. Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View was used for the valuable account of German Mediterranean strategy written by Walter Warlimont. Manstein, in Lost Victories, devotes little attention to the Mediterranean theater of war, although he considered the failure to capture Malta a colossal blunder.

Unfortunately for the study of German strategy in World War II, no complete study of Goering is available. Sources that are available, such as Manvell and Fraenkel's Goering, are extremely limited. For a study of the career of Hitler, the classic work is Bullock's Hitler, A Study in Tyranny. Although there is little on German strategy in the Mediterranean, it is valuable for an understanding of the Fuehrer and the Third Reich.

Martenssen's Hitler and His Admirals is written almost entirely from documentary materials, but as these have been generally available, Martenssen's study has been used lightly. Liddell Hart's The German



Generals Talk is an interesting and often valuable record of conversations with many of the major German generals after the defeat of Germany. The most useful for the Mediterranean theater was the conversation with General Student.

British sources have covered in every aspect the history of the Mediterranean war. For a complete analysis of British strategy in World War II, Churchill's six volume work is unsurpassed. The Hinge of Fate, fourth volume in the series, was the most valuable for the Mediterranean war, although specific details are often lacking. The major source for Britain in the Mediterranean is I. S. O. Playfair's official British history, The Mediterranean and Middle East. This work, although from the British view, is an extremely valuable, detailed account of British strategy and tactics, both at sea and in the land campaigns. Although undocumented, the author had full access to British files. Macintyre's The Battle for the Mediterranean unfortunately is undocumented, but the author's account of the war in the Mediterranean, with Malta as the focal point, was very useful. Particularly important was the account of the Luftwaffe raids on Malta. Ian Cameron's Red Duster, White Ensign discusses in detail the British supply of Malta, but it is a highly prejudiced account. Other works, such as Malta Magnificent and Malta Strikes Back, are nearly worthless, although the latter at least discussed Malta's defense preparations.

Of the other secondary works available, few have been used to any great degree, and they provided only an occasional aid.