

= Operation Pedestal =

Operation Pedestal (referenced in Italian sources as the Battaglia di Mezzo Agosto) was a British operation to get desperately needed supplies to the island of Malta in August 1942 , during the Second World War . Malta was the base from which surface ships , submarines and aircraft attacked Axis convoys carrying supplies to the Italian and German armies in North Africa . From 1940 to 1942 , Malta was under siege , blockaded by Axis air and naval forces . To sustain Malta , the United Kingdom had to get convoys through at all costs . Despite serious losses , just enough supplies were delivered for Malta to continue resistance , although it ceased to be an effective offensive base for much of 1942 . The most crucial supply was fuel delivered by the SS Ohio , an American @-@ built tanker with a British crew . The operation officially started on 3 August 1942 and the convoy sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar on the night of 9 / 10 August .

The convoy is also known as the Battle of Mid @-@ August in Italy and as the Konvoj ta ' Santa Marija in Malta ; the arrival of the last ships of the convoy on 15 August 1942 , coincided with the Feast of the Assumption (Santa Marija) . The name Santa Marija Convoy or Sta Marija Convoy is still used and the day 's public holiday and celebrations , in part , honour the arrival of the convoy . The attempt to run fifty ships past bombers , E @-@ boats , minefields and submarines has gone down in military history as one of the most important British strategic victories of the Second World War . More than 500 Merchant and Royal Navy sailors and airmen were killed and only five of the 14 merchant ships reached Grand Harbour . The arrival of the remains of the convoy did not break the siege , which continued until the Allied reconquest of Egypt and Libya . The Second Battle of El Alamein (23 October ? 11 November) and Operation Torch (8 ? 16 November) in the western Mediterranean , transformed the strategic situation and enabled land @-@ based aircraft to escort merchant ships to the island .

= = Background = =

= = = Allied operations = = =

The Allies waged the Western Desert Campaign (1940 ? 43) in North Africa , against the Axis forces of Italy aided by Germany , that had sent the Deutsches Afrika Korps and substantial Luftwaffe detachments to the Mediterranean in late 1940 . Up to the end of the year , 21 ships with 160 @,@ 000 long tons (160 @,@ 000 t) of cargo had reached Malta without loss and a reserve of seven months ' supplies had been accumulated . Three convoy operations to Malta in 1941 lost only one merchant ship . From January 1941 to August 1942 , 46 ships had delivered 320 @,@ 000 long tons (330 @,@ 000 t) but 23 ships had been sunk and modern , efficient , merchant ships , naval and air forces had been diverted from other routes for long periods ; 31 supply runs by submarines had been conducted . Reinforcements for Malta , included 19 costly and dangerous aircraft carrier ferry operations to deliver fighters . From August 1940 to the end of August 1942 , 670 Hurricane and Spitfire fighters had been flown off carriers in the western Mediterranean . Many of these used Malta as a staging post and then continued to North Africa and the Desert Air Force .

Malta was also a base for air , sea and submarine operations against Axis supply lines and from 1 June and 31 October 1941 , British forces sank about 220 @,@ 000 long tons (220 @,@ 000 t) of Axis shipping on the African convoy routes , 94 @,@ 000 long tons (96 @,@ 000 t) by the navy and 115 @,@ 000 long tons (117 @,@ 000 t) by the RAF and Fleet Air Arm (FAA) . Loaded ships sailing to Africa accounted for 90 percent of the ships sunk and Malta @-@ based squadrons were responsible for about 75 percent of those ships sunk by aircraft . Military operations from Malta and using the island as a staging post , led to Axis air campaigns against the island in 1941 and 1942 . By late July , the 80 fighters on the island averaged wastage of 17 per week ; the remaining aviation fuel was only sufficient for the fighters , making it impractical to send more bombers and torpedo @-@ bombers for offensive operations .

== Malta , 1942 ==

Operation Harpoon from Gibraltar and Operation Vigorous from Alexandria (12 ? 15 / 16 June) were costly failures . Only two merchantmen from Harpoon reached the island , as the Vigorous convoy was forced to turn back and many merchantmen , including the only tanker in Harpoon and several convoy escorts were sunk . By August , the fortnightly (two @-@ weekly) ration on Malta for one person was 14 ounces (400 g) sugar , 7 ounces (200 g) fats , 10 @.@ 5 ounces (300 g) bread and 14 ounces (400 g) of corned beef . An adult male worker had a daily intake of 1 @,@ 690 calories and women and children received 1 @,@ 500 calories . In August a mass slaughter of livestock began on the island to reduce the need for fodder imports and to convert grazing land for crop growing ; the meat was supplied to the public through Victory Kitchens .

Malta would be forced to surrender if fuel , food and ammunition were not delivered before September and Air Vice @-@ Marshal Keith Park , the local air commander since July , warned that there remained only a few weeks ' supply of aviation fuel . The Admiralty had the fast minelayer HMS Welshman converted to carry fuel and submarines were pressed into service , to run supplies of aviation fuel , anti @-@ aircraft ammunition and torpedoes through the blockade , to keep the remaining aircraft operational . The First Lord of the Admiralty A. V. Alexander and Admiral of the Fleet Dudley Pound , the First Sea Lord (professional head of the Royal Navy) , concurred with Churchill that the loss of Malta would be

... a disaster of [the] first magnitude to the British Empire , and probably [would be] fatal in the long run to the defence of the Nile Valley .

and prepared a new convoy operation from Gibraltar , with an unprecedented number of escorts , using ships taken from the Far East and from the Home Fleet , that had vessels to spare since Arctic convoys had been suspended , following the disaster to Convoy PQ 17 .

