

Navy Operations in the Adriatic from September 1943 to May 1945

1. The capitulation of Italy and the shift in the balance of power of the naval forces in the Adriatic

When the news of Italy's capitulation was broadcast on the radio in the evening of 8 September 1943, just before the Allied landing in the Gulf of Salerno, neither of the two warring sides was surprised as they have been preparing for this moment for several months. During operations in North Africa in May 1943, the German High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) was counting on defending the Balkans with only German and Bulgarian forces, whereas German forces on the Apennine and Balkan peninsulas in the following months were being constantly reinforced and were supposed to have been operating according to the secret plans "Alarich", "Konstantin" and "Achse".¹ The goal of these plans was to quickly neutralise Italian military forces and capture their positions in Italy and the Balkans. After the capitulation was announced and the order of the Italian High Command (*Commando Supremo della Marina, Supermarina* for short) to put all naval units under Allied control, the vast majority of the Italian fleet set off from Taranto to Malta where it joined the Allies.

The eastern coast of the Adriatic saw a mass and somewhat panicked retreat of Italian units from Dalmatia, but despite their quick advance, the Germans managed to disarm the Italian forces in Rijeka, the Zadar Division and part of the Bergamo Division in northern and central Dalmatia, and all of their forces in southern Dalmatia and Herzegovina, while the rest surrendered to the Partisans. As a result, all coastal batteries on the Dalmatian islands as well as the ones between Šibenik and Split fell into the hands of the Partisans. Their first victim was the steamboat *Dea Marcella* which was sunk by the Zečevo battery and in the following days, a number of German transport ships in the area between the islands of Lošinj and Mljet were damaged by coastal battery guns or were captured.²

After establishing direct contact with the Allies via the Yugoslav National Liberation Army mission, founded in October 1943 in the Italian Port of Bari, a joint reconnaissance of the islands of Korčula and Hvar already took place on 12 October. In the beginning of January 1944, the Supreme Command of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army gave the go-ahead to establish a base for the British Coastal Forces in Komiža on Vis Island. The Allies sent units of British and American commandos to help the forces of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army in defending the island, which is why the strength of the Allied units on this island reached almost 2000 soldiers in the first half of 1944.

2. German Navy in the Adriatic

At the time of Italy's capitulation, the German Navy (*Deutsches Kriegsmarine* – DKM) did not have significant seaworthy naval vessels present in the Adriatic. Two motor torpedo boats S 30 and S 33 were under repair in Pula and two German submarines were also under repair. The Germans found many Italian combat and auxiliary vessels in varying degrees of combat readiness in Italian ports in the Adriatic. In Pula, the Germans thus acquired an old cruiser *Cattaro* (formerly *Dalmatia* and *Niobe*), the torpedo boat *Insidioso*, several CB-class commando submarines, auxiliary minesweepers, and the water tanker *Verbano*. Several ports in the Adriatic (*Cantiere San Marco* and *Cantiere San Rocco* in Trieste; CRDA and

¹ J. Vasiljević, Mornarica NOVJ, Beograd 1972, str. 107.

² J. Vasiljević, Mornarica NOVJ, Beograd 1972, str. 138.

CANT Monfalcone, *Cantiere Scoglio Olivi* in Pula; *Cantieri Navali del Quarnaro* in Rijeka) had several military and auxiliary vessels in for repairs as well as a series of new Ariete-class torpedo boats in different stages of construction. In total, the Germans captured four steamboats (each with more than 20,000 GRT), 59 steamboats between 10,000 and 15,000 GRT, and a large number of motor sailboats with a combined GRT of 208,163.³ Captured military vessels included one cruiser, one auxiliary cruiser, four motor torpedo boats, six escort ships, one submarine chaser, two commando submarines, two minesweepers and six auxiliary ships. The Germans organized fast repairs, the completion of ship construction and the preparation of all Italian combat vessels to be incorporated into the German Navy. This process took unexpectedly long for some naval units due to the frequent Allied air attacks on shipyards and ports in the northern Adriatic.⁴ However, this was not enough and apart from the German Navy units that came from the Adriatic, the transportation of smaller vessels (torpedo boats and minesweepers) by land was organised from the Ligurian Sea across northern Italy and the Po River to the Adriatic.⁵ The shortage of professional naval personnel was also a serious concern, so the Germans transferred some of their units from Norway and southern France, while they also used personnel from the navy of the Independent State of Croatia to patch up the missing staff on German ships.

