

The following article appeared in the
July 2013 issue of *Military History*.

From the Battle of Taranto

By Joseph F. Callo

The 1940 British attack on the Italian naval base at Taranto had a significant impact on the early stages of World War II in the Mediterranean. It also had implications that went far beyond that time and place.

the British affectionately dubbed the “Stringbag” for the variety of weapons and other gear it could carry.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill assessed the impact of the raid in the House of Commons:



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS, A 3532

Twenty-one torpedo- and bomb-laden Fairey Swordfish hit Italy's fleet at Taranto.

Among Britain's objectives was the preservation of Malta as an operational hub in the Mediterranean. For their part the Italians needed to preserve the battleships, cruisers and destroyers that supported Italian ground operations in North Africa, while also threatening British logistics in the theater.

Those conflicting military objectives collided at Taranto on Nov. 11, 1940. The British night attack involved 21 Fairey Swordfish biplanes, launched in two waves from the Royal Navy carrier HMS *Illustrious*. Some aircraft were armed with torpedoes, others carried bombs. The torpedo attacks sank one Italian battleship and heavily damaged two others, and a heavy cruiser and several destroyers took bomb hits. It was an impressive score for a vintage aircraft

The result, while it affects decisively the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean, also carries with it reactions upon the naval situation in every quarter of the globe.

In light of widespread skepticism at the time about the viability of carrier-based airpower, the comment of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, British commander in chief in the Mediterranean, was perhaps more noteworthy:

Taranto and the night of November 11–12, 1940, should be remembered for ever [sic] as having shown once and for all that in the Fleet Air Arm the Navy has its most devastating weapon.

In fact the balance of naval power in

the Mediterranean was not altered as radically as Churchill claimed. Yes, Malta remained a crucial British base, but it faced continuous threat by land-based Italian and German aircraft, as did the shipping that supported it. In addition, the Italians maintained the basic integrity of their fleet and logistic support of their North African operations.

In the long view of history, however, the Battle of Taranto changed the face of naval warfare forever. It signaled the replacement of the battleship by the aircraft carrier as the centerpiece of naval forces and an accompanying shift in naval tactics and strategies. The Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor ferociously confirmed that transition. Of greatest historical significance, however, tactical airpower projected by sea quickly became a crucial component of U.S. national power, and more than seven decades later that special element of global power remains in full force.

Lessons:

■ As the torpedoes and bombs exploded at Taranto, so did the traditional naval combat doctrines based on the big guns of battleships.

■ New technologies and the new tactics they enable can be surprisingly effective in applying ancient military maxims, such as Sun-tzu's advice to “appear where you are least expected.”

■ Never underestimate the troublemaking capacity of a naval aviator at the controls of an aircraft—even one he jokes about—attached to a torpedo or bombs.

■ Surprise remains an invaluable force multiplier in naval warfare, whether you're talking about triremes or ballistic missile submarines.

■ Admiral Lord Nelson's combat doctrine—“the boldest measures are the safest”—articulated before the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, is timeless.

■ Others will mimic a successful tactic: What worked at Taranto was even more effective at Pearl Harbor. **MH**