Frank Norton, HMAS Sydney engaging RN Bartolemeo Colleoni, painted 1942. Cape Spada on the right. Colleoni can be seen to the right of Sydney, emitting smoke and having lost her bows but still firing. A destroyer to the left engages Colleoni with gunfire. Courtesy AWM[i,ii]

"Offensive Spirit and Resolute Handling"[iii]

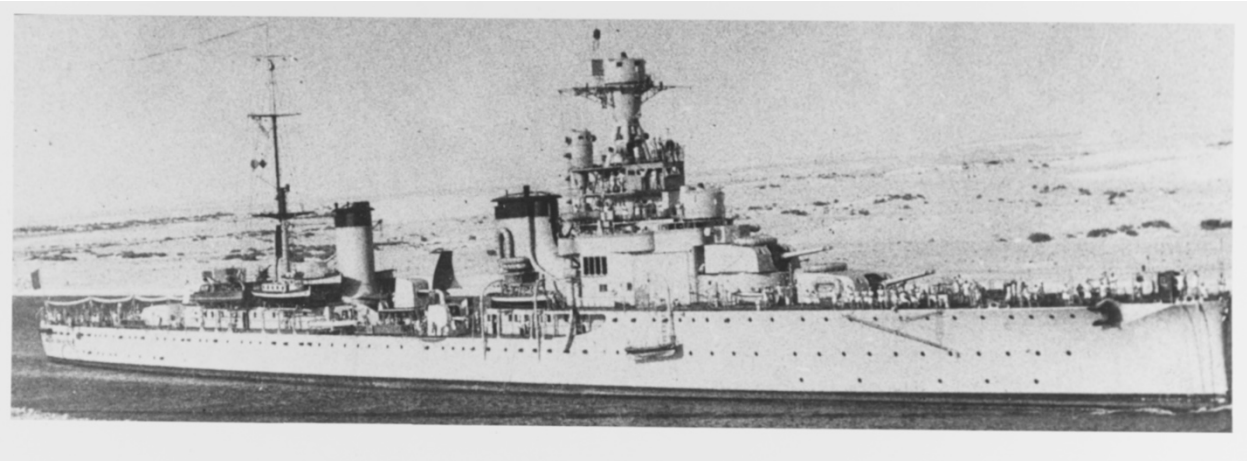
The Battle of Cape Spada, 19 July 1940

Pt. I The Genesis of Italy's Light Cruiser Force[iv]

Introduction

This article is the first of a series of two that aim to provide a new perspective on the Battle of Cape Spada on Crete's northern coast on 19 July 1940. Cape Spada was one of the first major naval engagements of the Royal Australian Navy in the Mediterranean in the Second World War, when the light cruiser HMAS Sydney (II), leading a force including five Royal Navy destroyers, engaged the two light cruisers of the *Regia Marina*'s[v] 2nd Cruiser Division (*IIª Divisione*), *RN Bartolomeo Colleoni*[vi] and *Giovanni delle Bande* Nere, sinking the former.

The articles will provide the Italian perspective on this battle. This article will provide background on the genesis, characteristics and employment of the first post-First World War Italian light cruiser force[vii], the 1920s *di Giussano*[viii]-class cruisers, in the run-up to the Second world war in the Mediterranean. The design considerations and weaknesses of the *di Giussanos* are critical to understand the decision-making of the Italian commander and the outcome of the battle. The second article will describe the battle in detail.



RN Bartolomeo Colleoni transiting the Suez Canal on her way to the China Station in 1938, showing the unusual arrangement of the floatplane hangar at the rear of B turret. (Courtesy US Navy – Naval Heritage Command)

