

## Strangling the Axis

This is a major reassessment of the causes of Allied victory in the Second World War in the Mediterranean region. Drawing on a unique range of multinational source material, Richard Hammond demonstrates how the Allies' ability to gain control of the key routes across the sea and sink large quantities of enemy shipping denied the Axis forces in North Africa crucial supplies and proved vital to securing ultimate victory there. Furthermore, the sheer scale of attrition to Axis shipping outstripped their industrial capacity to compensate, leading to the collapse of the Axis position across key territories maintained by seaborne supply, such as Sardinia, Corsica and the Aegean islands. As such, Hammond demonstrates how the anti-shipping campaign in the Mediterranean was the fulcrum about which strategy in the theatre pivoted, and the vital enabling factor ultimately leading to Allied victory in the region.

RICHARD HAMMOND is a lecturer at Brunel University and is a vice president of the Second World War Research Group. He is the recipient of the Society for Military History's Moncado Prize and the Corbett Prize in Modern Naval History (proxime accessit).

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*The Fight for Control of the Mediterranean  
during the Second World War*

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Richard Hammond

*Brunel University*



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*For my parents*

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## A Note on Terminology: ‘British’ and ‘Allied’

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Throughout this book, references made to ‘British’ forces are frequently shorthand. The ‘British’ armed forces during the war were a huge, multinational conglomerate that consisted of people drawn from the entirety of the Empire and Commonwealth. That was very much the case in the Mediterranean theatre, where non-British manpower constituted a high proportion of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and other personnel who took part. Emblematic of this was the make-up of the ‘British’ personnel based in North Africa in October 1942 at the time of Operation ‘Lightfoot’. Here, while nearly 400,000 personnel of all types from the United Kingdom were based in the desert, they were joined by over 100,000 from the Dominions of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, almost 200,000 who were classified as ‘other Imperial’, and around 70,000 ‘Allied’.<sup>1</sup>

The ‘Allied’ figure given above is worth explaining. Beyond those servicemen from around the Empire and Commonwealth who formally served alongside the British, those of numerous other nationalities found themselves serving under a ‘British’ banner. Over the course of the war, service personnel of numerous different defeated nations who wished to continue the fight against the Axis wound up serving in units or warships that were under British operational control. In one Mediterranean-specific example, a total of sixty-seven non-British submarines, of six different nationalities, served under British operational control at some point during the war.<sup>2</sup>

While ‘British’ is therefore very broadly defined, the Mediterranean was very much a ‘British’ theatre from June 1940 to mid-1942. It is for that reason that Chapters 2–5 refer almost exclusively to a ‘British’ anti-shiping campaign. From summer 1942 onwards, however, there was increasing American involvement. This initially took the form of the transferal of large quantities of American equipment such as tanks and artillery, as well as American air units, to Egypt in the dark days of summer 1942.<sup>3</sup> The theatre became a truly Allied venture from November 1942, with the landing of Anglo-American forces in north-west

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Africa. The American commitment to the anti-shipping campaign was important, although less diverse in terms of forces committed than that of the British. No American submarines operated in the theatre, while their surface warships took little part either. American air power, however, played an important role, through bombing ports in Italy and southern France, or through direct attack against shipping at sea. Therefore, from Chapter 6 onwards, this book refers more broadly to an ‘Allied’ anti-shipping campaign.

## Abbreviations

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AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
ASV	Air to Surface Vessel Radar
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
cbm	Cubic meters
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
Comando Supremo	Italian Armed Forces High Command
COS	Chiefs of Staff (British)
CU	Consumption Unit
DAK	<i>Deutsches Afrika Korps</i>
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
GAF	German Air Force
IAF	Italian Air Force
JCOS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (American)
MT	Motor transport
OKH	<i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i> (German Army High Command)
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (German Armed Forces High Command)
ORS	Operational Research Section
RAF	Royal Air Force
RDF	Radio Direction Finding (Radar)
S1	First Submarine Flotilla
S8	Eighth Submarine Flotilla
S10	Tenth Submarine Flotilla
SIGINT	Signals intelligence
Supermarina	Italian Navy High Command
USAAF	United States Army Air Force

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Maps

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1 The Mediterranean theatre

Source: Adapted from I. S. O. Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1: The Mediterranean, 1941-1943* (1954), p. 9



2 Axis sea and air transport routes to North Africa, October 1942–May 1943  
Source: Adapted from I. S. O. Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 4: The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa* (London: HMSO, 1966), p. 193

