REPATRIATION TO THE UK

On Sunday, 20 June 1943, an ocean liner quietly docked on the Clyde, carrying 862 British naval officers and ratings — including my dad. After 51 days at sea, having covered 13,500 nautical miles, they were finally home. Only a few months earlier, they had been in Italian captivity. This essay is the intriguing tale behind their remarkable return: the extraordinary circumstances under which they were exchanged for an equal number of Italian prisoners.

The word 'repatriation' entered my vocabulary at an early age. I didn't understand what it meant but I knew my dad was somehow *repatriated* from his Italian PoW camp, returning home via a circuitous route, including Rio de Janeiro. He was convinced that the terms of his release meant he was barred from returning to a frontline fighting role, which explained his final phase of the war, disposing of sea mines.

Why did I never ask him why he was one of the lucky few selected for freedom? Why did a journey from Italy go via Rio de Janeiro? What happened during the long voyage home? How did my mum and sister react when he walked through the door? So many unanswered questions.

History books briefly mention the exchange of naval prisoners with Italy, but none provide any details about why it occurred, who was involved, the terms of release and the controversy it caused. Documents in the National Archives allowed me to tell this extraordinary and, at times, amusing story. These men were the lucky ones; tens of thousands of the Allied prisoners who remained in Italy were destined for prisons in Germany.

The tale begins on 3 April 1941 when three Italian destroyers Pantera, Tigre and Battisti were scuttled in Saudi Arabian territorial waters. 'Scuttled' is a lovely sounding word meaning to intentionally sink the vessel.

Why would Italy sink its own warships, and what the hell were they doing near Saudi Arabia? Before researching this essay, I had never heard of Africa Orientale Italiana (Italian East Africa; ROI), Italy's colonies in East Africa – Eritrea, Italian Somaliland (now part of Somalia) and Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Another example of my ignorance of WW2 history. In 1939, their combined population was 15–20 million; now it's over 150 million and associated with famine, civil unrest and hundreds of thousands of deaths.

In 1941 the countries were part of the Italian empire, which was threatened by British and Commonwealth forces, who were rapidly advancing, capturing key ports and disrupting supply lines. The Italian Navy was based at a port on the Eritrea coast (Massawa) on the Red Sea. The only practical way it could be maintained was via the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. By April 1941 it was threatened by Allied forces. Without support, Italy's warships were trapped. Theoretically, they could have escaped via the Indian Ocean, but that was nigh impossible in practice.

The map shows the area referred to in this essay, in case your knowledge of geography is as bad as mine.

The Italian Navy made one final grand gesture, a daring attack on Port Suez and Port Sudan that failed disastrously, with most of the ships sunk. The assault had been anticipated, the defences reinforced, and sheer bad luck sealed their fate. The three surviving vessels, Pantera, Tigre and Battisti, escaped into Saudi Arabian territorial waters, where they were scuttled. Since Saudi Arabia remained neutral during WW2, this prevented the British from recovering the ships and offered a safe haven for their crews.

I wonder if my dad read this small item in the *Daily Express* on Saturday, 5 April 1941:

NOW THERE IS ONE

Italians scuttle two destroyers

Express Naval Reporter

CREWS of the big Italian destroyers Pantera and Tigre scuttled their ships in the Red Sea yesterday, leaving Mussolini with an Eritrea fleet of only one destroyer and two torpedo boats.

The article implied that one remaining warship was operational. This was an error since the Battisti had been scuttled several days before. Other sources provide a detailed account of the final days of these three destroyers and what happened to their survivors.

These sinkings occurred while he was still a civilian, setting in motion a complex diplomatic negotiation that took a little under two years to finalise. On Sunday, 20 March 1943 the Italians released my dad and 861 other British naval officers and ratings (the most junior class of seaman).

UNWANTED GUESTS

Saudi Arabia was responsible for the internment, not imprisonment, of the three ships' 700 Italian sailors. This meant guaranteeing their safety and providing housing and sustenance until the end of hostilities. With oil production still in its infancy, the country was poor,

relying on agriculture and the taxes collected from Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca. It's hard to believe now, but Saudi Arabia was then an undeveloped nation.

Initially, the sailors were housed in partially completed army barracks in Jeddah. After a month, they were relocated to two islands, within 3 miles of the coast – Abu Saad and Al-Wasita – previously used as quarantine stations for Hajj pilgrims affected by the plague. The accommodation comprised a mix of brick buildings and tents, creating harsh, unpleasant conditions. Medical facilities were non-existent and the climate was hot and humid. Although they were not being held as prisoners, their existence sounds frightful.

This is how one of the detainees described his experience after landing in Saudi:

> Crew survivors marched through the desert to Jeddah, then interned initially at Chishla Barracks (primitive conditions, malaria-ridden), then moved to El Wasta and Abu Saad islands, former quarantine sites for Mecca pilgrims. Life was extremely harsh: intense heat (50C), poor sanitation, monotonous diet (rice and goat), inadequate medical care, limited resources, and isolation.
>
> Internment lasted nearly two years. To maintain morale, Italian naval discipline was maintained, with work details, sports, education, theatre, crafts, fishing, and gardening to occupy their time. Several prisoners died from preventable illnesses. Escape attempts led to increased guard presence.

Over the following months, the number of Saudi 'guests' increased with the arrival of approximately a hundred Italian and German refugees from Italian East Africa. Although the internees worked to improve their conditions, exposure to tropical diseases, particularly malaria, took a heavy toll. Relations between the men and the Saudis were generally good, but the presence of the Italians placed a strain on the country's limited food supplies. They posed no immediate threat, but they were a burden that Saudi Arabia was eager to discharge.

The extent of this burden was forcefully expressed in a memo (21/Oct/41) to the Foreign Office by the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, Francis Hugh William Stonehewer-Bird – 'our man in Jeddah':

> Ibn Saud [the Amir: founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its first king] has sent me personal message begging for the earliest possible solution as 'one day of these individuals' presence is as a year'. Italian Minister is constantly badgering His Majesty with protests and demands – the latest, for erection of a prison. They are consuming the bulk of small supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, thus causing grave discontent among the local population. If during the pilgrimage serious epidemic occurred, Italians would have to [be] moved from quarantine island to the mainland and would, in Ibn Saud's opinion, there constitute a possible menace.
>
> The only solution which Yusuf Yasin [a prominent Saudi statesman, diplomat and adviser during the formative years of the country] – who brought me the message – could suggest was that, with His Majesty's

> Government's approval, internees should be transported to Italian territory in a neutral ship. I was sure that His Majesty's Government could not agree to this, except perhaps on basis of exchange, as with very few exceptions the men had been combatants capable, at least on paper, of fighting again. I said that I would suggest the possibility of exchange, but that even if this were in principle possible felt it might be difficult to induce Hitler to agree to handing back more than 800 officers and men in exchange for sorry individuals interned here.

It took the Foreign Office a little over a week to reply (30/Oct/41) to this suggestion:

> We fully understand that these Italian internees are a source of embarrassment to Ibn Saud and of anxiety to yourself. We do not at present see how we can help, as there can be no question of our agreeing to repatriation of combatants. Exchanges so far arranged or in contemplation only cover non-combatants or combatants who have been so badly wounded as to be incapable of further service. Consequently this offers no solution, as men are with very few exceptions combatants.
>
> 2. Possible way out would be for Ibn Saud to hand over Italian internees to us, but this would be unneutral act and might not Ibn Saud take such a suggestion as insulting to his reputation for hospitality and correct behaviour?
>
> 3. Please therefore explain position to Ibn Saud and say that His Majesty's Government greatly regrets that they can see no way of helping him to get rid of these men either by repatriation or exchange.

This seemed to end all discussions of a prisoner exchange.

The Amir was not so easily thwarted and a few days later (6/Nov/41), Stonehewer-Bird sent another memo asking if there was any hope of His Majesty's Government ridding the country of the non-combatants, especially the 26 Germans who 'never ceased to complain'. These were merchant seaman who believed they were entitled to move freely within Saudi. Our man in Jeddah advised the Amir that they had no rights and that 'they should be given a dhow [boat] and food and set adrift'. Back in those days, civil servants were more forthright in expressing their opinions!

I couldn't find any further correspondence for eight months, until a lengthy memo from the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to the Admiralty (25/Jun/42). The Turkish Chargé d'Affaires in Jeddah, who was responsible for Italian interests*, had approached the Saudi Arabian government to request the repatriation of approximately 30 sick and elderly Axis internees.

The Foreign Office weighed several potential responses.

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* You might wonder why Turkey was involved. During most of the war, Turkey adhered to a policy of neutrality, enabling it to act as a diplomatic mediator. This included facilitating communication and managing consular matters for countries that had severed relations. The term 'Axis' referred to the coalition led by Germany, Italy and Japan in opposition to the Allied powers.

One option was to refuse the request outright. However, this was quickly dismissed. Turkey was known to be pressuring Ibn Saud and allowing the internees to die due to British inaction would harm the Allies' reputation. Saudi Arabia had already expressed its inability to provide adequate medical care for the internees.

Instead, it was proposed that safe conduct could be granted – but only under exceptional circumstances – with Admiralty approval. The plan required the British Consul and a doctor to examine the sick internees. If deemed necessary, the British Army would arrange their safe passage. The decisive factor in favour of this approach was the assessment that these individuals were unlikely to contribute further to the Italian war effort.

A few days later (30/Jun/42), an Admiralty memo raised the possibility of exchanging able-bodied Italian internees for British prisoners. This was the earliest correspondence I found where the Navy discussed this possibility.

The memo's first point confirms agreement with the Foreign Office, explaining that ten of the sick Italians identified for repatriation were naval personnel and, of these, just three were 'curable'.

The second point talks about a proposal to exchange the rest of the internees for captured British naval prisoners:

> A further proposal has been put forward by the Turks that an exchange should be arranged of the Axis internees including the Italian Naval personnel against the British Naval prisoners of war. In the past our general policy has been to reject any suggestion of an exchange. It is, however, for consideration whether the quality of the crews of these Italian destroyers is such that their return into Italy would constitute any serious menace to our interests in the Mediterranean and whether any such menace would not be outweighed by the benefit to be gained by the return of an equivalent number of British naval prisoners.
>
> It is perhaps unlikely that the Germans will allow the Italians to put this exchange through, but we should be provided with an answer should the occasion arise.

Releasing the sick Italians could await the outcome of the more significant issue of exchanging the able-bodied internees. This reversal of the expected priority underscores how vital it was for the Admiralty to get hundreds of trained sailors back into action.

Over the following week, the pace and seriousness of the negotiations increased. An internal Admiralty memo from the Director of Plans* proposed 'energetic action' to exploit the offer of exchanging the able-bodied naval personnel (8/Jul/42).

There were two arguments for expediting the exchange. First, Ibn Saud was anxious for it to happen and the UK's Foreign Office was in agreement. Second, it was believed that the

* The Director of Plans played a crucial role in the planning and coordination of naval strategy and operations. This position was part of the Naval Staff and functioned at the heart of the Admiralty's efforts to manage Britain's naval war efforts.

poor living conditions of the Italian officers and ratings made the deal attractive to the Italian government.

The memo tactfully raised the question of whether other parts of the UK military should be informed about the exchange:

> The Foreign Office have, however, suggested that the War Office (and presumably the Air Ministry) would have to be informed since they will in all probability, expect to enjoy a share in the numbers to be released from Italy. This would, however, unnecessarily complicate the issue and the Foreign Office will do their best to avoid this.

This conjures up in my mind senior members of the Foreign Office and Admiralty having drinks in a London club and deciding to exclude other parts of the military from the discussions – all in the name of not wanting to 'complicate the issue'*. By the end of writing this essay, I was full of admiration for the ruthlessness of the Navy.

Responses to this memo all concurred. One stated that 'The present war situation appears to make speed a most desirable factor in these negotiations.' I assume this referred to the recent capture of Tobruk by the Germans (21/Jun/42) and the battles raging in Egypt. While this memo was being written, the First Battle of El Alamein was under way, with the Allies successfully preventing Rommel from breaking through their defences.

Another comment stated there were 600 British naval prisoners in Italy.

There's a two-month gap before the next development (8/Sep/42). This time the memo was from the Admiralty's Head of Military Branch, responsible for overseeing key operational and personnel matters. It seemed that the Germans had become aware of the exchange and had approved it, as long as their countrymen were included. This removed one potential stumbling block.

Despite there being more Italian than British prisoners, it was noted that the Prisoners of War Department – a department in the War Office – was opposed to including survivors from HMS Manchester†, which they believed 'might unduly complicate the issue'.

The only plausible reason for excluding the ship's crew from the exchange was concern over the potential impact on national morale. Yet, even if the Captain had made the wrong decision – a point still debated – it seems unjust to punish the crew for his actions.

However, on further investigation, I couldn't find any evidence that the survivors were held in Italian PoW camps. Rather, they were interned by the Vichy French‡ when they

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* For some reason, the memo referred to 300–400 Italians in Saudi Arabia, while all other correspondence stated that there were 700. Perhaps it was an intentional mistake to understate the numbers?