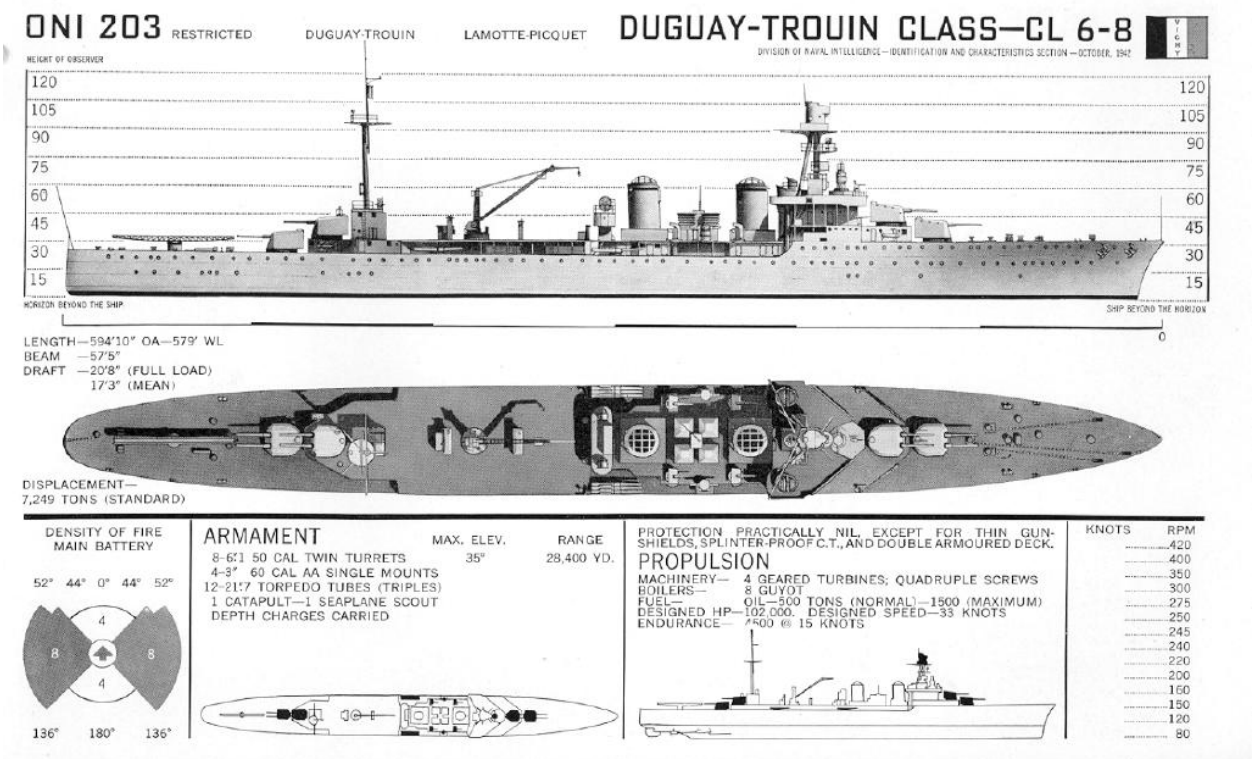
The Genesis of the *Regia Marina's* Light Cruiser Force – 1928 to 1940

The First World War had not seen an urgent need for a traditional cruiser force in the *Regia Marina*, as the key struggle was with the Austro-Hungarian navy in the Adriatic, and the role of the cruiser was covered by the light scouts, called "Explorers" – *Esploratori*[ix], of the *Mirabello* and *Aquila* classes. At the end of the war the *Regia Marina* 's scout or light cruiser force consisted only of four obsolete pre-First World War designs, the protected cruiser *Libia,* the scout cruiser *Quarto* and the two scout cruisers of the *Nino Bixio* class, dating back to 1907, 1909 and 1911 respectively. These vessels were successively decommissioned between 1927 and 1939. Reinforcing them, from 1921 onwards, were five scout cruisers received as war reparations from Germany and Austro-Hungaria and re-named after Italian port cities, *Ancona, Bari* and *Taranto* for the three German vessels and *Brindisi* and *Venezia* for the Austro-Hungarian vessels. They were comprehensively modernized before entering service.[x]

After the First World War a rapidly developing naval arms race in the Mediterranean put pressure on Italy to create a modern cruiser force, as the obsolete vessels described above were no longer sufficient for the role. In consequence, from 1926 onwards the *Regia Marina* began a construction program for a class of 12 fast, well-

armed but lightly armoured scout cruisers, still referred to as *Esploratori* at this time. These vessels became what is often referred to as the *Condottieri*-class of 12 light cruisers, even though they were not really a single class. The 12 *Condottieri* were laid down in five sub-classes, the design conceptualization of which evolved over almost a decade. The final *Condottieri* of the *Abruzzi* sub-class reached almost twice the size of the initial *di Giussano*[xi] sub-class and followed a completely different design concept. In line with the propaganda efforts by Italy's Fascist regime, which tried to hark back to Italy's martial past, the *Esploratori* were given the names of famous Italian military commanders, or *Condottieri*.[xii]