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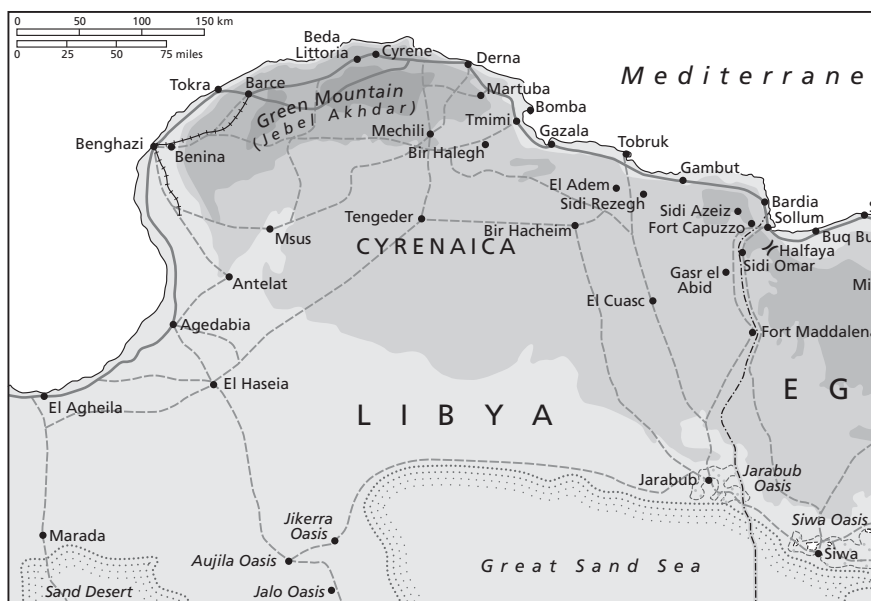
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3 The central and eastern Mediterranean, including the Aegean islands  
Source: Adapted from I. S. O. Playfair et al., *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 4: The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa* (London: HMSO, 1966), p. 193

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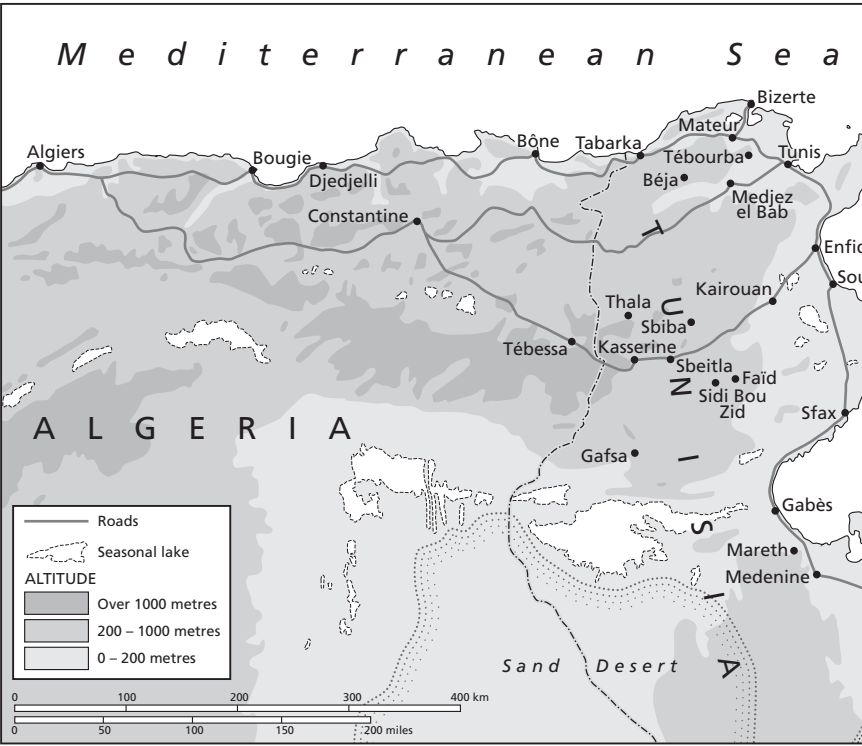




#### 4 The Western Desert battle area

Source: [www.asisbiz.com/il2/Fiat-G50/RA-151SA/images/Map-showig-the-Western-Desert-of-Tobruk-1941-0A.jpg](http://www.asisbiz.com/il2/Fiat-G50/RA-151SA/images/Map-showig-the-Western-Desert-of-Tobruk-1941-0A.jpg)

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5 Tunisia  
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