† HMS Manchester, a light cruiser, was sunk while escorting a convoy to Malta (13/Aug/42). Because it was badly damaged, the Captain made the controversial decision to scuttle the ship rather than continue fighting. The scuttling was carried out while the ship was relatively stable, fuelling debates about whether it could have been salvaged. On return to the UK, the Captain faced a board inquiry. The book *The Watery Grave* – detailed in the Sources listed at the end of this essay – provides a detailed investigation of the story using recently released documents.

‡ 'Vichy French' refers to the collaborationist government based in France, which governed unoccupied French territory and colonies from 1940 to 1944 under German influence (control).

reached Tunisia, with many held at the Laghouat internment camp in Algeria. Perhaps that information was not available at the time the comment was made?

There were a couple of responses to the memo. The Head of Naval Intelligence was supportive of including the Germans in the exchange. He thought from a security point of view they could be 'more troublesome than several times the number of Italians' and this might be a good opportunity to end that 'troublesome' responsibility*.

The final, handwritten comment was from the Admiralty Director of Plans (17/Sep/42), stating that the mismatch in the number of Italians and British naval prisoners was no longer a problem after the sinking of a British warship at Tobruk (14/Sep/42). He was referring to the loss of HMS Sikh and the capture of 239 naval personnel, including my dad. The story of the sinking of HMS Sikh is told in the essay 'HMS Sikh's last battle'.

The Italian government signalled its readiness to consider the British proposals for the exchange and the proposals for taking the personnel to Turkish territory. A few days later (14/Oct/42), the question of the sick and injured Italians was raised again, getting the answer:

> We have, however, given them to understand that should there be a favourable outcome to the negotiations [to exchange the able-bodied prisoners], we would be willing to consider exchanging sick personnel.
>
> As the numbers at stake are so small we would be inclined to include them in the Naval exchange in order to get rid of them.

The outlines of the plan for the exchange were taking shape. A memo from the British Naval Attaché in Turkey (12/Nov/42) said:

> Turkish Authorities suggest Mersina † repeat Mersina as the port of exchange of British and Italian Naval (prisoners of war). This would be most suitable from point of view of railway transport from and to the Syrian Frontier.

At the beginning of the negotiations, the number of Italians in Saudi was approximately 700. The number had increased since then and by November 1942 stood at 829, including 41 civilians. The number of British naval prisoners in Italy was thought to be 746, plus 239 from HMS Sikh. This mismatch meant some British naval prisoners were destined to remain in Italy.

There followed numerous messages seeking to clarify the exact numbers, whether it included civilians and whether officers would be exchanged against officers and ratings against ratings. This raised semantic questions about the equivalence between the titles of

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* Reading the archive, it was evident that the Admiralty did not hold the Italian sailors in high esteem. Though the language was not overtly insulting, it implied the Italians were less than effective. Maybe this was true or maybe it reflected the Navy's inflated self-confidence.

† The name Mersina appeared on many Western maps, reports and publications before and during WW2, but the official Turkish name for the city is Mersin. Sometimes, official documents call the port Icel (Mersina). It was approximately 170 miles from Mersin to the railway at Aleppo, close to the border between Syria and Turkey.

Italian and British naval personnel. All this correspondence is available in the National Archives files detailed in the Sources section.

Conspicuously missing was the Admiralty's preference for selecting which British prisoners would be exchanged. Whether this was an oversight or an assumption that they could not enforce their demands was never discussed. As we will see later, the most obvious rule of releasing prisoners based on how long they had been held was not applied. It also became clear that the Admiralty valued some of its officers more than others but never attempted to name those it wanted exchanged.

After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, the rules and logistics for exchanging prisoners were agreed and my dad was about to begin a long journey home.

Until studying this period, I hadn't realised the scope of Italy's involvement in the war. During October, November and December 1942, Italy was heavily engaged in North Africa and the Eastern Front.

Between 23 October and 4 November 1942, the Allies achieved a decisive victory at the Second Battle of El Alamein. The British Eighth Army overwhelmed the combined Italian and German forces. This was followed in early November by Operation Torch, in which Italian forces in Libya were forced to retreat westward.

By the end of 1942, Axis control of North Africa was crumbling, with significant losses in manpower and equipment.

During this time, Italy also aided the Germans on the Eastern Front, where the brutal Battle of Stalingrad was underway. With the war going badly and a British naval blockade causing severe food shortages, Italian public morale was fast eroding.

Thankfully, despite all these pressures, the authorities were still able to organise the exchange.

THE EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS

I never thought I would find a film of the prisoner exchange on YouTube, but I did. You can watch the video online. This is the description, translated from Turkish:

> Turkey, which maintained its neutral position, played an important role in the exchange of prisoners of war. This historic prisoner exchange in Mersin reveals Turkey's diplomatic sensitivity and peaceful mission in the international arena.
>
> These images include the exchange process of British and Italian prisoners of war, the activity in Mersin Port and how the agreement between the parties is implemented. This exchange, which was carried out within the framework of Turkey's policy of staying out of the war, was recorded as an important event in terms of international relations of the period.

The video's publisher is the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which explains the tone of the wording, praising Turkey's role in the venture.

Another, much shorter video is from Britain's Pathé News, showing the prisoners disem-

barking ‘somewhere in the Middle East’ – it was Port Said. Details of both videos are at the end of the essay.

The exchange was to be on 15/16 March 1943. It was delayed a week (to 20/21 March) because the Italians were transported from Jeddah by ship rather than rail.

The Admiralty was informed that the Italians would transport the British prisoners using their hospital ship Gradisca, shown in the photo, and was told the route it would follow (4/Mar/43).

They would be collected from Bari, a port city on the Adriatic Sea and the capital of southern Italy’s Puglia region, and taken to Mersin in Turkey, a four-day journey, implying the ship departed somewhere around 16/Mar/43.

This communication from the Foreign Office representative in Turkey explains how it would be supervised and the clothing to be worn (11/Mar/43):

> The Turkish Government are making suitable arrangements for the exchange which the President of the Red Crescent will supervise.
>
> The Assistant Naval attaché will be the representative at Mersin. Italian representative will be Colonel Claudio Galeone of the medical staff whom the President requires to wear mufti [ordinary clothes, not military uniform]. In consequence, British personnel, both guards and medical, must also wear mufti inside Turkish territorial waters.

The Admiralty received the details of the sailors being released in a note sent by the Italians to the Foreign Office representative in Turkey five days before the exchange (18 March 1943). Looking through these documents and seeing R. Stroud on the list of people coming home was weird; no, it was moving.

The British India Liner Talma took the Italians from Jeddah via the Suez Canal to Mersin, a journey of 1,800 miles. When the ship was 250 miles from Mersin it was attacked by an Italian bomber. Fortunately, they missed, and after what I can only assume was a heated radio exchange between the Captain and the Italian authorities, the plane withdrew. I cannot imagine the Italian prisoners were ecstatic being bombed by their countrymen.

The Talma and Gradisca moored close to the coast at Mersin and were ready for the exchange.

Alas, the weather intervened and rough sea conditions delayed things for a day. Then, on 21 March 1943, the sailors disembarked into barges, shown in the photo, then the British sailors boarded the Talma and the Italians the Gradisca. Saudi Arabia was free of its unwanted guests. Britain and Italy had successfully completed WW2's first exchange of able-bodied prisoner.

The Foreign Office in the UK was keen to manage news about the event and produced this text for the media (11/Mar/1943):

> At some stage this exchange of the Italian and German internees at Jedda, preferably when our men have reached an Egyptian port and certainly unless this is inevitable owing to news breaking sooner, not before they have reached Mersin we shall have to put out a press notice explaining the facts.
>
> This will be as follows: [Begins] • • •
>
> Seven hundred and eighty-seven Italians, most of them naval officers and men; 50 Italian civilians of whom a few are merchant seamen; and 25 German merchant seamen have all been interned at Jedda in Saudi Arabia over a period of more than 13 months.
>
> The presence of these internees has been an embarrassment to the Saudi Arabian authorities; and, in order to assist the latter, His Majesty's Government, with the co-operation of the Turkish Government have agreed that these internees shall be repatriated in exchange for suitable equivalents.
>
> Accordingly, His Majesty's Government have required a corresponding number of officers, petty officers and men of the Royal Navy in exchange for the 787 Italian naval personnel, a corresponding number of British merchant seamen and civilians for the 50 Italian merchant seamen and civilians, and 25 British merchant seamen in Germany for the 25 German merchant seamen in Jedda.
>
> The exchange of the two parties will take place at Mersin, in Turkey, with the cooperation of the Turkish Government; but the operation cannot be considered as concluded until the British party arrives at an Egyptian port. No details can therefore be given concerning members of the party until it does so. [Ends]

The description of the exchange from the Minister in Charge of the British Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, is factual and touching. These comments never made it into press, however.

> From the British Consulate, Mersin (26/Mar/43)
>
> Sir,
>
> With reference to your telegram of the 18th March I have the honour to report on the recent exchange of British prisoners of war at Mersin.
>
> 2. The Italian hospital ship 'GRADISCA' arrived off the port about 14.30 hours on the 19th March. The British military transport 'TALMA' dropped anchor close to her about 9.00 hours the next day, the 20th March.
>
> 3. I went out early with Lieutenant Commander Oliphant, R.N., to the 'TALMA' to make contact with the captain of the vessel and the officer in charge of the Italian and German internees. It so happened that I found the Captain Macdonald receiving the adieux of the senior German officer and the four senior Italian officers of the party, and I sat apart while the cere-

mony was completed. The German thanked Captain Macdonald with some feeling for all he had done to make his countrymen reasonably comfortable. The Italians followed with their thanks, and said (almost textually): 'We are very sorry about yesterday. There must have been a misunderstanding, as obviously an Italian aircraft would not knowingly attack a vessel carrying an Italian party on board.' The reference was of course to the incident which took place about 9.30 hours on the 19th, when an Italian aircraft from a height of 500 feet dropped about six bombs aimed at the 'TALMA', luckily missing. I much admired the correct and dignified way in which Captain Macdonald received these compliments.

4. The weather had changed from the brilliant sunshine of the previous day to rain and a gusty wind from the north-east. On reaching the shore I for one was relieved to learn from Dr. Remzi Goneno, the Director General of the Italian Red Crescent, that the exchange had been put off until the next day.

5. The exchange was accordingly started at 10.30 on the 21st March and lasted until about 18.30 hours. The lighters had been fitted with garden seats padded with life-belts, and these were ferried by tugs between the two vessels in a shuttle service. The arrangements looked rather rough, but they worked very well. On arrival in the 'TALMA' the British prisoners of war were checked by officials of the Turkish Red Crescent, observed by Lieutenant Commander Oliphant and Lieutenant Leach, the officers designated by the Commander in Chief, Levant [the officer responsible for operations in the Eastern Mediterranean], for the purpose. They consisted of:

42 officers, R.N.
105 non-commissioned officers, R.N.
640 ratings R.N.
31 civilians
19 merchant seamen from Italy
25 merchant seamen from Germany

The total is 862. For these were exchanged 863 Germans and Italians, the difference of one being explained by the death of Petty Officer Copeland, regarding which please see my despatch No.7 of 26th March and paragraph 10. below. Both Lieutenant Commander Oliphant and I agreed, at the request of the Turkish authorities, that the death should make no difference to the number of enemy nationals handed over.

6. In the course of the morning I sent Mr. Vice-Consul Paris on board the 'TALMA' to see how the exchange was proceeding and to introduce to the Captain the visiting journalists: Mr Roland (Reuters), Mr Salter (Daily Express), Mr Tetlow (Daily Mail) and two American journalists, Mr Brewer (Chicago Tribune) and Mr. Brock (New York Times). I went on board in the afternoon. Copies of your message to the officers and men had been prepared previously and were displayed on the various notice boards of the

ship, together with a message of welcome from the British Community in Mersin. A gift of oranges, dried fruit and sweets from the British community was sent on board. We also took freshly picked violets, but these proved rather an embarrassment until one of the ladies of the party deposited some of them in a wash basin in the sick bay, which we made a point of visiting.

7. One French and three Syrian ladies of Mersin sent me un-solicited gifts of cakes for our men, and these were also delivered on board.

8. I found officers and men surprisingly quiet, as if dazed. They could hardly believe their good fortune, they said, and they quietly expressed their gratitude for our expressions of welcome and esteem. Captain Walter, R.N., and Sir Walter Cowan, in particular, were anxious to thank the Turkish Royal Crescent for the gift (an orange, two packets of Turkish cigarettes and a packet of raisins) offered to all the ex-prisoners, British, Italian and German alike.

9. The sick were brought last on board the 'TALMA', Dr Remzi concentrating his care, and indeed affection, on this operation.

10. Then the body of Petty Officer Copeland was transferred from the 'GRADISCA' to the 'TALMA'. I understand from Dr Remzi that, on departure from the hospital ship, the Italians accorded the body military honours. Copeland, as reported elsewhere, had died on the 19th March after the 'GRADISCA' anchored at Mersin.