The Germans organised their navy by dividing the Adriatic into four operational areas, of which the western Adriatic (Italian coast) was under the command of the German Navy for Italy (*Deutsches Marine-Kommando Italien*), while the northern Adriatic (Gulf of Trieste and Istria), Dalmatia (including the Croatian coast) and the southern Adriatic (Montenegro coast and Albania) were under the Commanding Admiral Adriatic (*Kommandierender Admiral Adria*, Counter Admiral Joachim Lietzmann). The Admiral of the Adriatic ordered the formation of two motor torpedo boat flotillas (motor torpedo boats or *S-Boots*) for offensive operations, three flotillas of fast minesweepers (*R-Boots*) and additional captured vessels for anti-mine and support tasks, three submarine chaser (*U-Bootjaeger*) groups, one division of minelayers and net laying ships, a coastal defence flotilla, and two transport flotillas with a large number of twin-hull landing ships (*Siebelfaehre* – SF), barges, motor sailboats, and landing craft (*Marineartillerieleichter* – MAL) for local defence. At the same time, an order was also given to form the 11th Security Flotilla from the captured Italian torpedo boats and destroyers, while also including some armed steamboats. According to these orders, the 3rd S-Flotilla (initially four, later eight torpedo boats) started operations in the Adriatic from October 1943 as part of the 1st Motor Torpedo Boat Division (*1. Schnellbootdivision*), joined by 8 boats from the 7th S-Flotilla. The German 24th S-Flotilla received the former Italian motor torpedo boats (MS), but was disbanded in October 1944 due to the heavy losses and frequent boat breakdowns, the 3rd S-Flotilla receiving its remaining boats.⁶

At the end of 1943, out of the warships of the first line, the 11th Security Flotilla had 4 torpedo boats of foreign make (TA-*Torpedoboot Ausland*: TA 20 *Audace*, TA 21 *Insidioso*, TA 22 *Giuseppe Missori* and TA 37 *Gladio*), while work was being done on two additional torpedo boats (TA 48, formerly T 3 of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and TA 36 *Stella Polare*), the destroyer TA 43 *Sebenico* (formerly *Beograd*) and the old

³ KTB AA za 12. 9. 1943.

⁴ Z. Freivogel-A. Rastelli; Pomorski rat na Jadranu 1940-1945, Zagreb 2014, str. 147.

⁵ KTB 6. Raumbootflotille (6. flotilja minolovcev).

⁶ Z. Freivogel-A. Rastelli; Pomorski rat na Jadranu 1940-1945, Zagreb 2014, str. 168.

cruiser *Niobe* (formerly *Cattaro*, formerly *Dalmacija*, formerly *Niobe*). The plan was to incorporate into the flotilla the destroyer TA 44 *Antonio Pigafetta*, 11 torpedo boats that were under construction and several corvettes, with only four being finished.

At the end of 1943, most of these ships participated in the German conquering of the coast and islands, which were liberated by the Partisans after Italy's capitulation, but, on 22 December 1943, the cruiser *Niobe* was lost near the island of Silba. By completing new vessels, especially torpedo boats, the conditions were met for the formation of the 11th Security Division in Trieste in February 1944. It was going to operate in coordination with the 1st Motor Torpedo Boat Division which consisted of the 1st Escort Flotilla (*Geleitflotille*) based in Pula, the 2nd Escort Flotilla (Trieste), the 2nd Submarine Chaser Flotilla (*U-Jagdflotille*) based in Rijeka, and the 6th Minesweeper Flotilla (*Raumbootflotille*) based in Pula. The division was added the 6th Transport Flotilla (*Transportflotille*) and the 10th Landing Craft Flotilla (*Landungsflotille*). However, the delays in completing the new and repairing the damaged ships, and the chronic shortage of trained crews prevented the 11th Security Division from reaching its planned full strength before the end of the war.

3. Allied naval forces and operations in the Adriatic from September to December 1943

Even though the Germans controlled the entire coastal belt and all the islands except for Vis and Lastovo after the 1943/1944 winter operations, the balance of power on the eastern coast of the Adriatic was in a constant state of fragile equilibrium which could easily be disrupted by sudden measures taken by either side. The key tasks for the Germans were the protection of their maritime traffic and the defence of the coast and islands from a potential Allied landing.

For the Partisans, the main concern was the immediate danger of a German raid on Vis Island, the last stronghold of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army and the Allied forces on the eastern coast of the Adriatic. The second problem was the organisation of naval communications that would connect the island of Vis as the main location of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's forces with other Partisan units on the occupied mainland.

