
HMS SIKH'S LAST BATTLE

A nation that possesses Tobruk will dominate the eastern Mediterranean.

Attributed to the German explorer and naturalist Georg August Schweinfurth (1883)

On Monday, 14 September 1942, HMS Sikh sank. The human cost is listed in an Admiralty document in the National Archives (30/Aug/43):

Casualty List

Killed – 2

Died of wounds – 5

Died in captivity – 3

Missing presumed dead – 11

Prisoners of war 224 (previously reported as PoW have been repatriated.)

1 repatriated 26/1/1945

The names of 17 sailors who lost their lives are recorded in the casualty lists of the Royal Navy and Dominion Navies. According to the Admiralty war diaries, 'H.M.S. SIKH – Killed and Missing: 2 officers and 20 ratings*; approximately 200 taken prisoner.'

The ship was taking part in Operation Agreement, a venture that went horribly wrong. The Admiralty Diary for the following day (15/Sep/42) lists the awful toll of lost ships and lost lives:

* Ratings were the most junior class of seaman.

H.M.S. Coventry (Cruiser) Killed and Missing 3 officers, 61 ratings

H.M.S. Sikh (Destroyer) Killed and Missing 2 officers and 20 ratings. Some 200 captured

H.M.S. Zulu (Destroyer) Killed and Missing four officers and 34 ratings

M.T.B.s* 308, 310, 312, 314 Killed and Missing 8 officers and 41 ratings

M.L.s 352 and 353

It's hard to grasp the carnage of the last war. In one single battle, so many lives ended, so many families were left bereaved, so much equipment was lost. To put this in context, during WW2, the Royal Navy lost 278 major warships (battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers) and over 1,000 smaller craft – of these 132 were destroyers, like HMS Sikh. More than 50,000 sailors were killed.

In case you were wondering, today's Royal Navy has 73 vessels and 35,700 personnel – which includes reservists. The days when Britain ruled the waves are long since gone.

These are the cold, impersonal statistics about one among numerous WW2 missions. But behind those numbers were real people, living through moments of tension, fear and duty. In this essay, I explore the human side of that story – the experience of the crew aboard HMS Sikh in the final days leading up to its sinking. Before undertaking this, it's essential to understand something about Tobruk's turbulent past and the frenzied atmosphere in which the operation's planning was conducted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TOBRUK

At the beginning of WW2, the Italians ruled Tobruk, a port city with a population of 5,000 people, located on the coast of Cyrenaica in the eastern arid region of Libya. It was the country's only major naval base in this region and had been expanded and heavily fortified. The map shows Tobruk and all the other locations mentioned in the essay with the country names and boundaries as they are today.

* MTBs were motor torpedo boats designed as fast attack craft that could be repurposed for amphibious raids. MLs were motor launches, a larger patrol craft that could carry up to 50 Marines.



This town's strategic importance stretches back to antiquity, first as part of ancient Greece and later as a Roman fortress. Its natural deep-water harbour made it pivotal in controlling the eastern Mediterranean, with the inland cliffs offering natural defensive advantages against ground assault.

Italy entered WW2 in June 1940, and its forces in Libya advanced east into Egypt. Things did not go well. The Allied forces soon reversed the gains and then attacked Tobruk. The British-led assault began on 21 January 1941, soon followed by the Italian garrison's surrender the following day. Approximately 25,000 Italian troops were captured, leaving their base well stocked with supplies.

During the brief battle, defensive structures, including coastal artillery, bunkers and gun emplacements, sustained moderate damage. Attempts had been made to sabotage the infrastructure to prevent its immediate use by the Allies. Harbour facilities, particularly cranes, fuel depots and jetties, were damaged. Several ships had been sunk to block the port entrances.

The destruction was not extensive, however, and the Allies quickly had it repaired. British forces could now land supplies and reinforcements in Tobruk's harbour as they advanced further west to Benghazi*, which they captured in February 1941.

The loss of the two important port cities resulted in the arrival, in February 1941, of the German General Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Korps. Officially known as Deutsches Afrika Korps, they brought a new level of capability to reinforce the Italians. Rommel was an outstanding general, commanding an army of highly trained troops drawn from veteran German divisions.

In April 1941, he recaptured Benghazi and then headed towards Egypt, bypassing Tobruk in his rapid advance. The port town, now with its 30,000 garrison, was left isolated and under siege.

* Benghazi is situated on Libya's Mediterranean coast, making it a critical maritime supply hub for military logistics. Its port was vital for supplying reinforcements, armaments and fuel for the Axis troops.

The Royal Navy was its supply line, bringing in food, armaments and reinforcements. Although HMS Sikh operated in the vicinity, there is no evidence that she undertook dedicated Tobruk supply runs. Her contributions during this time were escorting Allied convoys to Malta and engaging enemy forces at sea.

The siege continued until November 1941, when the Allies launched an offensive aimed at lifting the siege of Tobruk and regaining Benghazi. This was successful and, during December, Tobruk was secure again. Almost immediately, however, the counteroffensive began, and in January 1942, Benghazi was back under German control. By May, Tobruk was again threatened, and in June, Axis troops launched an assault on the fortress, forcing the garrison to surrender within two days (21/June/1942).

More than 32,000 Allied troops were taken prisoner, mostly British and South Africans. This was the second-largest surrender of British-led forces after the fall of Singapore just months earlier, in February 1942.

The YouTube video detailed in the Sources section (*The Fall of Tobruk 1942: Battlestorm*) provides an excellent account of how Tobruk was captured.

The *Daily Express* (22/Jun/42) didn't mince its words when writing about defeat:

“

Hallowed Ground.

There will be no attempt to minimise the importance of this German victory. The fall of Tobruk is a disaster. It is a disaster for the defenders of Egypt and a great blow to the hopes of this nation. Tobruk was ground that had been hallowed by the blood, valour and success of our fighting men.

The *Daily Mirror* (23/Jun/42) was equally strident in its leader article:

“

No Tea Interval!

No one can believe that the Battle of Libya is a kind of cricket match which is over and done with, and that a return fixture can be arranged with a sporting chance of reversing the result. Rommel has different ideas of the war game. He does not believe in a tea interval! On he goes, pressing home the advantages gained, and if we don't look out we shall find him established on the Nile before we can say knife.

That is a possibility which should be gravely weighed by everybody, and especially by those fatuists* who think that the war is half won already. The United Nations are still on the defensive. Tremendous efforts still have to be made before a real initiative can be gained. We simply must begin to take this war seriously.

* If like me you were baffled by the word 'fatuists', it is a rare and archaic term meaning 'very stupid and not deserving your attention or respect'.

As I read the quotes, I couldn't help but compare the eloquence of the language to that of today's issues in these newspapers. I doubt if you will find the word lurking in today's editions of the *Daily Mirror*.

Due to the wonders of the Enigma decryption device, we can read Rommel's message to his army celebrating their victory:

“ Soldiers! The great battle on the Marmaric coast* has reached its climax with the rapid conquest of Tobruk. In all, 45,000 prisoners were taken and more than 1000 tanks, and almost 400 guns destroyed or captured. By your incomparable valour and tenacity, you have, in the long, bitter struggle of the last 3 weeks, given the enemy blow for blow by your offensive spirit. The enemy lost the core of his field army, which stood ready to leap to the attack on us, losing above everything his strong armoured forces. My particular appreciation goes to the leaders and the troops for these outstanding achievements.

This period marked a turbulent phase of the war, draining the Allied forces of both resources and morale. The swift fall of Tobruk was a profound humiliation, one that remains the subject of debate and disputed blame to this day. The National Archives have produced two blog posts about this period that provide a wealth of information – details are in the Sources.

Operation Agreement was conceived because of this awful defeat. A terrible blow had been dealt to the national confidence and the ego of its leaders.

At the time of Tobruk's fall, Winston Churchill was staying in the US at the White House. On 21 June, he went to see Roosevelt in his study. When they were together, the President was given a telegram, which he handed to Churchill. It said: 'Tobruk has surrendered, with twenty-five thousand men taken prisoners.' Churchill recalls his feelings once this had been confirmed by British sources: 'I did not attempt to hide from the President the shock I had received. It was a bitter moment. Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another.'

Sir Hastings Ismay (Churchill's Chief of Staff) described the moment he learnt of Tobruk's surrender as 'a hideous and totally unexpected shock'. The loss of Tobruk prompted a surge of national resentment, resulting in a no-confidence debate in the House of Commons (2/Jul/42). This comment by Aneurin Bevan – a Labour MP – must have made Churchill fume:

“ The Prime Minister wins debate after debate and loses battle after battle. The country is beginning to say that he fights debates like a war and the war like a debate.

Bevan held no Cabinet position during the war and was 44 when Tobruk fell. Somehow, I

* The Marmaric coast refers to the coastal region in North Africa. It corresponds approximately to the stretch of Mediterranean coastline within Libya, extending from the vicinity of Tobruk westward.

imagine my dad, who was 37 at the time, would have snapped back that Bevan ought to enlist rather than criticise from the sidelines. He never had much patience for Labour politicians.

