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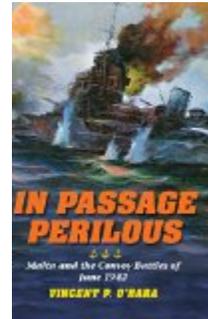
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vincent P. O'Hara. *In Passage Perilous: Malta and the Convoy Battles of June 1942*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00603-5.

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Vincent O'Hara's *In Passage Perilous* is a detailed, blow-by-blow history of two British convoys sent to re-supply the beleaguered island of Malta in June 1942 and the attempts of Italian and German air and naval forces to halt them. O'Hara, an independent scholar, deftly guides the reader through two convoy battles very different from those taking place in the North Atlantic at the same time. With no part of the Mediterranean beyond the range of land-based airplanes, convoy commanders and convoy raiders were forced to think and act in three dimensions. In the end, only two of the seventeen merchant vessels that set out for Malta reached the harbor at Valetta, very little to show for such effort. Basing his narrative and analysis on a close reading of the British and Italian primary sources, O'Hara tells the reader how and why the convoys failed, while giving the reader a deeper understanding of naval combat in the Mediterranean during the Second World War.

The two convoys—"Vigorous" sent from the eastern Mediterranean and "Harpoon" from the west—and their fate are at the heart of O'Hara's work, but he also lays out the place of Malta, the Mediterranean, and the North Africa campaign in the wider context of the before and after of the June battles. Interestingly, O'Hara makes it clear that in his opinion these convoys were unnecessary at best and dangerous at worst. He argues that Malta was a secondary outpost in a secondary theatre, and the blood and treasure expended in its defense could have been more profitably spent elsewhere, especially the Far East. Despite its key location, Malta's lack of infrastructure and berthing space made it a rather minor hindrance to Axis supply lines, and almost entirely useless as a launching-off point for offensive operations. Still, believing the island to be a useful outpost, and mindful of its

propaganda value, Winston Churchill and his cabinet ordered the two convoys to run supplies to the beleaguered island.

O'Hara tackles Vigorous first, painting a sobering picture of a battered Mediterranean Fleet, lacking heavy warships, aircraft carriers, and its commander, Admiral Andrew Cunningham. In his place was acting Admiral Henry Harwood, the new commander of the fleet, micromanaging the convoy from Alexandria, and Rear Admiral Philip Vian, commanding at sea. Although both men had proven themselves earlier in the war—Harwood against the *Graf Spee* at Montevideo and Vian during the *Altmark* incident—O'Hara shows the reader how the two men were neither ideal for their position nor willing to work with the other.

Indeed, Vigorous was an unmitigated disaster. Despite near-constant fighter coverage, the convoy was under aerial surveillance as soon as it set off for Malta. Before passing Tobruk, near the front on land, the convoy was beset by Italian and German air attacks, while a division of Italian ships left Taranto in pursuit. Although the Italian force never came to grips with the convoy, and lost a cruiser to British aircraft, Axis aerial attacks and the threat of a surface engagement forced Vigorous to turn around south of Crete, having already lost two merchantmen and four warships to Axis aircraft.

Harpoon, the western convoy, seemed better poised for success. The Home Fleet, responsible for the convoy, had a fuller complement of ships, including the battleship *Malaya* and the aircraft carriers *Eagle* and *Argus*, which accompanied the convoy as far as the Sicilian Narrows. The commander of the convoy, Vice Admiral Alban Curteis, possessed more experience and a better temper-

ament than his Mediterranean counterparts as well. Unbeknownst to the British, however, the Italian high command had determined that Vigorous was a better target for heavy surface ships, leaving Harpoon to aircraft, submarines, and lighter surface elements.

Even with these advantages, Harpoon was hardly more successful than Vigorous, only two merchant vessels out of six surviving to enter Valetta, one heavily damaged. One merchant vessel was sunk by air attack even before the heavy units of the escort returned to Gibraltar. After that, a force of Italian surface vessels, backed up by aircraft, surprised the convoy near Pantelleria, sinking another three merchant vessels. Although the Harpoon convoy was able to regroup and reach Malta, one more transport was seriously damaged by a poorly swept minefield on the way into Valetta.

O'Hara paints a picture of a Royal Navy plagued by communication difficulties, intelligence failures, and, at least in the Mediterranean Fleet, subpar leadership. However, at the same time he also directs the reader to

consider the virtues of the much-maligned *Regia Marina*. The battles of June 1942, he argues, show that the Italian navy had made great strides in intelligence, communications, command, and, most importantly, combined arms operations, allowing it to force Vigorous to turn around and to savage Harpoon on its way to Malta.

To someone well versed in naval history and the Second World War, *In Passage Perilous* is a valuable account of a relatively neglected portion of the war at sea. With a good command of the Italian and British sources, O'Hara gives the reader a very detailed account of the convoy battles. However, nonspecialist readers will often find themselves at sea while reading this book. Although O'Hara provides four chapters of background before diving into the two convoys, much of this space is devoted to considering the place of the Mediterranean in the war at large. Readers unfamiliar with the equipment or tactics of the Second World War will have a very difficult time following O'Hara's narrative. Readers with the requisite knowledge, though, will find *In Passage Perilous* a very rewarding read.

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