After the landing of the British 8th Army in Taranto on 3 September 1943, this Italian military port became the main base of operations of the Allied naval forces for the Ionian Sea and the southern Adriatic. After the liberation of the ports of Brindisi (17 September) and Bari (23 September), the former became the front-line naval base for the British Coastal Forces with their 24th and 28th Flotilla of motor torpedo boats and motor gunboats as well as the mother ship *Vienna*, which was relocated further north to the Port of Bari at the beginning of October. The light Coastal Forces of the British Royal Navy established a temporary base of operations in Komiža in December 1943, later becoming their permanent base and the home of several motor torpedo boats, motor gunboats, motor launches, and harbour defence motor boats. The larger and more heavily armed torpedo boats with two or four torpedoes as well as motor gunboats were classified as *Fairmile D*, whereas smaller torpedo boats armed with two torpedoes were classified as *Vosper*. As a base and port of departure for motor torpedo boats and motor gunboats, Komiža represented the ideal base for offensive operations against German maritime traffic in the corridors between the islands of central and southern Dalmatia. These operations already started in December 1943 and missions were usually carried out in the night or in bad weather conditions as the Germans

usually avoided navigating during daytime when their ships were easy targets for the Allied air forces which had complete dominance in the air.⁷ The operations of light British naval forces from Vis Island have been extremely aggressive and very successful from the very beginning, which greatly jeopardized German maritime communications in the Adriatic. Since January 1944, the combined Allied and Partisan forces carried out raids on German garrisons on the islands of Korčula, Šolta, Hvar, Mljet and Brač, and drew a large number of German forces from the interior to the coast.

For the Germans, maintaining maritime transport along the eastern coast of the Adriatic was an absolute priority. Due to the Allied air superiority and the constant partisan attacks on railway and road communications in the interior of the country, the evacuation routes for the German forces leading from Greece to Germany were severely hindered and oftentimes completely severed. The same held true for the supply lines of German crews in coastal towns and on islands. The only relatively safe route for redeploying troops and military material from Greece led from the Ionian Sea through Boka Kotorska and Dubrovnik, and across the corridor between the Dalmatian islands to Rijeka, Pula and Trieste. German maritime traffic between the ports in southern and central Dalmatia, or towards Croatian ports further north up the coast was divided into sections that were dependant on night-time transport. Before dawn, ships would moor in camouflaged berths in deep bays, which are abundant on the Adriatic coast, well-fortified and protected with light anti-aircraft guns placed on surrounding hilltops. Additionally, German convoys were always escorted by armed ships of the 11th Division (torpedo boats from the 11th and 12th Flotilla, sometimes also Gabbiano-class submarine chaser corvettes, naval ferry barges, or well-armed motor cruisers) for protection against attacks from the sea. In order to neutralise Vis Island as a direct threat, the Germans had been planning the occupation of the island with a combined air and naval raid as early as February 1944, but the operation has been repeatedly put on hold for various reasons until the defence forces on the island had grown so strong that the Germans decided that the raid had no chance of success, so Hitler eventually cancelled the operation once and for all in May 1944.

Despite suffering losses themselves, the British had a lot of success launching night attacks on German convoys along the Dalmatian coast from their base in Komiža; however, the Germans managed to maintain maritime connections between the captured ports up until the evacuation of their forces from southern and central Dalmatia in October and November 1944.

4. Operations in the Adriatic from January to December 1944

In 1944, the Adriatic was the scene of several important naval battles and the German Navy suffered heavy losses in various sea operations.

In the night of 29 February 1944, a German convoy heading from Pula to Greece, consisting of the motor transport ship *Kapitaen Diedrichsen* (formerly *Sebastiano Venier II*), torpedo boats TA 36 *Stella Polare* and TA 37 *Gladio*, corvettes Uj 201 *Egeria* and Uj 205 *Colubrina*, and minesweepers R 188, R 190 and R191, was attacked near the island of Premuda by two French light cruisers *Le Terrible* and *Le Malin* of the 10th Light Cruiser Division based in the Italian Port of Manfredonia. The cruisers picked up the German convoy on their radar from a distance of 17,000 m and, in the ensuing short firefight, sank the corvette Uj 201

⁷ Niall Brannigan, "Allied presence on Vis 1944-45".

Egeria, set fire to *Kapitaen Diedrichsen* (she sank the next morning) and heavily damaged the torpedo boat TA 37 *Gladio*. Following this defeat, the Germans gave up redeploying transport ships from the Adriatic to the Aegean Sea.

In March 1944, the Germans started laying mine fields in the northern Adriatic, namely mine barriers on sea approaches to the Kvarner Gulf. During minelaying preparations with the minelayer *Kiebitz* (formerly *RAMB III*) in Vela vrata on the evening of 18 March, the torpedo boat TA 36 *Stella Polare*, which led the formation, hit a mine near the Port of Brestova on the eastern coast of Istria and sank in a few minutes. On 27 March, the corvette UJ 205 *Colubrina* was sunk in an air attack launched by British fighter bombers on the Port of Šibenik, while on the same day, 14 British fighter bombers attacked and sank minesweepers R 188 and R 189 in the Port of Povlja on Brač Island, and assault boats I-34 and I-72 on Korčula, and I-12 and I-115 in Dubrovnik. Over the next few days, airplanes sank another five assault boats and one twin-hull landing craft in the waters of the islands Brač and Hvar.