11. The 'TALMA' sailed before midnight on the 21st, and the 'GRADISCA' in the early hours of the next morning.

12. Lieutenant Commander Oliphant and I both consider that the exchange went off very well. Dr Remzi worked long and hard to make his task a success, and I trust that it will be possible to convey a message of warm thanks to all those in Mersin who, under the direction of the Red Crescent, did their work so well with only limited resources of a small port at their disposal. Perhaps the same opportunity will be taken to offer to the Red Crescent the grateful thanks of our men for the presents mentioned in paragraph eight above.

13. I have myself sent a letter of thanks to the Vali of Ice [Governor of İçel], the Mersin Red Crescent, and the Mersin Police.

14. The exchange, carried out before the background of the Taurus [I assume this means the Taurus mountains], was not without dramatic effect. It revealed a certain quality of sentiment in the Turks.

15. I have sent copies of this despatch to the Foreign Office and to the Minister of State in Cairo.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient, humble Servant

H.M. Consul

I was surprised to find only one personal account of the exchange from the prisoners' perspective. Lieutenant Moran Caplat was an officer on HMS Tempest, a British submarine sunk on 13 September 1942, the day before HMS Sikh. Details of his memoir *Dinghies to Divas* are in the Sources.

Caplat was being held in Campo 35 in Padula about 300 miles from my dad's camp (Campo 70). Submariners have a reputation for a dark sense of humour, as shown in the following extracts.

> I was told that I and three other naval prisoners were to be repatriated and that we must be ready to leave at four o'clock next morning.
>
> No reason was given for our selection; it seemed to be an arbitrary decision. We were not the most senior, nor the least, we were not ill. Nobody could offer an explanation except for the fear at the back of all our minds that sooner or later we would be moved to Germany and that this might be the first of a series of ruses to get us to 'go quietly'.
>
> At 4am we presented ourselves at the main gates. Outside in the courtyard was an army truck, a surprise as it was normal for prisoners arriving or departing to be marched to the station. An officer and four guards came with us and treated us with unusual politeness. On the train we were put into a first-class compartment and to our surprise again the train set off not to the north but in an easterly direction. Incredulous though we had been when we started, we began to think we might have been told the truth.
>
> Bari of the hideous memories of a year ago was still a transit camp [Campo PG 75], but it had been cleaned up and improved facilities greeted us everywhere. We found ourselves part of a rapidly growing collection of navy personnel – officers and men drawn from camps all over Italy, all equally bemused by their sudden change in fortune.
>
> We were embussed and taken to the docks, and there was the hospital ship 'Gradisca'.
>
> Gleaming white with red crosses on her funnel and on her sides, old but elegant, she awaited us. Ushered on board by stewards, we sorted ourselves out. Five of us were submariners and succeeded in getting a cabin together. The ship was crowded but there was a festive feeling in the air. We would sail at about 9pm and dinner would be served. There were women on board. These were voluntary nurses, not the lower orders of staff but in the upper echelon of the Italian Red Cross. All of them were ladies of distinction, some titled, most spoke excellent and charming English, and some of them knew England well and found friends among our mutual acquaintances. It was like a mad dream, the transition was so great and so fast.
>
> We knew that the British were justly suspicious of the uses to which the Germans had put Italian hospital ships in ferrying their troops to and from Africa. We thought of our colleagues at sea and prayed that we would have a

safe passage and not get torpedoed by one of our own boats. I remembered how 'Tempest' had so nearly attacked a ship given safe conduct.

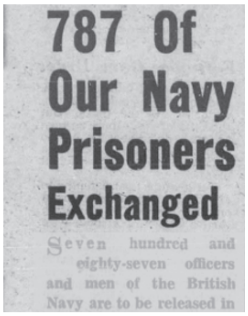
Two days later in the early morning the 'Gradisca' anchored in the bay of Mersin. She must have looked more like a large private yacht or a cruise ship than anything normally seen in war-time. On the other side of the bay, perhaps half a mile away, was anchored a British India Line passenger vessel – sleazy, old, but, and this certainly cheered our hearts, flying a tattered red ensign.

The Turkish Red Crescent appeared in a launch bringing us, unbelievably, a consignment of Turkish Delight and Turkish cigarettes.

Once on the 'Talma' things changed again. She was as tatty below as on deck and there were no ladies to welcome us, but the old first-class saloon bar was just as it had been for years throughout her service on the Indian coast – a mock Tudor room with a mock log fire in an ingle-nook hung with horse brasses. What is more we were immediately greeted with large scotches and soda with ice.

We were each allowed to send one short telegram home. I don't remember what I put in mine and nobody appears to have kept it.

A day before the exchange, news of the event appeared in the UK newspapers on Saturday, 20 March 1943. Although the reports originated from the same three British journalists, they were slightly different. As can be seen from the headlines of four publications, they even reported different numbers being repatriated (*Liverpool Echo*, *Manchester Evening News*, *Evening Telegraph* and *Evening Express)*:



787 Of Our Navy Prisoners Exchanged

Seven hundred and eighty-seven officers and men of the British Navy are to be released in

787 British Naval Officers and Men to be Released

Germans' Donets Blows Become Fierce

BUT RUSSIAN TROOPS CROSS

ITALY

Jews of Five

Allies Consolidate

EXCHANGE OF NAVY WAR PRISONERS

SEVEN hundred and eighty-seven officers and men of the British Navy are to be released in exchange for a corresponding number of Italian naval personnel, the Foreign Office announced to-day.

In addition 50 British merchant seamen and civilians are to be exchanged for 50 Italian merchant seamen and civilians, and 25 British merchant seamen

862 P.O.W. TO BE EXCHANGED

Mainly Naval Men In Italian Hands

SEVEN hundred and eighty-seven officers and men of the British Navy are to be released in exchange for a corresponding number of Italian naval personnel, the Foreign Office announced today.

This was the first time any next of kin would have known their loved ones might be coming home. Just think of what that weekend must have been like. Households all over the UK left wondering if they would soon see their husbands, dads and friends again.

I know my mum knew about the exchange from her carefully maintained, 80-year-old press cuttings, all neatly dated. This news report, issued by Reuters, must have given the family reasons to hope (22/Mar/43):

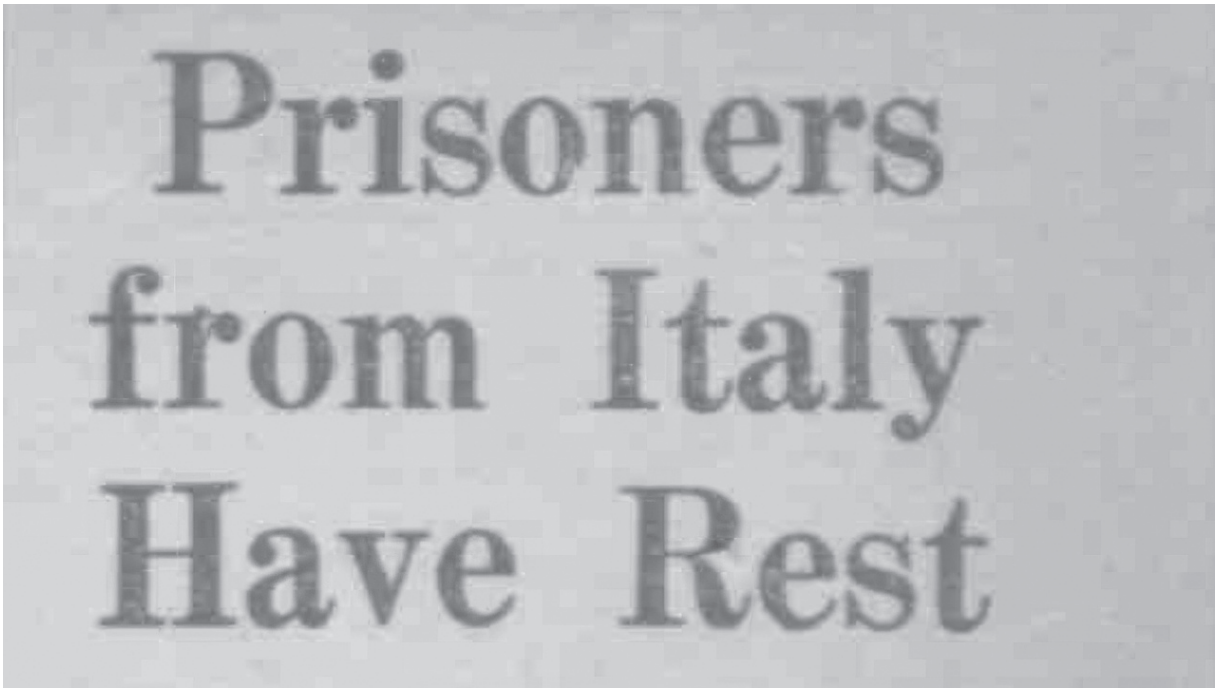
> Survivors from H.M.S. Sikh in Mercy Ship
>
> Men from the Sikh, disabled off Tobruk by shellfire during the British raid there last September were amongst the Royal Navy personnel repatriated under the exchange. Although the Sikh took terrible punishment when held in the glare of enemy searchlights, casualties were extremely light and over 200 of her complement were saved.

On Tuesday, 23 March the Commander-in-Chief Levant distributed a list of officers and ratings being repatriated to the Commanders of the Barracks at Portsmouth, Chatham, Devonport and the Commandant of the Marine barracks, requesting their next of kin be informed.

News of Talma's arrival 'somewhere in the Middle East' made front-page headlines, which were accompanied by pictures of the sailors disembarking (24/Mar/43). One of the papers (*The Scotsman*) inadvertently identified the location as Port Said (Egypt). I can imagine families gazing at the newspaper photos with magnifying glasses, trying to recognise their loved ones.

The sailing time from Mersin was less than two days, so I guess it arrived on 23 or 24 March 1943. A short Pathé News film was released showing the event (15/Apr/43). The commentary was a little economical with the truth, saying the Talma was attacked by an Italian aircraft but not that it was carrying Italian prisoners at the time.

Yet more news coverage appeared on 24 March 1943, telling of the men's arrival in Alexandria (Egypt). This is an extract from the *Manchester Evening News:*



Interestingly, the distinction between officers and 'the men' was maintained even in these extreme circumstances.

A few of the articles were more serious. Reporters had been speaking to the sailors about their life in the Italian PoW camps and the sinking of HMS Sikh. I was surprised that neither subject had received the censor's red pen. I will return to these issues a little later.

For my family, the waiting was over on Sunday, 28 March 1943 with the arrival of this telegram:

Lieutenant Moran Caplat, whose account I quoted earlier, had said: 'We were each allowed to send one short telegram home.' If my dad sent such a message, it wasn't kept by my mum, which I find astonishing, since she diligently kept all of his correspondence. Maybe this was an officer's privilege?

The first record I have of a direct communication from my dad, after his arrival in Egypt, was a couple of weeks later (14/Apr/43), sent from Royal Naval Air Station Dekheila (sometimes referred to as HMS Grebe), an airbase near Alexandria.

This message remains one of the mysteries I haven't been able to unravel. I have a hazy memory that my mum was equally surprised on receiving it. Until now, his correspondence was what you would expect between husband and wife. This note, the longest he had been able to send for over a year, was about flying in a plane and the cost of cigarettes. I think he was trying to send a message about his return to the UK that would avoid being censored.

It started by saying he had been up for a flight lasting 90 minutes. He couldn't name the plane but it was a 'well known one'. The weather conditions were perfect with a cloudless sky. He then commented about seeing details of the UK budget and the increase in the price of cigarettes*. He was thankful this didn't affect him since he could buy them for 1/3 (one shilling and threepence) for 50. If he had to pay the full price, he would have to give up smoking. It then concluded with 'will have to close now, give my love to all'.

This puzzle was even beyond the powers of AI's Deep Research to unravel.

It was two weeks more before my mum received any further communications, this time from the Red Cross (24/Apr/43):

* There had been a budget statement on 12 April 1943, increasing the price of cigarettes by 17%, meaning he was buying them at 20% of the UK price.

DVO/GA

WAR ORGANISATION
OF THE
BRITISH RED CROSS SOCIETY and ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM

PRISONERS OF WAR DEPARTMENT

Chairman :
MAJOR-GENERAL SIR RICHARD HOWARD-VYSE, K.C.M.G., D.S.O.

General Manager of Packing Centres :
THE LORD REVELSTOKE

Deputy Chairman :
J. M. EDDY, C.B.E.

Directors :
LT.-COL. M. W. BROWN, O.B.E.
MISS E. M. THORNTON, O.B.E.

TELEPHONE NO. :
ABBEY 5841

When replying please quote reference :— RN/M/4343

ST. JAMES'S PALACE,
LONDON, S.W.1

23rd April, 1943.

