

## A Failure of Intelligence? The loss of Prisoners of War on MV *Sebastiano Venier*, 9 December 1941

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### Introduction

Following the entry of Italy into the Second World War, the Mediterranean became a battlefield in which the Axis and Empire forces struggled for control of vital supply lines. A particular aspect of the campaign was the attack on vessels carrying Empire prisoners of war. In late 1941 and early 1942, these attacks cost the lives of well over 1,000 Empire prisoners. This article provides some further detail on the loss of the first of these ships, Italian MV *Sebastiano Venier*<sup>2</sup>, on 9 December 1941.

By early December 1941 thousands of Empire soldiers had been captured by the Axis forces in Operation CRUSADER. They were removed from the forward combat zone around Tobruk to the main supply port of Benghazi, 460km to the west. The burden they presented on supply requirements in North Africa necessitated their further removal to Europe, exposing them to attack by Empire forces because, unlike hospital ships, prisoner transports were not marked. Removals commenced in early December 1941, with modern MV *Sebastiano Venier* being one of the first merchant vessels to carry prisoners north.<sup>3</sup> Most of the prisoners carried north by her were South Africans of 5 S.A. Infantry Brigade, captured at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November 1941, and New Zealanders, captured outside Tobruk during operations lasting from 29 November to 2 December 1941.

At the end of November, the North African convoy route was in a deep crisis but *Venier*, escorted by the elderly *Navigatori*-class destroyer *Ct da Verrazzano*<sup>4</sup>, had successfully made the journey from Taranto to Benghazi where they arrived at 0900 hours GMT, 1 December 1941, carrying an important cargo of 1,968 tons supplies, 591 tons of urgently needed ammunition, 190 vehicles and 14 Italian M13/40 medium tanks.<sup>5</sup> Also on 1 December, *Spica*-class torpedo boat *Tp Centauro*<sup>6</sup> arrived in Benghazi, escorting German SS *Spezia*, a smaller merchant vessel plying the coastal convoy route between Tripoli and Benghazi, and German high seas tug *Max Behrendt*, the latter requested by the *Kriegsmarine* naval command Benghazi to help salvage operations of SS *Tinos*, a German merchant who had arrived in Benghazi on 22 November and on 25 November, in a Royal Air Force night attack had been hit at the height of hold 3 and sunk to the bottom of the harbour. Her crew was taken off her while attempts are made to refloat her but by early December it was clear that this would take more time and 15 men of her German crew were sent to Italy on *Venier*. One of these would come to play a crucial role in the drama of *Venier's* last voyage.

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<sup>1</sup> Author contact: [rommelsriposte@gmail.com](mailto:rommelsriposte@gmail.com) Andreas owns the Crusader Project blog at <http://rommelsriposte.com>. Many thanks go to the late Brian Sims who has researched this topic exhaustively, and to Barb Edy, whose father Don of No. 33 Squadron R.A.F. was on the *Ariosto* as a prisoner and survived her sinking. The article draws on research on Operation CRUSADER. The author is grateful for the review and comments by Prof. Marcus Faulkner, Kings College, London.

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary UK documents refer to her as *Sebastiano Veniero*, this is likely a confusion with the Italian submarine of the same name. *Venier* is the Venetian rendering of the name *Veniero*. Sebastiano Venier was the *Doge* of Venice from 1577 to 1578 and commanded the Venetian fleet at the Battle of Lepanto.

MV *Sebastiano Venier* was originally ordered by Lloyd Triestino. When Lloyd could not pay for her, the yard sold her on the stocks to the Dutch line NMSO, who named her *Jason* after the mythological figure. The picture above shows her during her trials in the Adriatic, prior to being seized by the Italian authorities after the German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940. She was a beautiful, modern, 6,310 GRT vessel running on F.I.A.T. diesel engines and could reach 16 knots. After her seizure she was assigned to SIDARMA, a state-owned Italian shipping company and commenced work on the North Africa route.

<sup>3</sup> It appears that *Ct da Verrazzano* was one of the first prisoner transports, taking 250 prisoners to Taranto via Tripoli.