After the corvette UJ 207 *Carabina* was destroyed and the corvette UJ 206 *Bombarda* severely damaged in the Allied bombing of the Breda Shipyard in Mestre in February and March 1944, the 11th Security Division was left with only the torpedo boat TA 20 *Audace* in combat-ready condition. The situation was similar with their motor torpedo boats as most of the boats of the 7th S-Flotilla were still in the process of land and river transport to the Adriatic, and only two 3rd S-Flotilla boats (S 36 and S 61) were operational while the rest were under repair, as was the minesweeper *Kiebitz*.

In April, British Coastal Forces based on Vis Island continued with their attacks on German maritime traffic in the operational area from Zadar to the Pelješac Peninsula, attacking motor sailboats, tugboats, barges, small tankers, harbour defence motor boats, and assault boats of the coastal defence and combat engineer units. Some of these vessels were sunk, whereas others were captured and taken to Vis Island. Since a large number of German transport ships, especially motor sailboats, were destroyed or captured not only by the torpedo boats and motor gunboats of the British Coastal Forces, but also by the armed ships and patrol boats of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's Navy, the Germans equipped one flotilla with six well-armed anti-partisan decoy vessels; however, the first of these ships, codenamed A 144 *Anton* (formerly *Bianca Stella*), was captured by the Partisans on 27 April 1944 after a short battle on the island of Olib (the ship was later added to the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's Navy as NB 11 *Crvena zvijezda*).

In May, German forces were bolstered by the torpedo boat TA 38 *Spada* which joined the 1st Escort Flotilla, and the refurbished torpedo boats TA 21 *Insidioso* and TA 22 *Giuseppe Missori* which joined the 2nd Escort Flotilla. After 20 May and several failed attempts, the Germans finally managed to transport three minesweepers of the 12th R-Flotilla (R 178, R 38 and R 185) to the Aegean Sea, while losing the fourth one (R 190) to Allied aircraft. In May, the forces of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army from Vis Island launched a raid on the island of Šolta supported by the British Coastal Forces, which resulted in severe Partisan losses against the entrenched enemy. On the night of 18-19 May, British Coastal Forces and Air Forces sunk several smaller German coastal tankers in the Pelješac Canal. In order to clear the islands of central Dalmatia from Partisan activity, the Germans launched operation *Wikinger-Feuerzange* and landed on the island of Dugi otok on 31 May; escort was provided by ships from the 11th Security Division. As a result of the German airborne and ground assault named Operation *Roesselsprung* (Knight's

move) – an attempt to destroy the Supreme Command of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army and Marshall Tito in Drvar on 25 May, which pulled German forces towards the coast, a joint Partisan and Allied assault on Brač Island was launched from Vis Island with artillery support provided by a unit of the British Coastal Forces from Vis Island.

With the Allied invasion of Normandy on 6 June, the period from June to August 1944 signalled the start of the German retreat on all fronts. At the same time, the German Navy in the Adriatic was at its strongest by incorporating into its ranks the completed new ships and the large number of MFP naval ferry barges (MFP-*Marinefaehrprahm*) redeployed to the Adriatic. However, more losses would follow. On the night of 11-12 June, British destroyers *Eggesfore* and *Blackmore* (Hunt-class) sank the torpedo boat S 153 near Hvar. Near the island of Murter, British torpedo boats destroyed the torpedo boat TA 34 (the former Yugoslav T 7), which was supposed to be handed over to the navy of the Independent State of Croatia. On the night of 16-17 June, French light cruisers *Fantasque* and *Le Terrible* attacked a German convoy heading from Rijeka along the eastern coast of Istria towards Pula that consisted of the tanker *Giuliana*, two smaller tankers, and minesweepers R 14, R 8, R 15 and R 4. The gunfire from the cruisers destroyed the tanker *Giuliana* and damaged all of the minesweepers except for the R 14. In June, Allied aircraft severely damaged the torpedo boat TA 22 *Giuseppe Missori* of the 2nd Escort Flotilla off the western coast of Istria. The boat was later towed to Trieste, but was never repaired.

