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**|The Taranto Raid**

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## THE TARANTO RAID

The raid by 21 Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm on the Italian fleet in Taranto harbour on the night of 11/12 November 1940 was the first successful major attack by torpedo-carrying aircraft on capital ships. Flown from the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious*, Operation Judgment was an outstandingly successful attack undertaken at night in slow, low-flying biplanes for the loss of just two aircraft and their crews. It has been claimed that the Taranto raid was used by the Japanese as a blueprint for their devastating attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Considering how important the Taranto raid is to the history of both air power and sea power, there are comparatively few serious texts on the subject. Fortunately, those that do exist include a small core of authoritative, useful and very readable works. The JSCSC Library holds multiple copies of most of the major texts cited in this guide as the raid is studied by the ACSC PCT.

### Monographs

The Taranto Raid receives uneven coverage in the official histories that were published in Britain in the years following the Second World War. **ROSKILL's** *The War at Sea* should have provided the definitive official history of the Taranto raid but surprisingly it is only mentioned in the briefest possible terms on two pages (pages 300-301). **PLAYFAIR's** official history *The Mediterranean and the Middle East* does little better with just four pages (pages 235-238) devoted to the raid but the book does at least have a good map of the action. The best official history on the topic is the **ADMIRALTY's** *Battle Summary No.10*. This account puts the action at Taranto into the wider Mediterranean context but still includes enough operational detail to be useful for a campaign study. Appendices on the Italian defences and a narrative for each aircraft's crew involved enhance the basic account as does a very detailed map. Many subsequent works on the Taranto raid appear to have used this *Battle Summary* as a basis. The **NAVAL STAFF HISTORY** on *The Development of British Naval Aviation 1919-1945* has a 5-page précis (pages 129-133) of the raid taken from the *Battle Summary*. An official dispatch on the Taranto raid was written by Captain Boyd of HMS *Illustrious* and was published as a **SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE** after the war. Although quite brief, it gives some interesting insights into the planning of the raid and the conclusions drawn by the Royal Navy from the action.

To complement and expand upon the official *Battle Summary*, the three most comprehensive books currently available on the Taranto raid are those by **LOWRY/WELLHAM, SMITHERS** and **WRAGG**. *The Attack on Taranto* by Lowry and Wellham is a well-researched work, which has the added value of authenticity as one of the authors (Wellham) actually took part in the raid. *Taranto 1940* by Smithers is also an important work on the subject although it does not quite reach the depth of research and detail possessed by *The Attack on Taranto*. However, both books have useful appendices as well as a few illustrations and simplified versions of the map that appears in the *Battle Summary*. The latest account, *Swordfish* by Wragg, uses documents and first-hand accounts that were not available to earlier authors and also concludes the story of Taranto by including an account of the subsequent career of HMS *Illustrious* and the long-term effects of the raid on the Mediterranean theatre.

Another book devoted totally to the Taranto raid is **NEWTON/HAMPSHIRE's** *Taranto*. Although published nearly 40 years earlier than the previously cited works, this is still a reasonable account of the early years of the naval war in the Mediterranean, the planning for the raid and the attack on Taranto Harbour itself. The only other book dedicated solely to Taranto is **SCHOFIELD's** *The Attack on Taranto*. This is a useful, if somewhat brief account of the subject that includes several helpful appendices and a few illustrations.

The Taranto raid is also the subject of individual chapters or significant sections in several general books. These books could be used to gain a quick overall impression of the raid before tackling the more in-depth texts cited above. There are a number of general histories of British naval aviation available and those by **CAMERON, MACINTYRE** and **KEMP** each have a specific chapter devoted to Taranto. All three books give a short (15-20 pages) account of the main details of the operation but Cameron's work is perhaps the most valuable in that it highlights the planning aspects of the raid and

the part played by the originator of the Taranto attack, Rear Admiral A. L. StG. Lyster. Five other books that have separate chapters on the Taranto raid are those by **GREENE/MASSIGNANI, HAMER, JACKSON, KAPLAN** and **PEARCE**. The section on Taranto is quite short in each of the books and Greene and Massignani's *The Naval War in the Mediterranean* and Hamer's *Bombers versus Battleships* are more academic than the other three but all would suffice as a basic introduction to the study of the campaign. Although **STURTIVANT** only devotes a total of three pages (pages 48-50) to Taranto in *British Naval Aviation*, the book has one of the better versions of the map of the raid that is included in most of the works cited here. **STURTIVANT**'s other book *The Swordfish Story* (Chapter 8) gives another version of the raid including personal accounts from two participants (A. W. F. Sutton and J. W. G. Wellham) while **BROWN**'s *Lyster: Taranto, 1940* is particularly useful for its illustrations, including an excellent coloured map. **ROBB-WEBB**'s chapter in *The Royal Navy and Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century* highlights the strategic aspects of the Taranto raid and places it neatly into the context of the Royal Navy's operations to secure the Mediterranean in the early phase of the War.