<sup>4</sup> *Ct* = *Caccia Torpediniere*, literally "Torpedo Boat Destroyer", or simply Destroyer in English. The *Navigatori* class was built in the late 1920s to serve as light explorers. By the start of the war they had been downgraded to destroyers, and were employed on convoy duties, no longer being fit to serve with the battle fleet.

<sup>5</sup> <https://crusaderproject.wordpress.com/2009/02/15/successful-supply-runs-for-the-axis-november-1941/>

<sup>6</sup> *Tp* = *Torpediniere*, Torpedo Boat. A small destroyer/corvette type vessel. The *Spica*-class were a group of 32 light escort vessels typically equipped with 3 100/47 main guns, AA, torpedo and A.S.W. weapons, and capable of minelaying. They displaced just over 1,000 tons at full load and could reach 34 knots on paper. *Tp Centauro* was an early boat of the *Climene* sub-class of six vessels.

After being discharged of her cargo at Benghazi, *Venier* left the port for Taranto at 1900 hours on 8 December 1941, escorted only by *Tp Centauro*, carrying 2,000 Empire prisoners.

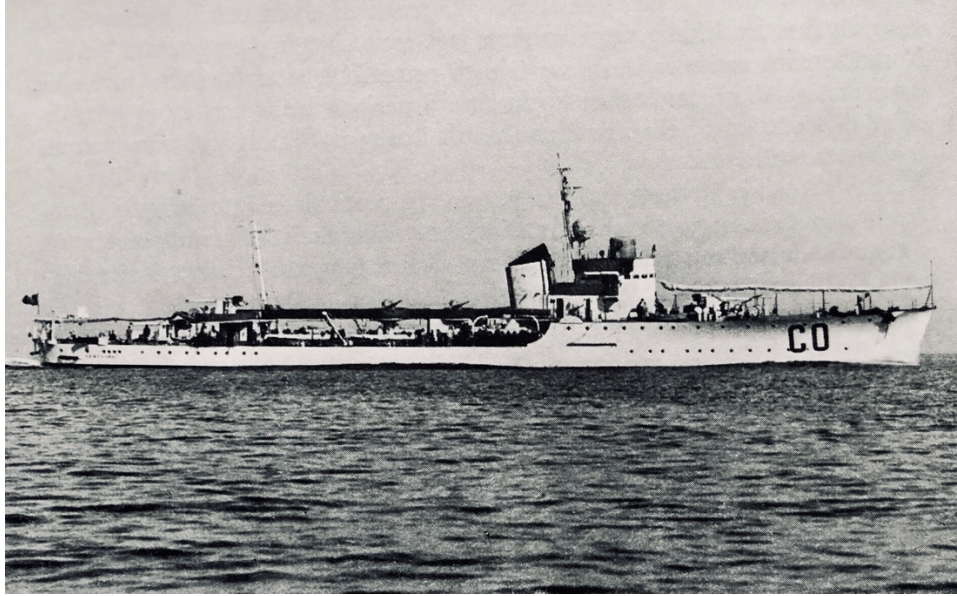
Three officer prisoners on *Tp Centauro* included New Zealand Brigadier James Hargest, who had been captured outside Bardia on 27 November, when the H.Q. of his 5 New Zealand Brigade was overrun by the *Afrika Korps*.<sup>7</sup> The small convoy took the easterly course, hugging the coast of Greece to be outside the range of Malta-based Swordfish torpedo bombers. The sea was described by Hargest as choppy, with *Tp Centauro* rolling heavily throughout and one of the officer prisoners being heavily seasick.



*Dutch motor vessel Jason, photographed ca. 1939-1940 by an unknown photographer. New Zealand National Library Collection Number: PAColl-2242-1-1*

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<sup>7</sup> Hargest, J. *Farewell Campo* 12, Michael Joseph Ltd., London, 1945