Dear Mrs. Stroud,

Able Seaman R. Stroud

We have received information from the Royal Naval Barracks at Portsmouth that your husband is amongst those Naval prisoners of war who have been repatriated by the Italian Tovernment. You will no doubt already have been informed, and we know how pleased you must be to have this good news.

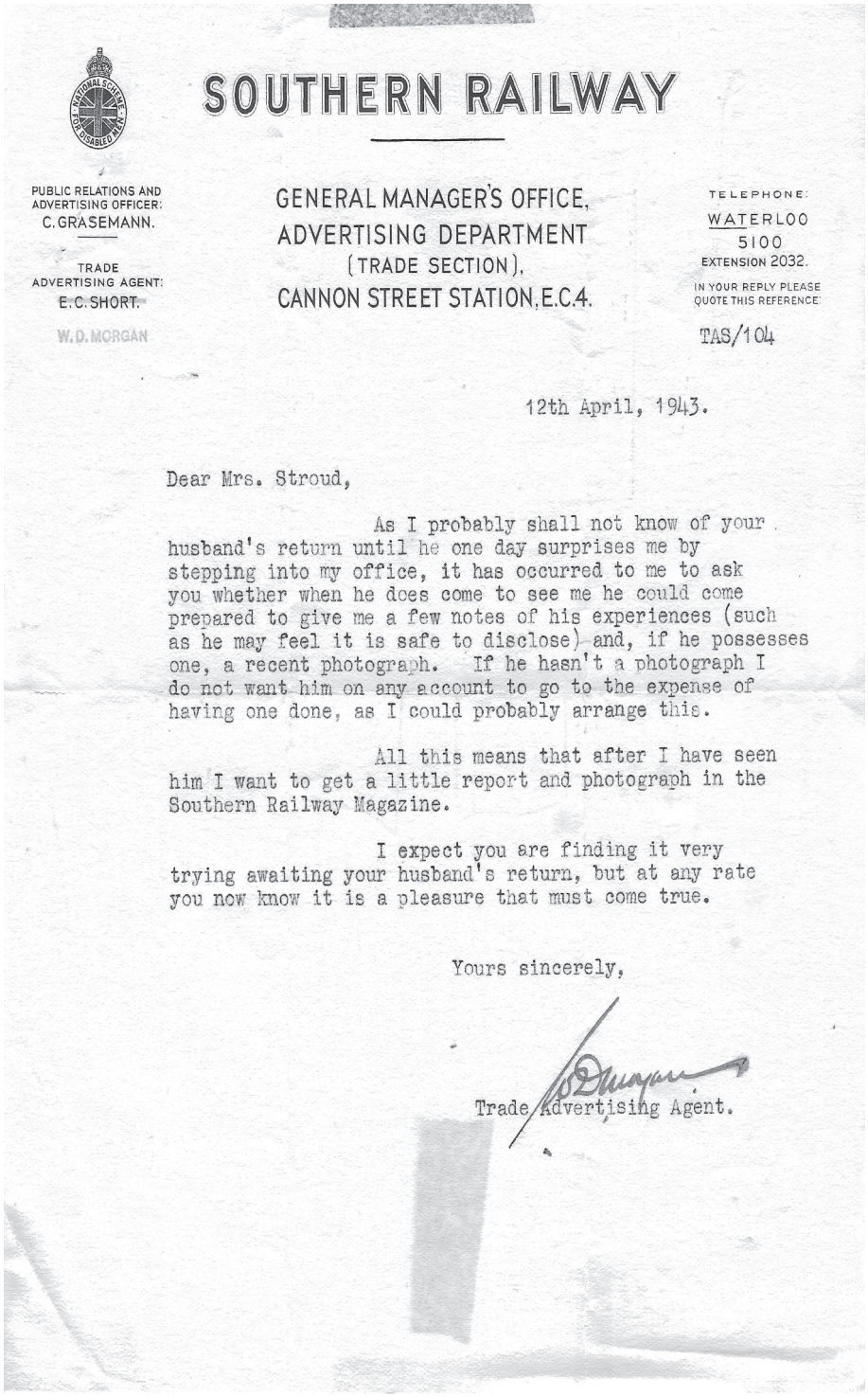
We hope it will not be long before your husband is home again, and we should like to send you both our congratulations and good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

E.M. THORNTON D.V.O.

Director.

A few days earlier, this letter had been received from my dad's employer (Southern Railway):



SOUTHERN RAILWAY

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ADVERTISING OFFICER:
C. GRASEMANN.

TRADE ADVERTISING AGENT:
E. C. SHORT.

W. D. MORGAN

GENERAL MANAGER'S OFFICE,
ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT
(TRADE SECTION),
CANNON STREET STATION, E.C.4.

TELEPHONE:
WATERLOO
5100
EXTENSION 2032.

IN YOUR REPLY PLEASE QUOTE THIS REFERENCE.

TAS/104

12th April, 1943.

Dear Mrs. Stroud,

As I probably shall not know of your husband's return until he one day surprises me by stepping into my office, it has occurred to me to ask you whether when he does come to see me he could come prepared to give me a few notes of his experiences (such as he may feel it is safe to disclose) and, if he possesses one, a recent photograph. If he hasn't a photograph I do not want him on any account to go to the expense of having one done, as I could probably arrange this.

All this means that after I have seen him I want to get a little report and photograph in the Southern Railway Magazine.

I expect you are finding it very trying awaiting your husband's return, but at any rate you now know it is a pleasure that must come true.

Yours sincerely,

Trade Advertising Agent.

I wonder if today's mishmash of private and state-owned rail companies would send a letter like this?

Another letter, received about the same time, explained how the railway company attempted to send parcels when my dad was in captivity:

> So soon as we were able to confirm address and fix up label arrangements with the Red Cross and St. John Fund, our Prisoners of War Comforts Fund, in conjunction with your wife, we sent you a useful parcel of clothing and accessories, but, of course, this has not had time to find its way to you.
>
> We did, however, commence sending you 500 cigarettes and 1-lb tobacco in January last, which continued monthly until we knew you were on the way home, but fortunately, as it appears, you were not long enough in captivity to even receive the first parcel.

That's an amazing number of cigarettes and quantity of tobacco. As I have commented before, smoking seemed to be universal at this time and a vital component of wellbeing. This might explain why both my parents died of lung cancer.

In late July 1943 there is a photo of my dad and three other survivors from the Sikh, all of whom had worked for Southern Railway, being welcomed back to the UK and given a cheque as compensation for the parcels they never received.

I would like to think that today's private and nationalised industries would be so supportive. I have my doubts.

All these events occurred over 80 years ago, during wartime, long before the era of the internet.

Complex negotiations unfolded between Saudi Arabia, Italy, the United Kingdom and Turkey. Newspapers, telegrams and letters chronicled these events extensively. Employers showed genuine concern for their staff. Despite the distance in time, much of what happened feels strikingly familiar. If writing this essay has taught me anything, it's that the past isn't so different from our present.

Before describing the journey back to the UK I want to consider the question of why my dad was one of the lucky ones to be repatriated.

Right time, right place

When negotiations first began, there were around 700 Italian sailors stranded in Saudi Arabia. By November 1942, that number had increased to 829, including 41 civilians. Meanwhile, British naval prisoners held in Italy were estimated at 746, with an additional 239 captured from HMS Sikh, bringing the total to 985. This number was later reduced by one after an escape – Petty Officer Penny sought refuge in the Vatican before being exchanged for an Italian prisoner and returning to the UK. This case was widely publicised at the time. The imbalance was clear: more British naval personnel were held in Italy than Italians in Saudi, meaning not all Allied sailors could be repatriated – some remained prisoners of war.

When reading the correspondence, to understand the mechanics of the selection process, I found a memo from Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen*, the British Ambassador to Turkey (21/Nov/42). It was addressed to the Foreign Office and Admiralty and said:

* The ambassador's unusual name was too much of a temptation so I researched his history and was amused to discover that Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen was later involved in one of the worst breaches of Allied military intelligence during WW2.

> Lists contained in your despatch No. 205 show total British naval prisoners in Italian hands as being 746 plus 274* missing from H.M.S. Sikh; all the latter may not be in Italian hands.
>
> 2. If we were to include 41 Italian civilians interned at Jedda in proposed exchange, total Italians in our hands would be 829. If exchange were to be carried out on lines of equal numbers on both this would allow the inclusion of at least 83 from H.M.S. Sikh, assuming all other prisoners are still alive.
>
> I suggest we should endeavour to strike a bargain with the Italians and offer the inclusion of civilians if the Italians will release all our naval prisoners. If you agree, I will cause the Italian Government to be informed accordingly through the Turkish Government.
>
> I should be grateful for an early reply.

The ambassador implies that since the prisoners from HMS Sikh were the most recently captured, they would be the last to be exchanged. Thankfully for my dad this rule, as fair as it seems, wasn't applied.

Elyesa Bazna, codename 'Cicero', worked in the British Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, as Sir Hughe's valet. Bazna accessed Sir Hughe's secret papers, photographed them and sold them to Germany between October 1943 and April 1944. Fortunately for my dad, this was after the repatriation took place.

Despite the extensive nature of these leaks, the Germans, including Adolf Hitler, treated the intelligence with suspicion, fearing it was deliberately planted by Allied intelligence. Sir Hughe's carelessness seems to have had little adverse effect. Perhaps this explains why he wasn't sacked (or worse); however, his next job as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Belgium and Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Luxembourg was, by some in the Foreign Office, deemed punishment enough.

The day after this telex, another arrived with updated figures: 12 officers and 227 petty officers and ratings had survived from HMS Sikh, bringing the total number of naval prisoners in Italy to 984. In addition, it said:

> The best proposal will be therefore for a head for a head exchange that is 788 on each side with suggestion that we will also repatriate the 41 Italian civilians if for them Italians will give 41 British seamen. If accepted, this would ensure release of 829 British and we cannot hope for more than that.

Throughout January and February 1943 the negotiations continued, centring around ensuring the exchange was done on the basis of 'like for like'. Difficulties arose in the equivalence of rankings between the Italian and British navies. For instance, 'guarida-marinas' are midshipmen and deemed as officers in the British Navy, and 'maresciallos' are a sub-officer rank, similar to a petty officer (not considered an officer). Another category that caused prob-

* This figure of 1,020 is 35 more than had previously been mentioned.

lems was 'sottocapos', who the Italians ranked as petty officers and the British as leading seamen.

As we know, eventually, the deal was done, and 787 members of the British Navy were about to start their journey home, but nearly 200 remained in prison, including the Captain of HMS Sikh (St John Aldrich Micklethwait).

I discovered a document listing the 'Ratings previously reported as prisoners of war in Italy – repatriated 21/3/43.' This is the most authoritative source detailing the ships where the ratings served before being sunk. I couldn't find an equivalent for the officers.

Sikh 221
Tobruk Raid (14/9/42) 166
Tobruk (fall of) 20/6/42 92
Hereward 69
Cochalot 55
Oswald 23
Zulu 22
Crete 21
Tempest 14
Thorbryn 12
ML. 352 10
Clan Ferguson 6
Eskimo Nell 4

Sikh survivors were the largest group, followed by those captured during the Tobruk raid. My guess is these were Marines taken prisoner during Operation Agreement, the engagement in which HMS Sikh was sunk. On that day, 69 men from the 11th Battalion Royal Marines were killed, and around 200 were captured by Italian forces. Further details about the number of casualties can be found in the essay 'HMS Sikh's last battle'.

So, it appears that all the ratings captured from HMS Sikh were repatriated, but crews from other ships were less fortunate. For example, records indicate that while 89 crew members of HMS Hereward were captured, only 69 are listed as repatriated. Similarly, of the 200 Royal Marines reportedly captured, only 166 appear on the repatriation list.

A word of caution: it's possible that the final repatriation details were updated later, and the relevant documents aren't filed in the National Archives. Additionally, the records regarding survivors and captured personnel could contain inaccuracies. What remains clear, however, is that some naval personnel were left behind in the camps and weren't very happy about it.

This is a note from a lieutenant in the Royal Navy that was intercepted by the 'Postal Censorship British Prisoner of War Branch P.C. 96'*:

* PC 96 examined all incoming and outgoing letters and packages between British PoWs abroad, especially those held by Axis powers in Germany, Italy and Japan, and their families back home, checking all communications for sensitive military intelligence. The letter is dated 10/Mar/43, ten days before the exchange of prisoners took place.

> From Lieutenant XXXXX in the Royal Navy in P.G. 35 [an Italian prison near Salerno]
>
> P/W's Criticism re method of repatriation
>
> This has been a very exciting week in the camp, as the Repatriated sick have been notified that they are going home, but the biggest shock was that from this camp alone 10 naval officers got a ticket for home and have already departed, presumably on exchange. Only two of these were captured before me, the rest were quite recent, which shook some of us who have been in the bag for over 2 and some nearly 3 years. Just in case this sort of thing ever happens again, I wish you would write to ... [The note then details somebody he thinks might be able to assist.]