OPERATION AGREEMENT

Before retracing those final days of HMS Sikh, we must first understand the scope and objective of the mission that lay ahead. Theoretically, details of plans were known only to the Captain and his most trusted officers. For the rest of the crew, the operation was a mystery cloaked in orders and routine.

There is no shortage of books about Operation Agreement. Those I consulted are listed in the Sources.

The following is an ultra-summarised account of what the operation hoped to achieve and the multiple things that had to go right for it to succeed – few did.

First, some context about what was unfolding 400 miles east of Tobruk, in a town now associated with a famous Allied victory, El Alamein. Back then, the chances of victory were anything but certain. Like many people of my generation, I had family – two uncles – involved in the battles that were soon to rage in the desert. It's only now, while writing this account, that I've learnt why it was of such military importance.

To its south lies the impassable Qattara Depression, a vast salt marsh and desert area that, at its lowest, is 400 feet below sea level, impossible for tanks or heavy vehicles to cross. To the north is the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, El Alamein was situated at a military bottleneck, about 40 miles wide, making it ideal for defence.

It was here that the Allies intended to halt Rommel's seemingly unstoppable advance towards Cairo and the Suez Canal – a shipping route that was vital for military supplies and only 150 miles away. After the fall of Singapore and Tobruk, the loss of El Alamein might well have changed the outcome of the war.

When Operation Agreement took place in early September 1942, the military situation at El Alamein was delicately balanced. Axis forces had advanced deep into Egypt but were halted in July at the First battle of El Alamein. Another effort, at the end of August, to break through Allied defences had also failed.

The newly appointed commander of Britain's Eighth Army*, General Bernard Montgomery, was now consolidating his position, preparing for a counterattack planned for late October.

Rommel was resupplying his troops and depended on the port of Tobruk to remain operational. Operation Agreement aimed to exploit this weakness by crippling the port's facilities, intensifying the German army's already critical supply shortages.

* The Eighth Army was a multinational force, with most of its troops coming from the UK, and significant contributions from India, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. It led the Allied effort during the North African campaign and played a key role in the invasion of Italy.

The following is a document from the Office of Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Station to Their Lordships* that describes the need for the operation.

“ 2. The operation was planned to coincide with a land attack on Benghazi (Operation Bigamy) and to be followed by the capture of the Gialo Oasis (Operation Nicety). The object of Operation Agreement and Bigamy was to cause the maximum possible dislocation to the lines of communication supplying the enemy's army in North Africa.

3. The setting in which these operations were conceived was that which followed our retreat to the Alamein Line. It was felt that everything possible must be done to give our Eighth Army the chance of an early strike back. From a Naval point of view, the enemy's hold on the North African coast was intolerable. Convoys could not be run to Malta, and our few Bases in the Eastern Mediterranean were exposed to short range bomber operations. Great risks were, therefore, justified when undertaking any operation which had a chance of relieving the situation.

4. It was known that the Panzer Armee had been halted more by enemy exhaustion and supply difficulties than by our own depleted Eighth Army, whose reinforcements, although they were arriving in Egypt, had not been formed or trained in desert conditions. Successful raids on Tobruk and Benghazi might, therefore, have had a decisive effect on events to come.

Prime targets were the port facilities, including wharves, cargo cranes and ship repair workshops, all intended to render the harbour unusable. Also on the list were the fuel and oil storage tanks, ammunition dumps and vehicle depots. Additional targets were enemy vessels docked at Tobruk – specifically Italian warships, merchant transports and German supply barges.

The list goes on and includes the wireless radio station, the command headquarters and the defences, especially the coastal artillery batteries and anti-aircraft emplacements.

As you can see, Operation Agreement was an umbrella operation encompassing multiple coordinated raids. If this were not complicated enough, it required coordination with multiple branches of the military beyond the Navy:

- Operation Bigamy used the newly formed Special Air Service, supported by the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), to target the Italian-held port of Benghazi and its nearby Benina airfield.
- Operation Caravan used the LRDG to raid an Italian garrison town and airbase northeast of Benghazi (Barce). Of the four raids under Operation Agreement, Caravan was the only one to succeed, achieving its objectives.

* In the Royal Navy official communications, the term 'Their Lordships' referred to the senior members of the Board of Admiralty, who were responsible for managing the Royal Navy. The paragraph numbering reflects an Admiralty writing convention, whereby the opening contextual paragraph was treated as implicit paragraph one, and substantive points therefore began at paragraph two.

- Operation Nicety's objective was to capture an oasis deep in the Libyan desert (Jalo Oasis). This involved the LRDG and was intended to secure this base as a rendezvous and resupply point for the raiding forces*.

We are fortunate to have access to the Naval Operation Orders. This is the blueprint for the operation that the Captain of HMS Sikh would have read before setting sail for Tobruk. A copy of the Outline Plan is in the Appendix.

The operation relied on many things going right, but as Helmuth von Moltke, the Prussian general, famously said, 'No plan survives contact with the enemy.'

Having understood the scope and complexity of the planned military operation, we will return to the Sikh's role together with another Tribal Class destroyer (HMS Zulu). Both carried a contingent of Royal Marines and soldiers for an amphibious assault on Tobruk's harbour facilities and shipping.

THE FINAL DAYS

At 08.10 on Monday, 14 September 1942, Captain Micklethwait was the last to abandon HMS Sikh just before the scuttling charges exploded. The previous 24 hours had been a nightmare, with many lives lost for no military advantage. My dad was ten days away from his 35th birthday, which he was about to spend in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. Knowing what he experienced during this battle, he must have been thankful to still be alive.

I have constructed a timeline of Sikh's final days from multiple accounts, including an audio diary of a survivor, documents from the naval investigation into the failed operation and books about Operation Agreement. All are detailed in the Sources.

As you would expect, there were some minor variations in the recollections; any significant discrepancies have been highlighted.

Friday, 11 September 1942, Haifa harbour (Palestine)

21.00

The 11th Battalion Royal Marines, with attachments from the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers and two Machine Gun Sections, boarded HMS Sikh and HMS Zulu: a total of 400 troops, 350 of whom were Marines.

Saturday, 12 September 1942

06.00

HMS Sikh and Zulu departed for Alexandria, Egypt, a distance of 270 nautical miles. The

* The BBC TV series *SAS Rogue Heroes*, first shown in October 2022, gives a good feel for the fighting conditions of these three operations. The article *Operation Agreement: Victory Over Allied Commando Forces*, published on the Commando Supremo website, succinctly details the operation (see Sources).

crews were unaware of their final destination, but the port hands appeared to know it was Tobruk – the first worrying sign that all was not well.

20.00

Travelling at 20 knots, they arrived after nightfall; the ship refuelled and took on extra ammunition for the coming operation.

Sunday, 13 September 1942, Alexandria (Egypt)

05.45

The Sikh, commanded by Captain Micklethwait, sailed at first light along with HMS Zulu. Micklethwait was also Captain (D) for the operation, meaning he oversaw both destroyers.

09.00

The Marines were told that this was not an exercise, that it was part of Operation Agreement.

10.00

The ships rendezvoused with the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS Coventry and four escort Hunt Class destroyers (Hurworth, Beaufort, Exmoor, Aldenham), named after famous fox hunts. The book *Tobruk: A Raid Too Far* says there were only two escort destroyers.

To deceive the enemy, Sikh and Zulu had Italian Navy markings painted on their hulls and were prepared to make smoke and even simulate damage (leaking oil) once inside Tobruk – a ruse to appear as crippled Italian vessels.

That evening, they steered west along the North African coast toward Tobruk. They were unsighted by enemy aircraft, though an Axis reconnaissance plane sighted Coventry's group before Sikh and Zulu had joined.

19.00

The Marines tested their weapons, ready for action.

21.30

Sikh and Zulu left the other ships and proceeded at 24 knots toward Tobruk. When 70 miles off the coast, the first of the RAF air raids could be seen hitting Tobruk.

Monday, 14 September 1942

Midnight

Flashes were seen above Tobruk as Allied bombers struck the port's defences, intending to cause fires and explosions to create confusion. This continued until approximately 03.00.

The deck party on the submarine HMS Taku worked to assemble two folbots (lightweight

collapsible canoes) that would carry two soldiers. These were from the group that became known as the Special Boat Squadron (SBS).

Their role was to get ashore and set beacon lights to guide the Marines when they landed. The sea conditions were rough. All those on deck attempting to launch the folbots were swept into the sea, along with their craft, which were destroyed. All the men were recovered, but Taku's role in the operation was abandoned.

Author and member of the SBS Eric Newby recounted a similar experience departing from a submarine a month earlier in his book *Love and War in the Apennines*.

01.34

The Taku withdrew and sent a coded message to the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean: 'Mallard. Beach unmarked'.

The 'Mallard' code meant 'assault craft likely to beach successfully and get off again'.

Like me, you are probably wondering why such a message was sent following the rough seas the crew just experienced. We will return to this incident in the next section, 'What went wrong'.

01.57

The destroyers received a radio transmission containing the codeword that the operation would take place (the choice of word would not be used today, a word starting with 'N'), followed by a good luck message from Winston Churchill.

