THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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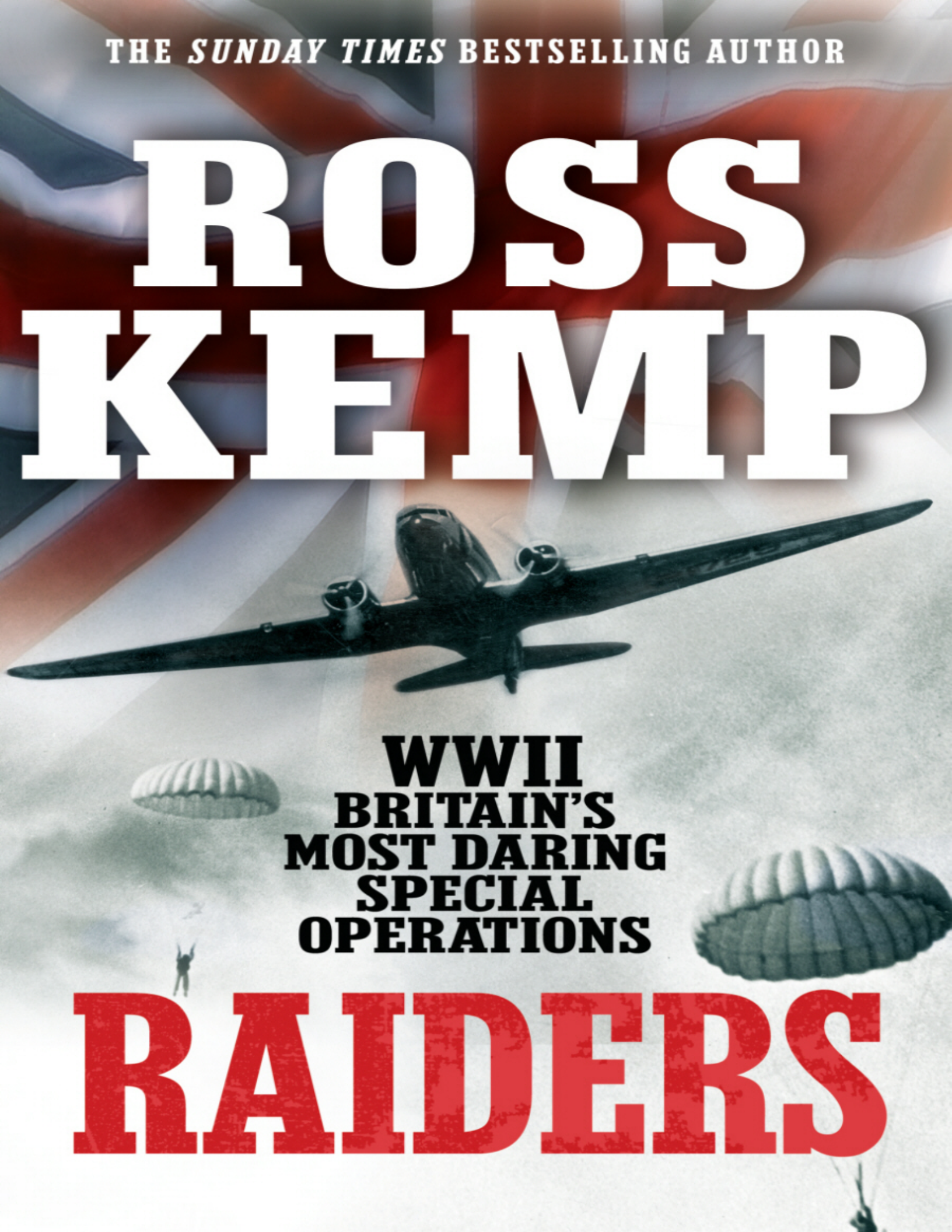

WWII BRITAIN'S MOST DARING SPECIAL OPERATIONS

RAIDERS

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About the Book

Award-winning television journalist Ross Kemp is back with *Raiders*: six tales of the most daring British Operations of World War Two.

Operation Judgement: one of the most spectacular efforts of the entire conflict where obsolete British bi-planes attacked the Italian Fleet at anchor in Taranto.

Operation Archery: the first true combined operation carried out by all three British forces. It was this successful raid that persuaded Hitler that the Allies were planning a full-scale invasion of the European mainland.

Operation Biting: a cross-Channel raid into France and was the first major attack by the British Airborne Division and its first battle honour.

Operation Gunnerside: a dramatic demolition assault on Hitler's atomic bomb plant in Norway carried out by a Norwegian unit of British Commandos.

Operation Chariot: simply known as 'the greatest raid of all', the British amphibious attack on the heavily defended Normandie dry dock at St Nazaire in German-occupied France.

Operation Deadstick: the story of a small party of British airborne troops, the first Allies into the fray on D-Day, tasked with seizing and holding two bridges to prevent an armoured German counter-attack against the beach landings.

Six astounding stories of ordinary soldiers tested to their limits in a time so alien to us now; a time when personal

sacrifice was expected from one and all.