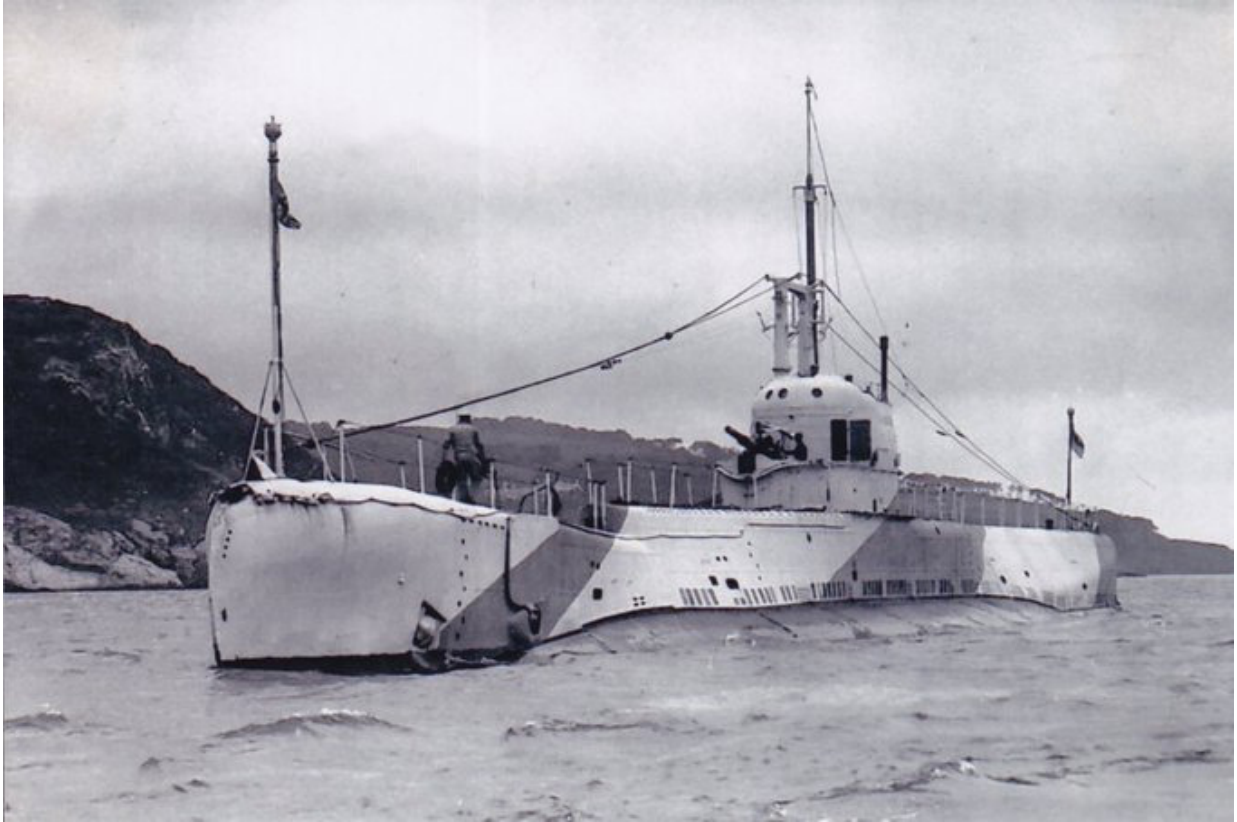
*Regia Marina Spica-class Torpedo Boat Centauro, prior to modernisation in 1942. Italian Navy.*

While *Tp Centauro* carried standard Italian escort A.S.W. equipment. She received German A.S.W. sonar and depth-charging equipment only in early 1942, consisting of sonar and better-performing depth charge launchers.<sup>8</sup> In December 1941 she had to rely on Italian listening sets which were not effective in heavy weather and/or at higher speeds. *Venier* was thus only weakly protected, with only one escort vessel with limited A.S.W. capabilities.

