

**Angus Konstam. *Naval Battle of Crete: The Royal Navy at Breaking Point*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, [www.ospreypublishing.co.uk](http://www.ospreypublishing.co.uk), Campaign Series no. 388, 2023. 96 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, charts, index. US \$33.00, ISBN 978-1-47285-404-9. (E-book available.)**

The book is a brief, highly graphic account of the action of the Royal Navy in the battle that occurred on the sea and in the air surrounding Crete during the invasion of the island by airborne German troops and the subsequent evacuation of the island by Allied forces in late May/June 1941. The stories of major personalities and events of the campaign are presented, focusing largely on the British and German forces and using British sources. The book is built around a range of innovative graphics, while the text is subsidiary. The striking cover illustration is the first of three “full-colour battlescenes,” which epitomize the conflict. It shows an onrushing British cruiser at the instant a bomb explodes on the bridge, while above Ju 87 Stukas are pulling out from their dives amid flak bursts. On the horizon, another ship is on fire. Along with photographs, maps, and diagrams, graphics include innovative “battlescenes” and “3-dimensional ‘bird’s eye-views,’” which are large-scale maps with a chronology that plots the action hour-by-hour.

In the introduction there is a brief sketch of the strategic situation in the theatre introducing the Italians with “Mussolini’s unprovoked aggression” (8) and a description of the raid on Taranto by the Fleet Air Arm and events of the Battle of Cape Matapan in which major units of the Italian fleet were disabled. The Luftwaffe announces its arrival by damaging HMS *Illustrious*, which reduces the air component of the Allied defence for the Crete campaign and sets the stage for the conflict between ships and aircraft. Already the Luftwaffe is rated as “far more effective than their Italian counterparts” (8).

“Opposing Commanders” are the flag officers of the Royal Navy and commanders of the Luftwaffe. Admiral Andrew B. Cunningham’s counterpart (nemesis) is given as Wolfram von Richthofen, with a supporting role for Kurt Student, two leaders of the Luftwaffe in charge of the air assault. No German naval officers make the cut. Cunningham eventually is conflated with the RN and the numerous references to him become tedious. His Italian counterpart, Admiral Angelo Iachino of the *Regia Marina*, appears only once, to withdraw his damaged flagship to safety prior to the Battle of Cape Matapan.

“Opposing Forces” opens with a paragraph on the land battle unfolding and directs the reader to number 147 in the same Campaign series, which reminds us that the publisher’s main objective is to sell books. Specifications of vessels and aircraft are described only in the briefest-possible terms. The Axis order of battle includes only German aircraft. The names of the officers commanding the vessels that were part of each RN task force and the Luftwaffe

air formations are listed concisely. Somehow the ubiquitous Savoia-Marchetti SM 79 aircraft is omitted while there is a photograph of a Do 17 and two of a Ju 88. The poster child for the Axis air forces is the Ju 87 Stuka which is literally splashed across the cover and in full-colour “battlescenes.”

The Italian effort gets short shrift: the only good-sized photograph of Italian warships (30) shows the three heavy cruisers (*Pola*, *Zara*, and *Fiume*) on their way to being sunk at the Battle of Cape Matapan. An extensive caption summarizes the Italian effort: “The Regia Marina could have intervened in the Crete campaign to add even more pressure on Cunningham’s fleet, but despite German urging, it avoided repeating its sortie of the previous month” (30). This theme is echoed throughout the text. The only other illustration of Italian warships is a photograph of an untitled and uncredited painting showing the action at Cape Matapan a few weeks before the Battle of Crete. The scene is lurid as with the same three ships, now unsuspecting quarry, begin to explode under searchlights. The caption reads: “A depiction of the night action off Matapan, 28 March 1941, showing Cunningham’s battleships destroying a force of Italian heavy cruisers. The victory helped ensure that the Regia Marina’s battle fleet would not sail in support of the German invasion of Crete, or risk another surface clash with the British in the same waters” (8). Two cutaway diagrams (of a Dido-class cruiser and a “J,K,N-class” destroyer) are too small to be readable or useful.