About the Author

Born in Essex in 1964, Ross Kemp worked for the BBC for ten years and ITV for four years as an actor. He then had a change of career and started making documentaries and has subsequently been nominated for three BAFTAs for his series on Afghanistan, Gangs and Africa. He and his team won the BAFTA for Best Factual Series in 2006. Ross is a patron of Help for Heroes and has spent time on the front line in Afghanistan with 1 Royal Anglian, 5 Scots, 16 Air Assault and 45 Commando.

Also by Ross Kemp

Moving Target
Devil to Pay
Warriors: British Fighting Heroes
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Raiders

Ross Kemp

Foreword

For the first four years of the Second World War, Britain was in no position to be able to launch a significant offensive against the Axis forces. Fighting over so many fronts, from the North Atlantic to the Far East, her resources and manpower were stretched to the limit. The country's factories and dockyards were manufacturing warships, tanks, aircraft, weapons and equipment as fast as they could, but it was going to take time to build up, train and re-equip the Allied forces to be strong enough to carry the fight to Germany in a long, concerted campaign. Within days of the Dunkirk evacuation, Prime Minister Churchill, unhappy at the thought of sitting back in a defensive posture for so long, ordered his Chiefs of Staff to come up with ideas for some form of offensive operations against the enemy. It was not in the British Prime Minister's nature to pursue a policy of passive defiance. He wanted to harass Hitler's hordes relentlessly, never letting them settle in the new homes they had acquired for themselves in Western Europe through the Blitzkriegs of 1939 and 1940.

Churchill called for the British to launch a 'reign of terror' against Germany, and he envisaged it being executed in two ways: through a pan-European campaign of sabotage by irregular, covert operatives, and through a series of raids carried out by elite regular troops along the Atlantic Wall. The practical aim of the latter was to force Hitler to strengthen his defences along the western coast of Europe by diverting men and materials urgently required elsewhere. But there was a wider, less tangible purpose, whose dividends could not be calculated in an accounts ledger or a

casualty list – and Churchill understood it better than anyone: morale. Britain's newspapers offered little cheer over the breakfast table at this time. The nation's cities were being battered by the Luftwaffe and every day seemed to bring news of a fresh setback from one corner or another of the globe. The sinking mood could only be lifted by the knowledge that there was still some fight left in the country. Even the smallest hit-and-run raid, no more than an irritating distraction to the Nazi war machine, would at least show the British people – and the Germans – that the war in Europe was not quite decided yet.

'How wonderful it would be if the Germans could be made to wonder where they were going to be struck next instead of forcing us to try to wall in the Island and roof it over!' Churchill wrote. As a result, the Commandos and airborne troops were brought into existence and the tri-service Combined Operations was established. Thousands of the country's best fighting men were soon taking part in intensive training courses; specialist weaponry and equipment was rolling out of the factory gates, and audacious plans for hit-and-run assaults were being sketched out in the planning rooms. The British might have been hopelessly ill-prepared for the Second World War, but they certainly made up for their dithering with a colossal national effort. The raiding forces that were launched against the Nazis were the sharp end of that effort and, as the war ground on, the toll they took on the enemy mounted significantly. The British quickly proved themselves to be masters of the 'raid' as well as irregular warfare. The Commandos caused so much trouble that Hitler issued his famous order: if captured, Britain's elite troops were to be summarily executed, even if they were wearing uniform and had tried to surrender.

Four of the six chapters in *Raiders* tell stories of daring amphibious or airborne operations against targets along the western frontier of Nazi-occupied Europe. Operation

ARCHERY was a Combined Operation assault on a Norwegian coastal town that had consequences far beyond the expectations of those who had planned it. Operation BITING, a cross-Channel raid into France, was the first major attack by the British Airborne Division and its first battle honour. Operation GUNNERSIDE was a dramatic demolition assault on Hitler's atomic bomb plant in Norway, carried out by a Norwegian unit of British Commandos. Operation CHARIOT, an amphibious assault on the heavily defended French port of St Nazaire, has been known ever since as 'the greatest raid of all'.

The other two raids described here are of a slightly different nature, but are no less compelling and extraordinary. Operation JUDGEMENT, in which obsolete British biplanes attacked the Italian Fleet at anchor in Taranto, was one of the most spectacular efforts of the entire conflict and altered the balance of the war in the Mediterranean and North Africa. Operation DEADSTICK is the story of a small party of British airborne troops, the first Allies into the fray on D-Day, tasked with seizing and holding two bridges to prevent an armoured German counterattack against the beach landings.

The six stories, each with their own distinctive character, are not just dry, step-by-step accounts of events that will be of interest only to students of military history. As in *Warriors*, my book about individual British war heroes of the two world wars, in *Raiders* I have tried to draw out the human element of these spectacular, dramatic operations, carried out by small groups of fervently patriotic, tough young men, who expected to die for the country they loved and for the freedom of their friends.