At 1425 hours GMT on 9 December 1941 Royal Navy submarine HMS Porpoise under Lt.Cdr. Pizey D.S.C. sighted *Venier* just off Cape Methoni, outside Navarino harbour on the Greek coast. Brig. Hargest describes the crew of *Tp Centauro* as being in a high state of alert prior to the attack but does not note any specific indication that HMS Porpoise might have been detected. At 1435 hours GMT she attacks *Venier* with a spread of four torpedoes. Only one of the four torpedoes hits, but the Italian crew abandons the ship rapidly. *Tp Centauro* engages HMS Porpoise, attacking with 22 depth charges, but none of them fall near the British submarine, which makes her escape unchallenged. Urged on by Brigadier Hargest, the captain of *Tp Centauro* takes her closer to shore to offer assistance to *Venier* and compel her crew to reboard her, but due to the sea state can do no more and has to retire to nearby Navarino harbour. The Italian naval command immediately sends out two modern destroyers, *Soldati*-class *Ct Ascari* and *Carabiniere* to assist but there is nothing they can do to give help either.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://crusaderproject.wordpress.com/2015/12/07/german-sonar-on-italian-vessels-pt-3/>



*HMS Porpoise underway. @drachinifel Collection.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> HMS Porpoise was a Grampus-class mine-laying submarine of 2,038 tons displacement (submerged). She was capable of laying 50 mines and carried a 12.7cm gun as well as 12 torpedoes for her six bow tubes. She was launched in 1933.





Captain G B H Fawkes with Commander (S) E F Pizey DSC, RN in Algiers, February 1943. IWM16004

12.40.0/c 330° . 12.55.0/c 360° S.E.C.

Zone Time kept at Noon	No. on Sick List	Leave granted to Ship's Company	Anchor Bearings
-2			

14.25. Sighted one Merchant ship and was escort vessel. During attack on 14.31.0/c 160°  
 14.35. Fired four torpedoes. 1 hit, probably went deep 150 ft. Course altered at 14.40. 22. depth  
 charges dropped. Attached in position (36° 43' N, 21° 38' E. Peled Light 196' 6"  
 15.00. Course 270°. Commenced re-load. 15.04.0/c 240°. 15.16.0/c 200°. 15.30. Depth 80 ft.  
 16.59.0/c 180°