In the second half of July, British torpedo boats and motor gunboats carried out several consecutive night attacks on multiple German convoys in the Mljet Canal and the waters around Korčula Island, sinking several boats, but suffering considerable losses themselves. British attacks continued in August when, on the night of 10-11 August near Vir Island, British boats sank an MFP landing vessel and heavily damaged a second one. A few days later, three German torpedo boats of the 24th S-Flotilla ran aground at the entrance of the Sveti Ante Canal, while a fourth one collided with the minesweeper R 15. This meant that, in a very short period of time, all of the ships of the 24th S-Flotilla along with one minesweeper were out of action, all of which were supposed to have been sent to Pula for repairs.⁸ On the night of 17-18 August, a fierce naval battle took place in the Mljet Canal where three British boats attacked the German convoy “Hammer”. One German assault boat, two escort ships and the small tanker *Peter* were sunk. The following night, the Germans were out looking for survivors at the scene of the battle of 5 *S-Boats*, but got entangled with three British boats which hit and set fire to the S 57 which had to be scuttled by its own crew. At the end of August, British boats started operating in the northern Adriatic where they sank the large cargo ship *Numidia* along the western coast of Istria. On 17 August, the torpedo boat TA 35 *Giuseppe Dezza* from the 2nd Escort Flotilla hit a mine near the Brijuni Islands and sank, losing most of its crew.

The most important ships of the German 11th Division were the modern Italian Ariete-class torpedo boats, of which ten were supposed to have been built in the shipyards in the Adriatic and entered into use. Two were being used since February 1944, but the TA 36 *Stella Polare* was sunk as early as March 18, whereas the TA 37 *Gladio* was heavily damaged on 29 February in the attempt of redeploying the transport ship *Kapitaen Diedrichsen* to Greece. Other torpedo boats were eventually completed and given into use

⁸ Z. Freivogel-A. Rastelli; Pomorski rat na Jadranu 1940-1945, Zagreb 2014, str. 347.

immediately (TA 38 *Spada* in February, TA 39 *Daga* in March and TA 40 *Pugnale* in July). When TA 41 *Lancia* and TA 45 *Spica* began operation in September, the conditions were met for the redeployment of three torpedo boats (TA 37, TA 38 and TA 39) to the Aegean Sea to the 9th Torpedo Boat Flotilla (Operation *Odysseus*), which was successfully completed so that two torpedo boats, despite engaging in a short firefight with British destroyers HMS *Whaddon* and *Belvoir* near the Albanian coast, reached Piraeus on 24 September undamaged. It was, however, not worth the risk as all three torpedo boats were lost in action in less than a month and the 9th Flotilla was disbanded. The last Ariete-class torpedo boat, the TA 42 *Alabarda*, was completed and entered into service with the 1st Escort Flotilla of the 11th Security Division in November 1944, while the remaining two - TA 46 *Fionda* and TA 47 *Balestra* were heavily damaged in an Allied bombing of the shipyard in Rijeka and were never completed before the end of the war.

Destroyers TA 44 *Antonio Pigafetta* and TA 43 *Sebenico* (formerly *Beograd*) entered into service with the 11th Security Division in October 1944 and February 1945, but were constantly in for repairs due to the continuing breakdowns and did not join any combat mission before the end of the war. Similarly, the torpedo boat TA 48, although nominally under the flag of the Independent State of Croatia's Navy, entered into service as late as February 1945 when it was sunk by Allied aircraft in Trieste.

The last quarter of 1944 was marked with the continuing German retreat and the liberation of a large part of Dalmatia. With Bulgaria leaving the Tripartite Pact, German forces in Greece were facing the danger of a complete encirclement.

British Coastal Forces were still very active in neutralising German maritime traffic in the period between September and November 1944. Most of the operations were aimed towards attacking German convoys that participated in the evacuation of the German forces from the area of Šibenik and Zadar, but they also acted as support for the landing of Partisan forces that captured the coast and the islands of southern and central Dalmatia. In Italy, the forces of the British 8th Army liberated the territory 50 km north of Ancona, where a new front-line naval base was established. This enabled boats of the Coastal Forces to operate all the way to Venice and Trieste. In an attempt to slow down the advance of Allied and Partisan forces towards the north, Germany resorted to very densely mining all sea access routes leading to all important ports, including Rijeka, Pula and Trieste. During one of such minelaying missions on 5 September, the minesweeper R 12 was sunk due to an accidental mine explosion, killing most of its crew.⁹ From October 1944 onwards, preparations were underway for the retreat of German forces from the Zadar area carried out at night by German convoys. Frequent Partisan attacks on German motor sailboats had the Germans convinced that the island of Molat was a strong base of operations for the Partisan forces, which is why Operation *Da Capo* was planned and launched on 10 October with a sea artillery barrage of the island carried out by corvettes (submarine chasers) UJ 202 *Melpomene* and UJ 208 *Spingarda*, torpedo boats of the 3rd S-Flotilla S 61, S 58 and S 60, torpedo boats of the 24th S-Flotilla S 626, S 623, S 629 and S 628, and the torpedo boat TA 40 *Pugnale*. Despite the heavy barrage, the German attack did no harm as the Partisan base was on the Island of Ist and not on Molat.

⁹ KTB 6. Raumbootflotille, 5. septembra 1944.