Operation Judgement

‘It was a beautiful, picture-postcard evening; there were only a few wisps of cloud below us, otherwise the sky was clear, and littered with a blaze of stars; to the south a three-quarter moon was throwing a golden pathway across the calm sea; the air was smooth giving hardly a judder. It would have been the most perfect evening to enjoy flying, had it not been for the reason for our flight.’

Lt John Wellham

WHEN MUSSOLINI DECLARED war on Britain on 10 June 1940, the Royal Navy’s Mediterranean Fleet found itself in an extremely vulnerable position. At a stroke, Britain’s ability to maintain control over a region vital to its survival was plunged into serious jeopardy. Outnumbered and outgunned, many of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham’s antiquated ships, impressive though they looked, were clapped out and close to the end of their operational usefulness. The Italians, by contrast, boasted dozens of new and impeccably renovated ships and submarines in a huge fleet, backed up by a large air force with hundreds of very good-quality aircraft. Mussolini liked to refer to the Med as ‘Mare Nostrum’ (Our Sea) and, on paper at least, it was his Royal Navy, not Britain’s, that ruled its waves.

Since Nelson’s time, the Mediterranean Fleet had been regarded by British admirals as the finest command of them all, but nine months into Hitler’s War, it had become something of a Cinderella service. Most of its best ships had been rushed back to defend home waters: the Dunkirk evacuation had begun at the end of May, the Battle of Britain raged overhead, the Atlantic convoys were being sunk in great numbers by German U-boats, and Norway

needed help too. What ships could be spared for the Med were past or fast approaching their scrapping date.

This might not have mattered had the Mediterranean been a backwater command irrelevant to Britain's war effort. But that was far from the case. Control of the 2,400-mile-long sea was vital to British interests and it had to be held at all costs. The Mediterranean was the main corridor for all British imperial assets and territories in North Africa, the Middle East, the Far East and Australasia. The alternative passage from the UK to India, around the Cape of Good Hope, was 4,000 miles longer, which added several more weeks to the journey time.

Gibraltar had no airfield at the time and Malta, the Royal Navy's other major base in the region, lay a short flight from a string of Italian air bases. Over a two-year period, the tiny island and its British naval base was to be subjected to more than 3,000 bombing raids. There was no other good-quality naval base or anchorage in the 6,000 or so miles between Malta and Singapore. The Navy had adopted Alexandria out of necessity rather than choice: the Egyptian port's defences and facilities were poor and the fleet was vulnerable there.

With all her capital ships drawn off for more pressing engagements, by the end of 1939 the once formidable Mediterranean Fleet consisted of three small cruisers and a few destroyers of World War One vintage. The reinforcements that arrived by the time Mussolini decided that Britain was a spent force, ripe for picking off, were welcomed, but they brought little more than the appearance of strength. A fleet is only as powerful as its biggest guns – that is, its battleships – and against Italy's six modern battleships, only HMS *Warspite* could hope to hold her own in an old-fashioned slugging match. Possession of just two of her modern battleships, supported by its cruiser and destroyer squadrons, would have been sufficient to give the Italians the upper hand in the Mediterranean. Half a dozen

of them was a luxury that Britain could only envy – and fear. The Royal Navy was also very short of ammunition and, if major repairs were needed to a ship, she would have to return to the UK or make the long, dangerous passage to the United States or Canada.

In short, Britain's days in the Med were numbered. Not for two centuries had one of Britain's enemies had a better opportunity to defeat a fleet of the fabled Royal Navy in open battle. And yet the Italians never tried. There were two reasons for this. Firstly and frankly, they simply didn't fancy it. The reputation alone of the Royal Navy was formidable enough to keep the Italian Fleet in the safety of its heavily defended bases. Secondly, even with the odds stacked in their favour, they didn't need to risk a confrontation. In spite of his ageing fleet's technical inferiority, Admiral Cunningham, a fighting man to the tips of his well-polished shoes, never stopped trying to invite the Italians out into the open. But they never came. When, once, the two forces ran into each other, after a brief engagement the Italians quickly ran for the sanctuary of their harbours.

It wasn't so much cowardice as common sense that persuaded Admiral Riccardi, Chief of the Italian Naval Staff, to keep his big ships out of harm's way. Italian submarines and aircraft of the Regia Aeronautica were causing quite enough damage to British interests as it was. Malta was hanging on by a thread; British submarines were being sent to the bottom faster than they could be replaced; Allied supply convoys to North Africa were being harassed to distraction, and Italian seaplanes, with virtually no opposition in the air, were providing information about every British move in the Med. Riccardi simply had to wait for the overstretched, obsolete Royal Navy fleet to burn itself out before sailing forth to administer the knockout blow.

Admiral Cunningham and his senior commanders understood the danger. They knew they had to act before it was too late. With the RAF tied up defending Britain from a

German invasion, Britain's air assets in the Med were pathetically inadequate for the job of defending the fleet and her bases. There was barely a dozen aircraft available to patrol almost one million square miles of air space, an area the size of the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy, the Lowlands, Poland and Greece combined.