17.00.0/c 120°. Land Pic. { 36° 43' N  
 21° 34' E

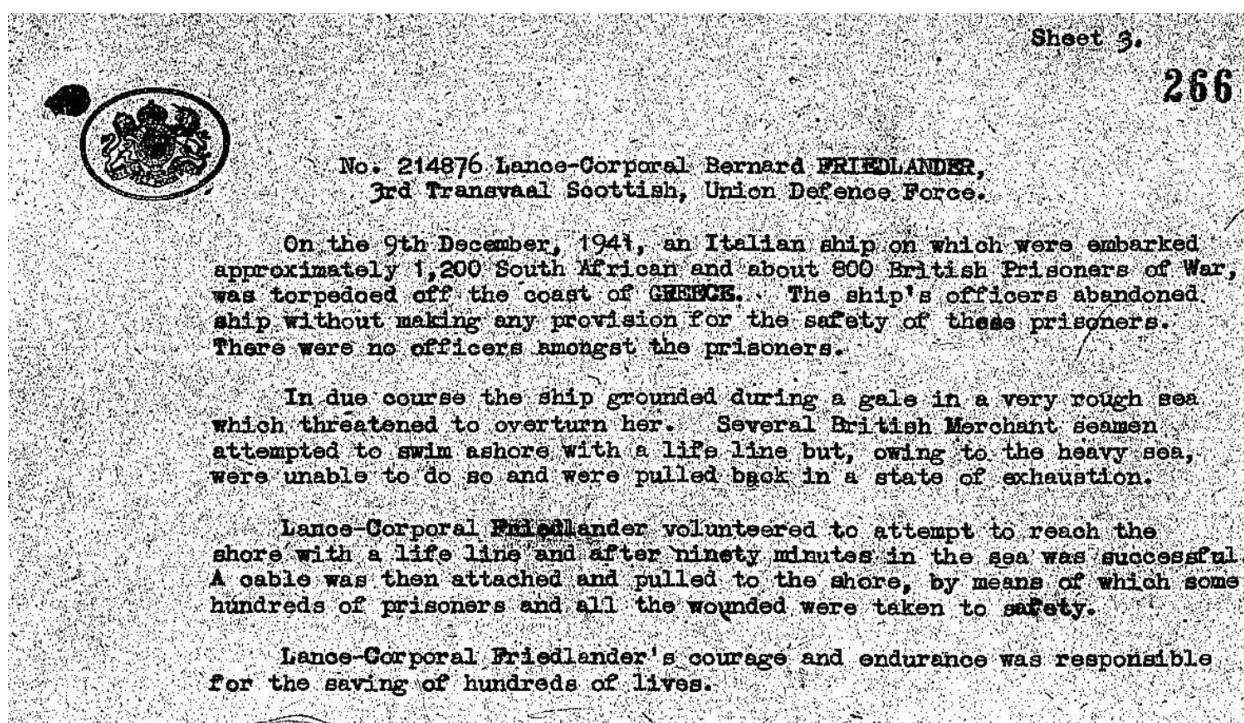
BP

Entry in December 1941 Log of HM/Sub Porpoise for 9 December describing the attack on Sebastiano Venier. UK TNA ADM173/16912

Down by the bow and with her steering wrecked, *Venier* remains afloat but is so badly damaged that she has to be beached stern-first in a desperate action under the control of a German engineering officer, almost certainly of *SS Tinos*, while remaining guards and German crew members of *SS Tinos* remove the covers from the holds in which the prisoners are confined. Following some skillfull maneuvering, about 2.5 hours after the torpedo struck her, *Venier* is beached under the walls of Methoni castle.

Due to the sea state, survivors cannot come off her onto land however. Ultimately, a line is put up through the heroic action of L/Cpl Bernard Friedlander, 3<sup>rd</sup> Transvaal Scottish Regiment, who was awarded the George Medal for this act in July 1945 after being liberated from a German camp.<sup>10</sup> Despite Friedlander's deed, more men are killed as they try to reach land via this escape line. Once on land, survivors of the beached *Venier* are assisted by soldiers of a nearby Italian garrison.

Reports state that 309 of the 2,000 Empire prisoners on board die in the attack, most of them when the torpedo struck the forward hold of the *Venier*, as well as 11 members of the Italian crew and guard. There are other estimates reaching up to 500 men being killed.



Citation for L/Cpl Friedlander's George Medal, awarded in 1945. UK TNA WO373/69/514

<sup>10</sup> Second Supplement to The London Gazette, 17 July 1945, Issue No. 37185, p.3765



*Ship Sebastiano Venier aground at Point Methoni, Greece, New Zealand Archives PAColl-2242-1-2*

Based on available sources it is impossible to arrive at a clear breakdown by nationality of the prisoners carried on *Venier*. It is generally estimated that ca. 1,200 of the prisoners were South African, primarily from 5 S.A. Infantry Brigade captured on 23 November 1941, and another ca. 400 New Zealanders captured at the Zaafran battle outside Tobruk between 28 November and 2 December 1941. The remainder are likely to be primarily British men captured at various locations. It is possible but unlikely that small numbers of AIF personnel were on board. Even then their number would not have been substantial, since the only Australian Army unit involved in CRUSADER was 2/13 Battalion, which did not report any prisoners taken during operations. In the past, Flying Officer David Rutter of No. 3 Squadron R.A.A.F. has been identified as a casualty on *Venier*, but it is now clear that he did die in an air battle at El Adem on the same day.

#### The Role of ULTRA

By late 1941, the ability of the British command to read Italian and German naval and air force messages encoded on Enigma machines, known as ULTRA, was well-developed. Messages were read with very short delays and in time to guide operational decisions and messages that prisoners were to be carried northbound on merchant vessels returning to Italy had been deciphered since 5 December. Thanks to ULTRA, the departure time and escort arrangements of *Venier* were known in London, well before her actual departure. Furthermore, the fact that *Venier* had 2,000 prisoners on board was also known in London since 0540 GMT on 8 December, when a message confirming this was decoded.

HMS Porpoise had left Alexandria for her 14<sup>th</sup> war patrol on 28 November, prior to these messages being deciphered in Bletchley Park. While she would have been in contact with her command authorities, and it is likely that sufficient time passed between the message being deciphered and the attack on *Venier* to allow for HMS Porpoise to be instructed not attack merchants moving north, this would have brought with it the risk that such a message would be intercepted or that in the case of capture it would be revealed. Notifying a submarine on patrol would thus potentially compromise the security of ULTRA.

