



SUPPLEMENT

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FLEET AIR ARM OPERATIONS AGAINST TARANTO ON 11TH NOVEMBER, 1940.

The following Despatch was submitted to The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 16th January, 1941, by Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the accompanying report of the Fleet Air Arm operations against Taranto on 11th November, 1940.

2. An attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto by the Fleet Air Arm with torpedoes had been under consideration for many months and long before the outbreak of war with Italy. The bridge between planning and execution was, however, a wide one, since several requirements had to be met before the operation could be undertaken with a reasonable prospect of success.

3. The most important of these requirements was good and timely photographic reconnaissance, since to plan the attack it was necessary to know not only that the battleships were in harbour but also their position and berthing with some accuracy. It was not until the Glenn Martins arrived at Malta that such reconnaissance was possible, war experience having shown that flying boats are too vulnerable and slow to approach defended ports with impunity.

4. In the event, the success of the Fleet Air Arm attack was due in no small degree to the excellent reconnaissances carried out by the Royal Air Force Glenn Martin Flight (No. 431) from Malta, under very difficult conditions and often in the face of fighter opposition.

5. An undetected approach to the selected flying off position was also most important, and to achieve this the use of long range tanks in the Swordfish aircraft was very desirable.

These were not available until ILLUSTRIOUS arrived on the Station early in September.

6. A considerable amount of night flying training was also necessary before the pilots and observers could be regarded as fully competent to undertake the long flight required for this hazardous enterprise and it was not until mid-October that the necessary state of training was reached.

7. The attack was first planned to take place on the night of 21st October, but owing to a fire in ILLUSTRIOUS' hangar a few days before, which destroyed and damaged a number of aircraft, the operation had to be deferred. It was considered again for the night of 30th/31st October, when the fleet was operating off the West coast of Greece, but it was decided not to attempt it as there was then no moon and the attack would have had to be carried out with flares, in the use of which the aircraft crews had had little practice.

8. In the meantime further photographs had been taken of the outer anchorage at Taranto by the Glenn Martins, and close examination revealed the presence of balloons and of nets surrounding the battleships. This discovery was most fortunate as these defences naturally affected the method of attack very considerably.

9. It had always been intended that both ILLUSTRIOUS and EAGLE should take part in this attack. Two days before the fleet sailed for the operation EAGLE developed serious defects to her petrol system, caused undoubtedly by the many near bomb misses she had experienced in the early days of the Italian war, and she therefore had to be left behind. Six of her T.S.R.* aircraft and crews, however, were embarked on ILLUSTRIOUS, so that the EAGLE, whose squadrons had reached a high state of efficiency, was to some extent represented in the attack.

* Admiralty footnote :—T.S.R. = Torpedo/Spotter/Reconnaissance.