Old-school Navy characters – and there were a great many of them – were yet to fully grasp the strategic importance of 'air' to navies in modern warfare. Some even thought it was unchivalrous for one Navy to attack another with anything but the guns on her ships. But, whether they knew it or not, the days when two fleets took up position and knocked lumps out of each other from a distance were over. To devastatingly destructive effect, the Luftwaffe divebombers had recently shown in their attacks against the Royal Navy in Norway that a few dozen small aircraft, produced at a fraction of the cost of a warship, were able to locate enemy ships at sea with ease and then set about them with powerful, precisely delivered bombs. The Royal Navy, with its outdated, inaccurate AA guns, never stood a chance in the doomed Norwegian campaign (by coincidence, the campaign came to an end the day Italy declared war on Britain).

A letter in May 1940 from Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, Cunningham's predecessor in the Med, confirmed what the new Commander-in-Chief already knew. It read: 'I am afraid you are terribly short of "air", but there again I do not see what can be done because . . . every available aircraft is wanted in home waters. The one lesson we have learnt here is that it is essential to have fighter protection over the fleet whenever they are within the range of enemy bombers. You will be without such protection, which is a very serious matter, but I do not see any way of rectifying it.' At the time of his writing, the ancient aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle* was on its way from the Far East with a small squadron of biplanes in its hangar, but that was next to no comfort to the naval

chiefs. Carriers, warships and aircraft were being built at a frenetic rate back in Britain's shipyards and factories, but whether there would still be a Mediterranean Fleet for them to reinforce was another matter.

From the moment they received the news that Britain was at war with Italy, every sailor and airman (what few there were of the latter) in the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet understood there was only one option: Cunningham was going to have to 'do a Nelson'. That was the expression buzzing around below the decks, referring to two great episodes in the history of the Royal Navy, the Battle of Copenhagen and the Battle of the Nile. In both encounters, Nelson used the element of surprise to attack enemy fleets whilst they were at anchor. Both ended in decisive victories for the Royal Navy and secured British domination for years to come.

The huge Italian fleet at the southern port of Taranto was asking for the same treatment. The only difference this time round was that it was not giant ships of the line, with a thousand guns between them, that were tasked to wreak the destruction. It was a handful of cloth-covered biplanes that looked as if they had flown straight out of a Biggles adventure book.

There is a well-told story in the Fleet Air Arm of an officer from the US Navy boarding HMS *Illustrious* in 1940. He walks along the flight deck and, pointing at the strange-looking aircraft emerging from the lift hangar, exclaims: 'Oh My God! You don't actually fly those things, do you? They look more like four-poster beds than frontline airplanes.' There's no reason to doubt the truth of the story. Even seventy years on, you don't have to be an aviation expert to take one look at a Fairey Swordfish and wonder how its type had not been consigned to the scrapyard many years earlier. At a time when sleek, powerful Spitfires and Hurricanes were tearing up the skies with Me109s and Stuka

divebombers, there’s no getting away from the fact that the Swordfish looked like an aircraft better suited to a museum or a vintage airshow than a modern theatre of war. How that American naval officer would have been astonished to learn that not only would the Swordfish remain in frontline service until VE Day, but that it would account for sinking a greater tonnage of Axis shipping than any Allied aircraft in the war.

The Swordfish was conceived and went into production in the mid-1930s at a time when the rest of the world’s aircraft manufacturers had begun to turn their creative minds to monoplanes, constructed from steel and toughened aluminium. The British designer Charles Fairey, founder of Fairey Aviation, believed there was still a role for an old-style biplane made from struts and wires and covered in linen cloth. At the behest of the Admiralty, it was designed as a maritime aircraft that, flying off carriers, could carry out antisubmarine patrols, reconnaissance and torpedo-dropping. Carrier aircraft, coming in at speed, needed to be extremely robust to withstand the heavy landings on deck and, operating far out at sea, often a long way from their targets, they also needed to have longer legs than most. The Swordfish had a range of 450 nautical miles, and that could be doubled by strapping on an extra fuel tank.

It was never imagined that the Swordfish would be able to hold its own against the speedy, powerful fighters of the Italian or German air forces. The Swordfish could reach 100 knots at a push, but nothing like that when laden with fuel and bombs or a torpedo. The Me109, the Luftwaffe’s workhorse fighter, was four or five times faster; its armament of fixed machine guns and cannon immeasurably more powerful and accurate than anything the British biplane could put up. The Swordfish’s only form of defence was a fixed forward-firing Vickers machine gun and a swivel-mounted Vickers or Lewis gun at the back of the open cockpit; these were so cumbersome and inaccurate that the gunner/wireless operator rarely bothered to use them and

they were often removed altogether. A handheld pistol was seen as a more effective means of defence. Slow, defenceless and made from stretched cloth . . . the sight of a leisurely approaching Swordfish was unlikely to put the fear of god into its enemies. The hope was that they would rarely meet.