Thus, not having been informed of this fact, almost 33 hours after the signal confirming that *Venier* was carrying 2,000 prisoners north was deciphered in Bletchley Park and over 24 hours after this information had reached the Admiralty and Prime Minister's office in London, HMS Porpoise fired her spread of torpedoes.



187

ADM  
TO I D B  
FROM N S

ZIP/ZTPI/2837

9370 KC/S TO O 1100/5  
ROME TO TRIPOLI TO I 1512/5/12/41  
IMPORTANT

FROM: NAVAL STAFF, ROME  
TO: NAVAL H.Q. BENGHAZI, REPEATED NAVAL COMMAND LIBYA TRIPOLI

58533- REFERENCE TELEGRAM 58491 FROM ADMIRALTY, ROME  
OF 2/12. REPORT BEFOREHAND THE EMBARKING OF PRISONERS ON  
STEAMSHIPS AND NAVAL UNITS RETURNING TO ITALY, GIVING  
NUMBER AND PORT OF DISEMBARCATION.

1850/5/12/41+++LWF/DE  
RD

57

ADM  
TO I D B  
FROM N S

ZIP/ZTPI/2946

5880 KC/S TO O 2310  
ROME TO SALONICA TO I 2254/07/12/41  
MOST IMMEDIATE

FROM: ADMIRALTY ROME  
82211. REFERENCE YOUR NO.35177/7/12.  
SAILING OF MOTORVESSEL "VENIERO" HAS BEEN POSTPONED  
TO 1800/08/12.

DEPT NOTE: NO.35177 HAS NOT YET REACHED US. ZTPI/2834 STATED  
THAT "VENIERO" WAS EXPECTED TO SAIL FOR POINT 'TESTA' AT  
1800/07 AND ZTPI/2672 STATED THAT T/B "CENTAURO" WAS TO  
ESCORT "VENIERO".

0232/8/12/41/CEL/LLB+++  
READ REFERENCE YOUR NO.35177/7/12.

ULTRA intercept of intent and arrangements of shipping prisoners on merchants and naval units, decoded 1850 hours GMT 5 December 1941.

ULTRA intercept of delay of departure time and escort arrangements of Venier, decoded 0234 hours GMT 8 December 1941.

UK TNA, DEFE3/834

45

ADM  
TO I D B  
FROM N S

ZIP/ZTPI/2957

5880 KC/S TO O 2325/07 TO I 0144/08/12/41  
ROME TO PATRAS IMPORTANT

FROM: ADMIRALTY ROME  
TO: NAVAL HEADQUARTERS TARANTO AND REPEATED TO  
NAVAL COMMAND PELOPONNESE,  
NAVAL HEADQUARTERS HESSINA

77146. DECRYPTER-IN PERSON.  
MOTOR VESSEL "VENIERO" EXPECTED TO SAIL ESCORTED BY  
1 T/B, SPEED 16 KNOTS, AT 1800/08 (FROM ?) 'CANALE' PROCEEDING  
TO 'COHMA', PASSING 30 MILES WEST OF 'CARENA'.  
2000 PRISONERS ARE ON THE MOTORVESSEL.

DEPT. NOTE: POINT 'COHMA' MAY BE TARANTO (SEE ZTPI/2855) LAST  
PARAGRAPH.

0540/08/12/41+++CEL/SR  
RD

MOST SECRET

NAVAL SECTION.

NAVAL HEADLINES 159.  
(Times are G.M.T.)

1100/8/12/41.

ITALIAN.

1. s.s. "Iseo" and "Ankara" (Naval Headlines 158, para. 1) were to have sailed on 8/12. But both convoys have been postponed.
2. The Italian Admiralty informed Western Air Sector Tripoli that the protection of "Del Greco" (Naval Headlines 158, para. 4) was of vital importance; maximum escort at high and low altitudes was requested, and also protection during the entire period of unloading.
3. Convoy "Calitea" (Naval Headlines 158, para. 2) sailed 24 hours late. Tankers "Lenoo" and "Tevere" arrived at Tripoli on 7/12 (on which date Tripoli reported fuel oil stocks as "nil"). On the same day "Spezia" escorted by "Centauro" left Tripoli for Benghazi.
4. The motor-ship "Veniero" will leave Benghazi for Italy at 1800/8, with 2,000 prisoners of war on board.