Nothing on the document indicates that the letter was confiscated. However, its contents were sent to MI12 P/W. This was a department within the Admiralty's Military Intelligence Section and was responsible for the exploitation of intelligence from naval PoWs.

Were there other letters expressing similar feelings of unfairness that were never filed? We will never know but, somehow, the concern about the potential unfairness of the repatriation came to the attention of a member of Parliament, who asked a question in the House of Commons on 24 March 1943. The questioner was Mr William Thorne, who coincidentally was the MP for West Ham, Plaistow, the constituency where my parents were born.

The debate, titled 'Prisoners of War and Nationals (exchange)', is available in the online version of Hansard.

Mr Thorne asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether 'in the arrangements made to exchange Royal Navy prisoners of war in Germany and Italy, the men who had been prisoners longest got priority; and whether a similar number will be taken from the Army prisoners of war in Germany and Italy?'

Because the latter part of the question mentions Army prisoners, this raises the question of whether some members of the military establishment were disturbed that all the prisoners were from the Navy. Whatever the reasons, Mr Richard Law, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, responded as follows.

First, he provided a summary of the history of the exchange, emphasising that it involved exchanging Italian naval personnel in Saudi Arabia for British naval prisoners in Italy. He continued by saying:

> At that time it was understood that the total number of British naval personnel in Italian hands was less than the number of Italian naval refugees at Jedda. No question, therefore, arose of the length of captivity. When, subsequently, more British naval personnel were captured by the Italians it was felt to be inadvisable to make fresh conditions in order not to risk delay in reaching an agreement.

Mr Thorne responded that 'he has not answered one part of my question. I asked whether the men who had been prisoners longest got priority.' Law responded, 'I think I answered that. I explained that no question of priority arises in the circumstances.' The Secretary of State's reply was a masterclass in obfuscation, designed to avoid giving a clear answer to a straightforward question.

The National Archives contain the Foreign Office's response drafted for the minister, which included the final sentence: 'There is no question at present of any further exchange by which Army prisoners of war will benefit.' When speaking in the Commons, however, Mr Law omitted this statement. Perhaps he wanted the debate concluded or thought it would only lead to additional questions being asked.

Just over a week later, Mr Thorne was back asking questions in the House of Commons about the exchange of British prisoners (2/Apr/43). This time, his target was Mr Eden, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, whom he asked: 'whether, in any negotiations now proceeding through the Red Cross officers with a view to another exchange of prisoners of war, he will put forward the name of Rifleman Clauson, No. 6845863, now a prisoner of war in Italy?'

Mr Eden responded that 'Negotiations with the Italian Government for the reciprocal repatriation of prisoners of war who are seriously ill or wounded are conducted through the Protecting Power*, and not through the Red Cross.' He then commented that if he were given the circumstances of Rifleman Clauson (his illness and injuries) he would nominate him for examination by the Mixed Commission.

Mr Thorne clarified that the reason he asked the question was that the man has been a prisoner of war from the very earliest stages. Mr Eden answered, 'That alone would not be sufficient.'

Later in the year (11/Jun/43), a memo from the Admiralty's Head of Military Intelligence, talking about another potential exchange of prisoners, said:

> The only criticism which was levelled against the last exchange was that not all the men who had been prisoners of war longest were repatriated and it is thought that if the principle of an exchange is acceptable, we ought to stipulate that the 5 officers and 13 ratings who have been longest in captivity should be repatriated on the British side.

All these exchanges demonstrate that the duration of captivity was never a factor in determining release. It seems the captured ratings from HMS Sikh were fortunate to have been chosen by the Italians, though examining Italian war records might shed more light on why this occurred. There's no evidence suggesting the Admiralty attempted to influence the

* In this context, the 'Protecting Power' refers to a neutral state designated by warring nations to represent their diplomatic and humanitarian interests. In the case of British and Italian PoWs, Switzerland was typically the Protecting Power that mediated negotiations. The 'Mixed Commission', sometimes called 'Mixed Medical Commission', operated under the guidelines of the Geneva Convention and was composed of neutral representatives who evaluated wounded, sick or disabled PoWs to determine their eligibility for repatriation under international law.

selection of sailors for repatriation and the notion of first captured first released was never discussed.

From the beginning of the negotiations, it was assumed that Italian sailors would be exchanged for British sailors. Perhaps the outcome might have been different if the Army and Royal Air Force had been involved. They weren't, so that remains an unanswered question.

We know that 42 Royal Navy officers and 105 non-commissioned officers* were among those repatriated.

However, I found no evidence that any of them were from HMS Sikh, and some to suggest they were not. The only record of what happened to them, immediately after their capture, comes from the statement of Captain A.G. Lascaris, who was attached to 11th Battalion, the Royal Marines:

> We were taken to what was known as Navy House, Tobruk, searched, and given some food. At 1400 or 1500 hours the same day, we were placed in buses, that is the officers only, and taken to Derna, where we arrived at about 0030 hours on 15 September 1942.
>
> The officers were segregated from the men, the officers being put in a square fort known as the Ridotta Taranto which was on the top of a small sandhill overlooking the sea. We stayed there until approximately 1200 hours on 17 September 1942 when we were removed from this fort and taken on lorries to the Derna aerodrome, from where we were flown to Lecce [in Italy].

It therefore appears that shortly after their capture, they were separated from the ratings; however, it is unclear whether Lascaris referred solely to Marine officers or if this separation also included Navy officers. We know for certain that the Sikh's Captain (Micklethwait) and Commander Scott-Smith remained in Italy.

I hope this essay has clarified the reasoning and logistics behind the repatriation; before I describe my father's journey home from Alexandria, however, I want to briefly reflect on those who were left behind.

Italy's collapse

During the spring of 1943, there were instances of British and Commonwealth PoWs being repatriated from Italy on medical grounds, in accordance with the Geneva Convention†.

In April 1943 about 700 sick and wounded British (and Commonwealth) PoWs held by

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* A non-commissioned officer includes the ranks of Chief Petty Officer and Petty Officer (PO), and they serve in supervisory and leadership roles.

† Article 68 of the 1929 Convention said: 'Prisoners of war who are seriously wounded or seriously sick shall be repatriated, regardless of rank, as soon as their condition permits it.' Medical personnel (such as doctors, nurses, medics) and religious personnel (such as chaplains) who were captured were not considered to be PoWs. They could be retained temporarily, but only if they were needed to care for prisoners of war.

Italy were selected, along with 940 'protected' personnel from the British side and repatriated under the terms of the Convention.

A second, smaller prisoner exchange, similar to the one involving my dad, occurred later in 1943. The following extract, dated 17 August 1943, is taken from a telegram containing information intended for the press:

> Early in the year, there was an exchange of British prisoners in Italian hands, most of them officers and men of the Royal Navy, against certain Italians interned at Jedda.
>
> It had been intended to include in this operation 20 Italians but for practical reasons this was not possible. These men are now being exchanged against 20 British prisoners belonging to the three fighting services, and the British prisoners have arrived in Lisbon whence they will be able to depart when their Italian counterparts have left Gibraltar.
>
> The operation will only be considered as concluded when both parties are free to proceed to their homes, and therefore no details can now be given regarding the British party, but as soon as the exchange is completed the next of kin of those concerned will be informed. As a result of this operation there remain in the Red Sea area no more Italian internees to be exchanged against British Prisoners of war.

When the event was reported in English newspapers, it appeared as a brief comment on page five or six in the provincial press. The only notable exception was *The Scotsman*, which featured a front-page photograph of the men safely back in Allied territory.

The telegram highlighted that the exchange involved prisoners from the 'three fighting services', though the majority were from the Royal Navy. The remark about there being no further Italian internees available for exchange seems like a subtle message to the British public warning them not to anticipate similar exchanges in the future. These nuances were too subtle for the newspaper reports, however, and were dropped.

It seemed that talk about future exchanges had ended. However, the political and military developments in Italy were leading to growing concerns about the fate of the remaining naval PoWs.

In July, the Allies invaded Sicily with troops of the US Seventh Army, capturing Palermo, the regional capital of Sicily, the first city liberated by US forces in WW2. By mid-August, the island was in Allied hands. Most German troops fighting there had escaped to the mainland.

Mussolini's hold on power was weakening. For the first time, Rome was bombed (19/Jul/43), and the Italian forces were defeated in the south of the country. By the end of July 1943, Mussolini was deposed and replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio. During the first week of August secret negotiations took place between President Eisenhower and the Badoglio government to arrange an Italian surrender to the Allies.

As the Allied armies advanced through southern Italy, Germany deployed significant forces in the country's north, suspecting that its ally might defect.

During this period, the British Admiralty was considering how it could extract the remaining naval prisoners. I discovered a document from the Military Branch detailing how this might be done. These proposals were developed between 14 and 25 July 1943. These were the main parts of the plan:

- There were 116 naval officers and 450 ratings in Italian PoW camps.
- It was suspected that the Italians had deliberately excluded these officers from earlier exchanges because of their extensive experience. Among them was Captain Micklethwait of HMS Sikh.
- Because there were no more Italian detainees in Arabia, the exchange would need to use Italian naval PoWs, who posed no threat to the Allies since the Italian fleet was now inactive, a nice way of saying destroyed.
- The rationale for the exchange was to return to Italy, on humanitarian grounds, Italian naval personnel captured in Italian East Africa, whose health might be supposed to have 'suffered from the climate'.
- It was thought the Italians might accept the proposal, but it had to happen soon because British prisoners were already being handed to the Germans. The fear was this process was about to accelerate.
- If the British sailors were to return to active duty, the exchange would need to be on an 'extra-conventional' basis, meaning it could not be governed by the Geneva Convention, which prohibited repatriated personnel from resuming active military operations – hence the wording 'on humanitarian grounds'.
- Even if the Italians did not immediately accept the proposal it was hoped the proposal would delay them from handing prisoners to the Germans.
- The Admiralty believed it had no alternative but to disclose these plans to the War Office and Air Ministry to gain their support. This was done, and their agreement was achieved.

At the beginning of August 1943 the Prime Minister directed that an urgent meeting be held by the War Office to investigate possible ways of preventing the transfer of British prisoners of war into German hands. It was thought (wrongly) that the new government in Italy was unlikely to move British PoWs without severe pressure from the Germans. For this reason, and the offer from General Eisenhower to repatriate Italian prisoners on the cessation of hostilities, it was decided to abandon the Admiralty's plan.

It was recommended that a strong note should be sent to the Italians, emphasising the importance attached to the safety of our PoWs. This note was submitted to the Prime Minister, who revised and despatched it.

The full text of the Admiralty's plan is provided in the Appendix. The Navy has always regarded itself as the 'senior service' and this correspondence clearly illustrates its readiness to undertake whatever measures were necessary to safeguard its personnel. Rules were often treated as guidelines to be circumvented – a remark intended as praise rather than criticism. Tragically, the urgency they showed was justified by the events that followed.

On Tuesday, 21 September 1943, when the Secretary of State for War was asked in the House of Commons about the fate of British PoWs in Italy, he said:

> Late in July it was reported that a considerable number of British prisoners of war was being transferred from Italy to Germany. Inquiries revealed that some 2,400 had been transferred immediately before the fall of Mussolini. This transfer was not contrary to any provision of International Law, but representations were immediately made to the Badoglio Government to prevent the handing over of any Allied prisoners to the Germans. This Government gave an explicit assurance that no transfers had taken place since 25th July and that no further transfers would take place.
>
> We have no knowledge of other transfers of prisoners from Italian to German hands, but it is possible, and even probable, that the Germans are transferring prisoners from areas where they are now in control.

Strangely, no mention was made of the rescue of Mussolini by German paratroopers on 12 September 1943 and the breakdown in order within the country. Both these were widely reported in the following day's papers, as can be seen from these extracts from the *Daily Express* (13/Sep/43):

> German radio interrupted a musical programme last night to claim that Mussolini has been freed by German paratroops and is now at liberty. A special communique from Hitler's headquarters said: 'German paratroops, together with personnel of the security police and S.S. guards, today carried out an operation to free the Duce, who was held captive by Italian traitors.'
>
> Resistance to the Germans in northern Italy is almost crushed. A last stand is being made in Milan, Turin and Venice. Panic-stricken people are leaving the smaller towns empty and crowding the roads in a flight to the mountains. Food is scarce. The Germans have seized much, and transport has broken down.
>
> Some towns are besieged by German tanks and motorised troops. One of these is Como where thousands of Allied prisoners, freed by the Italians are blockaded. Five thousand more Allied prisoners are making for the Swiss frontier.

After Mussolini's release, or was it capture by the Germans, he became the head of the Italian Social Republic that ruled German-occupied northern and central Italy. The country was split into two: the south under the Royal Italian government allied with the Allies and the north under Germany, with Mussolini as the nominal head of state.

When Italy announced its armistice on 8 September 1943, roughly 80,000 Allied PoWs were in custody in 76 Italian camps. With much of the country occupied by the Germans, the assurances about no PoW transfers given by the Italian government were worthless.