== Axis command ==

The Axis command structure in the Mediterranean was centralized at the top and fragmented at the lower levels . Mussolini had monopolised authority over Italian armed forces in 1933 , by taking the offices of Minister of War , Minister of the Navy and Minister of the Air Force . Feldmarschall Albert Kesselring of the Luftwaffe commanded the German ground forces in the theatre as Oberbefehlshaber Süd (OB Süd) but had no authority over Axis operations in North Africa or the organization of convoys to Libya . Fliegerkorps II and Fliegerkorps X were subordinate to the normal chain of command of the Luftwaffe . Since November 1941 , Kesselring had some influence over the conduct of the German naval operations in the Mediterranean , as nominal commander of Naval Command Italy (Marinekommando Italien) but this was subordinate to the Kriegsmarine chain of command . German service rivalries obstructed co @-@ operation and there was little unity of effort between German and the Italian forces in the Mediterranean . Kesselring had the authority only to coordinate plans for combined operations by German and Italian forces and some influence on the use of the Regia Aeronautica for the protection of convoys to North Africa . The Italian Navy resisted all German attempts to integrate its operations , ships in different squadrons never trained together and Supermarina constantly overruled lower @-@ level commanders .

== Prelude ==

== Allied plans ==

== Operation Pedestal ==

Admiralty planning for Operation Pedestal began in late July 1942 , under the direction of Vice @-@ Admiral Neville Syfret , Rear Admirals Lumley Lyster and Harold Burrough and the Naval Staff

. Syfret transferred to HMS Nelson on 27 July when Nelson and HMS Rodney returned to Scapa Flow from Freetown , West Africa . Syfret convened a conference on 29 July , for Flag and Commanding Officers of the naval forces for Pedestal at Scapa , to consider the orders for the operation . Several smaller operations were also planned , to be carried out concurrently with Pedestal . The convoy comprised 14 merchant vessels , the most important being SS Ohio , the only large , fast tanker available , an American ship loaned to the British , with a British crew . As insurance against the loss of Ohio and its 12 @, @ 000 long tons (12 @, @ 000 t) of oil , the other ships were to carry fuel in drums . The convoy was to be protected by two battleships , three aircraft carriers , seven cruisers , 32 destroyers and seven submarines , the largest escort force yet .

The combined group was named Force F , the convoy and escorts from Britain to the rendezvous became Force P , the aircraft carriers Victorious , Argus and escorts were named Force M on the voyage to the meeting point . The aircraft carrier Eagle and its escort from Gibraltar to the rendezvous became Force J , the carrier Indomitable and its escorts from Freetown were Force K ; during Operation Berserk , all the carriers and escorts became Force G , Force R was made up of the fleet refuelling vessels RFA Brown Ranger , RFA Dingledale , escorted by four corvettes and an ocean @-@ going tug , RFA Abbeydale a Dale @-@ class oiler and escorts were named Force W also for Operation Berserk , Force X formed the close escort to Malta , Force Z was made up of the heavy ships of Force F , that were to turn back to Gibraltar and Force Y was to conduct Operation Ascendant , a run from Malta to Gibraltar , by the two ships that had reached the island during Operation Harpoon and escorts , as Pedestal entered the Mediterranean .

Embarked on Victorious were 809 Squadron and 884 Squadron FAA with 16 Fairey Fulmars and 885 Squadron with six Sea Hurricanes ; on Indomitable , 806 Squadron had ten Grumman Martlets , 800 Squadron and 880 Squadron had 24 Sea Hurricanes , 827 Squadron and 831 Squadron had 14 Fairey Albacores . On Eagle were 801 Squadron and 813 Squadron with 16 Sea Hurricanes . Based on Malta were five Baltimores , six PRU Spitfires and five Wellington Mk VIII reconnaissance aircraft . Reinforcements were sent temporarily from Egypt , raising the maximum number of operational aircraft to 100 Spitfires , 36 Beaufighters , 30 Beauforts , 3 Wellingtons , 2 Liberators , 2 Baltimores and three FAA Albacores and Swordfish .

The convoy was given the bogus title WS.5.21.S (genuine Winston 's Specials were convoys from Britain to Suez via the Cape of Good Hope) . After the usual convoy conference , just before sailing , Burrough met with the Convoy Commodore , A. G. Venables and the masters of the merchant ships on board his flagship , HMS Nigeria to brief them . A similar meeting was held with radio operators of the merchantmen , to explain fleet communications and procedures . Envelopes marked " Not to be opened until 08 : 00 hours August 10 " were handed to the ships ' masters , containing personal messages signed by the First Lord of the Admiralty wishing the masters " God Speed " . The convoy sailed from the River Clyde on the night of 2 / 3 August , escorted by HMS Nigeria , HMS Kenya and destroyers , to rendezvous with the other escorts the following morning .

= = = = Operation Bellows = = = =

Shortly before the departure from Scapa , the Admiralty decided that Furious should carry out Operation Bellows , to reinforce Malta (known informally as a Club Run) with Spitfires at the same time as Operation Pedestal . The departure of Furious was delayed by technical difficulties caused by the flight deck , that sloped upwards to a point amidships . A Spitfire made a practice take @-@ off , with wooden wedges in the flaps to ensure a 25 ° angle and Furious steaming at 30 knots (35 mph) , into a 10 @-@ knot (12 mph) wind . The Spitfire was thrown into the air by the rise on the flight deck , bounced onto the forward slope , fell off the front near stalling speed and narrowly avoided ditching . An immediate request was made to the Air Ministry for Constant @-@ speed propellers and two days later , a Spitfire with the new propeller took off easily , leaving 38 aircraft still on board to be flown to Malta . In company with HMS Manchester , she joined Nelson and the convoy three days before the start of Operation Pedestal .

= = = = Operations Berserk and Ascendant = = = =

On 31 July , Nelson , Rodney , HMS Victorious , HMS Argus , HMS Sirius and destroyers sailed from Scapa to rendezvous with HMS Eagle and HMS Charybdis from Gibraltar and HMS Indomitable and HMS Phoebe , from Freetown , for Operation Berserk . The operation took place between the Azores and Gibraltar from 6 ? 9 August and included exercises with the merchant ships in anti @-@ aircraft gunnery , emergency turns and in changing cruising formations , communicating with signal flags and short range wireless telegraphy (W / T) . The risk to security in breaking W / T silence during the exercises , was accepted by Allied planners and according to Cunningham , the convoy attained an efficiency in manoeuvring " comparable to that of a fleet unit . " The aircraft of the force performed dummy air attacks in the afternoon of 8 August , to exercise radar reporting , the fighter direction organisation and to give anti @-@ aircraft gun crews aircraft recognition practice , followed by a fly past . In Operation Ascendant , Troilus and Orari , the two merchant ships that had survived the Harpoon fiasco in June , were to sail from Malta for Gibraltar , with a screen of two destroyers (Force Y) on the night of the first day of Operation Pedestal . Force Y was to be disguised and show Italian deck markings and sortie from Malta , to 30 nmi (56 km ; 35 mi) to the south of Lampedusa , then sail past Kelibia on Cap Bon , keeping close to the Tunisian coast as far as the Galita Channel and from there make for Gibraltar . (Force Y left Malta about 20 : 30 on 10 August , reached Cap Bon the next day and arrived at Gibraltar at about 10 : 00 on 14 August .)

