

THE PLANNED INVASION OF MALTA – POSTAL HISTORY

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D.

I do not propose to relate in detail the plans for the capture of Malta during the Second World War – an invasion that fortunately never materialised but which, throughout the conflict, occupied the minds of the ablest strategists on the Axis side. A huge mass of literature, some very authoritative, based mostly on Italian sources, has clarified the subject. On the other hand I know of almost no published material in English which is not merely divulgative or, at worse, war propaganda.

A serious study, tapping all the archives – British, German, Italian and Japanese – is long overdue. This magazine cannot be the right venue for such an important historical enterprise. The drama, the deceit, the rivalries, the indecision which characterised the operation would, I am sure, make captivating reading.

The conquest of Malta by the Axis troops had obsessed the High Commands from the beginning of the hostilities. The Island was a thorn in the side of their systems of communications, supplies and provisions for the troops in North Africa. Plans to invade and hold Malta had simmered from day one. Napoleon's detailed studies had been unearthed and studied; Japanese officers, considered the experts on amphibious landings, had been roped in.

Hitler and Mussolini played a constant see-saw of yesses and noes. Whenever the go-ahead became imminent, the order came to postpone. Extremely detailed studies, plans and projections had meanwhile been worked out by the High Commands of the Axis forces.



Fig. 1 Admiral Vittorio Tur, head of the special naval force destined for the invasion of Malta during World War Two. Some of the letters illustrated in this feature were addressed to him

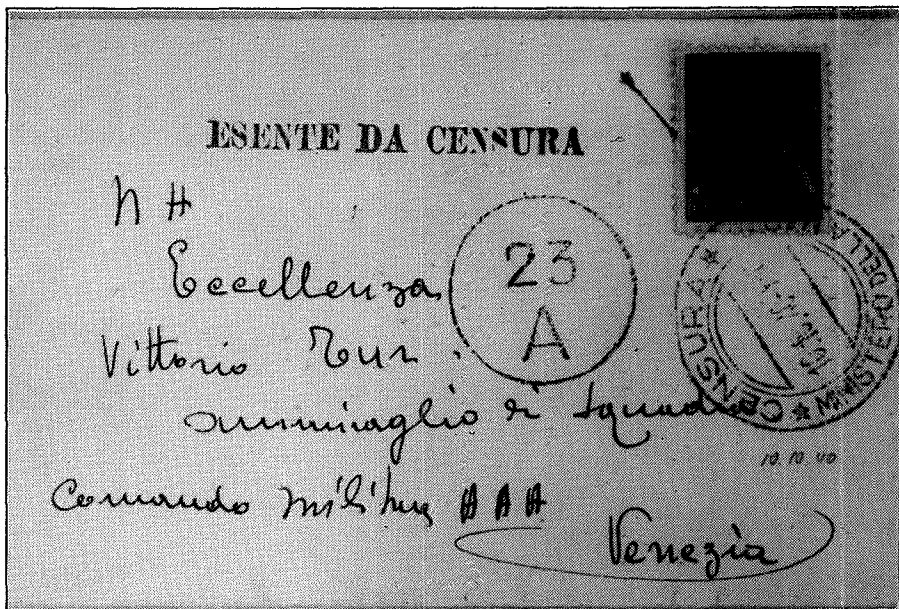


Fig. 2 A letter, dated October 10, 1940, addressed to Admiral Tur. Although handstamped 'Exempt from Censorship' the contents were equally examined, as evidenced by the CDS 'Censura del Ministero della Marina'

The planned invasion of Malta was repeatedly discussed at the highest levels, with Hitler taking active, and contradictory, stances. First in January 1942 in Garmish, a meeting headed by Admiral Raedar, decided on the capture of Malta. In Klessheim and Berchtesgaden in April 1942, a military summit which included Hitler, Mussolini, Jodl, Keitel and Kesselring reviewed the situation. On his part, Count Ciano the Foreign Minister, later executed, never believed in the real existence of a political and military determination to see the invasion of Malta through. He seemed certain that, despite the big words, the main actors were busy deluding themselves and each other.

Field Marshal Rommel, in North Africa, the Commander most interested in neutralising Malta to launch a successful counter-offensive, seemed to have considered the capture of the Islands a waste of military effort and time.