In “Opposing Plans,” Cunningham is ubiquitous, the master-strategist directing operations. He is mentioned six times on page 26 alone, setting plans and organizing his formations. Summing up the long piece on the admiral, the author concludes: “Cunningham was the right man for the job. It would be hard to think of anyone better qualified to lead the Mediterranean Fleet in time of crisis” (13-14). Certain passages of Cunningham’s speeches, such as that on the role of tradition in RN and it needing 300 years to repair are echoed throughout the text, which constitutes a form of padding, though serving to underline the reader’s positive feelings toward British leadership. The reference to Cunningham’s “bullying side” (13), in the context of the RN during the Crete campaign, is curious if not amusing. As late as the 1920s, there were “boys” and midshipmen, who now would be called child soldiers, who would be liable for corporal punishment for misdemeanors. Truly, in the case of Cunningham, the winner writes history. His autobiography, *Sailor’s Odyssey* (Hutchinson, 1946), is monumental at 716 pages, illustrated with coloured charts and graphs as well as many full-page photographs of himself, singly and with a parade of powerful contemporaries, like General Eisenhower and HM King George VI. ABC’s tome would provide most of the detail about the RN needed to write the work being reviewed.

In “The Campaign,” the action of major engagements is described. In

the first such, King's Force C is "spotted by Italian reconnaissance planes flying from Rhodes ... followed by an air attack by three SM 79 and four SM 84 torpedo planes" (38). In the prelude to the attack on the *Sagittario* convoy, Force C is attacked by Italian MAS boats at 1050 on 20 May. The accompanying "full colour battlescene" depicts the action above, as Force C encounters the troop convoy escorted by the torpedo boat *Sagittario* north of Crete on 22 May 1941. *Sagittario* is seen tearing through the destroyer screen with cruisers looming up. Somehow, with all this action on the part of the Italian navy and air force, other than this dramatic depiction, they are omitted entirely. Two of the three "battlescenes" depict the Ju 87 Stuka.

The photographs from the period are of varying quality. All photographs are credited to "Stratford Archive", which is presumably the publisher's shorthand for the British National Archives at Stratford. Some are so dark they could be omitted (8, 76).

The text is concise, dramatic, and mostly focused on the action. All headlines are in the present tense to heighten the sense of action and immediacy. Chapter headings include, "The Fleet Deploys," "The Luftwaffe Strikes," and "Black Thursday." The most important feature of the text is that accounts of the movement of the opposing forces (at the task force level, down to the level of the individual vessel of the Allied navy and air group for the Luftwaffe), assign a precise location and time for each operation, so that the reader can follow hour-by-hour.

The book perpetuates and propagates the post-Second World War British view of the Italian effort as being generally ineffectual and its leadership diffident, which is expressed many times in different ways without further exploration. Individuals like Lt. Fulgosi, however, are permitted to be gallant as in the "battlescene" depicting him attacking the entire formation of cruisers and destroyers and buying time for the convoy to escape: "In the end, thanks to Fulgosi's bravery, only two of the small transports were caught and sunk by Force C" (54). Had there been a *Regia Marina* intervention, "operating under the air umbrella of the Luftwaffe might have made a difference" (24).

The text shows some confusion about the Italian vessels involved. *Jane's* 1944 has an index listing for *Lupo* in the Italian war loss section (617) but no record, which is common for such a chaotic time. *Sagittario* (described as a "Spica-class torpedo boat commanded by Lieutenant Guisepppe Fulgosi" (51), is listed in *Jane's* 1944 as a Sirio class torpedo boat with a complement of 94, displacing 652 tons. It was a modern vessel completed in 1937 and capable of 34 knots. The same *Jane's* lists *Pica* as a torpedo boat of the Ariete class slightly larger than the *Sagittario*. They were modern, fast, and well-armed for such small vessels. *Sagittario* is listed in *Jane's* 1961 as displacing 1,000 tons standard with a complement of 110, so was obviously a successful design

with a long service life. The bare specifications of the “MAS boat” alone are intriguing: *Jane’s* 1944 lists *Motoscafi Anti-Sommergibili* 500 series at 20-23 tons displacement, gas powered with two 18” equivalent torpedoes.