On the night of 11-12 October, British Coastal Forces near Vis Island engaged in battle with a German convoy of three MFP naval ferry barges, the small tanker *Habicht* and one assault boat. The fierce battle resulted in the destruction of all three MFPs (two ran aground and one was sunk), while the tanker *Habicht* suffered heavy damage and was later captured by the Partisans. On the night of 22-23 October, the corvettes UJ 202 *Melpomena* and UJ 208 *Spingard* engaged four Partisan boats near the island of Maun, which resulted in all four Partisan boats and the corvette UJ 202 suffering light damage. The very next night, the two corvettes and two German convoys fought five British torpedo boats and two landing craft gunboats near the island of Škrda, with multiple German vessels suffering heavy damage during the fierce battle. The naval ferry barge (MFP) F 433 suffered the heaviest damage and sank the following day near the island of Dolin, close to Rab Island. On 25 October, the torpedo boat S 158 of the 7th S-Flotilla was sunk at its camouflaged berth in an Allied barrage in the Sveti Ante Canal near Šibenik.

The 11th Security Division was dealt its biggest blow on the night of 1 November 1944 when British destroyers *Wheatland* and *Avon Vale* together with 7 boats of the Coastal Forces ambushed and sunk German corvettes UJ 202 *Melpomene* and UJ 208 *Spingarda* near the island of Škrda (Operation Exterminate), and the torpedo boat TA 20 *Audace* which was en route from Rijeka to Zadar. The British saved 90, while the Germans saved 21 surviving crew members. In just one night, the Germans thus lost three irreplaceable military vessels, three experienced commanders, the commander of the flotilla, and nearly 300 crew members, which was the biggest blow for the German Navy since the beginning of their operations in the Adriatic.

This was, however, not the end of the series of devastating blows suffered by the Germans. In the Allied bombing of Rijeka on 5 November 1944, executed by the American 15th Air Force from their bases in southern Italy, the minelayer *Kiebitz* was sunk along with the torpedo boat TA 21 *Insidioso*, patrol boat G 104 of the Independent State of Croatia's Navy, and the rescue boat *Arpione*. The 2nd Escort Flotilla was down to the torpedo boat TA 48, which was constantly in for repairs, the corvette UJ 205, which was still being outfitted, and the old minelayer *Fasana*. Due to the organisational changes in the German Navy, the Commanding Admiral Adriatic was disbanded from 29 November 1944 onwards, while the remaining operational area which encompassed a smaller part of the northern Adriatic with the islands of Rab and Pag was transferred over to the Naval High Command South. In its ranks were the 11th Security Division with the 3rd S-Flotilla of torpedo boats and the Maritime Transport Office, while the 7th and 24th S-Flotilla of torpedo boats were disbanded (their remaining boats were incorporated into the 3rd S-Flotilla). Following the liberation of Zadar, the British established a new major base of the Coastal Forces there.

Due to the shortage of warships, the Germans in the following months focused on commando operations, the base for which was in Čikat Bay near Mali Lošinj. On the night of 9-10 November 1944, the Marineeinsatzkommando 71 (MEK 71) German naval commando unit equipped with German Linse-type and Italian MTM-type (Motoscafo Turismo Modificato) explosive boats and folding kayaks was transferred there. From the base in Čikat, several commando attacks were launched towards the islands of Grujica, Sestrunj and Molat. The Allies, who were aware of the danger of sabotage coming from the liberated coastal areas, launched several combined airborne and naval attacks on the base in Čikat (18/19 November, 2 December, 17 December and 22/23 December 1944), but did not manage to destroy the base or stop the German commando activities. It was the Allies who suffered the biggest losses. First, two

Vosper-class torpedo boats from the 24th Flotilla ran aground on the island of Zeča in foggy conditions. The crews were unable to dislodge them and they ended up being destroyed by the British themselves. However, the biggest loss came when the British destroyer HMS *Aldenham* (Hunt-class) hit a mine near Škrda Island on 14 December, broke in half and sank along with 126 crew members.¹⁰

5. Naval operations from January to May 1945

The beginning of 1945 saw the continuation of the combined attacks of the torpedo boats of the 3rd S-Flotilla and German naval commandos on the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's bases on Ist, Molat and other islands as well as the liberated ports in Zadar and Šibenik, and strategic targets along the Italian coast. However, on the 10 January 1945, the German 3rd S-Flotilla suffered a heavy blow when a compass malfunction caused torpedo boats S 33, S 58 and S 60 to run aground on Union Island where they were found and destroyed a few days later by British torpedo boats.

On the night of 17-18 January 1945, the Germans attempted to launch several naval and commando attacks on the British cruiser HMS *Colombo* in Zadar with seven torpedo boats of the 3rd S-Flotilla, but they were deflected already on their approach to Zadar. The most significant German naval commando attack came in the early morning hours of 12 February 1945 when three explosive boats escorted by the mother ship attacked the Port of Split where one boat exploded next to the British cruiser HMS *Delhi*, inflicting heavy damage.