As the country descended into chaos, Italian guards and camp commanders deserted or

opened the camp gates, uncertain what to do. Allied prisoners were initially hesitant – having been ordered months earlier (June 1943) by MI9* to stay put in the event of an Italian capitulation.

Why these orders were issued and their repercussions are still hotly debated. Tom Carver's book, *Where the Hell Have You Been?,* provides a good account of the incident.

What I find baffling is that parts of the defence establishment were aware of the risks and questioned the decision. I found this comment from the Admiralty's Head of M Branch I† at the end of July 1943:

> If we obtain information that the Germans are trying to occupy a belt in Northern Italy it might presumably be necessary to amend orders to stay put to the prisoners of war camps in the extreme North. The better advice would then seem to be that they should, if released by the Italians, try to make their way South.

At a meeting of the British Directorate of Prisoners of War‡ (28/Jul/43) the chairman started by saying that evidence of transfers of prisoners of war from Italy to Germany was beginning to be received. A broadcast mentioned prisoners of war in German hands, two officers previously recorded as at Campo 75 (Bari), Italy. It was clear from his comments that he feared that any safeguards negotiated with Italy were likely to be ineffective.

However, he also said that the Admiralty's proposal for an independent exchange with Italy, the 'extra-Convention' exchange of prisoners, 'had some way to go before it was approved'. The Admiralty's representative at this meeting must have been frustrated and angry.

When news came that Italy had declared an armistice on 8 September, Italian guards in many camps simply melted away or threw open the gates.

In some camps, prisoners broke out en masse, whereas in others, they stayed until it was too late. German forces fanned out to secure Italy – rounding up Allied PoWs as part of Operation Achse. Huge numbers of Allied prisoners were recaptured by the Germans almost immediately. It's estimated that of the approximately 80,000 Allied PoWs in Italy, about 50,000 obeyed orders and remained in the camps, only to be quickly taken by troops and transported north into captivity in Germany. Roughly 30,000 more prisoners escaped their camps into the Italian countryside during the armistice chaos. Many of these were later caught, but some remained free, my wife's uncle being one of them – later he was captured. After the war the MoD estimated that 11,500 escaped by crossing the Alps into Switzerland or breaching German lines to reach Allied forces.

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* MI9 (Military Intelligence Section 9) was part of British military intelligence, primarily responsible for the escape, evasion and repatriation of Allied PoWs. It coordinated secret radio transmissions to PoW camps, embedding coded messages within BBC broadcasts.

† M (Military) Branch was the hub for sensitive operational communications and high-level naval policy in the Admiralty. M Branch I handled the most sensitive strategic and operational business.

‡ The British Directorate of Prisoners of War was a War Office department tasked with all PoW matters during WW2. It oversaw both Axis prisoners and British and Commonwealth PoWs held by enemy powers.

The Admiralty must have been furious that it was stopped from attempting a prisoner exchange at the beginning of August. Who knows if it would have been successful? I feel sure Germany would have tried to block it since it was already transferring PoWs out of the country.

What we do know for certain is that most naval prisoners spent the rest of the war in a German PoW camp.

Who was responsible for this debacle? Two books examine the issue: Robert Blake's *The Decline of Power* and Michael Richard Daniell Foot's *MI9: Escape and Evasion*. Foot's account is the more authoritative, though it primarily presents the perspective of MI9. Given the significance of this wartime event and its impact on many lives, I have written a brief summary highlighting the key individuals involved and the critical decisions they made (see the Appendix).

What happened to Captain Micklethwait gives a graphic example of the fate of those prisoners left in Italy. After being captured, he spent time in Camps 75 and 35, where he was when Italy surrendered. By February 1944 he had been moved to Germany and was in Oflag VIII, then in May he was transferred to Oflag 79. He was moved again in August 1944 to Oflag 79/XII-B, where he remained until it was liberated on 2 April 1945. Unlike his crew, who spent six months in captivity, he was a prisoner for over two and a half years.

THE JOURNEY HOME

My dad and the other lucky PoWs being repatriated didn't have to experience the chaos that engulfed Italy and the likelihood of spending the rest of the war in a German prison. All they had to do was get back safely from Egypt. On Sunday, 2 May 1943, the voyage home started. It lasted seven weeks, and they arrived in Scotland on Sunday, 20 June 1943.

Before this, they spent six weeks in Egypt. Other than my dad's one letter, sent from Alexandria (14/Apr/43), I have no personal records of how he spent this time. I had hoped that Caplat's book would provide some personal insights about this period, but, alas, no. He recalls that after arriving in Port Said, he was soon on a train to Alexandria, where he was 'debriefed'; he wasn't very impressed with this process.

The officers and the men had different types of accommodation. Caplat's sounds luxurious – a villa run by Greek nurses: 'for several days we did nothing but swan around in luxury'. What worried him and the other submariners was the thought of a journey back to the UK on board a ship, especially if it had to go via the Cape of Good Hope. I don't think this was the fear of being seasick, but of being sunk by an enemy or Allied submarine.

His senior officer agreed that he and the four other submariner repatriated officers could go to Beirut, the new home of the Allied submarine flotilla, and take their chances of getting a plane or boat back to the UK.

Due to the lack of firsthand accounts, and because ordinary seamen probably had little say over where they stayed or how they returned home, I have constructed a 'most likely' sequence of events for the period before their journey began.

After the journey from Port Said to Alexandria, probably taking about six hours, the PoWs were almost certainly taken to HMS Nile (Ras El-Tin) for administration, medical

screening and initial debriefing. This was the Royal Navy's headquarters for its activities in the eastern Mediterranean.

That my dad sent a letter from RNAS Dekheila makes me think he might have been taken there because of its more comprehensive medical facilities. Returning prisoners requiring significant medical assistance would have been taken to one of the hospitals in Alexandria. It is possible, but unlikely, they were taken to Cairo (Camp Maadi).

I remember my dad talking about how he and many of the PoWs suffered from dysentery and other gastrointestinal diseases. Other than that, he mostly talked about the lack of food and the importance of the Red Cross parcels. I expect the number one priority was to provide the returning PoWs with medical care, food and cigarettes!

If Caplat, as an officer, found the debriefing superficial, it's reasonable to assume the enlisted men received similar treatment. As I'll explore later, many of them believed they had signed documents agreeing not to fight again – something that only came to light later that year, once they rejoined their units.

After the stress of combat and being imprisoned, this time must have been like an extended holiday. The weather would have been sunny with an average temperature of 20C. Even so, after seven weeks, I imagine they were delighted to start the journey home.

As a child I was longing to travel but our holidays were always in the UK. Whenever I complained I got the same response: 'I have done all the travelling I want to do.' I now have much more sympathy for this answer, having learnt about his route back to the UK.

On 30 April 1943 the PoWs probably got their first sight of the Ile De France, the liner that would bring them back to the UK. There's a video showing how the liner looked in 1949, after it had been refitted, entering New York. This was a very different ship from what my dad experienced, however. Gone were all the finery and decorations that made it so popular with the very rich. Links to the video and a website containing details and photos of the liner are listed in the Sources.

Originally built to carry 1,800 passengers – one-third in first class – the vessel arrived on the Clyde with 6,257 aboard, nearly all of them military personnel; only 232 were civilians.

Polish forces were the largest contingent aboard, numbering 1,865, followed by 1,637 personnel from the Royal Navy and Royal Indian Navy. The ship's manifest was sent in a secret message to the Transport Officer at Greenock on 16 June 1943. An earlier message dated 24 May 1943 reveals that the Royal Navy complement included 42 officers, 94 chief petty officers and 1,115 ratings.

Although the Ile De France now carried three times as many people, it retained one feature from its heyday as a luxury liner – it was fast. With a top speed of 23 knots, it was fast enough to sail alone, without escort protection.

Two sources outline the journey's itinerary to the UK: the ship's log, in the National Archives, and the online diary of a Polish paratrooper (Toni Paszkiewicz). Details for both can be found in the listed sources. Fortunately, they tell the same story!

The journey back was approximately 13,500 nautical miles (25,000 km), took 51 days and is shown on the map below. Here is the Ile De France's itinerary:

Port	Arrive	Depart
Suez	30 April 1943	2 May
Aden	5 May	6 May
Durban	16 May	22 May
Rio de Janeiro	3 June	Believe it was 4/5 June
Freetown	11 June	12 June
Clyde (Greenock)	20 June	

Paszkiewicz's diary mainly recorded arrival and departure dates, though it also offered some details about two legs of the journey:

> When the boat departed Aden the next day for Durban and sailed through the Gulf of Aden, south through the Indian Ocean and into the Mozambique Channel, arriving in Durban on 16 May. This was not the simple journey that it sounds. There was a considerable threat from German and Japanese submarines off the eastern coast of Africa, particularly around Madagascar.
>
> Sailing independently, Ile de France departed Durban on 22 May and sailed around the Cape into the south Atlantic. She was destined for Freetown in Sierra Leone but instead sailed to Rio de Janeiro, where she arrived on 3 June.

I found one rather strange account of the conditions on board the liner. This is a passage from the book *Massacre at Tobruk* recalled by a sailor from HMS Sikh named 'Tug' Wilson:

> This was a ghastly ship, the food was terrible and aboard her there were all sorts of weird women, WRNS who had got pregnant, Polish evacuees, all manner of strange women. They were eager for male company and we had to have shipboard patrols in an attempt to stop temptation, both sides were queuing up for it! Anyway, we had to have patrols for the whole journey.

I don't remember my dad ever talking about this aspect of his journey home! As for its accuracy, I am unsure. The same source talked about the exchange involving a thousand Italians held by the Shah of Iran and being organised by the Red Cross. As we know, this couldn't be further from the truth. Perhaps Tug had an active imagination!

The next reference to the returning sailors was a note sent to the Commodores of their barracks with practical information about the 'repatriates'. This was the first and last time I found them referred to in this way. A copy of the note is in the Appendix. The main points were that:

- Ration cards should be issued, enabling them to purchase double the civilian amounts of foodstuffs during their leave.
- Leave was set at 14 days plus seven days for every six months they had been away from home.
- They should be questioned about information that would help the war effort.

I assume that, for security reasons, the ship's arrival and the disembarkation of the returning PoWs went unreported in the press. In the following weeks, however, numerous local news stories emerged, describing emotional reunions between sailors and their families. These reports are detailed in the essay 'A PoW in Italy', because they offer valuable firsthand accounts of the night the Sikh was sunk and the events that followed.

The Ile De France docked in Scotland on Sunday, 20 June. I don't know exactly how long it took for the sailors to disembark and be processed before starting their journey home. The train ride from Scotland to the town where my mother lived was at least 18 hours, so I imagine they were reunited by Wednesday. They had been apart for nearly two years. By then, my sister would have been almost six and attending an infant school in Sussex. Thus began eight weeks of leave* before his next posting.

This map shows the route home

BACK IN BLIGHTY

I know nothing about how my mum and dad spent the weeks after his return. I like to imagine it was a joyful time for them – reunited as a couple and, for him, precious days with my sister. Eventually, his leave came to an end. I know that he returned to the gunnery school at Whale Island in Portsmouth – HMS Excellent – where he had trained in 1941 before joining HMS Sikh.

At this point in the story, I begin by recalling fragments of what he told me. On the Sikh, he had served as part of a gun crew, so I assume returning to Whale Island was a refresher course. As we know, the Navy fully expected him to return to active duty.

He was convinced that he had signed documents in Italy – papers that, according to him, prohibited a return to combat under the Geneva Convention. When he saw some familiar faces at the gunnery school – people who, unlike him, had never seen active service – his sense of justice flared. He raised the issue with his superiors: how could he be sent back to

* I calculated his leave period from the date he arrived home (probably 23 June) until he started at his next posting (19 August). The press reports of other PoWs confirm that they had approximately the same period of leave.

fight, in apparent breach of international law, while others had been spared entirely? These are very old memories, but I think they capture the gist of his feelings.

Whether as a reprimand or a concession, his posting was changed. Instead of returning to a destroyer and its 4.7-inch guns, he was assigned to the Navy's establishment responsible for making sea mines safe (HMS Vernon). He loved that work – and it's the subject of the final essay – 'Mine disposal – HMS Vernon'.

Researching this essay revealed that my dad wasn't alone in believing that returning to active duty violated the Geneva Convention. The Admiralty grew alarmed as more servicemen returned from leave with similar concerns. The issue became so important that it warranted its own folder in the National Archives.

The following two letters, which must have been intercepted, highlight the problem the Navy faced.