At about this time, the message from the submarine was received, causing doubt over whether the operation should continue, especially because a heavy swell was running in the vicinity of the Sikh. (I assume this was the message 'Mallard. Beach unmarked'.) Captain (D) conferred with Lieutenant Colonel Unwin, who was responsible for coordinating and executing the ground assault and it was decided to proceed with the mission.

The First Lieutenant of the Sikh commented that: 'there was a heavy swell running at the time and from the ship it appeared that landing might be difficult'.

03.00

A large explosion onshore was recorded, thought to be an ammunition dump igniting. This resulted in smoke obscuring the coastline, which would hamper the landings.

03.10

Sikh and Zulu stopped at the designated position for disembarkation, about 2 miles off the beach. The order was given: 'First flight to boat stations.' Another account says the distance was three-quarters of a mile. The assault craft were prepared for lowering into the sea.

03.45

The ocean swell made launching and manning the boats very difficult. This operation took about 40 minutes, double the time allocated during practice exercises. All the boats were clear and proceeding inshore at 03.48. During this period, the Sikh was undetected.

Another account said that the delay in launching the boats was longer (over an hour). By the time they had departed, the air raid on Tobruk had ceased.

The first flight consisted of 150 Marines. I have another account saying 200 left Sikh and Zulu, using three tows, each of which consisted of a power boat and two dumb lighters. These were small flat-bottomed vessels designed to carry cargo or troops, but lacking power and steering ability. We will return to the deficiencies of these craft in the section ‘What went wrong’. One power boat contained the Colonel in charge of the operations and the First Lieutenant of the Sikh.

Numerous pyrotechnic signals (or shore lights) were visible from all around the harbour, making navigation confusing. These were intended to guide the assault craft but were not flashing at the correct intervals and some may have been lights in the beach hospital.

Shortly after the Marines left, a searchlight on shore swept across Sikh, illuminating her, but no shore fire resulted. Perhaps this was because the Sikh was flying Italian colours. The timing of this event differs in accounts, one suggesting it didn’t happen until 05.00.

Soon the tows were lost to sight as the Sikh and Zulu set course seawards at 15 knots.

04.14

The destroyers altered course back towards the coast.

04.44

Both ships had arrived back at the position to launch the second flight of Marines – about a mile off the coast – when one of the tows was spotted.

Lieutenant Colonel Unwin in the lead powerboat established wireless contact with Cmdr White aboard Zulu and explained that his boat had broken down and that another boat was standing by him.

Other accounts say flashlights were used to communicate between the destroyers and Unwin’s boat.

Both destroyers closed in on the coast, with the intention of launching the second flight to land and to meet Unwin’s broken-down boat.

A searchlight was shining from the area of Tobruk point, sweeping at 30-second intervals. To avoid detection, Sikh steered bows up into the beam. Neither the destroyers nor the landing craft appeared to be sighted.

Unwin came aboard and went to the bridge, telling Micklethwaite that the landing was being strongly opposed and that the operation should be aborted. Sikh then attempted to re-embark the remaining members of the assault force, closing even further inshore to collect them.

(There are different accounts of exactly what happened with Colonel Unwin. In the preface to *Massacre at Tobruk*, Unwin makes no mention of ever returning to the Sikh and implies that he landed at Tobruk and was involved in the fighting. Another account in the book is very different:

“ Lieutenant Colonel Unwin returned to the destroyer, going up to the bridge to confer with Captain Micklethwaite. The decision was to abandon the

operation and the Sikh began to edge in yet further, in order to re-embark all those it could from the first flight.

The memories of one member of the Sikh crew are different again (*Lost Voices of The Royal Navy*), recalling:

“ The second wave of assault craft turned back, much to the annoyance of Captain Micklethwaite, who slated the commanding officer on the upper deck before ordering him and all his detachment forward on the mess decks.

We will never know exactly what happened. What is certain is that Sikh's decision to move closer to the coast to recover the tows proved to be a fatal one. Whatever the truth, the Sikh's crew attempted to re-embark the assault force and closed still further inshore to collect them.)

04.50

The enemy coast defence opened fire on the destroyers. The first salvo passed over the ship. An attempt was made to illuminate and blind the batteries by firing star shells. After two rounds, the fire was changed to high-explosive ordnance. By this time, the ship was being continually caught in the moving searchlight.

A new shore battery of Italian guns (150 mm)* started firing, along with a battery of 88 mm guns.

At about this time, Sikh was hit, causing significant damage in the gearing room, putting the lubrication and the fire and bilge pumps out of action. Worse still, the starboard engine seized. It was then discovered that the rudder had become jammed hard starboard, causing the ship to circle towards the shore in a desperate effort to get out of range of the guns. Colonel Unwin believed the Sikh was sunk by the German 88s: 'Their shells went through her hull like butter.'

The audio diary of a sailor on the Sikh recalls how they tried to turn the rudder manually but were overcome by smoke and had to abandon the effort.

The enemy coast defences continued to hit the ship, and three of the gun magazines were intentionally flooded, but it was impossible to flood the other as a fierce cordite fire had started in the forward mess decks and the flooding gear was damaged. Flashes badly burnt Marines stationed in the passageways to the mess decks from exploding shells in the radio office and the forward galley. The burns were more serious because of the inadequate protection given by the shorts and open-neck shirts the Marines were wearing.

* These larger guns were formidable weapons, firing shells weighing 100 lb, with a range of up to 12 miles. A skilled gun crew could achieve a sustained rate of approximately three to six rounds per minute. Theoretically, the shore batteries should have been destroyed by the land-based attack by the Long Range Desert Group.

04.55

Three of the boats (from the first flight) arrived off a very rocky part of the coast. Artillery and mortar fire was opened when they were 300 yards from the coast. Some of the Marines made it to the coast (approximately 70) and landed in a rocky area, making disembarkation difficult. After a few hours of fighting, only 21 remained alive.

05.55

Zulu was ordered to come alongside to take Sikh in tow, but the crew lost control of Sikh in a medium-heavy swell and the wire could not be passed.

06.05

Zulu closed again and passed a wire, which was secured.

06.21

Zulu was preparing to take the strain on the tow when a direct hit on Zulu's quarter deck severed the wire. Guns continued firing in local control, the transmitting station (which controlled the guns) being out of action. Smoke was made to give the Sikh cover as it began listing to starboard.

By now the ship was being heavily hit fore and aft. A shell exploded on the mess deck, igniting the cordite, killing or badly burning many of the Marines. (My father talked about this horrific event. As part of the gun crew he wore anti-flash gear, a hood and gloves made of flame-resistant cotton that covered the head and neck, leaving openings only for the eyes. The Marines were dressed in shorts and shirts, ready for battle. Cordite is the propellant used in artillery shells, and results in an intense blast of heat and rapidly expanding gases.) I am not sure if this was a separate incident from the one recalled at 04.50.

There is a graphic account of the horror of the damage caused by these explosions in *Tobruk Commando* – an extract is reproduced in the Appendix.

With Zulu twice being hit forward, Micklethwait decided she should disengage and save herself.

06.55

Zulu was told to return to Alexandria and the Sikh's crew was ordered to prepare to abandon the ship. Scuttling charges were set to sink the ship, and all secret installations were destroyed; the Asdic (sonar technology for identifying submarines) and RD/F (radio direction finding used for navigation and enemy detection) were destroyed. All confidential books, the operation orders and bridge signal books were thrown over the side in a weighted bag.

Rafts and flotation devices (buoyant net-like flotation devices) were hung on lanyards over the side, to be cut away when required. It was impossible to jettison the torpedoes because the spare dumb lighters had become wedged against the torpedo tubes.

07.25

The whaler (a sturdy, clinker-built wooden boat) was launched with the wounded, and the ship's company began to enter the water.

Some of the badly burnt Marines didn't want to jump because of their burns and had to be pushed.

07.45

An officer was killed by a shell splinter when attempting to launch the spare dumb lighter that was jammed.

The fierce cordite fire was blazing around the starboard hoist for a gun magazine, filling the mess decks with smoke, trapping some of the second flight of Marines, stationed in the lower Torpedo-men's mess deck. At the time, however, it was believed they had all escaped.

The Captain went around the ship, making sure that no one living was still aboard, before he entered the water, having received no answer to his shouts in the forward mess deck.

08.10

The Captain was the last to leave the ship, accompanied by the Torpedo Officer, just before the scuttling charges exploded.

09.10

HMS Sikh took three hours to sink. All the time, the enemy kept firing, causing further casualties when the shells hit the men in the water.

HMS Sikh sank approximately 2 miles from Tobruk Port, although the audio diary said it was twice this distance. Gunfire from the shore continued, as did attacks from the air, which lasted for a further 20 minutes.

One of the Carley floats (an oblong flotation craft) received a direct hit, wounding many of the survivors with shell splinters. I remember my dad talking about clinging to one of these floats before he was rescued.

11.30

The loss of Sikh, coupled with Zulu's departure, meant the Allied seaborne assault force had no means of evacuation, wrecking their withdrawal plan.