That the invasion was never formally ordered depended on many factors, foremost the almost total dearth of fuel (an estimated 40,000 tons); but Rommel's impatience and Hitler's dithering gave the final blow to an event that, if successful, could have turned the tides of war in their favour.

COME SI DOVEVA SBARCARRE A "MALTA"

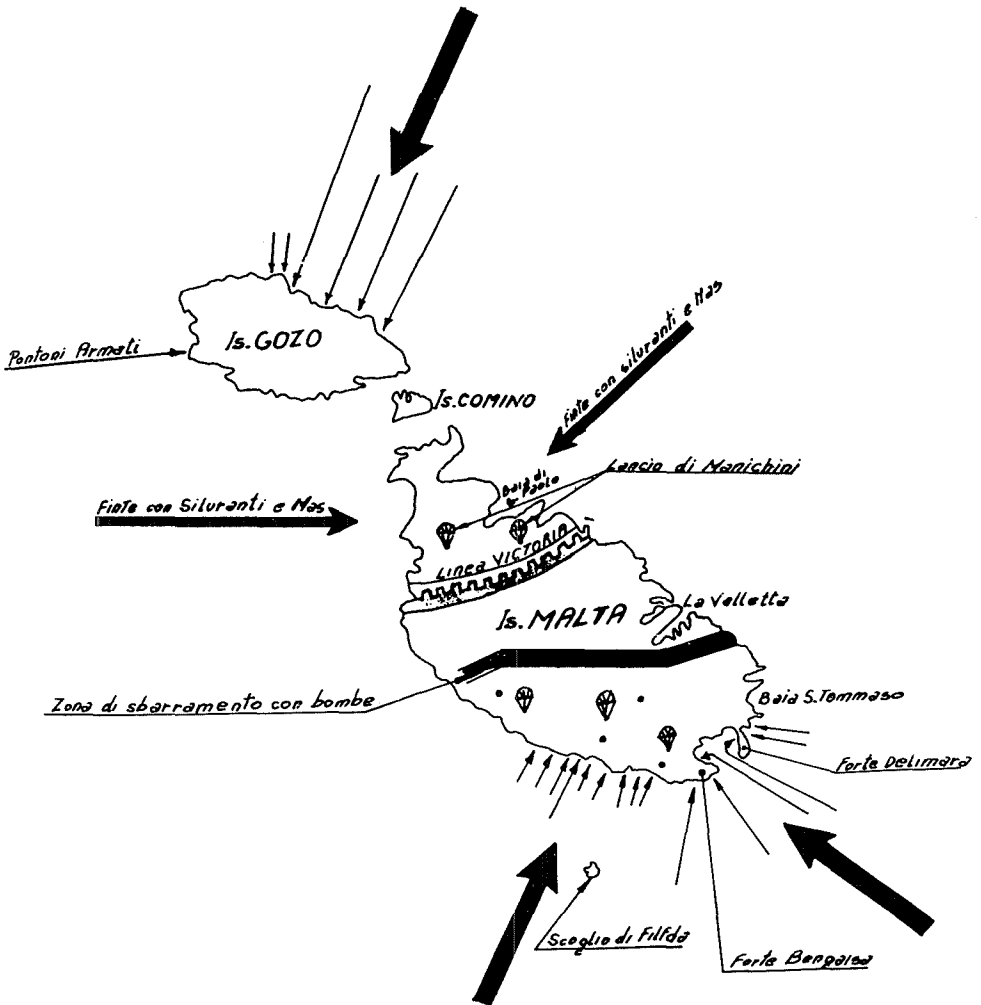


Fig. 3 Detailed plan for the invasion of Malta, from Mariano Gabriele's book on the Operation C 3



Fig. 4 A military postcard dated November 20, 1941 showing the 'POSTE MILITARI – M (SEZIONE A)' This was the special handstamp assigned to the troops training in Sicily for the invasion of Malta. In this case, the card originated in Castelvetro



Fig. 5 Enrico Paolo Tur, the admiral's brother, and a spy attached to De Gaulle's intelligence service for the collection of information on the invasion of Malta