In February 1945, British torpedo boats from their bases in Zadar and Ancona launched several attacks on German convoys in Kvarnerić and along the western coast of Istria, while their operational area was extended all the way to the Italian coast near the mouth of the Tagliamento River. In the month of March, German mines sank several British ships. On 23 March, the torpedo boat MTB 655 was sunk in Kvarnerić, while MTB 705 hit a mine and sunk near the passage of Maknare near Molat Island on the same day. On 10 April, MTB 710 hit a mine and sank near Suska Island, while on 13 April, MTB 697 also sank after hitting a mine near Krk Island.¹¹ However, amidst heavy Allied bombing of the ports in Rijeka, Pula and Trieste on 17, 20 and 24 February 1945, several German ships were also sunk, including the new large minelayer *Kuckuck* and the destroyer TA 44 *Antonio Pigafetta* which was the largest warship of the 11th Security Division.¹² In Sistiana near Monfalcone, the Germans established a secret base where they trained crews in operating Molch-type commando submarines which were to be used to attack Allied destroyers when they appeared in the Gulf in Trieste.

With the shortage of aerial and naval forces, the focus of the German defence shifted to blocking sea access routes to the waters of Kvarnerić, Kvarner, the western coast of Istria, and the Gulf of Trieste. In the area between Pag Island and Trieste, more than 6000 mines were laid. The majority were moored contact and non-contact mines, while in April, non-contact mines were also laid on the sea floor, especially in important ports.¹³

¹⁰ F. A. Mason: *The Last Destroyer: HMS Aldenham 1942-44*, London 1988.

¹¹ D. Pope: *Flag 4 – The Battle of Coastal Forces in the Mediterranean 1939-45*, London 1998., str. 267.

¹² Auf Verlorenem posten, str. 308.

¹³ Drugi obalski pomorski sektor..., str. 494.

On 1 March 1945, the last organisational change in the German Navy took place as the 1st Escort Flotilla of the 11th Security Division was renamed to the 9th Torpedo Boat Flotilla (9. *Torpedobootflotille*). At the beginning of March 1945, the newly-established 9th Torpedo Boat Flotilla had five ships (TA 40, TA 41, TA 42, TA 43 and TA 45), with one (TA 43) not being combat-ready, even though it was entered into use.¹⁴ At that time, the Yugoslav Army's offensive was already in full swing and was preparing for an assault on the islands of Pag and Rab in the northern Adriatic. Pag was liberated on 5 April, while on land, the Yugoslav Army's forces liberated Karlobag and Jablanac. 12 April saw the liberation of the island of Rab, and the town of Senj was liberated the following night.

On the night of 12-13 April 1945, British Coastal Forces achieved a great success when two torpedoes launched by their motor torpedo boats hit the torpedo boat TA 45 *Spica* in the Velebit Canal near Novi Vinodolski, sinking it and killing 80 of its crew, while 76 were saved. After the loss of TA 45, the 9th Torpedo Boat Flotilla based in Trieste was down to only one torpedo boat (TA 40 *Pugnale*) as torpedo boats TA 41 and TA 43 were not combat-ready.

On the night of 16 April 1945, Allied motor torpedo boats and motor gunboats from the base in Ancona torpedoed and sank the minesweeper R 15, killing 13 of its crew, which practically ended all combat activity of the 6th Minesweeper Flotilla.

Rijeka was liberated on 3 May and a day earlier, on 2 May 1945, the Yugoslav Army launched an attack on the completely surrounded fortified base in Pula, from where all the remaining seaworthy motor torpedo boats of the 3rd S-Flotilla set off for Ancona where they surrendered to the Allies. On 1 May 1945, besieged by the Yugoslav Army in Trieste, the Germans scuttled the TA 40 and TA 43, and then proceeded to evacuate their naval forces along with the remaining support vessels and stranded them at the mouth of the Tagliamento River where they surrendered to the Allies. This was the final action of the German Navy in the Adriatic.¹⁵

6. Conclusion

The main protagonists carrying out naval activities in the Adriatic between September 1943 and May 1945 were the German Navy (*Deutsche Kriegsmarine*), the Royal Navy Coastal Forces, and the navy of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army, while the presence of the Independent State of Croatia's Navy can be regarded as merely symbolic.