The Sikh survivors spent approximately four hours in the water before being picked up by Italian F-lighters (used for coastal transport of troops, vehicles, tanks and cargo) and a German R-boat (a minesweeper and patrol craft). One account said they were rescued by an E-boat (a fast, agile motor torpedo boat used by the German Navy).

The crews of the German boats were said to have treated the survivors well, doing their best to provide first aid before handing the prisoners to the Italians.

By late morning, the battle at sea was over. By the next day, virtually all Sikh survivors – including Captain Micklethwait and my dad – were in enemy hands as PoWs. What happened next is covered in the essay 'Prisoner of war in Italy'.

Three days later, the front pages of the British newspapers began reporting the sinkings. God knows what my mum was thinking as she read these articles, given that she knew my dad was on the Sikh. These and many more were in her shoebox of wartime memories. Three days after reading about it in the newspapers, she received a telegram saying:

“

Regret to report that your husband Richard Stroud Able Seaman is missing on War Service. Commodore Naval Barracks Portsmouth.

**First Eye-Witness Story of The Tobruk Raid : Warships
Fought Shore Guns A Mile Off to Cover Returning Troops**

**H.M.S. SIKH, AFIRE, SINKING,
SENT RESCUE SHIP AWAY**

News Chronicle, 18 September 1942

**TOBRUK:
WE LOST
2 SHIPS**

THE sinking during the recent battle off Tobruk of H.M.S. Sikh (Captain St. J. A. Micklethwait, D.S.O., R.N.), and H.M.S. Zulu (Commander R. T. White, D.S.O., R.N.), was announced by the Admiralty last night

Daily Mirror, 17 September 1942



Daily Express, 18 September 1942

The Appendix contains an account of the operation filed in the *Admiralty Naval Staff in the Mediterranean Fleet War Diary* (September 1942). This broadly agrees with the timeline I constructed, except for the details about problems discharging the Marines and the subsequent decision to cancel the operation. The same omission occurs in the account of the *Second World War Admiralty War Diaries*. However, these documents were prepared days after the event, based on the best available information.

In the *Casualty Lists of the Royal Navy and Dominion Navies* are the names and ranks of those killed during the battle. There were 17 lives lost when the Sikh perished and 12 when HMS Zulu sank (14/Sep/42). The heaviest casualties were among the Marines, with 66 deaths. Every one of these deaths created a tragedy for their families. Such loss of life is awful, but it was just another day in the war when people died all the time. At the same time as the crew of the Sikh were fighting for their lives, another ship, the Royal Canadian destroyer Ottawa, perished in the Atlantic with the loss of 116 lives, more than those killed at Tobruk*.

“ War is a beast whose hunger is fed by human lives (anonymous).

* The number of deaths is approximate and contradicted by other sources.

It is challenging to find a fitting conclusion for this harrowing period of so much death and destruction for negligible gains. Among the Admiralty files, I came across a particularly moving letter from the Colonel of the Sikh Regiment, paying tribute to the ship and crew who proudly carried his regiment's name. This letter eloquently captures the quiet dignity and profound humanity that lingered even in moments of senseless tragedy:

Kenwardston,
Budleigh Salterton,
Devon.

17th September, 1942.

FROM Colonel H.St.G.M.McRae, D.S.O., O.B.E.,
Colonel 3 Bn. 11th SIKH Regiment, RATTRAY'S SIKHS.

TO The Secretary, Board of Admiralty.

Sir,

As Colonel of the 3rd Bn. 11th Sikh Regiment (Rattray's Sikhs), on behalf of all officers and men of the Battalion I wish to express the deep regret which will be felt on hearing of the loss of gallant H.M.S. SIKH on September 13th at TOBRUCK.

Officers and men of Rattray's Sikhs will wish to be identified in expressing admiration for the gallant service of H.M.S. SIKH, and in sympathy to the next of kin of the bereaved.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

Sd. H. St. G. M. McRae

Colonel.

Colonel 3 Bn. 11th SIKH Regiment

WHAT WENT WRONG

As I set out to write this section, uncertainty creeps in and I wonder what purpose it serves. Understanding past mistakes, especially when they occurred 80 years ago, doesn't change anything. No one is likely to claim 'lessons have been learnt'. I'm neither a historian nor a military strategist, so what fresh insights could I possibly offer? Moreover, I've never faced the chaos and panic of battle, never experienced the frantic urgency that inevitably clouds

decision-making. Perhaps it's naïve patriotism to assume 'something went wrong'. Maybe the Italian and German forces were simply superior and the Allies were outmatched.

Yet, my reasons for delving into this history have won out. First, I still have the analytical mindset of a consultant, eager to sift through information, seeking clarity and closure. More profoundly, there's a deeply personal motivation – my father endured these terrible events, and part of me needs to understand why.

Those seeking answers about the failure went to the highest levels of government. Here are Winston Churchill's thoughts in his note to the First Sea Lord:

SECRET.

PRIME MINISTER'S
PERSONAL MINUTE

FIRST LORD.
FIRST SEA LORD.

SERIAL No. M. 422/2

I was not favourably impressed by Admiral Harwood's account of the Tobruk operation, and I should be glad to receive a commentary from the Naval Staff upon it. Complication is inherent in all amphibious operations, but this seems to have been exceptionally complicated. We certainly suffered very heavy losses for little or no result. One would have thought such an enterprise would have played its part in a battle combination rather than as an isolated episode. On the other hand, no doubt they hoped to reduce the traffic ^{through} ~~to~~ Tobruk in the interval before the battle.

W.S.C.

28.9.42

It's interesting that Churchill mentions that the reason for failure is: 'Complication is inherent in all amphibious operations, but this seems to have been exceptionally complicated.*'

* Admiral Harwood was, at the time, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean. I will return to his involvement and the controversy about his leadership.

Even a cursory study of this operation reveals the vulnerability of relying on so many elements of the attack needing to succeed, in which even a small mistake early in the mission could prove fatal. In the months that followed, there was no shortage of people offering their opinions on what went wrong and why.

These extracts are from the review conducted by Captain Angus Dacres Nicholl, a senior Royal Navy officer. It's a good starting point for understanding what happened. At that time, he was the Admiralty's chief operations planner for overseas theatres (Director of Operations Division (Foreign)). The document dated 26 April 1943 is in the folder ADM1/12771 at the National Archives.

“ In the operation orders 'Outline Plan' paragraph 7 and 'Movement of forces' paragraph 15, it is laid down that if the operation was successful SIKH, ZULU and M.T.B.s would remain in the vicinity of, or actually inside, Tobruk harbour until p.m. Day 2. They were therefore for at least 6 daylight hours to remain 270 miles beyond our own front line outside range of even Beaufighter [a long-range fighter aircraft] protection and within 25 miles of at least eight enemy airdromes or landing grounds, depending largely on captured enemy A.A. guns for their defence.

It is highly doubtful that the methods used to instruct the destroyers to appear as sinking Italians could have fooled the Germans. Moreover, the A.A. guns crews would have been severely hampered in their own defence as a result of these measures.

CONCLUSIONS

Desperate causes require desperate remedies and A.M. 0209/21 July made a month before this planning of this operation started, shows that the Admiralty also considered the situation very serious [see memo at the end of this document].

The chances of survival of SIKH and ZULU were small. Even had the L.R.D.G. [Long Range Desert Force] failed to capture Marsa Sciause the ships and boats would have had a long run home without fighter protection.

The prize to be gained was largely moral. The physical disablement of a port is never very effective for long and it is considered that the risks outweighed the prize. In any case the loss of ZULU was not justified. There was no danger of COVENTRY falling into the hands of the enemy and no need therefore to delay ZULU's return to safety.

There appears to have been lack of forethought in preparing the M.T. B.s' [motor torpedo boats] part in the operation.

It is suggested that a letter should be sent to C in C Levant* along the lines of the attached draft.

* The role of Commander-in-Chief, Levant (C-in-C Levant) was a senior command position in the British Royal Navy, responsible for naval operations and coordination in the eastern Mediterranean.

Marsa Sciause is a small coastal inlet west of Tobruk and was used for covert landings, reconnaissance and infiltration operations.

This is the memo referred to in the previous note from the First Sea Lord, the senior naval officer and professional head of the Royal Navy. He would be responsible for operational command and strategy.

“

0209B/21

To C. in C • Mediterranean 21/7/42.

From Admiralty.

HUSH MOST SECRET.

Personal from First Sea Lord*.

Have you considered sending one destroyer to shoot up anything in Tobruk Harbour with H.E. [high explosive] at dawn, when it is known that a convoy has just arrived there.

Admittedly, this is a desperate measure, but the destruction of a convoy at the present time would, in my opinion, justify the possible loss of a destroyer.

I'd say this fits the adage of 'desperate times call for desperate measures'.

The following note was appended to Nicholl's memo and reveals the attitude of some in the Admiralty to critically appraising Operation Agreement – unfortunately, I don't know who it was from.

“

I do not like the draft letter. After the report has hung about in the Admiralty for four months it is now proposed to find fault with the C.-in-C.