= = = Axis plans = = =

The Germans and Italians planned separately and although they co @-@ operated to an extent , their forces operated independently in the operation against the convoy ; Fliegerkorps II in Sicily co @-@ ordinated plans with the local Regia Aeronautica commanders but conducted its attacks separately . Supermarina the Italian Navy headquarters , considered four contingencies , that the Allies would use their naval strength to protect a convoy , that a sortie would be made by the main Allied battle fleet to provoke the Italians to react , to use a powerful covering force for a convoy to force a passage to the north of Pantelleria instead of turning westward at the entrance to Skerki Bank or to use aircraft @-@ carriers for attacks on Sardinian airfields to ease the passage of a convoy . The Regia Aeronautica had 328 aircraft (90 torpedo @-@ bombers , 62 bombers , 25 dive @-@ bombers and 151 fighters) and the Luftwaffe 456 aircraft (328 dive @-@ bombers , 32 high @-@ level bombers and 96 fighters) . Most Luftwaffe torpedo @-@ bombers had been sent to Norway in June and did not return in time for the operation . About 20 Ju @-@ 88s from Fliegerkorps X Air Corps on Crete arrived at Sicily on 11 August , were ready for operations the next morning and another 8 Ju @-@ 88s arrived from Crete the same day , after completing convoy escort duties in the Aegean .

The Regia Marina had four battleships , three heavy and ten light cruisers , 21 destroyers , 28 torpedo boats and 64 submarines but most of the capital ships were non @-@ operational , for lack of fuel and air cover . The navy had received only 12 @,@ 000 long tons (12 @,@ 000 t) of fuel in June , equivalent to 20 percent of fuel consumption by convoys and the Italian battleships had to refuel the smaller vessels . Because of the acute fuel @-@ shortage , Mussolini suggested to Hitler that a Malta convoy should be opposed only by submarines and land @-@ based aircraft . Supermarina managed to prepare the 3rd Cruiser Division with three eight @-@ inch cruisers (Gorizia , Bolzano and Trieste) and seven destroyers , along with the 7th Cruiser Division with three six @-@ inch cruisers (Eugenio di Savoia , Raimondo Montecuccoli and Muzio Attendolo) and five destroyers plus 18 submarines , 19 torpedo boats (six Ms and 13 Mas) ; the Germans had three U @-@ boats and four S @-@ boats . The Axis air forces lacked the fighters to escort surface ships , bombers and torpedo bombers and Mussolini preferred to use the fighters as bomber escorts and as cover for surface forces . Kesselring rejected the Italian request to provide air cover for the Italian fleet , because the Luftwaffe did not have enough fighters for bomber and ship escorts .

Kesselring doubted that the Italian heavy cruisers could succeed even with air cover and used the lack of fuel as a pretext but Admiral Eberhard Weichold , the German naval attaché in Rome , wanted the Luftwaffe to give air cover for Italian ships . Marshal Ugo Cavallero , Chief of the General

Staff (Capo di Stato Maggiore Generale) , also wanted Italian surface forces to participate in the operation but Supermarina did not want its big ships to operate without air cover . Axis tactics were similar to those used against Operation Harpoon in June ; a joint special air reconnaissance of the western Mediterranean by Axis aircraft on 11 and 12 August and Axis aircraft in Sicily and Sardinia , Italian submarines and German U @-@ boats , Axis torpedo boats and minefields would be used as successive barriers . The four barriers were to cause the convoy to disperse and be vulnerable to a force of cruisers and destroyers . Twenty @-@ two torpedo @-@ bombers , about 125 dive @-@ bombers all with fighter escorts and 40 high @-@ level bombers , were to be used in a synchronized attack . Priority was given to the destruction of aircraft carriers , to prevent them from intervening when Italian surface forces closed in on the remnants of the convoy . The Axis navies had 19 submarines available in the western Mediterranean and nine boats were to be stationed north of Algeria between longitudes 01 ° 40 ' E and 02 ° 40 ' E and ten submarines were to wait between Fratelli Rocks and the northern entrance to the Skerki Bank , some arrayed north @-@ west of Cap Bon , to operate in co @-@ operation with aircraft . An Italian submarine was to patrol west of Malta , one off Navarino (Greece) and three more about 87 nautical miles (100 mi) west @-@ south @-@ west of Crete .

From June 1940 to April 1942 , the Regia Marina laid about 2 @, @ 320 mines between Cap Granitola at the south @-@ west end of Sicily and Pantelleria , 1 @, @ 020 mines between Pantelleria and Ras el Mustafa , Tunisia , 6 @, @ 880 mines between the Aegadian Islands and Cap Bon and 1 @, @ 040 mines between Bizerte and Keith Rock . The Italians also intended to lay a temporary minefield off Cap Bon on the night of 11 / 12 August , just before the convoy passed through . On the night of 12 / 13 August , 13 Mas and six Ms torpedo boats and four S @-@ boats were to lie in wait south of Marettime (one of the Aegades) and off Cap Bon , then later off Pantelleria . The 3rd Cruiser Division and the 7th Cruiser Division would be about 100 nmi (190 km ; 120 mi) north of Pantelleria during the afternoon of 12 August and then sail on an interception course south of Pantelleria through the night , to attack the remains of the convoy and its close escort just before dawn . It was assumed that at this time , Axis aircraft could provide fighter cover against the larger number of British aircraft from Malta . An Allied convoy from Egypt would be attacked by the 8th Cruiser Division based at Navarino in Greece , because of a lack of readiness , the division was ordered on 12 August , into the Ionian Sea to support the 3rd Cruiser Division .