The Swordfish might not have been the most sophisticated piece of kit to take to the air in the Second World War, but they didn't build 2,392 of them for the amusement of the Germans and Italians. Speak to the pilots of the Fleet Air Arm who flew her throughout the war, and you won't hear anything but affection and admiration for the aircraft. They will tell you that the Swordfish had three outstanding qualities: it was extremely manoeuvrable, highly adaptable and, in spite of its flimsy-looking cloth frame, it was as hard as nails.

Its aerobatic qualities certainly came in handy when being chased by German fighters in the Norwegian campaign a few months earlier. A number of Me109s, chasing Swordfishes up fjords, found it hard to lay a round on them as the biplanes twisted and turned. In the aerobatic tangle, the less manoeuvrable German fighters sometimes crashed into the steep rock faces of Norway's jagged coastline. The Swordfish was highly unlikely to shoot down an enemy fighter, but she could certainly give him the runaround. The aircraft's versatility earned it the nickname 'Stringbag'. The Swordfish was happy to drop anything: bombs, torpedoes, flares, depth charges, mines . . . Like a housewife's string shopping bag, the Swordfish could carry any number of items of equipment at a time. But above all, she could take a great deal of punishment, more than any other aircraft in operation at the time. Most rounds passed straight through her linen-covered fuselage and wings.

Since the emergence of military aircraft thirty years earlier, no strike from the air had ever been attempted on a heavily defended naval base anywhere in the world. This

was in part down to the very sensible reasoning that such an operation could have only one outcome: disaster for the attacking force of aircraft. Taranto, like Portsmouth and Wilhelmshaven, was one of the world's great naval bases, protected by layer upon layer of defences. In addition to dozens of shore batteries, there were, of course, the countless guns of the ships themselves to see off any aircraft mad or brave enough to fly within their range. But Admiral Cunningham was not the only senior commander in the Med to believe that a surprise night attack on Taranto could be carried out. It was a happy coincidence that his air adviser, Rear Admiral Lyster, now in charge of carriers in the Mediterranean, had drawn up plans for an air attack on Taranto two years earlier when war loomed. When HMS *Illustrious*, Britain's only modern aircraft carrier, sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar in August 1940, his plans were immediately taken out of the filing cabinet and dusted down.

It has been well known to Britain's enemies down the centuries that the Royal Navy 'never refuses action'. Nor has it been in the habit of sitting back and waiting to react to its enemies' moves. The Royal Navy has always played on the front foot. Or as Admiral Nelson put it: 'Our country will, I believe, sooner forgive an officer for attacking an enemy than for letting it alone.' Cunningham was an aggressive commander in the mould of Nelson and, although at the start of the war he had no great enthusiasm for naval aviation, he was sharp enough to understand that the crews of the Fleet Air Arm represented his best, and probably his only, hope of delivering a decisive blow against the Italians. But when Cunningham, Lyster and Air Marshal Longmore, the RAF Air Officer Commanding Middle East, sat down in Alexandria Harbour to draw up a plan for an air attack on Taranto, even those bright military minds could not have foreseen that they were devising one of the great raids in the history of warfare, and one that would have a

major impact on the nature of naval warfare for many years to come.

When Rear Admiral Lyster submitted his plans for the raid they were met with an ‘approval’ by the Admiralty back in Whitehall that was so grudging it was almost a refusal. After giving ‘Operation Judgement’ a dim green light, Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, couldn’t resist a little dig. ‘Only sailors who live in ships should attack other ships,’ he wrote.

The broad outline of the plan was for two carriers, HMS *Illustrious* and HMS *Eagle*, to get as close to Taranto as possible without arousing Italian suspicions and launch a night attack on the Italian Fleet. The element of surprise was essential. The last thing they needed was every gunner in the Italian Navy at action stations on their arrival. The attack was to take place at night when there was no chance of being intercepted by the Regia Aeronautica, which had no nightfighters in its otherwise impressive air fleet. Although the first wave of Swordfish was tasked with dropping parachute flares to guide in the rest, the attack still needed a good ‘moon period’ to help light up the ships in the harbour. For that reason, and no doubt with a salute to Admiral Nelson too, 21 October – Trafalgar Day – was chosen as the date, only for it to be scrapped soon after a major fire broke out in *Illustrious*’s hangar. The additional fuel tanks were being attached when one of the aircraft burst into flames. The fire quickly spread, reducing one other Swordfish to a blackened wreck and seriously damaging five others. Much of the damage was caused by the sea water pumped in to douse the inferno. The aircraft that escaped the blaze had to be taken apart, washed in fresh water and reassembled. The raid was postponed first to 31 October, and once more to the night of 11 November – Armistice Day – in order to exploit the light from a near-full moon.

There was a further setback shortly before the two carriers and their escort were due to set out from

Alexandria. HMS *Eagle*, an ancient vessel already in her death throes, had to be withdrawn at the last minute after developing problems with her aviation fuel supply. Rather than delay the operation again, it was decided to leave her at Alexandria. Five Swordfishes and eight aircrew were transferred to *Illustrious*.