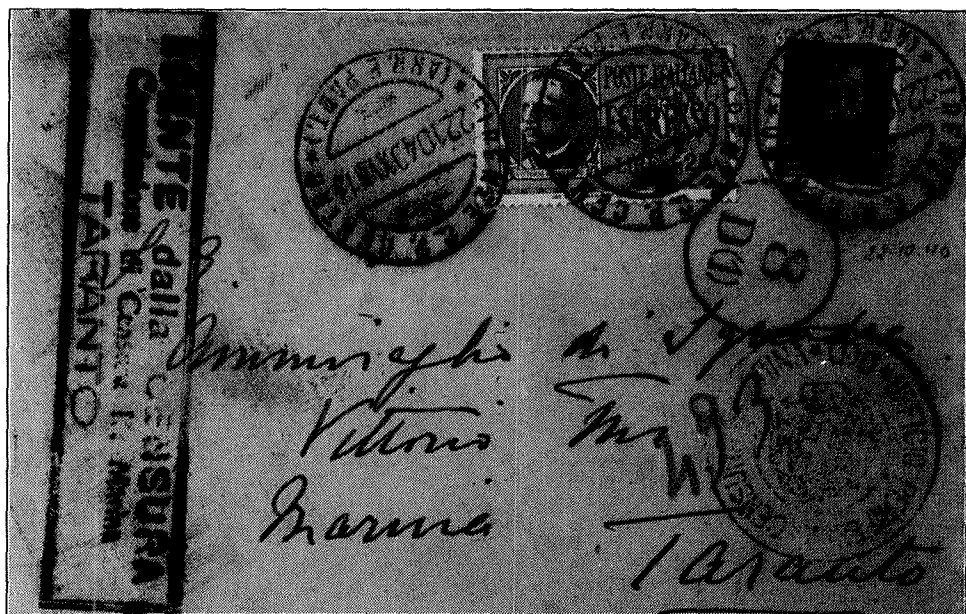


Fig. 6 Letter addressed to Admiral Tur on October 22, 1940 from Florence to Taranto. This cover bears prominently a rectangular handstamp certifying that the letter was not to be subjected to censorship

The plans, often changed and refined, consisted broadly of diversionary attacks on the North of the Island, while the brunt of the troops would land on the South, concurrently with airborne forces using gliders. In all, some 62,000 had to take part, with 1600 land transports and 700 guns. They were to be ferried over by 16 ships, 270 landing craft and 50 other vessels, escorted by 30 torpedo boats. The troops destined for Malta would leave from Catania, Licata and Porto Emedocle; those for Gozo from Syracuse.

The parachute corps were directed to land in the Dingli-Zurrieq area, the gliders near Kalafrana and Benghisa. The actual landings were to be effected near Qrendi and in the North of Gozo, with special troops at Marsaxlokk.

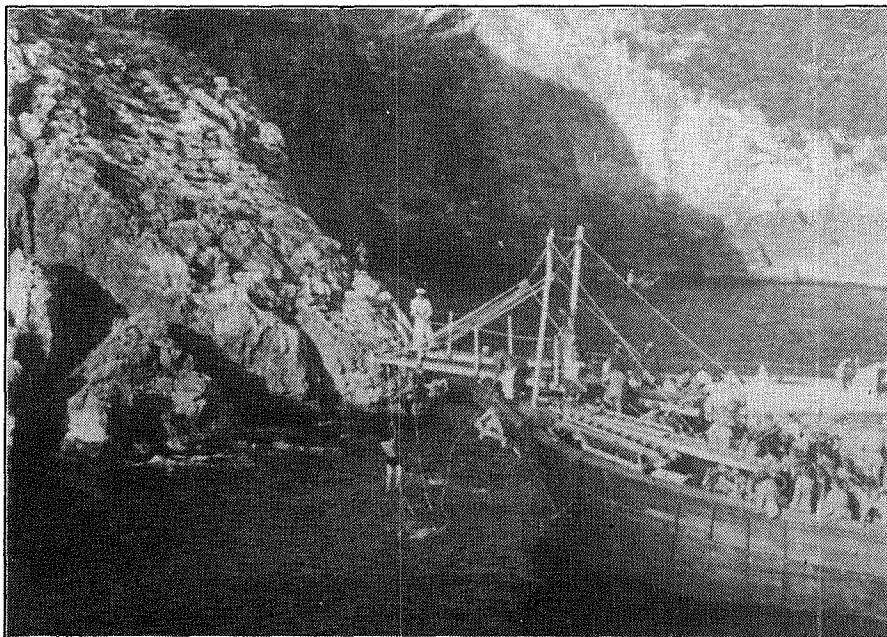
Plans for the invasion of Malta were definitely and finally abandoned on July 27, 1942.