Considered in two parts:

(i) Was the object worth the risk and was the plan sound?

It is difficult to give a fair opinion. The First Sea Lord's signal of 21st July showed how serious the situation was. After the event the general opinion is that it was not worth it; on the other hand it does seem to have given some relief to our hard pressed Army.

(ii) The actual carrying out of the operation.

The loss of SIKH was due to a lucky hit from a shore battery, ZULU and COVENTRY by bombs, due mainly to ineffective fighter protection so far from our own bases.

I think it is also too late to deal with D. D. o. D.(C). I would suggest N.F.A. but that the 'Lessons Learnt' should be brought out in 'Fighting Experience' and 'Coastal Force Periodical Review'.

That the report has 'hung about in the Admiralty for four months' suggests there was no

* On 21 July 1942, the First Sea Lord was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Alfred Dudley Pound.

urgency in understanding the failures of the operation and a reticence to apportion blame, especially to the Commander-in-Chief.

I am not sure that the desperate time calls for desperate action argument, justified by the benefit that 'it gave some relief' to the Eighth Army, is a robust argument to defend such a loss of life and equipment. I have found no evidence to support this argument. Consequently, Montgomery's preparations for the decisive Second Battle of El Alamein proceeded unaffected by the raid and 60 days afterwards were spectacularly successful.

The statement that the loss of HMS Sikh was a 'lucky hit' from a shore battery is manifestly wrong. There was no 'luck' involved: the ship was under massive attack from the shore and air. HMS Sikh's 'bad luck' was the severing of the tow line to the Zulu; however, at that stage the ship was already mortally wounded.

The statement regarding the insufficient air cover was neither controversial nor unique, having appeared repeatedly in other accounts of the battle. However, my cynical side suspects that blaming another service branch offered an easy way out – even if the criticism was justified.

The final sentence needs some decoding. The abbreviation DDOD(C) stands for Deputy Director of Operations Division (Coastal). This was the part of the Naval Staff responsible for Coastal Forces, including motor torpedo boats (MTBs), the fast attack craft. My guess is that the 'too late to deal with' comment refers to a controversial incident involving these craft. I haven't covered their role in Operation Agreement but, like everything else, it had awful problems, losing boats and many lives.

Admiral Henry Harwood was openly critical of Lieutenant Denis Jermain and his crews' performance on these boats. He reportedly stated, in anger, that it would have been better if none of them had returned. Jermain vehemently defended himself and his men, asserting that the failure was due not to cowardice but to poor planning, inadequate leadership decisions and impossible operational conditions imposed upon the MTBs.

Later to become Captain, Jermain received the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross)* and Bar and was mentioned in despatches five times. His anger at the accusation didn't fade with time and was mentioned in his obituary.

Harwood was effectively relieved of his command in December 1942, signalling the Admiralty's dissatisfaction with the outcomes under his leadership. After leaving operational command, he returned to Britain, where his naval responsibilities became more administrative and ceremonial. The book *Henry Harwood: Hero of the River Plate* by Peter Hore depicts a more positive picture of the man.

Returning to the document's suggestion that NFA (no further action) be taken about the unspecified issue, but that the 'Lessons Learnt' should be brought out in 'Fighting Experience' and 'Coastal Force Periodical Review', both were official Royal Navy internal publications for disseminating operational lessons and experience. I thought this sounded either dismissive or intended to bury the details of what happened.

I am left with the conclusion that the operation was formulated with a gung-ho attitude

* The DSC is one of the most prestigious decorations for naval gallantry and a 'Bar' signals that its holder has twice demonstrated conspicuous bravery under fire at sea – an honour shared by only a small fraction of DSC recipients.

that 'something must be done'. When things went awfully wrong, the reaction was to delay and to obfuscate the review results.

I also studied the detailed appraisal of what went wrong with Operation Agreement and the Allied operations at the National Archives (WO 201/745). It drew many conclusions and made multiple recommendations. These are the comments I found most interesting:

“ The detailed planning meetings should be kept as small as possible. In the case of AGREEMENT, the meetings were far too big, 10–12 Officers attending. Many too many were in on the operation from the start, while certain officers who should have been told were not informed.

There were numerous reports that the Axis forces were aware of the details of the attack. Some blamed the RAF air attack, which signalled that an invasion was imminent. That both Sikh and Zulu were seen with landing craft on their decks, in Haifa harbour, might have warned the Germans of an imminent operation. The official review was critical of the large numbers of people who knew about the operation. In the book *Tobruk: A Raid Too Far*, the author is more direct: 'Owing to the appalling lack of security in Cairo, Alexandria and Beirut, the Germans and Italians occupying Tobruk had known for some time about the planned raid.'

“ It seems that a raid of this kind is better undertaken by MTBs owing to their comparative invulnerability to air attack. If destroyers are used, it is essential that they keep sufficiently far from the shore to avoid close range AA and CD gunfire [I think this refers to coastal defence guns].

There were many comments about the vulnerability of destroyers to air attack, but this was the only one that suggested that MTBs should have been used instead:

“ The wireless communications between Force 'B' [the land-based soldiers attacking from the desert] and the MTBs was not satisfactory. It seems necessary that all MTBs should be on the same frequency as the land force with which they are co-operating, as well as being on their normal Naval frequency.

Throughout the operation, the inability of the various forces to communicate with each other was a recurring problem. This still occurs today, even with our advanced technology, when different forces must work together.

“ The use of pyrotechnic signals needs more careful examination. In the original planning, it was decided against the use of pyrotechnic signals on any great scale due to the difficulty in distinguishing between our own and those of the enemy. This opinion was borne out by the confusion that arose.

I didn't find any explanation of why the decision was reversed to use this type of signalling. My guess is it was the best that could be devised, and it was decided it was better than nothing – a fatal decision.

“ It seems possible that Force 'A' [the Royal Marines on Sikh and Zulu] may have landed at the WADI EL AUDA instead of MARSА MREIRA. This raises the question as to whether the light signals displayed by the Folbot party were adequate. The destroyers did, however, report seeing the white signal being flashed.

This was a strange comment, since it was known that the signal transmitted from the submarine (HMS Taku) said 'beach unmarked'. There was confusion about this signal – was it sent? Was it received? As we will see in the section 'Aftermath', when a more comprehensive report was published this issue remained unclear.

What was conspicuously missing was any criticism about the craft used by the Marines to travel ashore. A survivor from the Sikh (Able Seaman Arthur Collins) said of these craft that they were 'flat-bottomed landing craft knocked up out of plywood sheets nailed together by Arab workmen which in the event proved unseaworthy'. A picture of German soldiers inspecting the craft confirms that description – the photo below, taken from Peter Smith's *Massacre at Tobruk*.

Colonel Unwin, Royal Marines, was of a similar mind:

“ I was something of a yachtsman, and in my opinion, the landing craft that were constructed for our use in this operation were a disgrace, badly designed and poorly built. They did not stand up to the conditions of sea and weather that night and contributed much to our failure to get all the Royal Marines ashore.



The most critical comments were made in Gordon Landsborough's *Tobruk Commando*:

“ They were flat-bottomed, blunted things made of plywood, abortions in the sight of any seamen. They had been made locally, in Haifa, by men who could have known little about boat-building and certainly had no pride in craftsmanship; for everything was crude, unfinished, with nails protruding everywhere, and cracks already showing behind splintered wood.

How is it possible that none of these documents criticised these craft as not being fit for purpose? It was not until a further report, published eight months after the sinking of the Sikh, that their role in the operation's failure was officially recognised. I will return to this in the final section, 'Aftermath'.

At the close of 1942, Admiral Harwood sent his account of why Operation Agreement failed, to the most senior members of the Admiralty. The document is in the Appendix. This is what he said about HMS Sikh:

“ Our subsequent failure to exploit this surprise was due to the following causes:-

H.M. Ships SIKH and ZULU closed too far in shore while landing their assault parties, and thus exposed themselves to heavy fire from the shore batteries.

[He also blamed the failure of the beach marking and that the young officers in the MTB flotillas were a little too untrained and inexperienced.]

I very much regret the loss of H.M. Ships COVENTRY, SIKH and ZULU. I do not criticise the gallant attempt of H.M. ZULU to tow H.M.S. SIKH out of range of the shore batteries, but the fact remains that had she sunk H.M.S. SIKH as soon as the latter's condition was realised, she might herself have been saved.

I dread to think what Captain Micklethwait's reaction would have been to this report? I expect he did eventually get to read it, but not until after the war, because he was in a German PoW camp and was not released until 1945.

Slowly the truth about Operation Agreement emerged, as we will see in the next section.

AFTERMATH

On 14 September 1942, morale among the German and Italian troops stationed at Tobruk must have soared. They had successfully repelled a multipronged attack, inflicted heavy damage upon the Allied forces and dealt a severe blow to their enemy's morale, all without sustaining significant casualties.