From Lympstone, Devon (Centre for the Royal Marines):

> I feel like a little boy who is lost, but I suppose I will get over it. 47 days of Good old Civvie street have spoilt me.
>
> Admiralty states our repatriation was a political one not military, therefore it does not come under international law regarding repatriation, therefore it is quite in order for us to go into combat again. We have been drafted to the XXXXXX Battalion of Royal Marine infantry, & we go to them on Monday. I am afraid I can do nothing about it, & if it was found out I attempted to again I should get it in the neck.
>
> We were warned not to repeat this outside because the newspapers would get hold of it. I leave that to you, do something if possible I <u>know</u> if it was made public it would raise a storm of protest. But do not on anything you do make out it is me who has asked you to do it. Make out it is you yourself who is indignant at the great unfairness of all this.
>
> That 47 days leave was heaven & I regret it could not last for ever. But still as we are told there is a war on.
>
> Cheerio, will write again soon.
>
> Your ever loving Son,
>
> P.S. It seems very obvious that they are afraid of the newspapers getting hold of this & the public make a storm of protest, but do what you can, or all you can. But as I say do not associate me with it or say I have asked you to do anything.

From Able Seaman, Leading Telegraphist:

> Dear Sir,
>
> I hope you will excuse my taking this liberty in writing to you, but I am hoping you will be able to clear up a little problem for me.
>
> I have been a prisoner of war in Italy and was repatriated in March, and am now on leave which expires on the 12th of this month (August); since I

have been home quite a good many people have told me that according to Geneva Convention I should not have to go back to the fighting forces again, but I have to go back to my depot, and as far as I know we will all be given another ship.

Well Sir I am not afraid to go back and do some more, although I have been in the Royal Navy since before the war, and have been through Norway, the evacuation of France, Battle of the Atlantic, and did 2½ years in the Mediterranean before being captured, but I would like to find out exactly what my position is.

When we left Italy we had to sign two papers, which in one place stated the date and place of our capture, and also stating the words to the effect that we were being repatriated on the 20th of March; 1943.

Trusting you will be able to help me out in some way or other,

I remain,

Yours hopefully,

By 20 October 1943 this matter had escalated and reached the House of Commons with this short question and answer exchange ('Naval Repatriations from Italy') between Mr Adam McKinlay (MP for Dunbartonshire) and The First Lord of the Admiralty (Mr Alexander):

> **Mr. McKinlay** asked the First Lord of the Admiralty the terms of the agreement under which 787 officers and men were repatriated from Italy in March, 1943, and the terms of the document signed by such officers and men before they were exchanged?
>
> **Mr. Alexander:** I would refer my right hon. Friend to the statement made to this House by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on 24th March last [which was quoted earlier in this essay], in which he fully explained the circumstances leading to the agreement for the repatriation of these officers and men. The agreement reached with enemy Governments contained no special terms. The documents which were signed by such officers and men before they were exchanged, were discharge sheets containing a statement of pay received and an authorisation for the disposal of outstanding balances.
>
> **Mr. McKinlay:** If the men involved were to make a statement that the document was a declaration that they would not fight again against the Axis, would they be telling an untruth?
>
> **Mr. Alexander:** I should be very surprised to hear of any such statement, because this was not a repatriation agreement within the scope of the Geneva Convention at all.
>
> **Mr. McKinlay:** I have had correspondence on this matter, and I must ask my right hon. Friend to give a categorical denial or otherwise. Did not the men involved in this repatriation sign a document saying that they would not be used against the Axis again?

> **Mr. Alexander:** I have already given an answer that the documents they signed consisted only of discharge sheets, a statement of the pay they had received, and an authorisation for the disposal of all outstanding balances.

This was merely a prelude to their next encounter on 20 November 1943. The full exchange can be read on the Hansard website.

Again, McKinlay wanted to know the specifics of the terms of the agreement:

> Were the men's names drawn out of the lucky bag, at random? Were the men removed from the Italian prison camp because they were suffering from disability? If they were removed, while in no way suffering from the effects of the war, then I protest against 787 able-bodied men being repatriated while at the same time we must have had in prison camps in Italy men who sorely needed bringing home.

This was a new argument – if the men were all able-bodied, it meant they were given priority over the sick and disabled prisoners in the Italian PoW camps. As we know, the Admiralty wanted the return of 800 trained and battle-hardened sailors who could be deployed back into action.

McKinlay said he had received letters from sailors – one of them a crew member of HMS Sikh – who had complained but were told to keep quiet about it. They were silenced, told to 'hush it up', with the message that they were the lucky ones – they made it home. He continued:

> I want to know why a man who had to swim for it at Tobruk and who has suffered pneumonia twice, plus starvation in an Italian camp, finds himself now, almost in the category of Grade I with nothing to prevent him returning to active service.

Again and again McKinlay kept asking for the exact terms of the agreement to be made public*.

The First Lord of the Admiralty answered by giving a long account of how the exchange came about and was implemented, concluding with the statement:

> A perfectly separate agreement, apart from the Geneva Convention, was made in which the 788 Italian naval internees in Saudi Arabia were exchanged for 788 British naval prisoners of war in Italy. That is what we did. The terms of the Geneva Convention and the operation of Section 74

* It seems that Adam McKinlay had become the focus for channelling the discontent of people like my dad, who were about to be recalled for service.

> with regard to sick and wounded do not apply to this case at all. These are the terms of the agreement.

He then addressed the point about the PoWs signing documents promising not to fight again before they were released. He detailed the extensive enquiries that had taken place and that nothing could be found to substantiate the claim.

As for the question of being involved in active combat again, he said:

> “There are other men who also have fathers and mothers, who go through a campaign, are wounded, recover and go back into the campaign again. Whether these men are fit or not to go on with their duty will have to be determined from the medical examination and the hospital treatment that they receive.

He concluded by saying: ‘It was understood from the beginning. The terms of the agreement make it perfectly clear that it was an exchange of able-bodied men on both sides.’

Unlike Mr McKinlay, I had access to what transpired within the Admiralty in the lead-up to this debate. What follows is a chronology of those events.

5 August: A memo to the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, that was forwarded to the Admiral of the Fleet, stating that a rating had requested to see him, believing that before leaving Italy he had signed a document promising not to take up arms against the Axis powers. In response, five other repatriated personnel were interviewed; all recounted similar experiences. One document in particular was described as a foolscap sheet bearing Italian text on the front and a space for a thumbprint. The reverse side, written in English, was headed ‘Punishments Awarded’. The signatories recalled being told by an Italian sergeant major at the time of signing that they would not be required to fight again.

20 August: A memorandum from the Commodore of Portsmouth Barracks was addressed to the Director of Personal Services at the Admiralty. He reported that he had interviewed 25 repatriated sailors. On their release, all had been photographed, fingerprinted and required to sign documents written in Italian. Approximately a quarter of the men believed these documents constituted an agreement not to return to active combat. Notably, the instructions given by guards appeared to vary between camps.

One of the men produced a translated copy of the document, which included a calculation detailing how much money he had received while imprisoned, and how much remained unpaid (£19 in today’s money)*.

21 August: A note from the Military Branch of the Admiralty notes that those in the second exchange of prisoners from Yemen raised the same questions about not returning to active duty (July 1943).

9 November: Statement from Commander Brown to the Admiralty Plans Division. He acted as the senior British officer of the prisoners of war repatriated under the ‘Jedda

* British PoWs were entitled to pay – very small amounts – which was credited to accounts held by their home governments and military authorities.

Exchange' – the name given to the one that included my dad. This role started when he arrived at Campo 75, which all the PoWs being repatriated were brought to, and included the period on the repatriation vessel (Talma).

Because the officers and men shared the same accommodation at Campo 75 and onboard the ship, he was adamant that:

> No report reached me either directly or through the Divisional Officers that anyone was being asked to sign a statement that he would not engage in further hostilities, nor that anyone was being asked to sign any statement that he did not understand, with the possible exception of a statement in Italian with regard to the money credit which the prisoner of war had not expended.

Brown, who spoke fluent Italian, said he received the same response from every Italian officer he encountered: their release came with no conditions restricting them from continuing to fight. It was, he said, a standing joke with the junior Italian officers that they expected their return when captured for a second time.

He concluded by saying he was certain he would have been aware if anybody was asked to sign a suspicious document.

The final document, also on 9 November, was drafted by John Mossop, a civilian lawyer, who worked for the British Admiralty's Secretariat (Military Branch I)*.

Mossop created the detailed briefing document for the First Lord of the Admiralty's appearance in the House of Commons. This contained a detailed history of the Jedda Exchange, the research done by the Admiralty to investigate the sailors' grievances and why the Geneva Convention didn't apply to the exchange. He included one item in the document that hadn't appeared before and was not declared in the House of Commons:

> Instructions have been given, in conformity with War Office and Air Ministry practice to drafting offices, that the men should, on return from leave, be drafted in the first instance to billets where strenuous active service is not anticipated, and as a general rule should not be regarded as liable to draft abroad or on active service afloat until six months after their return to the U.K. (A.F.O.4682/43)†.

Why was this the first time this instruction was mentioned? I wonder how many of the 860 repatriated sailors returned to frontline service unaware of this order.

My dad's new role of deactivating sea mines must have met the rules of not being 'active service afloat'. Was this the reward for questioning his deployment?

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* Military Branch I was the Admiralty's department responsible for shaping high-level naval strategy and operational decisions

† Admiralty Fleet Order 4682/43 mandated a rest-and-home-service interval for naval personnel back from extended service overseas. Its intent was to safeguard the wellbeing of battle-weary sailors and to optimise the use of experienced personnel by phasing their return to active theatres.

It would have saved a lot of trouble if Adam McKinlay MP had been told that the Navy was sympathetic to the new drafting of returned PoWs.

I don't doubt the Admiralty was justified in insisting that no formal agreement had been reached with Italy, and that the exchange arrangement fell outside the scope of the Geneva Convention. From the account of one of the exchanged Italians, we know this was their understanding of the agreement:

> The exchange circumvented Geneva Convention rules, allowing prisoners to return to active service. Some survivors, including decorated sailors, resumed combat; others joined opposing sides in Italy after the September 1943 armistice.

I admire the Admiralty's determination to bring their sailors home – even if it meant stretching the rules. They had little control over the criteria used to select prisoners for repatriation. Still, that offers little comfort to those who remained in captivity despite being prisoners for longer than the men sent home.

What remains a mystery is why they didn't make order 4682/43 public. I know the whole premise of the exchange was to use these experienced officers and ratings to fight again, but why were the implications of the order never raised in discussion? Was it ignorance about the order's existence or a convenient lapse of memory? We will never know the answer.

The Jedda Exchange changed the lives of many men and their families, mine included. Despite a few unanswered questions, this essay provides the first authoritative account of what happened.

APPENDIX

Memo from Military Branch of the Admiralty (12–25 July 1943)

We have recently recovered and returned to active service 42 Naval Officers and 744 Ratings, prisoners of war in Italian hands, in exchange for an equal number of Italians interned in Saudi Arabia. We are now in the process of recovering a further one officer and 14 ratings in exchange for Italians interned in the Yemen. All the Italians originally came from Italian East Africa, and the Italian approach was based on the detriment to the men's health anticipated from continued detention in the Red Sea area.

2. There remain in Italian hands some 116 officers and 450 ratings, most of whom are fully trained and experienced. The breakdown is as follows:

Royal Navy:

1 Captain
1 Commander
15 Lieutenant Commanders
36 Lieutenants
3 Sub-Lieutenants

Royal Navy Reserve:

3 Lieutenant Commanders
5 Lieutenants
1 Sub-Lieutenant

Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (R.N.V.R.)*:

1 Lieutenant commander
14 Lieutenants
19 Sub-Lieutenants

Royal Marines:

1 Major
14 Lieutenants

* The RNR were reservists who were civilians with maritime experience, including merchant seamen, fishermen and other skilled mariners. The RNVR was a reserve force of civilian volunteers who were trained and could be mobilised to supplement the Navy during wartime.

It is unnecessary to stress our shortage of experienced officers or the value which these officers would be to us and M. Branch [Military Branch]* accordingly propose that an effort should be made to induce the Italians to carry through a further exchange.

3. The previous exchanges have entailed the return of Italian Naval personnel interned in neutral territory, but the supply is now exhausted. If equivalents are to be found for a further exchange they will have to come from the ranks of prisoners of war in our hands. In the past it has been considered that the disparity of the morale is such that we can accept with equanimity the return of Italian personnel to active service. Today the argument is much stronger since the Italian Fleet is inactive and more than ever tied to its bases.

4. The conclusion of the present small exchange will provide a suitable opportunity to propose a further exchange to the Italians, which might be based on an expressed desire to return to Italy 'on humanitarian grounds' Italian naval personnel captured in Italian East Africa, whose health might be supposed to have suffered from the climate. Their return would be a natural sequel to the exchange of their comrades in Arabia and the repatriation of Italian women and children from Abyssinia†. It might well be attractive to the Italians without giving them personnel of value.

5. On past form there is reason to hope that the Italians may accept our proposals. They are, however, already handing over British prisoners of war to the Germans – a process which the progress of present operations is likely to accelerate – so that this project will have to be pushed forward with the utmost energy with a view to the exchange taking place in August at the latest. It is important that the basis be 'extra-Conventional' to avoid the mischief of section 74 of the Geneva Convention‡, which provides that men repatriated under the convention may not take part in active military operations.