On several occasions, the author broaches the question of cooperation, between the Italians and Germans, but is content to dismiss the Italian effort thus, “The Kriegsmarine commander had a few Italian ships “grudgingly supplied by the Regia Marina” (23) and “naval commitment to the operation was limited to a pair of Spica- class torpedo boats (*Lupo* and *Sagittario*) and a half flotilla of MAS motor torpedo boats” (24). By not pursuing the topic, the author misses the big story of cooperation (or lack thereof) among Axis forces at a high level and at the interservice level, which, as he points out, might have spelled success.

As Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano’s diaries give insight at the top-most level: on Italian interservice relations and attempts to cooperate with the German high command. In the context of cooperation between the Germans and Italians, the battle occurs at the end of Blitzkrieg with the Luftwaffe’s and, especially Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring’s, star at its apogee with the Fuhrer. A year later he would be still having his way, insisting that Stalingrad could be resupplied by air. His exaggerated ideas did not admit of a need for cooperation, the attempts at cooperation deserve some attention, because cooperation did take place.

What were the specifications and armament of the “Pica-class” torpedo boats and the *Motoscafi Anti-Sommergibili*, which figure in several engagements? *Regia Aeronautica* aircraft figure heavily in the text in most engagements but are not represented or discussed except to be shown as ineffective. The ubiquitous SM 79 is not represented in the text or illustrations, whereas the marginal Luftwaffe’s Do 17 is. Likewise, the few aircraft on the allied side also seem to operate from nowhere. Some detail on radar and communication technology is necessary, given their key role in events.

This work may appeal to younger, graphically-oriented people weaned on action movies. The detailed treatment of the names of vessels and German air units could be of use in tracing one’s forbears through the conflict, that is, for genealogy or family history enthusiasts. This work may also be of interest to simulation game enthusiasts, who can use it to recreate events (on the British side at least) with some accuracy.

The book would hold more general interest with more detail on the *Regia Marina* and *Regia Aeronautica* structure and well as RN Fleet Air Arm and RAF participation. Along with more information on Italian ships and aircraft would provide more balance as would graphics, like a cutaway diagram of a MAS Boat and torpedo boat as is done for Dido class and J/K/L destroyers.

The lack of a bibliography and references is more than an inconvenience.

It produces a homogenized history and makes following up and fact-checking difficult. Use of a wider group of sources would give a less-biased result. All titles are shown as published in the UK. It excludes Cunningham's memoir, *Sailor's Odyssey*, while quoting from it in summing up the battle. Konstam includes three Norman Friedman titles, on radar, British cruisers, and big ship gunnery, but excluding his (much more germane) *Naval Anti-Aircraft Guns and Gunnery* (Seaforth, 2009). At thirty-three dollars Canadian, the book is pricey. The physical product of the paperback volume is close to a magazine format, with high gloss, kaolin paper in a rugged "perfect" binding, which makes it durable. The book is part of Osprey Publishing's integrated website that presents and markets the Campaign and other series. On the back cover there are three miniature photographs. The top one is of Cunningham. The accompanying text makes me wonder whether the person who wrote it had actually read the book: "world-leading maritime historian Angus Konstam tells the fascinating story of how Allied ships failed to repulse Axis convoys," when it is the story of how troop convoys successfully driven off during the period covered.

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**Mark Lardas. *South China Sea 1945: Task Force 38's bold carrier rampage in Formosa, Luzon, and Indochina*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, [www.bloomsbury.org](http://www.bloomsbury.org), 2023. 96 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography. CDN \$33.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-4728-5311-0.**

In *South China Sea 1945*, Mark Lardas explores the carrier campaign led by United States Navy Admiral William Halsey and Task Force 38 in 1945. TF 38's objective was to destroy Japanese military installations and shipping in the South China Sea by disrupting supply lines, severing Japan's access to vital resources, and isolating the majority of the Japanese Army deployed in China. Halsey's campaign proved the versatility of carrier operations, neutralizing both seaborne and land-based opposition. While the author of numerous Osprey publications, Lardas is not a trained historian. Nor does the strict format of the series allow for much historical analysis. This has led to many flaws within the text such as a disreputable bibliography, the absence of citations, inconsistent nomenclature, and copious amounts of superfluous information without