The German Navy began its combat activities in the Adriatic using exclusively the captured military vessels and equipment of the former Italian Navy and operating out of the former Yugoslav and Italian ports. It took great effort and transferring small units by sea and land to the Adriatic, but by the middle of 1944, its power had been constantly increasing, although it did suffer heavy losses due to the Allied superiority in the air and, eventually, on the sea. Since the Germans were unable to clear the occupied areas or neutralise the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's forces by the end of 1944, the latter were inflicting increasingly heavy losses on them both on land and sea. A critical strategic mistake was abandoning the plans to take Vis Island which became the main base of attack for the Allies and the Yugoslav National

¹⁴ Auf Verlorenem Posten, str. 310.

¹⁵ Auf Verlorenem Posten, str. 339–342.

Liberation Army's forces in the Adriatic. Contemporary former Italian Ariete-class torpedo boats were the strongest boats in the *Kriegsmarine* in the Adriatic, but their numbers were insufficient to maintain German sea superiority in the region. German motor torpedo boats were one of the main combat units which, despite not having specific objectives, bore the brunt of the combat activities. Their diesel fuel was less dangerous than the petrol used by British boats, but due to their light armament, they were no match for British boats in firefights. The small R-class motor minesweepers were successful in battles against small partisan ships, and corvettes – Italian Gabbiano-class submarine chasers were serious adversaries to the British motor torpedo boats and motor gunboats, but there were too few of them and their numbers kept dwindling as a result of Allied activities. A special problem was posed by the shortage of experienced crews for warships and auxiliary ships. Patching up crews was very difficult and inadequate, so any destruction of a larger warship and the loss of its crew in battle presented an irreplaceable loss. If the crews were aggressive enough, then the well-armed German landing vessels and assault boats could go toe to toe with British and partisan boats, but they were vulnerable due to their lack of armour and slow speed. Many of these ships belonged to the German coastal defence and combat engineer units which were part of the Army and not the *Kriegsmarine*, but still played an important role in sea battles. The greatest threat to transport vessels and one that was difficult to hide from and defend against was the Allied Air Force which operated in the entire area of the Adriatic from the end of 1943 till the end of the war.

Since the large German submarines of the 29th Submarine Flotilla did not have a permanent base on the western coast of the Adriatic and only occasionally used the Port of Pula as an auxiliary base, mainly for repairs, their presence in the Adriatic was barely felt at all. However, in the final phase of the war, after losing the majority of the surface military vessels, the Germans resorted to commando warfare in the Adriatic. They introduced navy commandos and explosive boats into the fight and were also planning to implement commando submarines, but they eventually ran out of time. Especially effective was the German mine warfare. Minelaying duties were performed by purpose-built minelayers, but also by merchant ships (e.g. the motor boat *Kiebitz*), tank carriers, motor torpedo boats and even torpedo boats, which laid several thousand mines of different types in 1944 and 1945. Mines were responsible for sinking a great number of Allied (but also German) ships and their presence was still felt years after the end of the war when many merchant ships sank in uncleared mine fields.

The Royal Navy combined its maritime operations in the Adriatic with their military and maritime operations in the Mediterranean and along the Italian coast. Destroyers from two flotillas (a total of 12 destroyers) were occasionally sent from the Mediterranean into the Adriatic – mostly for the task of shelling specific targets in support of offensive operations, ambushing larger German warships, whereas British Coastal Forces also operated in the Adriatic after the landing in Italy and the arrival to Vis Island. These forces consisted of large torpedo boats and Fairmile D-type motor gunboats and the smaller Vosper-type motor torpedo boats, motor launch patrol boats and harbour defence motor launches. With their well-trained and combat-ready crews, the Coastal Forces were responsible for the very effective disruption of German transports in the Adriatic. The weak point of the British boats was their petrol engines and petrol itself as a highly flammable liquid as well as the lack of stronger armour plating. In the final months of the war, a large number of British boats were destroyed by sea mines which proved deadly

for smaller vessels. A division of French light cruisers very successfully completed several attacks on German convoys in the Adriatic, destroying or sinking a number of German ships.

Even though it was armed with relatively outdated weapons and equipped with wooden auxiliary ships which were modified for military use and were not proper warships, the Yugoslav National Liberation Army's Navy showed surprising resilience, efficiency and perseverance which was reflected in the many successes in sinking or capturing German motor sailboats. Additionally, the fleet of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army grew mostly thanks to the capturing of enemy motor sailboats and other ships seized in battle; a unique case is the NB 11 *Crvena zvijezda* when the Partisans managed to defeat a specialised anti-partisan ship. The good organisation and execution of complex attacks on German garrisons on the Dalmatian islands still had to rely on the British Coastal Forces which participated in the maritime defence and military transport as well as artillery support for land operations. The navy of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army also held a significant advantage in terms of the crews as partisan ships had a large number of experienced seamen who knew the Adriatic, the coast and the islands very well.

Danijel Frka, dipl. inž.

Sušilo 13

51262 Kraljevica

Tel. +38598328059

e-pošta: danijel.frka@gmail.com