The Swordfish were to be launched in two flights of twelve aircraft with roughly one hour between each attack. Each flight was to comprise six aircraft carrying a mixture of 250-lb bombs and parachute flares, and six carrying torpedoes, which were expected to cause the greatest amount of damage. The orders were kept loose. It was left to the pilots to decide on their arrival at Taranto which was the best ship to target. The battleships were the main prizes, however, and the torpedo bombers, the heavy mob of the operation, were to go for them. It didn't matter which of the six they attacked because RAF reconnaissance images showed the Italians' capital ships were bunched so closely together that a torpedo, dropped in their general direction, stood a good chance of hitting one of them. The bombers' principal targets were the fleet's heavy and light cruisers and destroyers, but they were also to go for the seaplane base and the oil installations. The flying boats were the eyes of the Italian air force and the bane of the Mediterranean Fleet; the destruction of their operating centre would raise a loud cheer back in Alexandria.

Sitting on the instep of Italy's 'boot' in the heart of the Mediterranean, Taranto was the obvious location to house the Italian Fleet. It had two large harbours. The outer harbour, known as the Mar Grande, is shaped like a backward 'C' and is almost three miles in diameter. It was here that the six battleships were anchored, along with three heavy cruisers and eight destroyers. Behind it, in the land-locked inner harbour, known as Mar Piccolo, there was a bomber's feast of six cruisers, twenty-one destroyers, five torpedo boats, sixteen submarines and a variety of minor

warships and support vessels. Not surprising, then, that Taranto was protected by a formidable network of defences designed to deter aircraft from attacking some of the most powerful warships afloat. Of the twenty-seven barrage balloons, sixteen were at the harbour entrance, protecting the battleships, and there would have been a further sixty had they not been wrecked in a recent storm. A shortage of hydrogen meant that they had yet to be replaced. With all the gaps between them, the balloons were expected to be more of a nuisance than a grave danger.

The battleships in the open expanse of the main outer harbour were vulnerable to torpedo attack and almost 14,000 metres of underwater netting were needed to protect them (were a torpedo ever to enter Taranto Harbour, it would come, the Italians believed, from a submarine, not an aircraft). On the night of the raid, a little over 4,000 metres of net had been installed – and even these could be avoided thanks to a new invention known as the Duplex pistol, which gave the torpedo two opportunities of detonating. It was fitted with a conventional contact pistol that detonated when the torpedo hit the target and also a magnetic one that went off when the torpedo passed underneath. All the propeller-powered torpedoes were set to run at twenty-seven knots at thirty-three feet, a depth great enough to slip under the protective nets.

It was more the vast array of anti-aircraft (AA) guns that the aircrews had to worry about. Strung out along the shore, as well as on the submerged breakwaters and the island of San Pietro at the mouth of the harbour, and on a series of floating pontoons, there were twenty-one batteries of 76-mm and greater calibre guns, eighty-four 17-mm and 20-mm guns and over 100 smaller weapons. There were also twenty-two searchlights to help the gunners pick out their targets. The guns of the ships doubled the weight of fire that could be brought to bear on unwanted visitors. How the crews of the lumbering Swordfish might expect to escape

unscathed from the maelstrom of fire in so confined a space remained to be seen.

Illustrious was to leave Alexandria under cover of providing an escort for a number of convoys to reinforce Malta, Crete and the forces sent to assist the Greeks in their bitter struggle against the Italians. Alexandria was a port crawling with Axis spies and it was essential that *Illustrious*'s true objective should not be revealed. Were the Italians to pick up a whiff of suspicion that the aircraft carrier's true target was Taranto, then they would have promptly weighed anchor and moved the entire fleet to the sanctuary of more northerly ports beyond the range of the Swordfish. Rumours had been abounding below decks for weeks, but details of *Illustrious*'s mission were not confirmed to the aircrews until the naval force had slipped Alexandria on 6 November. The Fleet Air Arm crews were a highly experienced, tight group of young men who would all have flown with one another at some point. Each of them instantly understood the challenge of the historic task they had been handed. As was the strict custom, no one dreamt of airing their fears in the wardroom over a drink at the end of the day, but inwardly each one knew the odds were against them returning. As one of the pilots, John Wellham, noted: 'My feelings were mixed . . . Certainly, it was a boost to the ego to have been chosen but, on the other hand, it looked a pretty hairy operation, with less chance of returning in one piece than on earlier ventures . . . I had a drink and tried to look enthusiastic.'

The overall operation was given the code Mike Bravo Eight (MB8) and the total force involved practically every serviceable ship in the Mediterranean Fleet, consisting of five battleships, two aircraft carriers, eight cruisers, two AA cruisers, thirty destroyers and many smaller vessels. Once the convoys were considered secure, HMS *Illustrious* and her escort were to launch Operation Judgement, while a diversionary attack was launched further along the Italian

coast in the Straits of Otranto. Inevitably, it was not going to be long before a force of that size attracted the attentions of the Regia Aeronautica. Sure enough, seven Savoia-Marchetti SM79 bombers were soon on the scene but, attacked by three Fulmar fighters, two were sent spiralling into the sea and the rest ditched their bombs and turned tail.