= = = Axis preparations = = =

Axis planners lacked information about Allied plans but had fair knowledge of the Allied order of battle and the movement of Allied forces inside the Mediterranean from the reports of Abwehr agents near Gibraltar , the Spanish enclave of Ceuta (opposite the Strait of Gibraltar) and from reconnaissance aircraft and submarines . Reports from the Abwehr on 5 August , convinced Kesselring that the Allies were preparing a big operation to supply Malta from the west , in conjunction with a simultaneous attack on Mersa Matruh in Egypt . Allied bomber aircraft on Malta were expected to attack Italian naval forces as Malta fighters covered the passage of a convoy through the Sicilian Narrows . The Germans also considered a threat to Crete when the convoy had reached Malta and Kesselring ordered increased readiness of Luftwaffe units in Sicily and Crete , ordering the transfer of aircraft from Crete to Sardinia and Sicily .

Fliegerkorps II reduced operations to increase serviceability and prepared facilities at Elmas in Sardinia for reinforcements from Fliegerkorps X in the eastern Mediterranean and Kesselring began discussions with the Regia Aeronautica , for employment of the German and Italian forces in the forthcoming operation . The Allies learned through Enigma that the Luftwaffe had supply difficulties in Sardinia , preventing the movement there of long @-@ range bombers and of fighter operations to the extent intended and that the Luftwaffe had sent 40 ? 45 long @-@ range bombers and six twin @-@ engined fighters from the eastern Mediterranean ; Fliegerführer Afrika was forced to divert aircraft for convoy escorts in the Tobruk area . On the morning of 8 August , a report erroneously indicated that an Argus @-@ class carrier and four destroyers had sailed into Gibraltar and Abwehr agents reported much shipping in the Strait of Gibraltar on the night of 8 / 9 August . By 10 August ,

220 Luftwaffe aircraft were on Sicily along with 300 aircraft of the Regia Aeronautica and another 150 Italian aircraft assembled on Sardinia . As soon as it was clear that a convoy was sailing eastwards , 20 long @-@ range bombers from Crete and ten torpedo @-@ bombers from the training school at Grosseto were to be transferred to Sardinia . In Sicily , 15 dive @-@ bomber crews resting from operations were alerted and six Bf 110 long @-@ range fighters were sent from Africa , bringing the total to 701 aircraft .

= = Battle = =

= = = 9 / 10 August = = =

Force R left Gibraltar on 9 August , ready to meet the convoy at a rendezvous south of Majorca and Force F made an uneventful passage of the Straits in dense fog , during the night of 9 / 10 August . Fishing boats and one merchant vessel were passed at close quarters but due to the moonless night and the fog , Syfret thought it improbable that the force had been sighted from the shore . Abwehr agents near Gibraltar and Ceuta had sighted the convoy and the British decrypted their Enigma messages , learning how well @-@ informed the Axis were and their plans to defeat the convoy . At about 08 : 00 on 10 August , German reconnaissance aircraft detected the convoy and at 12 : 45 reported that the convoy was about 70 north of Algiers .

At 17 : 00 a French aircraft reported two aircraft carriers , two battleships , two cruisers , fourteen destroyers and twelve merchant vessels about 50 nmi (93 km ; 58 mi) north of Oran . Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft reported at 19 : 00 that a convoy of two battleships , two carriers , two cruisers , fourteen destroyers and twelve merchantmen was on an easterly course , 55 nmi (102 km ; 63 mi) north @-@ north @-@ east of Oran . By the afternoon of 10 August , Kesselring and Supermarina were aware that a convoy of forty to fifty ships , including possibly two carriers and nineteen freighters , was in the western Mediterranean , sailing on an easterly course at a speed of 13 ? 14 nmi (24 ? 26 km ; 15 ? 16 mi) . The convoy was expected to be south of Majorca by 06 : 00 on 11 August and south of Sardinia by the same time on 12 August . Fliegerkorps II in the western Mediterranean was alerted and Fliegerkorps X was ordered to reconnoitre the eastern Mediterranean beyond the 25 ° E line of latitude after dawn on 11 August .

= = = 11 August = = =

Despite Axis submarines , three cruisers and twenty @-@ six destroyers refuelled from the tankers Dingledale and Brown Ranger of Force R by dawn . (Previous Malta convoys had refuelled at Malta but now the island had no oil to spare .) The convoy was south of the Balearic Islands on course for Cap Bon at daybreak and at about 06 : 20 , a U @-@ boat sighted the convoy . At 08 : 15 a Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft reported that the convoy was 95 nmi (176 km ; 109 mi) north @-@ west of Algiers ; fifteen minutes later , a Ju @-@ 88 began to shadow the convoy at 20 @,@ 000 ? 24 @,@ 000 feet (6 @,@ 100 ? 7 @,@ 300 m) and continued throughout the day . At noon , the convoy was about 75 nmi (139 km ; 86 mi) south of Majorca , sailing due east on a zigzag course . Furious conducted Operation Bellows between 12 : 30 and 15 : 15 , flying off 38 Spitfires for the 555 ? 584 nmi (1 @,@ 028 ? 1 @,@ 082 km ; 639 ? 672 mi) journey to Malta and then turned round with her escorts for Gibraltar (37 of the aircraft reached Malta) . During the evening , HMS Wolverine one of the destroyers escorting Furious , rammed and sank the Italian submarine Dagabur .

Enigma decrypts showed that at 11 : 55 , the light cruisers Eugenio di Savoia , Raimondo Montecuccoli , Muzio Attendolo of the 7th Cruiser Division at Cagliari had been ordered by Supermarina to be at two hours ' notice from 18 : 00 and that with the heavy cruisers Gorizia , Bolzano and Trieste of the 3rd Cruiser Division at Messina , had been informed at 13 : 00 that Italian submarines were operating north of Bizerte . Three Axis submarines were seen departing Cagliari at 20 : 45 and the British learned that at 18 : 00 the 7th Cruiser Division with 17 destroyers , had sailed

east and that 3rd Cruiser Division had departed from Messina and Naples . Allied intelligence also learned that Panzerarmee Afrika in Egypt believed that the convoy was a threat to Tobruk . Kesselring thought that a landing on the North African coast might be attempted and next day issued an order of the day , that landings would influence operations in Africa and must be prevented . Luftgau Afrika (Air District Africa) expected a landing at Tripoli on 13 or 14 August .