There is little available (in English) on the Taranto raid written from the Italian point of view but **SADKOVICH**'s academic work *The Italian Navy in World War II* provides an objective, if brief (pages 90-95), commentary on the raid using Italian as well as British sources. The book is useful if only to put the Italian losses suffered at Taranto into a more general context. Equally brief is a section (pages 44-49) by **BRAGADIN** who gives another account from the Italian point of view.

Fortunately, there are a few personal accounts of the operation but, sadly, very little written by the senior commanders involved. **CUNNINGHAM**, as commander of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, was ultimately responsible for launching the attack but, disappointingly, the Taranto raid is mentioned only briefly (pages 283-287) in his autobiography *A Sailor's Odyssey*. There is also brief mention in **SIMPSON**'s first volume of papers relating to Cunningham which includes the Admiral's own observations on the raid. Command and leadership are the focus of **STEPHEN**'s *The Fighting Admirals* where Taranto is covered, albeit far too briefly, in chapter 4. However, there are two very useful first-hand accounts of the raid by Fleet Air Arm participants. **LAMB** was one of the Swordfish pilots involved although his autobiography *War in a Stringbag* only devotes two short sections (chapters 14 and 15, a total of 20 pages) to his participation in the Taranto operation. Another autobiography from one of the Taranto Swordfish pilots is **WELLHAM**'s *With Naval Wings*. Chapter 9 is an excellent first-hand account of the attack while earlier chapters cover the activities of HMS *Illustrious* in the Mediterranean just prior to the raid. More detailed coverage of the raid in respect of one of the participating pilots is provided in A W F Sutton's biography by **PIKE**. (See also **JANVRIN** and **SUTTON** below). **HARRISON** (pages 36-49) includes accounts from five of the aircrew involved, together with an interesting and detailed contribution from a member of 819 Squadron's deck crew.

### Periodical Articles

There have been a number of useful articles devoted to the action at Taranto published in military periodicals. Although few of these articles add anything new to the major books on the subject, they do offer a more concise introduction to the raid. The most incisive and, incidentally, the most recent, is that by **CARAVAGGIO** who provides an analytical account and assessment of the Taranto raid. He concludes that although Taranto was a tactical success, it did not significantly alter the strategic balance in the Mediterranean because the Royal Navy then failed to capitalize on the operational opportunities resulting from the attack. The two complementary articles by **BOLT** and **SUTTON** in *Air Pictorial* are also valuable, especially as both authors have excellent credentials for writing on the subject. Bolt was a Swordfish squadron commander in 1939 and Sutton was an observer in one of the aircraft that attacked Taranto. **BEEKMAN**'s article in *Military Review* looks at Taranto as a precursor to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and brings out the important tactical and strategic lessons of the raid. The paper by **PITT** in *Military History Quarterly* takes a similar theme while briefer articles can be found in **NAVAL HISTORY** and by **JANVRIN** (an observer in one of the attacking Swordfish who provides some interesting operational details).

## Websites

Unfortunately, the currently available Internet websites add very little information to the printed literature but they are useful for the illustrations that can be downloaded and used in presentations (with copyright permission of course). The **FLEET AIR ARM ARCHIVE** website is a mine of detailed information on World War Two Royal Navy aviation and has some information on Taranto but one has to search through a maze of various sections and individual pages to find it. For example there is some very useful information and some excellent photographs of the aircraft carrier HMS *Illustrious* on the <http://www.fleetairarmarchive.net/Ships/ILLUSTRIOUS.html> page, including a colour illustration of the ship's badge and links to other web sites where illustrations can be found. There are also large sections devoted to individual Fleet Air Arm squadrons and aircraft. Another of the more useful websites is the Italian site **REGIA MARINA ITALIANA**, which has several pages devoted to Taranto and includes some good illustrations. It is useful having an Italian view of the raid and the text is available in either English or Italian. The **ROYAL NAVY AND WORLD WAR 2** website has brief details of the raid but more useful is a coloured and simplified version of the raid map that includes a short and simple animated attack sequence.

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