In the countdown to the raid, the naval commanders requested daily sorties by the RAF's photographic reconnaissance aircraft to provide fresh information about the Italian Fleet and Taranto's defences. It was unfortunate that the rivalry between the Senior Service and its junior partner meant the relationship was not the healthiest at this time and the lack of cooperation threatened to jeopardise operational activity, including the raid on Taranto. To the undisguised annoyance of the Navy, the RAF regarded the images from their photographic recce flights as their property and they were unwilling to release them. The photos had to be flown from Malta to the RAF HQ in Cairo, where, incredibly, just one naval officer was allowed to look at them, and was refused permission to take them away.

The Navy might have enjoyed a good, clean fight with their enemy, but against their compatriots in the RAF they were forced to play an altogether dirtier game. On the eve of the attack, a young officer, Lieutenant David Pollock, was despatched to inspect the photos. When his RAF colleague was distracted, Pollock smuggled out the images. The following day the photographs were copied and then returned without the RAF ever realising they had been deceived. The copies shown to Admiral Lyster revealed that virtually the entire Italian Fleet, including all the battleships, was still at anchor in Taranto. But the good news was tempered by major alarm over the state of the Swordfish.

In the morning of 10 November, with less than thirty-six hours to go before the attack was launched, one of the Swordfish was on a routine recce patrol, about twenty miles from *Illustrious*, when the engine cut and the pilot was

forced to ditch. Lt Clifford and his observer Lt Going managed to inflate their dinghy before the aircraft sank and, igniting their flame floats, were able to attract the attention of two Royal Navy cruisers. They were flown back to *Illustrious*. The following morning yet another aircraft was forced to ditch after the engine failed. Hasty examinations back on *Illustrious* revealed that the ship's aviation fuel tanks had been contaminated with sea water, probably during the efforts to put out the hangar fire in October. With the clock ticking down to takeoff time, the fitters raced to strip down all twenty-one aircraft earmarked for the operation, wash out their fuel systems, and then reassemble and refuel them.

The air crews on *Illustrious* had nothing but praise for the small army of riggers, fitters, mechanics and engineers of various description who kept their aircraft in immaculate working order. And it was thanks to their hard work and efficiency that, with barely an hour or so to spare, the attack was able to take place. Had they been forced to delay twenty-four hours, the Italians might well have suspected British intentions and moved the fleet to safer waters. *Illustrious* and her escort of four cruisers and four destroyers split from the main force and headed north. Admiral Cunningham signalled: 'Good luck then to your lads in their enterprise. Their success may well have a most important bearing on the course of the war in the Mediterranean.'

By 2000 hours *Illustrious* had reached Kabbo Point, the flying-off location situated 40 miles off the Greek island of Cephalonia, and 175 from Taranto. The first wave of Swordfish was ranged on deck poised to launch the most daring air raid in the history of warfare. The RAF had just given the Luftwaffe a sound thrashing in the skies over southeast England. Now was the moment for the pilots of the Royal Navy, facing equally daunting odds, to prove their skill and courage.

At 1900, scores of men filed out onto the flight deck to start ranging the twelve aircraft of the first striking force. One after another, the Swordfish emerged from the lift hangar and were wheeled into position at the aft end of the ship. The moon, three-quarters full, glowed brightly above a blanket of thick cloud at around 7,000 feet.

There were several reasons why, when the order was given, the deck crews endeavoured to get the aircraft off the ship as quickly as possible. To provide the heavily laden Swordfish with the necessary lift to get airborne, the carrier had to steam into the wind as fast as she could. Moving in a straight line made her an easier target for subs and bombers, so the sooner she could resume a zigzagging course, the better. What's more, as the deck was crowded with Swordfish, if an aircraft already airborne got into difficulties, it would be unable to land and would be forced to ditch. It also meant that, in the event of an air attack, the Fulmar fighters would not be able to take off and defend the ship. A rapid series of takeoffs also conserved fuel and extended the range of the strike force as less time was spent waiting for the rest of the aircraft to get airborne. On the night of 11/12 November there was an even more pressing incentive to get a move on: delays and dawdling risked jeopardising the element of surprise that was considered essential to a successful outcome. It was fortunate that in HMS *Illustrious*, the air crews had a well-drilled ship's company of the very highest efficiency and skill. While the men on deck went about securing and checking the aircraft, the forty-two pilots and observers of the two striking forces gathered in the wardroom for the final briefing. If all went to plan, they'd reconvene in the comfortable club-like surroundings in six hours' time to swap stories over a strong drink. It was probably just as well they didn't know that the planners were preparing for a 50 per cent casualty rate.