At 13 : 15 , the aircraft carrier Eagle was hit by four torpedoes from U @-@ 73 (Kapitänleutnant Helmut Rosenbaum) and sank eight minutes later , 70 nmi (130 km ; 81 mi) south of Cape Salinas and 80 nmi (150 km ; 92 mi) north of Algiers . About 900 of the 1 @,@ 160 crew were rescued by the destroyers but 200 men and all the aircraft were lost , about 25 percent of the fighter strength of the convoy . The Luftwaffe attacked just after sunset at 20 : 56 , when the convoy was about 200 nmi (370 km ; 230 mi) from Sardinia , with 36 Ju @-@ 88 and He @-@ 111 bombers and torpedo bombers , that evaded the British fighters in the dusk . The aircraft scored no hits and the fleet anti @-@ aircraft gunners claimed three attackers destroyed . During the night the Axis airfields in Sardinia were attacked by B @-@ 24 Liberators and Beaufighters , which set a hangar on fire and destroyed several aircraft .

= = = Night , 11 / 12 August = = =

On the night of 11 / 12 August , the Italian 7th and 3rd Cruiser divisions and 17 destroyers , sailed from Cagliari , Messina and Naples to engage the British convoy . The RAF at the Malta Operations Room sent orders in plain language to a Wellington bomber that dropped flares and sent messages in clear , supposedly guiding a fictitious B @-@ 24 Liberator force , to bluff the Italian ships away from the convoy . (Supermarina (Italian Naval Headquarters) had actually cancelled the operation before the British signals were received , because of a lack of air cover .) At 00 : 20 , the British discovered from Enigma that Italian intelligence had sighted four British cruisers and ten destroyers and thought that part of the convoy might be proceeding to the eastern Mediterranean . Enigma also revealed operation orders from Fliegerkorps II to the fighters of Jagdgeschwader 77 (JG 77) at Elmas in Sardinia , to expect a convoy the Sicilian Narrows early on 12 August . Fliegerkorps II was to co @-@ operate with the Regia Aeronautica in Sicily and Sardinia , flying in waves with fighter escorts against the convoy .

British intelligence concluded that the convoy and its huge escort force had caused the Axis commanders to be apprehensive of a landing anywhere along the North African coast or on Crete . Axis precautionary measures had been taken on the assumption that if Crete was the target , landings would occur before 14 August . Defensive measures were also taken in the Benghazi ? Tripoli area of Libya , where a squadron of Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters and the long @-@ range bombers based at Derna were alerted to move to Benghazi or Tripoli , supported by Ju @-@ 52 transport aircraft . Panzerarmee Afrika prepared detachments to repel landings and moved forces to the Sollum ? Mersa Matruh area , to defend the coast east of Tobruk . At 07 : 00 , all ship movements from North Africa to Italy and the Aegean were suspended and by late afternoon , the British knew that the Luftwaffe anticipated a landing at Tripoli on 13 or 14 August . Fighter and dive @-@ bomber reinforcements were sent from Sicily and Enigma intercepted a message from Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring , the commander in chief of the Luftwaffe , ordering that the Luftwaffe

... will operate with no other thought in mind than the destruction of the British convoy ... The destruction of this convoy is of decisive importance .

and that the attacks were to be directed against the British aircraft carriers and merchantmen .

= = = 12 August = = =

= = = Morning = = =

Axis aircraft resumed shadowing at 05 : 00 and Indomitable launched Martlets at 06 : 00 to shoot

down two shadowing aircraft . The carriers then launched Sea Hurricanes for air cover . At 09 : 15 when the convoy was about 130 nmi (240 km ; 150 mi) south @-@ south @-@ west of Sardina , 19 Junkers Ju 88s dive @-@ bombers attacked and eight were shot down by anti @-@ aircraft fire and fighters for the loss of one FAA fighter . The biggest attack came at noon , when a combined attack by about 80 torpedo bombers , dive bombers and fighter @-@ bombers used a mixture of weapons , including new Motobomba pattern @-@ running torpedoes . Ten Savoia @-@ Marchetti SM.79 bombers carrying Motobomba torpedoes were followed by German fighter @-@ bombers to disorganise the convoy before the main force of torpedo bombers attacked five minutes later .

= = = = Afternoon = = = =

The attack was not synchronised as intended and lasted from 12 : 15 to 14 : 45 , the main force being intercepted by FAA Martlets and Sea Hurricanes and forced to drop their torpedoes at long range ; the merchant ships implemented the evasive manoeuvres practised in Operation Berserk and were not hit . Two Re.2001G / Vs modified to carry a 640 kg (1 @,@ 410 lb) bomb each and escorted by Re.2001s , joined Sea Hurricanes on their landing approach to Victorious and were not recognised by the anti @-@ aircraft gunners ; one bomb struck the flight deck but broke apart and the other missed . A force of dive bombers hit Deucalion and forced it out of the convoy , escorted by HMS Bramham . Enigma decrypts showed the British that at 18 : 30 on 12 August , an S @-@ boat flotilla was due to sail at 16 : 00 from Porto Empedocle in Sicily for Cap Bon , to operate in the area until about 04 : 30 on 13 August . At 21 : 45 , a Fliegerkorps II assessment revealed that the Axis thought that there were 51 ships in the western Mediterranean , including two carriers , two battleships , seven cruisers and twenty destroyers . The Germans mistakenly thought that a US Yorktown @-@ class aircraft carrier was present but correctly identified Rodney and Nelson . The convoy was thought to consist of 13 freighters of 105 @,@ 000 long tons (107 @,@ 000 t) , protected by 10 ? 16 fighters and plenty of anti @-@ aircraft guns .