There is a nine-minute YouTube video (see Sources) showing the Italians' account of the operation. It's very difficult to follow the storyline, but it gives an excellent feel for the desolate place Tobruk was. This is the text accompanying the video:

“ 13–14 September 1942 – The British attempt an amphibious landing at Tobruk but are defeated by the Italian 1st ‘San Marco’ Marines Regiment & Italian 152 mm coastal guns (not German 88 mm guns) that sink the British destroyer ‘Sikh’. Italian fighter-bombers from 13° Gruppo sink the British destroyer ‘Zulu’. About 300 British are killed with the Royal Marines reporting the loss 81 men, & the Royal Navy admitting the loss of another 217 men. Axis losses are fifteen Italians and one German killed and 43 Italians and 7 Germans wounded. A total of 576 British attackers are captured. Some 30 supporting LRDG [Long Range Desert Group] commandos are also captured and appear in this newsreel. (*Giornale Di Guerra* No. 285).

The Allied casualty figures are exaggerated; however, there is no question that they far exceeded those of the Axis forces.

The celebration didn’t last for long. Just 60 days after HMS Sikh was lost and my dad captured, Tobruk was back in Allied hands (11/Nov/42).

The Allies launched their long-planned offensive at El Alamein with a massive nighttime artillery barrage, only 39 days after Operation Agreement. In the early hours of 24 October, infantry and engineers advanced, cutting two corridors through the Axis minefields for armoured units to exploit. The British Eighth Army attacked on a broad front and, by morning, they had secured key objectives.

On 4 November Rommel, now hopelessly outnumbered and low on fuel, defied Hitler’s ‘stand and die’ instruction and began retreating westward, leaving Tobruk undefended. A more detailed timeline of this period is in the Appendix (‘The timeline for recapturing Tobruk’).

There was an inevitability about the victory at El Alamein. The Allied forces had an overwhelming advantage in terms of troops and tanks. Perhaps at the time, this was not so certain, and weakening the German forces by attacking Tobruk was justified. If Montgomery ever wanted or supported the operation, he never publicly expressed it.

John Sadler, in his book *Operation Agreement: Jewish Commandos and the Raid on Tobruk*, said:

“ Operation Agreement and its outcome was very quickly overtaken by events. Montgomery had been careful to distance himself from the raid, though he was by no means slow in adding his powerful voice to the wailing chorus of mourners when it failed.

There was no mention of it in his autobiography, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery*. And all that is said about it in Andrew Roberts’ biography of Montgomery (*The Storm of War*) is that: ‘It was badly compromised from the start.’

The Allies were eventually victorious, Tobruk was recaptured, so I can understand the reaction in trying to forget about the recent failure of Operation Agreement.

It was eight months before the next document appeared in the Admiralty files (29/May/1943). The Commander-in-Chief, Levant, sent a note to the most senior members of

the Admiralty. It was framed as a continuation of Admiral Harwood's document: 'in the light of information from repatriated officers of H.M. Ships Sikh and Zulu'.

It was now recognised that the RAF air attack had signalled that the landings were imminent, that the beach marking lights had failed and that the landing craft were not fit for purpose – worse still, their deficiencies had been recognised and ignored.

Stories from repatriated sailors started appearing in the newspapers during March 1943. This one from the *Western Daily News* (24/Mar/43) is astonishingly honest about the high casualties and the belief that the enemy had been forewarned about the attack:



So, having dissected the details about the tragic days in September 1942, what are my feelings? Before answering, I will quote the words from three authors who have studied Operation Agreement far more than I have.

David Mitchelhill-Green, author of *Tobruk 1942*:

“ It was a costly British fiasco. Churchill, Field Marshal Montgomery and Admiral Cunningham [appointed First Sea Lord in October 1943] all selectively ignored the event in their memoirs. A humiliating failure, the raid ended instead with some 600 British prisoners being taken, and ten gunboats and the destroyers Zulu and Sikh and the Coventry being sunk. German and Italian losses were comparatively light: sixteen killed and fifty wounded.

Gordon Landsborough, author of *Tobruk Commando*:

“ Quite why Operation Agreement went sour is still a matter of debate amongst historians. It would be fair to say, however, that the balance of evidence from German records alone indicates that the unusual strength and duration of the air attack on Tobruk on 13 September 1942 was the major contributing factor for the alertness of German rear area defence units on that night, and that preparations for a ‘landing alert’ signal were made.

Peter Smith, author of *Massacre at Tobruk*:

“ All the bright hopes had been dashed. Many of the brave young men who had set off in such confident and determined fashion a few days before now either lay dashed to pieces on the rocky coast, face-up under the harsh desert sun or herded together in a dusty stinking prisoner-of-war camp. Their cause was a hopeless one.

Men in the prime of life, trained and fit, ready and able to give their lives if necessary, had been wasted by a combination of sloppy preparation, indifferent organisation and downright disgraceful security.

All death is waste, but if in war death has to be a price to be paid, then such a death may be a relatively more desirable one for a warrior. But the bulk of those did not die thus; they were drowned within a few minutes of leaving the destroyers. They had no time even to glimpse their enemy, use their weapons, even fend for themselves. Jerry-built boats pulled apart and the packed men in them drowned in minutes. It was a bad death, a useless death, and a wasted death and to a part it was self-inflicted through haste, poor craftsmanship and the old British habit of trying to ‘muddle through’.

I am sure my views are influenced by knowing my dad survived the experience. If I were a close relative of one of those who had died, I would be much more critical.

There were numerous reasons why the operation should have been abandoned. There was a significant ocean swell, as HMS Taku discovered, yet it messaged saying the landing was possible. The landing craft were manifestly wrong for the job, which had been identified during training. Gaining an advantage by surprise was never going to happen. Reason after reason why the operation failed. But, should it ever have been launched? Would its success have materially changed the chances of the Eighth Army’s victory at El Alamein? There is not a jot of evidence to say that it would.

I keep wondering what my father would have thought if he’d read this essay. I imagine him saying that war is a terrible thing, that mistakes inevitably happen. That in such circumstances, doing your best is all anyone can ask. Perhaps this stoic acceptance says more about his generation – maybe it’s something one can only truly understand after experiencing battle firsthand. Regardless, the next phase of his war was about to begin: captivity in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp.

APPENDIX

Naval Operation Orders (the outline plan of operation)

National Archives ADM 1/12771 Actions with the enemy Operation Agreement report and Board of Enquiry

Most secret and Personal.

- Land Force B will seize and hold Mersa Sciausc* inlet after dark on Day One, and work westwards, capturing Flak Batteries on South Shore of harbour.
- Bombing attack on town and North Shore of harbour by RAF commences at 21.30/D One and lasts till 03.40/D Two.
- Force C will be landed in Mersa Sciausc at 02.30 from MTBs of Force C (Naval) to reinforce Force B.
- Force A lands from destroyers [Sikh and Zulu] in Mersa Mreira at 03.40/Day 2 and seizes coastal defences and flack batteries on the north shore of Tobruk harbour.
- After bombing ceases at 03.40, MTBs enter harbour and attack shipping in the Eastern end, thereafter retiring or taking cover until harbour area is in our hands.
- When harbour guns are captured, destroyers enter harbour.
- All forces remain in Tobruk, destroying port facilities until pm Day two, when some of the land forces re-embark and return to Alexandria in destroyers and MTBs.
- Certain land forces that can be equipped with motor transport will proceed westwards in Cyrenaica for further operations.

Description of the damage caused to HMS Sikh by the Italian guns

Taken from *Tobruk Commando* by Gordon Landsborough.

A big shell had landed in the forced lubrication system of the main engine gearing. The steering had also gone. Another shell had hit them forward and started a fire in the forecastle. It had also hit some ammunition stowed forward for 'A' gun, and the blast came down into the messdecks and through a passage into which the returning marines were crowding.

He [a member of Sikh's crew] saw the marines – those fine, healthy young commandos of a few moments before – go writhing in agony before the searing heat of the blast. Their bodies protected the Sikh seaman.

The alleyway and mess decks were a shambles of burnt and dying men. Worse, the fire forward had trapped many of the second flight of commandos, and it was impossible

* Mersa Sciausc inlet is a small coastal inlet located approximately 3 miles southeast of Tobruk. Mersa Mreira is a small coastal inlet located near Tobruk. Day One was Sunday, 13 September 1942.

to get through to them. Fire parties were being organised, and the wounded were being dragged out of the flames. But the ack-ack and coast defence batteries ashore were firing as fast as they could load at the crippled, almost motionless Sikh. She was a sitting target. Her director-tower was next hit, and now her guns had to fire independently.

An edited version of the *Admiralty Mediterranean War Diary* covering the period of Operation Agreement

Saturday, 12 September 1942

Operation AGREEMENT – Preliminary Movements

A combined operation under the command of Captain (D), Twenty second Flotilla to destroy shipping and port facilities in Tobruk Harbour

Force A:

H.M. Ships SIKH and ZULU were sailed from Haifa to Alexandria arriving after dark. Both ships were completed with fuel and extra ammunition. The strictest secrecy was maintained in order not to disclose the presence of the Royal Marines

Force C:

Eighteen M.T.B.s and three Fairmiles [a type of motor launch] were sailed from Alexandria at dusk with 150 support troops to take part in Operation AGREEMENT. One M.T.B. was forced to return with engine defects, her troops being transferred to an M.L.