Having lost three aircraft to mechanical problems, the final total of aircraft available was just twenty-one, drawn from 813, 815, 819 and 824 Squadrons FAA (Fleet Air Arm). In order to accommodate the extra fuel tank, the gunner/wireless operator was jettisoned and crews were reduced to pilot and observer. There was no gun aboard, but that was hardly going to affect their chances of survival. A misfiring, ancient Vickers against the might of the Italian fleet's guns and shore defences were no more use than a teaspoon in a knife fight. W/T (Wireless/Telegraphy) silence was to be observed throughout and the removal of the heavy W/T equipment was of greater concern to the crews. Each crew would have to find its own way back to *Illustrious*. The aircraft carrier might have been over 740 feet long, but in the vast expanse of the Med at night, quite possibly in cloud and with a limited amount of fuel, trying to relocate her could be a nerve-racking challenge.

By 2015, with all twelve Swordfish on the flight deck, *Illustrious* and her escorts immediately began to increase their speed for the takeoff. As the bows of the ships cut into the calm surface of the sea, great sprays showered the foredecks and the gathering wind tugged hard at the clothes of all on deck. The wash from *Illustrious*'s giant propellors, or 'screws', churned up a seething froth of white foam below the quarterdeck at the stern of the boat. The pilots and their observers in their bulky flying suits and Mae Wests walked through the darkness to their aircraft, pulled themselves up into the cockpit, settled themselves on their parachutes and strapped themselves in. The riggers and fitters assigned to each aircraft slapped the backs of the air crew and offered cheery words of encouragement.

The luminous wand of the deck officer made circles in the darkness, telling the pilots to fire up their engines. The handlers inserted the handle to wind the inertia starter, filling the air with a high-pitched whining sound. Slowly the revs built, the pilots set the throttle, and twelve Pegasus

engines, almost as one, coughed into life as clouds of smoke billowed from the exhausts. The pilots checked the gauges on the instrument panel and pushed the engine to full throttle, then back to tick-over, awaiting the summons forward. The ship was approaching maximum speed of almost thirty knots and the wind was now howling down the flight deck, offering as much lift as possible for the heavily burdened bombers. The crouching maintainers and handlers, buffeted by the gusts, dodged the whirling propellors as they slipped around the aircraft, ready to unfold and lock down the wings and remove the wooden chocks under the wheels. It was just before 2030 and some moonlight was visible through a break in the clouds.

A green light gave the signal for the first aircraft to fly off. The twelve aircraft, ranged on both sides at the rear of the flight deck, were to taxi out to launch their takeoff run, alternately from starboard and port. The silhouettes of 1,500-lb MkXII torpedoes were clearly visible under the fuselage of six of the aircraft and the 250-lb semi-armour-piercing bombs under the others. The first aircraft was flown by the leader of the striking force, Lt Commander Kenneth ‘Hooch’ Williamson, CO (Commanding Officer) of 815 Squadron. His observer was Lt Norman ‘Blood’ Scarlett. Moving out into the line running down the centre of the deck, Williamson held the brakes while the Swordfish’s double wings were folded out and locked tight. On the signal, Williamson opened the throttle and released the brakes. The engine roared as the 3.5-tonne fully loaded biplane gathered speed along the 740-foot-long deck, dropped over the bow and then climbed into the night. The other eleven followed in rapid succession and, eight miles from *Illustrious*, still climbing and heading in a roughly northwesterly direction, the force formed up on Williamson’s lead aircraft. Cruising at around eighty knots, the attack force were on course to reach Taranto shortly before 1100.

At around 7,500 feet, the twelve biplanes disappeared into thick cumulus cloud. When they emerged into the bright moonlight on the other side, the formation had been reduced to nine. Colliding in cloud could and did happen, but it was more likely that three other aircraft had become detached and were making their own way to the target area. All the aircrews later remarked on the extreme cold they suffered in the open cockpits. On arrival at the target area, the plan was for the twelve aircraft to split up. The two carrying the parachute flares were to drop them over the battleships as the torpedo-bombers negotiated the barrage balloons at the harbour entrance. The bombers were to head straight for the inner harbour to attack the cruisers and destroyers. The hope was that before the majority of the AA gunners had gone to action stations and opened up, the torpedo-bombers would be diving onto their targets. But, in the event, far from their arrival being a surprise to the defenders, virtually every gun in the Italian Navy was manned, loaded and waiting for the Royal Navy raiders. One of the aircraft that had become detached in the cloud, crewed by Lt Swayne and Sub-Lt Buscall, reached Taranto fifteen minutes before the others because it had flown at sea level. On realising they were the first to arrive, they had no choice but to fly around and wait for the rest of the attacking force. Inevitably, their presence was picked up by Italian listening devices and the alarm was raised.

Williamson and the others knew they were on the right navigational course when they were about ten minutes away. Hundreds of guns opened up and ‘flaming onion’ tracer shells erupted in the night sky. From that distance the skies above the harbour resembled a giant fireball. ‘Taranto could be seen from a distance of fifty miles or more, because of the welcome awaiting us,’ wrote Lt Charles Lamb, one of the flare-droppers, in his war memoir. ‘The sky over the harbour looked like it sometimes does over Mount Etna, in Sicily, when the great volcano erupts. The darkness