During the afternoon , there were many submarine alarms and the convoy was approached by Italian submarine Cobalto and Emo . Emo was depth charged and prevented from attacking and HMS Ithuriel rammed and sank Cobalto ; Ithuriel was badly damaged and had to return to Gibraltar . The Italian submarine Brin was driven off by destroyers and a Sunderland flying boat attacked and damaged the Giada off Algiers and a later attack by another flying boat caused more damage . Giada shot down the Sunderland before heading for shelter to the Spanish port of Valencia (where she remained until the 14 August) . Between 18 : 00 and 18 : 50 , the convoy was attacked by about 40 Ju @-@ 88s and Ju @-@ 87s , co @-@ ordinated with about twenty CANT Z.1007 torpedo @-@ bombers . A SM.79 drone and a CANT Z.1007bis guide aircraft , escorted by five FIAT G.50 fighters , attacked the convoy . The pilot of the SM.79 pointed the aircraft towards the ships and parachuted , for the Z.1007bis crew to guide the bomb by radio . The radio failed and the SM 79 drone flew on until it ran out of fuel and crashed into Mount Khenchela on the Algerian mainland .

Foresight had to be scuttled after a torpedo detonation on the stern sent crewmen flying spread @-@ eagled through the air and Junkers Ju 87s wrecked the flight deck of Indomitable with three bomb hits along with two or three near misses , leaving Victorious the last operational carrier . Several fighters on Victorious were ditched to make room and Indomitable was able to maintain a speed 28 @.@ 5 knots (32 @.@ 8 mph) ; a torpedo bomber hit the destroyer Foresight , which was later sunk by the British . Syfret intended Force Z to turn west upon reaching the Skerki Bank at 19 : 15 but ordered the turn at 18 : 55 , because the Axis air attacks caused a twenty @-@ minute delay , the turn not being noticed by the Axis until 20 : 30 . Because of the number of aircraft in the attacks up to 18 : 50 , Syfret thought that there could be no more before dark and that the danger at the Skerki Bank would come from torpedo boats in the night and aircraft after dawn , not Axis submarines .

At 18 : 55 , Burrough with the close escort of Force X continued towards Malta with the merchant ships as Force R cruised in the western Mediterranean in case it was needed , until ordered to return to Gibraltar (arriving in the morning of 16 August) . An hour later , to pass through the Skerki

Channel , the convoy manoeuvred from four to two columns , Nigeria , HMS Cairo and SS Ohio were torpedoed by the Italian submarine Axum . Destroyers were still with the damaged ships and when long @-@ range Beaufighter aircraft arrived and were fired on by the convoy gunners . Ashanti and HMS Penn laid a smokescreen to cover the light western horizon but the merchantman Empire Hope was hit by a dive @-@ bomber and sunk . The Axis air forces had flown 180 ? 220 escorted bomber sorties during the day and the Germans believed that they had damaged an aircraft carrier , a cruiser , a destroyer and a large merchant ship .

The captain of Kenya described the state of the convoy as " chaotic " and there are several versions of events . At about 21 : 00 Italian submarine Alagi reported that it had sunk the merchant ship Empire Hope and damaged the cruiser Kenya . While Kenya turned to avoid a torpedo , Bronzo reported that it had sunk Deucalion . Clan Ferguson was torpedoed and was later destroyed by an ammunition detonation and Brisbane Star was hit in the bows (possibly by Alagi) but kept going . At 21 : 30 , Tenente di Vascello Sergio Puccini of the Alagi noted that

... from 180 degrees around to 140 degrees we could see a continuous line of flame from the burning , sinking ships ... A burning ship blows up .

The torpedoing of HMS Nigeria and Cairo , the diversion of HMS Ashanti to become Burrough 's new flagship and the detachment of four Hunt @-@ class destroyers to stand by the damaged cruisers , temporarily deprived Force X of its commander , the two columns of their leaders , lost the convoy nearly half its escort and its two Fighter Direction ships . On hearing that Nigeria and Cairo had been torpedoed , Syfret ordered Force Z to send back HMS Charybdis , HMS Eskimo and HMS Somali to reinforce Force X. Nigeria and the other damaged ships turned back to Gibraltar , escorted by HMS Wilton and HMS Bicester .

== = 13 August = = =

== = = Operation MG 3 = = = =

In the eastern Mediterranean , the British Operation MG 3 decoy had begun when convoy MW12 with three freighters had sailed from Port Said after dusk on 10 August , escorted by two cruisers , ten destroyers and two escorts . One merchant ship escorted by two cruisers and three destroyers left Haifa at 03 : 00 the next day . The two forces had rendezvoused early on 11 August and sailed west to the longitude of Alexandria , then turned back . German aircraft had spotted the movements and early on 12 August , Kesselring informed Fliegerkorps X that four merchant vessels , six cruisers and an unknown number of destroyers were at 33 ° 40 ' N , 28 ° 34 ' E , sailing north @-@ east at 12 knots (14 mph) . Kesselring thought that the convoy was a British wireless @-@ telegraphy spoof but might also be a supply convoy for Malta . Fliegerkorps X was ordered to reconnoitre all of the eastern Mediterranean on the morning of 12 August . During the night of 12 / 13 August , British cruisers and destroyers had bombarded the port of Rhodes and during the day , the RAF attacked Maritsa airfield on Rhodes and a British submarine landed commandos at Simeto south of Catania on the east coast of Sicily , to sabotage electricity pylons . The Italian 8th Cruiser Division remained at port and the Germans detached one destroyer to reinforce the Italians ; local traffic along the North African coast and shipping traffic between Italy and Greece was suspended but MG 3 failed to divert Axis attention from Operation Pedestal .

== = = Night , 12 / 13 August = = = =

Around midnight , the convoy passed south of Zembra Island towards Kelibia on Cap Bon , to avoid the minefields between Africa and Sicily around midnight , still out of formation . Three minesweeping destroyers sailed ahead , followed by the cruisers Kenya , Manchester and two freighters . Charybdis and the destroyers Eskimo and Somali from Force Z were still some hours behind and Ashanti was steaming fast to overhaul the main body . Three destroyers remained with nine of the merchantmen and Bramham was en route after Deucalion had been sunk . The main

part of the convoy was attacked at 00 : 40 by eight Italian and seven German torpedo @-@ boats , which made fifteen attacks ; the long line of merchant ships and the reduced number of escort ships providing an easy target . At 01 : 20 off Cap Bon , Manchester was hit by a torpedo from either MS @-@ 16 or MS @-@ 22 , that wrecked three of its four propeller shafts and left the ship listing , stopped in the water . Power was restored , 156 men were taken on board HMS Pathfinder and at 05 : 00 , the captain ordered that the Manchester be scuttled and the remaining crew to make for the Tunisian coast .