Force D:

H.M. Ships COVENTRY, DULVERTON, HURSLEY, BELVOIR, CROOME, and HERO sailed at 2000 from Port Said to rendezvous with Captain (D), Twenty Second Destroyer Flotilla off Alexandria.

Sunday, 13 September 1942

Operation AGREEMENT

Captain (D), Twenty Second Destroyer Flotilla in SIKH with ZULU, HURWORTH, BEAUFORT, EXMOOR, and ALDENHAM were sailed from Alexandria at 06.00 to rendezvous with COVENTRY and the remainder of the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla.

Monday, 14 September 1942

Operation AGREEMENT

Intentions:

H.M. Ships SIKH and ZULU, with a force of 350 Royal Marines, were to land north of Tobruk harbour and the M.T.B.s with 150 support troops for our land forces were to land in an inlet outside the south end of Tobruk Harbour.

2. On completion of the demolitions, the forces would withdraw to the destroyers, who would spend the day inside Tobruk covered by the enemy gun positions manned by us.

Sequence of Events:

3. Our forces proceeding to the westward were not attacked by enemy aircraft, though an enemy reconnaissance did sight COVENTRY and her Fifth Destroyer Flotilla before SIKH and ZULU had joined.

4. During the night, the military force, which had proceeded overland from Kufra, penetrated Tobruk perimeter and at 0120 reported that they had captured the gun positions at Marsa Umm Es Sciausc, an inlet outside the south end of Tobruk Harbour. Unless this objective had been attained, the operation would have had to be discontinued.

5. As cover for the operation, a heavy air attack on Tobruk took place from 2130 to 0300. Many fires were started and several particularly large explosions took place.

6. At 0130, TAKU reported that the weather was suitable for landings by Assault Craft at Mersa Mreira. The landing of the Beach Marking Party in Folbots failed due to swell.

7. Only two of the seventeen M.T.B.s succeeded in landing their troops; both of these grounded and one was unable to get off and had to be destroyed. Many of the M.T.B.s

attempted to enter Tobruk Harbour, but failed owing to the heavy gun opposition and searchlights.

8. At 0400 destroyers landed their first flight of about 200 at Mersa Mreira, and this force got ashore unopposed, later they met heavy opposition. It appears possible that the assault craft landed in the wrong bay and were wrecked, probably losing direction as a result of the heavy fires ashore. They did not return for the second flight. SIKH closed to one mile off the shore to locate them. At this close range, SIKH was sighted and at 0530 was engaged by shore batteries, her steering gear and starboard engine being put out of action. ZULU took her in tow, but further hits parted the tow. At 0800, Captain (D), Twenty Second Destroyer Flotilla ordered ZULU to part company and return to Alexandria. SIKH was last seen close to the shore, heavily on fire and being repeatedly hit, but firing all guns. The sinking of SIKH and enforced departure of ZULU completed wrecked the withdrawal plans.

9. The Royal Marines fought for some time North of Tobruk town and advanced towards the harbour as intended but eventually they must have run out of ammunition. Some explosions as of demolitions were seen and heard on shore after daylight. The majority of SIKH's crew and the remaining Royal Marines managed to get ashore and are prisoners of war.

10. The Military forces are known to have held the area south end of the harbour until 0600 on the 14th when the M.T.B.s left.

11. The latter were repeatedly attacked by high level and dive-bombers; apart from a few near misses they came through unscathed.

12. At 0900 COVENTRY and the Fifth Destroyer Flotilla were ordered to return to the westward to support ZULU, who was retiring to the north east at high speed. ALDENHAM and BELVOIR were detached to Alexandria to fuel. The M.T.B.s retired in groups of four or less towards Alexandria.

13. COVENTRY was hit by enemy aircraft at 1140 and became heavily on fire. At 1213, she was abandoned. DULVERTON, EXMOOR, HURWORTH took off survivors and proceeded to Alexandria. [N.B. pencil notation: EXMOOR and HURWORTH scored out and BEAUFORT added with a question mark.] CROOME and HURSLEY tried to sink her by depth charges and gunfire. ZULU, after having avoided some eighty attacks joined CROOME and HURSLEY at 1515 and sank COVENTRY with torpedoes in position 32-45N, 28-17E.

14. ZULU was hit at 1615 by the last bomb in the last attack and disabled. HURSLEY took her in tow, but at 2154 she sank in position 32-00N, 28-56E.

15. At the same time as the attack on Tobruk L.R.D.G. forces with a small naval demolition party were to attack shipping and block Benghazi harbour.

Operation M.G. SEVEN

16. As a diversion to Operation AGREEMENT a bombardment of the Daba area was carried out by DIDO at 0001 for thirty minutes. 350 rounds were fired, 50% hits being in the main target area. JERVIS, JAVELIN, PALADIN, PAKENHAM, and KELVIN escorted DIDO. The entire force returned to Port Said at 1530 without incident.

Tuesday, 15 September 1942

Operation AGREEMENT

By 1500, twelve M.T.B.s and one M.L. had returned to harbour.

2. The following ships were lost during the operation:

H.M.S. COVENTRY

H.M.S. SIKH

H.M.S. ZULU

M.T.B.s 308, 310, 312, 314

M.L.s 352 and 353

Slightly damaged:

H.M.S. CROOME and M.L. 354

The majority of the M.T.B.s suffered minor damage as a result of these operations.

Casualties in H.M. Ships were:

H.M.S. COVENTRY Killed and Missing 3 officers, 61 ratings

H.M.S. ZULU Killed and Missing 4 officers and 34 ratings

M.T.B.s and M.L.s Killed and Missing 8 officers and 41 ratings

H.M.S. SIKH Killed and Missing 2 officers and 20 ratings. Some 200 captured

Admiral Harwood's report about Operation Agreement

This Admiralty report, designated Mediterranean 4513/00251/25, was issued on 15 December 1942.

SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships* the accompanying report on Operation 'Agreement'

2. The operation was planned to coincide with a land attack on Benghazi from Kufra, (Operation 'Bigamy'), and to be followed by the capture of the Gialo Oasis (Operation 'Nicety'). The object of operations 'Agreement' and 'Bigamy' was to cause the maximum possible dislocation to the lines of communication supplying the enemy's army in North Africa.

3. The setting in which these operations were conceived was that which followed our retreat to the Alamein Line. It was felt that everything possible must be done to give our Eighth Army the chance of an early strike back. From a Naval point of view, the enemy's hold on the North African coast was intolerable. Convoys could not be run to Malta, and our few Bases in the Eastern Mediterranean were exposed to short-range bomber operations. Great risks were, therefore, justified when undertaking any operation which had a chance of relieving the situation.

4. It was known that the Panzer Armee had been halted more by enemy exhaustion and supply difficulties than by our own depleted Eighth Army whose reinforcements, although they were arriving in Egypt, had not been formed or trained in desert conditions. Successful raids on Tobruk and Benghazi might therefore have had a decisive effect on events to come.

5. Judged by direct results these operations failed to achieve their object, but indirect results are now known to have been considerable. Enemy forces were diverted from the El Alamein position, to the coastal sectors, enemy reinforcements intended for Africa were diverted, and the enemy expended much valuable air effort and fuel in precautionary measures generally.

6. During the first stage of the operation there was every reason to hope that success would be achieved. At 0200 on the morning of the 14th all our forces had arrived unobserved on the scene of operations. The long-range Desert Group ashore had signalled that they were in position and ready for our landing parties. We had, therefore, achieved complete surprise.

7. Our subsequent failure to exploit this surprise was due to the following causes:-

- (a) There were failures in the beach marking arrangements, from numerous causes.
- (b) H.M. Ships SIKH and ZULU closed too far in shore while landing their assault parties, and thus exposed themselves to heavy fire from the shore batteries.

* 'Their Lordships' would have included the First Lord of the Admiralty (a civilian, usually a Cabinet minister), the First Sea Lord (Chief of Naval Staff) and the Second, Fourth and Fifth Sea Lords.

(c) The young officers in the Motor Torpedo Boat Flotillas were a little too untrained and inexperienced to take full advantage of unexpected opportunities. In the light of all that happened, they had a very difficult task, but there is no doubt that chances were missed.

8. I very much regret the loss of H.M. Ships COVENTRY, SIKH and ZULU. I do not criticise the gallant attempt of H.M. ZULU to tow H.M.S. SIKH out of range of the shore batteries, but the fact remains that had she sunk H.M.S. SIKH as soon as the latter's condition was realised, she might herself have been saved. It was a great misfortune that, after surviving the fire of shore batteries and almost continuous bombing for about seven hours, Commander White lost his ship through a hit by the last bomb of the last attack of the day.

9. As little was known of the course of events at Tobruk after the operation this report was delayed in case some of the military forces, who were known to have escaped, might return and be able to throw some light on events. Two reports have since been received. The first from military officers who escaped and the second from one man of H.M.S. SIKH, who was torpedoed and rescued by a British submarine whilst being evacuated to Italy in an Italian ship. Both these reports are, however, inconclusive.