6. Even if the Italians do not immediately accept our proposal it is possible that, whilst it is under discussion they will insist on keeping our men in Italy, a fact which may well mean that we shall ultimately recover men who would otherwise pass into German hands.

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* The Military Branch served as the secret and political office of the Admiralty, entrusted with the conduct of confidential affairs and the direction of operations during wartime.

† Abyssinia, now known as Ethiopia, was liberated from Italian occupation by Allied forces during the East African Campaign of 1941. Following this victory, tens of thousands of Italian civilians living in the region were interned by British authorities. Many of these civilians, including women and children, were placed in internment camps until arrangements were organised for their repatriation. The majority of returns occurred between 1941 and 1943.

‡ The 'mischief of section 74 the [1929] Geneva Convention' refers to article 74, which specifically addressed repatriation conditions for prisoners of war. Those repatriated due to illness, injury or humanitarian reasons were not permitted to rejoin active military service against the adversary during the ongoing conflict.

7. A copy of Cabinet conclusions W. M. (40) has been inserted in the docket, from which it appears that a proposal of this nature will require joint service backing. It is understood unofficially from the War Office that the price of cooperation will be participation in the exchange – and to this we cannot object, since we have already recovered nearly 800 Naval personnel against three Army and two Air Force officers or men. In view of the urgency of the matter it is suggested that C.N.S, may care to write in the sense or the attached draft letter to C. I. G. S., and C.A.S. with a view to enlisting their support.

8. N.L. and C.W. have been consulted and concur. N.A.2.S.L, heartily supports the project.

9. Submitted through D of P and D.N.I.

12th July 1943

I have done my best to decipher the deluge of abbreviations at this memo's end.

- CNS stands for Chief of the Naval Staff, which was the title for the professional head of the Royal Navy – more commonly known as the First Sea Lord.
- CIGS stands for Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the title used for the professional head of the British Army during that era.
- CAS stands for Chief of the Air Staff, the professional head of the Royal Air Force (RAF).
- NA2SL is the Naval Assistant to Second Sea Lord.
- The roles of NL and CW are less clear. My best guess is they were Naval Liaison and Combined Warfare.

The Chief of Naval Staff wrote to his counterparts, replicating most of this document. He added one new paragraph that provided new information about my dad's repatriation:

When the earlier exchange was put through, the Italians weeded out the 42 officers who, they considered, would be of least use to us, with the result that those now in their hands are all men of the first quality. I need only mention that amongst them are 15 Lieutenant Commanders and 36 Lieutenants R.N, as well as some of our most successful submarine and destroyer captains. I am sure it is unnecessary to stress the Navy's shortage of experienced officers or the value which these men would be if available for Active Service, particularly in connection with Combined Operations.

The most successful destroyer captains he referred to must have included Captain Micklethwait from the Sikh. Nowhere else have I seen it referenced that the Italians 'weeded out' for exchange those officers considered to be of least use to the Navy. It's possible that this

statement was added to justify why a new exchange of naval personnel was so important, with the wording about their importance in 'combined operations'.

Appended note
I fully concur with this proposal and think there is a fair chance that the Italians may accept it on an 'extra-Conventional' basis. It should be mentioned that the exchange of the Italian Naval personnel from Saudi Arabia was regarded by the Foreign Office as not coming within the terms of the Cabinet Conclusions W.M. (40), since the Italians were internees and not prisoners of war. In consequence, we were most fortunate that the other Services did not come into the negotiations*.

2. In this case, however, we have no alternative but to approach the War Office and Air Ministry. We do not wish to appear selfish but I do really feel that the relative value to the war effort of the Naval Officers and ratings remaining in Italian hands, is greater than that of the Military and Air Force personnel. This has, to some extent, been inferred in para 2 of the draft letter, in which it would perhaps be impolitic to stress the matter further. I think, however, we might hint something to that effect at the interdepartmental meeting in order to test the reactions of the other Service Departments.

3. A few small amendments have been made to the draft letter in which otherwise I concur.

Director of Plans
14th July 1943.

Appended note
Concur with D of P.

There is no security objection to the repatriation of any of the Italian naval prisoners of war captured in Italian East Africa.

Director of Naval Intelligence
16th July 1943.

* The 1940 War Cabinet's '307th conclusion' effectively set a policy that ensured inter-service concurrence for such moves, reflecting the need for unified military backing. This rule was not deemed to apply to the 1943 naval repatriation on the technicality that the Italians were not prisoners but internees.

Appended note

The proposed exchange was raised by V.C.N.S. at the V.C.O.S. meeting on 26th July 1943 and the result appears in the extract from the minutes not inserted*.

2. At the same time, the Prime Minister directed that immediate meeting should be held by the War Office to investigate possible means of preventing the transfer of British Prisoners of War into German hands. The recent change of Government in Italy suggested that it was unlikely that British prisoners would be moved without very severe pressure from the Germans, and it was decided, particularly having in mind the offer made by General Eisenhower to repatriate Italian prisoners immediately on the cessation of hostilities provided that our men were handed over safe and sound, that there was no point in carrying on with the limited proposal dealt with in this paper.
It was, however, recommended that a strong note should be sent to the Italians emphasising the importance which we attached to the safety of our Prisoners of war. This note was submitted to the Prime Minister who revised and despatched it.

3. In these circumstances, no further action appears necessary on this paper for the present.

Head of Military Intelligence
1st August 1943

The rationale behind and the consequences of the 'stay put' order given to Italian PoWs

In mid-1943, General Montgomery issued a directive instructing Allied PoWs in Italy to remain in their camps until they were liberated by advancing Allied forces. This directive was disseminated through MI9 and supported by the War Office and Air Ministry. Montgomery preferred orderly, disciplined operations and expected the Italian campaign to conclude swiftly. MI9's American counterpart, MIS-X, concurred with this decision, establishing a unified Allied position.

Several reasons justified the directive. First, Montgomery and Allied leaders believed the campaign would be brief, rendering risky escapes unnecessary. Second, authorities doubted PoWs' combat effectiveness, viewing them as physically compromised and untrained in infantry tactics, because most were airmen or technical personnel. Third, there was concern that uncontrolled PoW activities, such as unauthorised demolitions, could disrupt essential Allied logistical operations. Lastly, MI9 feared severe German reprisals if PoWs attempted mass breakouts, based on known Nazi brutalities. Staying in camps was considered safer, particularly under Italian custody, which had a less harsh record.

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* VCNS: Vice Chief of the Naval Staff. This position was a senior appointment in the Royal Navy, a member of the Admiralty Naval Staff who reported to the First Sea Lord.

VCOS: Vice Chiefs of Staff. This term likely refers to a meeting or body involving vice chiefs from various branches of the military, including Navy, Army and Air Force representatives.

However, this rationale proved disastrously flawed. The anticipated rapid Allied advance did not occur; instead, the campaign lasted nearly 20 months. When Italy surrendered on 8 September 1943, Italian guards abandoned many camps, leaving gates open but no guidance for prisoners. With the Allies still distant, German forces swiftly recaptured over half the PoWs, transporting them to harsher conditions in Germany. Conversely, the few who defied or circumvented the order to stay put had better chances of evading capture. Thus, obedience ironically led many directly back into enemy hands.

The decision-making and communications process was flawed. Initially, Montgomery informally conveyed his directive, limiting broader scrutiny. American and British coordination was initially strong but weakened in the face of rapid German actions.

Churchill belatedly ordered rescue efforts for PoWs through General Alexander but MI9 was (or claimed to be) unaware of the change in policy and unable to communicate revised instructions to the prisoners effectively.

This failure was compounded by logistical and technical barriers. MI9's secret broadcasting system was often too complex for PoWs to decode under pressure, and broader communication channels like the BBC could not provide precise or timely instructions. Meanwhile, MI9 rescue teams deployed into Italy faced significant challenges, including insufficient transport, few Italian-speaking personnel, unreliable local guides and limited resources, all of which restricted their capacity to locate and rescue prisoners.

Military regulations permit disobedience when conditions change drastically, yet many camp commanders rigidly adhered to their orders, more worried about the repercussions of insubordination. Only a minority foresaw imminent German capture and independently organised escapes, underscoring the conflict between military obedience and adaptability in the light of changing circumstances.

Afterwards, MI9 and other Allied leaders regretted the missed opportunities. Although recognising their original rationale as defensible, given available information, they admitted it was misguided. The speed of the German response and the protracted campaign exposed critical misjudgements. Although the feared reprisals did not occur on the scale anticipated, the actual outcome – mass recapture by Germans – did.

MI9 later acknowledged its failure to anticipate changing conditions and communicate swiftly enough. Nevertheless, no formal disciplinary action occurred, reflecting a tacit institutional acceptance of shared responsibility.

Ultimately, this incident emphasised the necessity for adaptable leadership, good communications and empowered decision-making at lower command levels. Strict adherence to orders without context-specific judgement proved disastrous.

Instructions sent to the Commodores of the returning PoWs' barracks

To the Commodore R.N. Barracks*, 9th June 1943

I am to acquaint you that the ILE DE FRANCE will be returning to this country in the latter half of this month with a total of 1402 naval personnel on board. It is under-

* These included Devonport, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Chatham and Lympstone.

stood that this total consists of a large number of Naval personnel who were repatriated from Italy in the Jedda Exchange.

2. I am to inform you that the following particular arrangements should be made in regard to these personnel:-

(a) Ration Cards.

(Ratings should be provided with a complete service Food ration card (R.B.12) (which normally covers a period of 14 days) in respect of each week's recuperative leave thus entitling the recipient to purchase double the current civilian scale of rationed foodstuffs during his period of such leave.

This arrangement should not normally exceed a period of 28 days, but if at the end of this time the rating's state of health is such as to warrant a further issue of cards covering double quantities of rationed foodstuffs, these may be issued on the authority of the man's Medical Officer.

In the case where the rating is still on leave, he should obtain a certificate from his own doctor and send this to the Medical Officer at his depot.

(b) Leave.

The scale of leave for those personnel will be 14 days plus the wartime scale of foreign service leave of 7 days for every six months.

(c) Intelligence.

Enquiries should be made if any repatriates*:
(i) are carrying any secret or special messages from camps intended for the War Office (M.I.19)
(ii) have any other information of a secret, general or personal nature of interest to the War Office or other Government Department.

Provided that none of the above have already been given in any interrogation carried out in the Middle East.

By the Command of Their Lordships

* The word 'repatriates' means a person who has returned to his or her native country (OED).

SOURCES

Web sources

History of the Italian Navy in the Red Sea and its exploits
https://tinyurl.com/4r2ec52a

Details of the final days of the Italian navy in the Red Sea and the fate of the sailors from the scuttled destroyers
https://tinyurl.com/2awtunzv

An excellent summary of the events described in the essay, including photos of exchange and British servicemen arriving at Port Said
https://tinyurl.com/32bkvby3

Hansard
Records the proceedings of the UK's Houses of Parliament, which are referenced multiple times in the essay
https://hansard.parliament.uk

Details and photos of the Ile De France
https://tinyurl.com/3vcmzk3u

Antoni Paszkiewicz project
Diary of his journey from Suez to Greenock
https://tinyurl.com/4zf84zdn

Books

The Watery Grave: The Life and Death of HMS Manchester, Richard Osborne
The sinking of HMS Manchester

Dinghies to Divas or Comedy on the Bridge, Moran Caplat
Personal story of being repatriated
Part of the book can be read online: https://tinyurl.com/3pke3wrt

I Was Cicero. Bazna Elyesa, in Collaboration with Hans Nogly, January 1962
Autobiography of the spy at the British Turkish Embassy

Where the Hell Have You Been? Tom Calver
The account by the stepson of Field Marshal Montgomery, the Allied Commander, of his capture and time in an Italian PoW camp and the events following Italy's surrender

The Decline of Power, 1915–1964, Robert Blake

Britain's slow decline from the world's premier power to a nation with no military commitments east of Suez

MI9: Escape and Evasion, Michael Foot and James Langley
An account of MI9, established in 1939, to instruct servicemen in evasion and escape techniques

Massacre at Tobruk: The British Assault on Rommel, 1942, Peter Smith
The story of Operation Agreement

National Archives
ADM 1/13976: Prisoners of war and internees, Repatriation of 788 RN [Royal Navy] and RM [Royal Marine] personnel from Italy under special repatriation agreement. [Covers 1943–1944]

ADM 116/4935: Exchange of Axis internees in Arabia for British prisoners of war in Italy. [1941–1944]
BT 389/16/62: Ship Name: Ile De France Gross Tonnage: 43450

ADM_1_13976: Contains briefing for the First Lord of the Admiralty about the terms of the release. Most of this is preparation for his appearance in the House of Commons. [10/Nov/43]

WO 208/5444/38
Name: St John Aldrich Micklethwait. Rank: Captain R.N., HMS Sikh

Videos of the exchange
Pathé news film of the prisoners arriving at Port Said
https://tinyurl.com/yv62e2sx

Turkish video of the exchange with English voiceover
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA23N4sppxc

Video of the Ile De France (post-war)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM_3mDddstk