Between 03 : 15 and 04 : 30 about 15 nmi (28 km ; 17 mi) off Kelibia , the torpedo boats hit and sank Wairangi , Almeria Lykes (US) , Santa Elisa (US) and Glenorchy , as they took a short cut to catch up with the convoy . Rochester Castle was torpedoed but escaped at 13 knots (15 mph) and caught up with the main body by 05 : 30 , by when Charybdis , Eskimo and Somali had arrived , increasing the escort to two cruisers and seven destroyers escorting Rochester Castle , Waimarama and Melbourne Star . Ohio and its destroyer were slowly closing the distance and further back were Port Chalmers and two destroyers . Dorset was sailing independently and Brisbane Star lurked near the Tunisian coast , ready to make a run for Malta after dark . Dawn brought an end to the torpedo boat attacks and at 07 : 30 , Burrough sent Eskimo and Somali back to help Manchester but they arrived too late , took on survivors who had not reached the shore and made for Gibraltar .

= = = Morning = = =

An attack by the Italian cruisers appeared imminent , after air reconnaissance had sighted them the previous evening , heading south about 80 nmi (150 km ; 92 mi) from the west end of Sicily , on course to reach the convoy at dawn . At 01 : 30 the cruisers had turned east and run along the north coast of Sicily ; British aircraft from Malta had conducted a ruse to decoy the cruisers but the main attacking force on Malta was held back , in case the Italian battleships sailed from Taranto . Some of the Italian cruisers were ordered to return to port and the rest were sent through the Straits of Messina to join the 8th Cruiser Division against the decoy convoy in the eastern Mediterranean . The cruisers were attacked by the British submarines HMS Safari and Unbroken and Unbroken torpedoed the Bolzano in the oil tank and the ship was run aground ; the light cruiser Muzio Attendolo was hit forward and 60 ft (18 m) of her bow was blown off .

At 07 : 00 the convoy was about 120 nmi (220 km ; 140 mi) from Malta and twelve Junkers Ju 88s attacked at 08 : 00 despite Beaufighters and Spitfires overhead . Waimarama was hit and disintegrated , the aviation fuel on deck burst into flame and HMS Ledbury passed through the fires , rescuing 27 survivors of the ship 's complement of 107 men . The wreckage of Waimarama showered flaming debris on Melbourne Star and several of her crew abandoned ship prematurely , some of whom were later rescued by Ledbury . At 10 : 50 , Ohio was disabled by several near @-@ misses from Ju 87 Stuka dive @-@ bombers and one crashed onto the deck ; Rochester Castle was torpedoed and set ablaze but kept going and Dorset was hit and stopped . The crew of Port Chalmers found a torpedo caught in the starboard paravane (a minesweeping device) but it exploded harmlessly ; two destroyers were left behind with the disabled ships and another air attack at 11 : 50 had no effect . The main body of the convoy , with Port Chalmers , Melbourne Star and Rochester Castle sailed on and when it was within 80 nmi (150 km ; 92 mi) of Malta , further air attacks were prevented by 407 Spitfire sorties from the island .

= = = Afternoon = = =

The remnants of the convoy steamed on to meet the 17th Minesweeper Flotilla of the Malta Escort Force at 14 : 30 and Force X turned for Gibraltar , the convoy reaching Grand Harbour in Valletta at 16 : 30 , where Operation Ceres , the immediate unloading of the ships began . Another aerial attack at dusk hit Ohio and Dorset was sunk . Penn tried to tow Ohio but the tanker was listing and snapped the tow line . During another attack , Ohio broke its keel when a bomb hit the same area as a previous torpedo hit . The crew , led by Captain D. W. Mason , temporarily abandoned the ship , as Italian torpedo bombers attacked . Brisbane Star evaded a U @-@ boat and managed to steam

at 5 ? 9 nautical miles (9 @.@ 3 ? 16 @.@ 7 km ; 5 @.@ 8 ? 10 @.@ 4 mi) despite the damage to its bows . While off Tunisia , Brisbane Star was boarded by the Sousse harbour master who tried to impound the vessel , until persuaded to relent and let the ship sail on after dark .

= = = 14 ? 15 August = = =

Brisbane Star arrived at Valetta Harbour with Spitfires circling overhead , during the afternoon of 14 August . Ohio was surrounded by ships to nurse the tanker to Grand Harbour and several American volunteers from Santa Eliza , manned anti @-@ aircraft guns on Ohio during the tow . The weight of the tanker kept breaking the tow lines , while constant air attacks were made by 20 bombers that destroyed the rudder , made a hole in her stern and brought the decks awash . The tanker was towed in by the destroyers Ledbury and Penn lashed on either side , with the minesweeper HMS Rye acting as a stabilizer at the stern . More air attacks disrupted the towing formation , until it was re @-@ established with Bramham replacing Ledbury for the remainder of the journey . Ohio was towed into Grand Harbour at 09 : 30 on 15 August , to cheering crowds and a band playing Rule Britannia . The crowd fell silent as the ships entered harbour , men removed their hats , women crossed themselves and a bugle sounded Still . The tanker discharged oil into two tankers and water was pumped in at the same time , to reduce the chance of structural failure . Ohio settled on the bottom just as the last of the fuel was emptied .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Analysis = = =

German reports on 17 August , stated that all the tankers in the recent Mediterranean convoy had been sunk and none of the transports had reached their destination (assumed to be Egypt) . In August , with Malta still besieged , 35 percent of Axis convoy shipping to North Africa was lost . The Allies had lost 13 vessels sunk , including nine merchantmen , one aircraft carrier (Eagle) , two cruisers (Manchester and Cairo) and a destroyer (Foresight) but the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy had saved Malta . The arrival of about 32 @,@ 000 short tons (29 @,@ 000 t) of general cargo , together with petrol , oil fuel , kerosene and diesel fuel , was enough to give the island about ten more weeks supply beyond the few weeks that the existing stocks could maintain . Later that year , Weichold summed up the German navy 's analysis ,

.... To the continental observer , the British losses seemed to represent a big victory for the Axis , but in reality the facts were quite different , since it had not been possible to prevent a British force , among which were five merchant vessels , from reaching Valetta Thanks to these new supplies Malta was now capable of fighting for several weeks , or , at a pinch , for several months . The main issue , the danger of air attack on the supply route to North Africa , remained . To achieve this objective no price was too high , and from this point of view the British operation , in spite of all the losses , was not a defeat , but a strategic failure of the first order by the Axis , the repercussions of which will one day be felt ...