10. The circumstances in which H.M.S. COVENTRY and H.M.S. ZULU were lost are being investigated and separate reports will be forwarded in due course.
Office of Commander-in-Chief,
Mediterranean Station.

ADMIRAL.

Report by Commander-in-Chief, Levant (29/May/1943)*

Office of Commander-in-Chief,
LEVANT.
29th May, 1943.

THE SECRETARY OF THE ADMIRALTY

OPERATION 'AGREEMENT'

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships a further report on Operation 'Agreement' in continuation of Mediterranean 4513/00251/25 of 15th December, 1942, in the light of information from repatriated officers of H.M. Ships SIKH and ZULU.

* Ralph Leatham, a Royal Navy Admiral, was assigned as Commander-in-Chief, Levant, for a short tenure.

2. H.M.S. SIKH received the success signal at about 0200 on 14th September, 1942. H.M. Submarine TAKU's signal was also received at about this time and its meaning seems to have caused doubt in the mind of Captain (D), 22nd Destroyer Flotilla, whether he should carry out the operation, especially as there was a heavy swell running at the time. However, after conferring with Lieutenant Colonel E.H.M. Unwin, R.M., he decided to do so.

The following points are brought out by these accounts:-

- (a) Though some surprise was, in the main, achieved, the unusually heavy air raid and events on the south shore caused the defences to be fully manned by the time the assault on the north shore landed.
- (b) The lack of beach marking lights on which too much reliance had been placed had serious results, as the landing craft were unable to find the correct beaches.
- (c) In a small operation of this nature, it is essential that there should be enough craft to land the whole force, as only a few of the first flight boats are likely to return, if the landing is opposed. The second flight should be ready to follow up the first, either to the timetable or on receipt of a success signal.
- (d) Compasses must be used and relied on in landing craft. Personnel in charge of tows and coxswains must be trained not to alter course, even when fired upon.
- (e) The danger of using coloured leading lights was well illustrated. If lights are used, they must be unmistakable.
- (f) Training must be realistic enough to bring out faults in material, and these must be rectified. In this operation the weakness of the painters on the L.A.L.C's* was discovered in practice but was not rectified.
- (g) The power L.A.L.C's were underpowered and the dumb L.A.L.C's too unwieldy and most unsuitable for landing men fully armed and equipped on a coast where opposition might be expected.

It is clear that those who succeeded in reaching the shore behaved with great determination and gallantry in a hopeless situation. No less gallantly did the company of H.M.S. SIKH fight their ship to the last.

Though the planning and execution of this operation have been criticised, it must be borne in mind that the circumstances in which it was conceived and took place are not easily appreciated now that Rommel's army has been routed. The situation at the time was grave indeed, for the fate of Egypt and the Suez Canal hung in the balance. Ralph Leatham, ADMIRAL.

The timeline for recapturing Tobruk

* LALC refers to the small boats used to transfer the Marines. It probably means light assault landing craft. The term 'painters' refers to the ropes of the landing craft – it has nothing to do with those decorating the craft!

September 1942

13–14 September: Operation Agreement – the assault ends in disaster.

21 September: Exhausted and ill, Field Marshal Rommel hands over command of the Italian German Panzer Army *Afrika* to General Georg Stumme and flies to Germany for medical treatment. This leadership change leaves the Axis forces under Stumme's command during the crucial weeks before the impending battle.

October 1942

Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army, heavily reinforced with new American-supplied tanks, guns and ammunition, rapidly builds an overwhelming advantage in strength.

To conceal these preparations, the Allies employ a large-scale deception plan (dummy supply dumps, fake tanks and camouflage) to mislead Axis intelligence about the timing and location of the offensive. Meanwhile, Rommel's replacement strengthens the defensive line at El Alamein with minefields but faces critical supply shortages, particularly in fuel.

23 October: Just 39 days after HMS Sikh sank, Montgomery unleashes the long-planned offensive at El Alamein with a massive nighttime artillery barrage. In the early hours of 24 October, Allied infantry and engineers advance, cutting two corridors through the Axis minefields for armoured units to exploit. The British Eighth Army attacks on a broad front, and by morning they have secured key objectives.

Allied forces numbered approximately 195,000 troops with over 1,000 tanks and 750 aircraft, while Rommel commanded only 110,000 men with 500 tanks and 700 aircraft.

25 October: General Stumme dies of a heart attack under the stress of battle. On learning of his death, Rommel rushes back to North Africa and resumes command, arriving to find his forces heavily engaged and on the defensive.

November 1942

2 November: The Eighth Army launches a concentrated final push to break the Axis lines. In ferocious fighting, Montgomery's forces punch through, shattering the German–Italian armoured divisions at El Alamein. British tanks pour through the defences, forcing the Axis into an increasingly untenable position.

4 November: Rommel, now hopelessly outnumbered and low on fuel, recognising the hopeless situation, defies Hitler's 'stand and die' instruction and begins retreating westward. After 12 days of combat (23 Oct–4 Nov), the Second Battle of El Alamein

ends in a major Allied victory. The Axis army is decisively defeated and begins withdrawing from Egypt, ending the Axis threat to Egypt and the Suez Canal.

8 November: As Rommel retreats, the Allies open a second front in North Africa. American and British forces, under Lt. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, land in French Morocco and Algeria, trapping the Axis forces in a vice, compelling the Axis high command to further pull back and redeploy resources.

11 November: Pursued by Montgomery's advancing Eighth Army, the last Axis units retreat out of Egyptian territory. The Allied pursuit continues west into Libya, liberating each Axis-held locale in succession. Winston Churchill declares: 'Before Alamein, we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.'

13 November: The British Eighth Army reclaims Tobruk unopposed, securing a critical lifeline that would remain firmly in Allied hands for the remainder of the war.

SOURCES

YouTube video

The Fall of Tobruk 1942: Battlestorm

Provides an excellent account of how Tobruk was captured

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nl6vGELqXYQ>

Operation Agreement: Italians sink HMS Sikh, capture 600 British commandos!!!

An account of Operation Agreement from the Italian perspective

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHORCRjUv84>

Web sources

Materials available online from the National Archives:

<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/the-battles-of-tobruk-1941-42-part-one/>

<https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/the-battles-of-tobruk-1941-42-part-two/>

The Second World War Admiralty War Diaries

The official log of events for 1–15 September 1942. This is a long document that contains the Royal Navy's operations in all theatres of war and is best viewed by searching for 'Sikh'.

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8a7xjb>. Originals of these diaries can be accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/sna73dck>

The Admiralty Naval Staff Mediterranean Fleet War Diary (September 1942). Provides details of the diary kept for operations in the Mediterranean: <https://tinyurl.com/5awxuwyp>

Operation Agreement: Victory Over Allied Commando Forces (2013). A succinct account of the different elements of the operation: <https://tinyurl.com/4xu2kbxz>

Names and ranks of casualties of the Royal and Dominion Navies during WW2. Researched and compiled by Don Kindell: <https://tinyurl.com/4p82j4ck>

Books

Massacre at Tobruk: The Story of Operation Agreement, Peter C. Smith. Detailed account of the offensive from the perspective of the attackers and defenders

Tobruk: A Raid Too Far, David Jefferson. An in-depth military investigation into the raid and why it failed

Operation Agreement: Jewish Commandos and the Raid on Tobruk, John Sadler. The role of the Special Interrogation Group in the battle

Disaster at Tobruk, Francesco Mattesini. A view of the battle from the Italian perspective

Tobruk Commando: The Raid to Destroy Rommel's Base, Gordon Landsborough. The story of the commandos who attacked Tobruk from the desert

Alamein: War Without Hate, Colin Smith and John Bierman. A story of how the two sides chased each other back and forth across the unforgiving North African landscape

The Storm of War, Andrew Roberts. Biography of Field-Marshal Montgomery

The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery. Autobiography of Field-Marshal Montgomery

The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. IV: The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa, Major General J.S.O. Playfair. The official history of WW2 published by HMSO

Operation Agreement: Commando Raid on Tobruk, G.R. Worledge. A personal account of the commando raid

Lost Voices of The Royal Navy: Vivid Eyewitness Accounts of Life in the Royal Navy from 1914-1945, Max Arthur. Personal account of the last days of HMS Sikh

Oral history about HMS Sikh

Interview with R.G. Reading – recorded 1981, Imperial War Museum, Catalogue #80004797
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80004797>

National Archives records

ADM 1/12771

Actions with the enemy Operation Agreement report and Board of Enquiry

Accounts of the sinking of HMS Sikh. Contributions from:

Able Seaman Collins, HMS Sikh (14/Nov/42)

Commander R.T. White, HMS Sikh (17/Sep/42)

First Lieutenant Sharp, HMS Sikh

Commander from HMS Nile

Captain A.D. Nicholl

Officers repatriated from HMS Sikh and HMS Zulu

WO 201/745

Lessons learnt

Notes and reports on individual raids including Operation Agreement and Operation Nicety

ADM 1/30266

Awards to officers and men of HMS Sikh