This short study looks at some interesting postal-history aspects of that non-event, which, if translated into reality, could have radically threatened the democratic history of Malta and possibly the destiny of the whole European war. The Maltese operation went by the name of *Esigenza C 3* for the Italians, and *Hercules* for the Germans.



Fig. 7 View of the Valletta harbours from the air during an attack by the Savoia Marchetti bombers. An S.M. 79 is clearly visible in the foreground

Fig. 8 Italian troops training for the invasion of Malta, possibly near Gaeta. Shorelines with rock formations similar to those of Malta were chosen



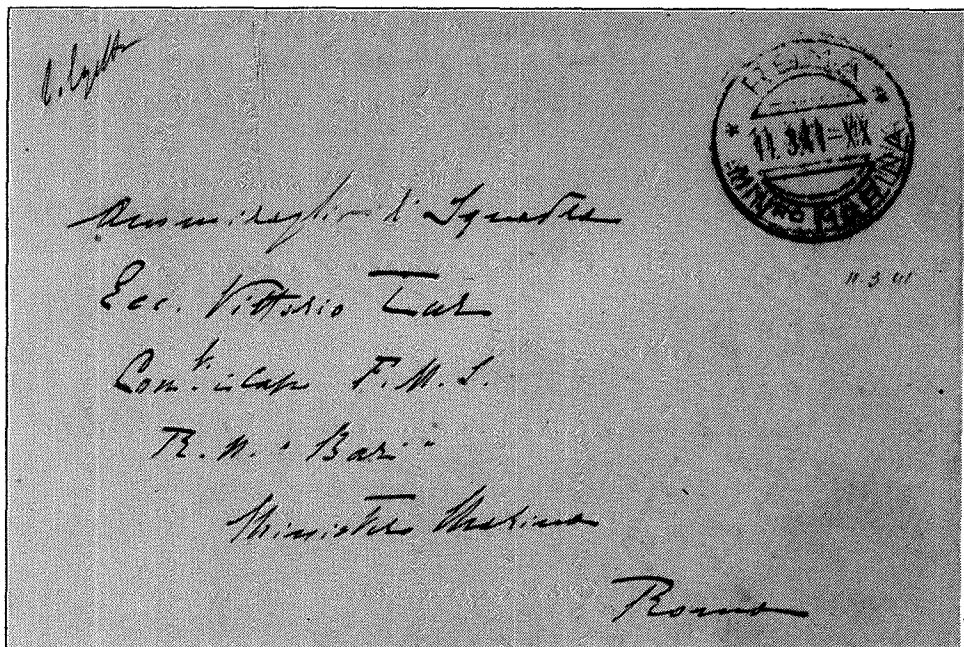
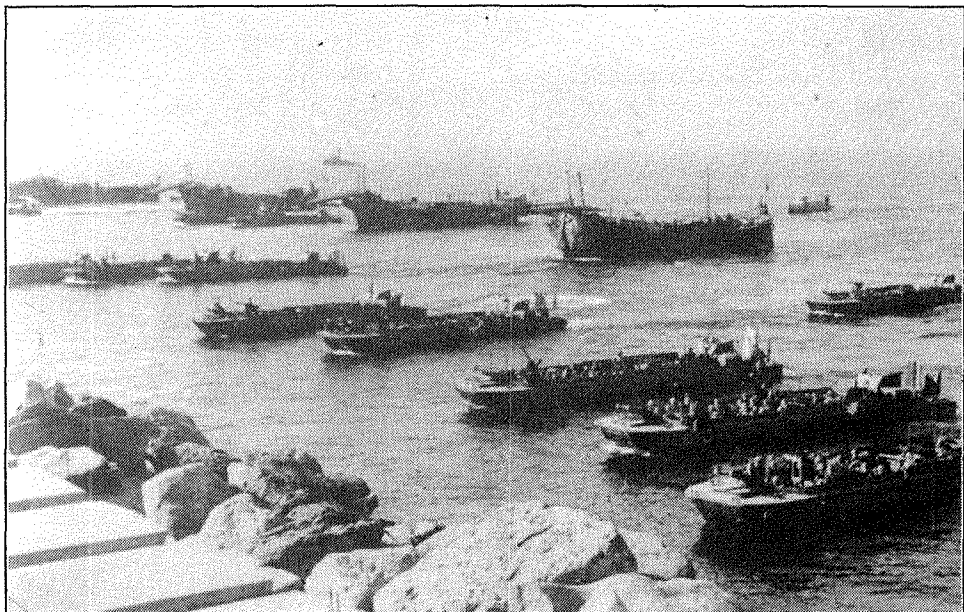