Royal Navy gunners and Fleet Air Arm fighters shot down 42 of about 330 Axis aircraft that flew against the convoy . In 1994 , Sadkovich wrote that Operation Pedestal was a tactical disaster for the British , of a magnitude comparable to the German attack on Convoy PQ @-@ 17 . In 2002 , Giorgerini wrote that the operation was an Italian success , the Italian submarines had adopted more offensive tactics and sank a cruiser and two merchantmen , damaged two cruisers and the Ohio . For the British and the other Allies , Operation Pedestal was a strategic victory , raising the morale of the people and garrison of Malta , averting famine and an inevitable surrender . In September and October , Malta was supplied by submarines (Otus , Rorqual on the Magic Carpet run and Clyde had sailed during the operation with ammunition , aviation fuel and torpedoes) . Submarines Parthian , Clyde , Traveller and Thrasher made more Magic Carpet runs and the fast minelayer Welshman made a dash from Gibraltar with 300 long tons (300 t) of food .

=== Casualties ===

In 1956 , Playfair wrote that the Fleet Air Arm lost 13 aircraft in action and 16 when Eagle was sunk , the RAF lost 5 aircraft and 35 Axis aircraft were shot down , including losses over Malta . In 1957 , Santoro wrote that the Regia Aeronautica lost 24 aircraft (excluding those lost in British raids on Sardinian airfields and the radio @-@ controlled SM 79 bomber) and that the Germans lost 24 aircraft , plus an unknown number of reconnaissance aircraft operating against the convoy . In 2003 Malcolm listed 160 men killed on Eagle , 132 on Manchester , 52 on Nigeria , 50 on Indomitable , 24 on Cairo , 5 on Foresight , 3 on Kenya . Merchant Navy casualties were 83 on Waimarama , 18 on Clan Ferguson , 7 on Glenorchy , 5 on Melbourne Star , 4 on Santa Elisa , 1 on Deucalion , 1 on Ohio and 1 on Brisbane Star . In 2010 , Vego wrote that about 350 men had been killed , Ohio never sailed again and the British lost one carrier (Eagle) , two cruisers (Manchester and Cairo) and the destroyer Foresight . One carrier (Indomitable) , two cruisers (Nigeria and Kenya) and three destroyers were damaged and under repair for some time and the Fleet Air Arm lost thirteen aircraft on operations and sixteen Sea Hurricanes when Eagle was sunk . The Allies could not risk such losses again and another large convoy to Malta was not attempted until November 1942 , when the re @-@ capture of airfields in Egypt and Libya after the Second Battle of El Alamein made it much easier to provide land @-@ based air cover . Two Italian cruisers (Bolzano and Muzio Attendolo) were damaged and not operational for the rest of the war , the Italian submarines Cobalto and Dagabur were sunk , Giada was damaged and 42 Axis aircraft were shot down .

=== Subsequent operations ===

From 16 to 18 August , HMS Furious made another Club Run from Gibraltar and dispatched 29 Spitfires to Malta in Operation Baritone . In September , with Malta supplied , Allied forces sank 100 @,@ 000 long tons (100 @,@ 000 t) of Axis shipping , including 24 @,@ 000 long tons (24 @,@ 000 t) of fuel destined for Rommel , leaving the Axis forces in Egypt consuming supplies faster than receipts , contributing to tactical paralysis during the Second Battle of El Alamein (23 October ? 11 November) and Operation Torch (8 ? 16 November) . Submarines and Bristol Beaufort torpedo @-@ bombers escorted by Bristol Beaufighters , regularly attacked Axis supply ships , known to the Allies through Ultra intercepts from Bletchley Park . An attempt to run a disguised merchant ship to Malta early in November failed and then Operation Stoneage (17 ? 21 November) , a convoy of four merchant ships from Alexandria , arrived undamaged (the light cruiser Arethusa was torpedoed with 155 men killed and had to be towed back to port) . Force K was re @-@ established at Malta and in Operation Portcullis (1 ? 5 December) , five ships were dispatched and arrived safely . Chariot manned torpedoes began to operate from Malta that month and from late December to January 1943 , four convoys , Quadrangle A , B , C and D , with pairs of merchantmen each , delivered 200 @,@ 000 long tons (200 @,@ 000 t) of stores without loss and empty ships were retrieved from the island .

=== Commemoration ===

In recognition of their fortitude during the siege and air attacks during all of the Mediterranean campaign , Malta was awarded the George Cross in the months immediately preceding this operation . Vice @-@ Admiral Syfret was appointed as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath for his " bravery and dauntless resolution in fighting an important convoy through to Malta in the face of relentless attacks by day and night from enemy submarines , aircraft , and surface forces . " The master of the tanker Ohio , Dudley Mason , was awarded the George Cross for showing " skill and courage of the highest order and it was due to his determination that , in spite of the most persistent enemy opposition , the vessel , with her valuable cargo , eventually reached Malta and was safely berthed . " Several other officers , crew members and commanders of both the Royal and Merchant Navies , including the commander of HMS Ledbury , Roger Hill , received military

awards ranging from the Distinguished Service Order and Conspicuous Gallantry Medal to Mentioned in Despatches , for the bravery and intrepidity shown in ferrying the merchantmen to Malta . The Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal was awarded to Junior Third Officer Frederick August Larsen , Jr. and to Cadet @-@ Midshipman , U.S. Merchant Marine Academy , Francis A. Dales for " Heroism beyond the call of duty " . Operation Pedestal was the subject of a 1953 black and white British film , Malta Story , that interspersed archive footage of the SS Ohio with scripted studio scenes .

= = Order of battle = =