ULTRA intercept confirming Venier's cargo of 2,000 prisoners, 8 December 1941, 0540 hours GMT.

Naval Headlines 159, daily information update to UK Prime Minister's Office, 1100 hours GMT, 8 December 1941.

UK TNA, DEFE3/834

UK TNA HW1/308, emphasis by author.

### After the loss of *Venier*

Two days after forcing her to beach, HMS Porpoise undertook another attempt to destroy *Venier*, launching two torpedoes at her. Both failed to strike their target. On 15 December, HMS Torbay succeeded in striking *Venier*, putting her beyond repair. The wreck was broken up in situ in the 1950s.

On 14 February 1942 U-class submarine HMS P.38 (Lt. Hemingway RN) attacked a small north-bound convoy consisting of Italian SS *Ariosto*, German SS *Atlas*, and escorts *Ct Premuda* and *Tp Polluce*. *SS Ariosto* was sunk, hit by two torpedoes, and going down after a few hours in the early hours of 15 February, with 138 Empire prisoners lost. On 27 February 1942, U-class submarine HMS Upholder (Lt.Cdr. Wanklyn, VC) sinks SS *Tembien*. At least 390 out of 468 prisoners on board die, together with 41 Italians and 10 Germans. In total, around 1,000 prisoners taken during CRUSADER were killed in these three attacks, equal to just under 10% of the number of prisoners taken during CRUSADER.

HMS Porpoise was to become the last Royal Navy sub to be sunk by the enemy when she is lost in the Malacca Straits in 1945, on her 23<sup>rd</sup> war patrol. *Tp Centauro* continued to operate as an escort on the Libya route. While in port in Benghazi in November 1942 she is struck by a bomb during a night raid, catches fire and capsizes in harbour. She had undertaken 79 escort missions during the war.



*Methoni Lighthouse today. Photo by Jason Blackeye on Unsplash*



## Bibliography

Hammond, R.J. *Strangling the Axis* for general background

Hargest, James, *Farewell Campo 12* for a description of the voyage north

USMM, *La Difesa del Traffico con l'Africa Settentrionale, Vol. II* for general background

## Further Reading

<https://rommelsriposte.com/2008/07/16/so-how-many-men-were-lost-in-the-battle/> for an overview of losses in CRUSADER

<http://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/corporal-edward-lee-gamble-1917---2003-third-transvaal-scottish-regiment.88858/> for a survivor's account of the sinking of MV Sebastiano Venier

[http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0018-229X2018000100006](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0018-229X2018000100006) on the context and personal experiences of prisoners on board *Venier*

[https://www.aifpow.com/part\\_6\\_nominal\\_roll\\_and\\_casualty\\_list/chapter\\_3\\_nominal\\_rollcasualty\\_list](https://www.aifpow.com/part_6_nominal_roll_and_casualty_list/chapter_3_nominal_rollcasualty_list) for a casualty roll of ANZAC casualties in the war against Germany and Italy

<http://conlapelleappesaaunchiodo.blogspot.com/2015/12/centauro.html> for the history of Tp Centauro

<https://uboat.net/allies/warships/ship/3412.html> for the history of HMS Porpoise.

<https://www.odt.co.nz/lifestyle/magazine/inadvertent-victims> for background on New Zealand prisoners

<http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Pris-N78986.html> for background on New Zealand prisoners

<https://www.angelfire.com/art/happiclown/Jan.html> for background on the sinking of MV *Sebastiano Venier*

[https://viewer.waireto.victoria.ac.nz/client/viewer/IE698288/rep/REP698688/FL698690/t1/c4?dps\\_dvs=1611586708042~107](https://viewer.waireto.victoria.ac.nz/client/viewer/IE698288/rep/REP698688/FL698690/t1/c4?dps_dvs=1611586708042~107) for background on New Zealand prisoners

<http://www.goonintheblock.com> for a description of the sinking of SS Ariosto