Fig. 9 Letter sent by Admiral Piccolomini to Admiral Tur when he was already head of the 'Malta' seaborne forces. Uncensored and unstamped

Fig. 10 Training for the invasion of Malta. Military landing craft in exercises near Livorno



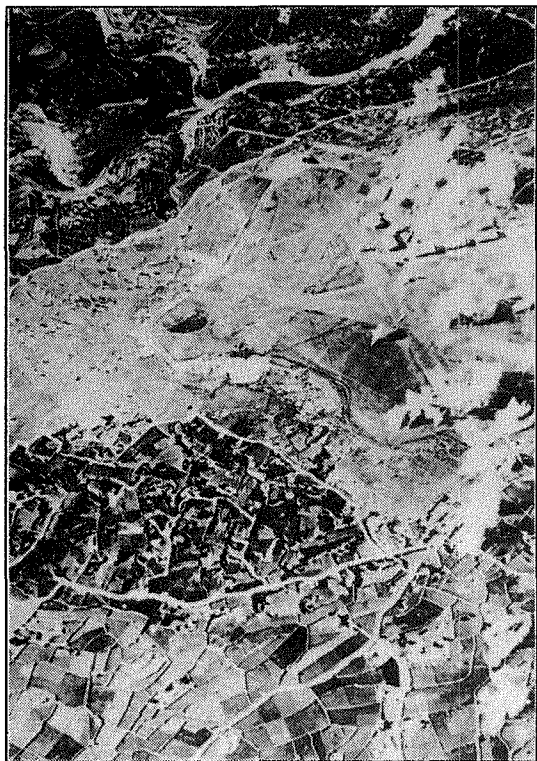


Fig. 11 A photo of Imqabba, in the vicinity of the airport, during an air raid. Taken by an Italian plane

Fig. 12 Sailors of the San Marco Division training for the invasion of Malta





Fig. 13 A military postcard sent on November 8, 1941, from Scoglietti by a soldier destined for the invasion of Malta. It shows the special CDS "M (SEZIONE B)"

Fig. 14 Specially designed armoured launches intended for the Malta operation, during naval exercises



The naval contingents earmarked for the Malta landings concentrated at Taranto, while thousands of troops destined for the invasion trained actively in various localities in Sicily whose physical characteristics resembled those in the South of Malta. The postal organisation was modified to serve the 'Malta' troops.

At the head of the sea operations was placed Admiral Vittorio Tur, a brave officer who believed ardently in the necessity and feasibility of the invasion of Malta. He offered his only son to join the first wave of landings. Tur never wavered in his determination to bring C 3 to a successful conclusion. The saddest irony for him proved to be his brother Paolo Francesco Tur, an anti-fascist spy in charge of an important section of the De Gaulle French intelligence service detailed specifically to obtain information about the Malta landings.

This notwithstanding, the British, though extremely anxious to penetrate the C 3 organisation, never managed effectively to elicit much that was substantially useful about the invasion plans.

This little collection of 'Malta invasion' mail, some of it addressed to Admiral Tur himself, is given as an example of war letters from the other side – correspondence that intimately connects with the organisation for the conquest of Malta. It would have been instructive and fascinating to balance these items with others related to the British plans to resist that invasion. Of these designs I know very little and have never managed to identify any covers that have some bearing on the event.

Sources:

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