The design requirement for this new class of scout cruisers was based on the presumption that the most likely confrontation the *Regia Marina* would face would take place in the western and Central Mediterranean as a struggle for supremacy with the French *Marine Nationale*. In the early 1920s, the *Marine Nationale* had radically modernized the concept of the scout cruiser with the design and introduction of the *Duguay-Trouin* class in 1926. These were fast, practically unprotected vessels of 7,250 tons displacement, armed with long-range 6" guns and carrying a scout plane launched from a catapult. Conceptually the three *Duguay-Trouin* cruisers were another step towards prioritizing speed and gunfire over protection, as the idea was that they could outgun and outrange destroyers, while being able to outrun any heavier vessel that could harm them. Their introduction was accompanied by the launch of the super-heavy destroyers of the *Chacal* and *Guépard* classes. These in turn were a reaction to the *Regia Marina's* new, heavy destroyers of the *Leone* class and incorporated design aspects of the late-First World War German destroyers of the *Großes Torpedoboot 1916* class, which had conceptualized the heavily armed and fast destroyer model and of which *SMS S113* had been ceded to France after the war. The *Chacals* and *Guépards* were capable of exceeding 35 knots design speed and carried a main armament of five single 130mm/5.1" guns on the *Chacals,* or 138.6mm/5.4" guns on the *Guépards*. They were thus considerably better armed and faster than most other destroyers of their time.



Light Cruiser Dugay-Trouin, ONI203 booklet for identification of ships of the French Navy, published by the Division of Naval Inteligence of the Navy Department of the United States (9 November 1942) – Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

The combination of the *Duguay-Trouin* cruisers with the super-destroyers created a fast and well-armed, if lightly protected strike force, to which the 12 *Esploratori* were the *Regia Marina's* response. Completing the concept, the 12 *Esploratori* were to be accompanied by 24 *Esploratori leggeri* or light scouts[xiii], of the *Navigatori* class, named after famous Italian seafarers. These were essentially large, fast destroyers. They displaced 1,628t and were equipped with six 120mm (4.7") guns in three twin-turrets as their main armament. The initial concept of employment for the new *Regia Marina Esploratori* force, embodied in *Colleoni's* motto "*Velocemente e Veemente"* (Fast and Forceful), was to conduct rapid raids in the Western Mediterranean, interdicting the sea lanes between Metropolitan France and its North African colonies, and either picking and winning a fight with the fast strike forces of the *Marine Nationale*, or escaping any superior force by using their high speed. Raiding squadrons composed of *Esploratori* divisions with *Esploratori leggeri* flotillas in support would sail from bases on the Italian west coast, as well as in Sardinia and Sicily, searching for and destroying French convoys and/or chasing French raiders threatening Italian traffic by intruding into the Ligurian and Tyrrhenian Seas. This operational concept did not change substantially until the mid-1930s, when the final sub-class of the *Condottieri* was laid down, and the battle of Cape Spada was triggered by such a cruiser raiding operation. By the mid-1930s however the Royal Navy had become the major concern for the *Regia Marina* and the last of the *Condottieri* were vastly different types of ships.

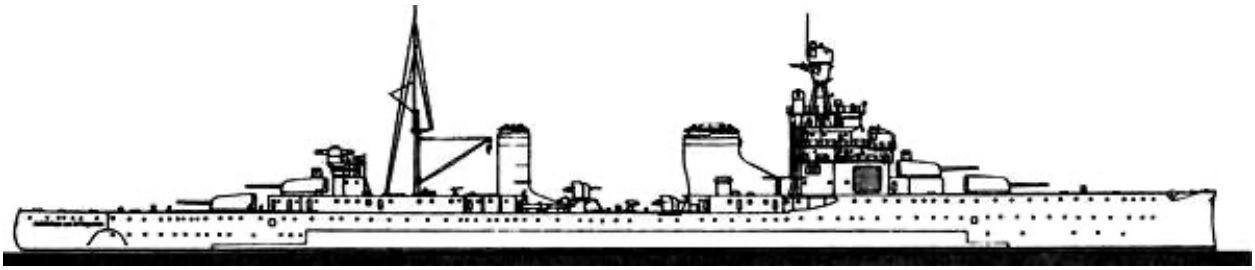
The First *Condottieri*

The initial plan of the *Regia Marina* was to build 12 *Esploratori* to the design of the *di Giussano* sub-class. Nevertheless, after completing the first two, *Alberto di Giussano* and *Giovanni delle Bande Nere*, named after, the financial crisis of 1929 caused budget cuts which reduced the planned programme of 12 to only four, while the programme for the accompanying *Esploratori Leggeri* was cut from 24 to 12. Only two more vessels were completed to the same design, *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and *Alberico di Barbiano. Alberto di Giussano* and *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* commissioned into the *Regia Marina* on 1 January 1931, while *Alberico di Barbiano* commissioned that year. *Bartolomeo Colleoni* was the last to commission in 1932.

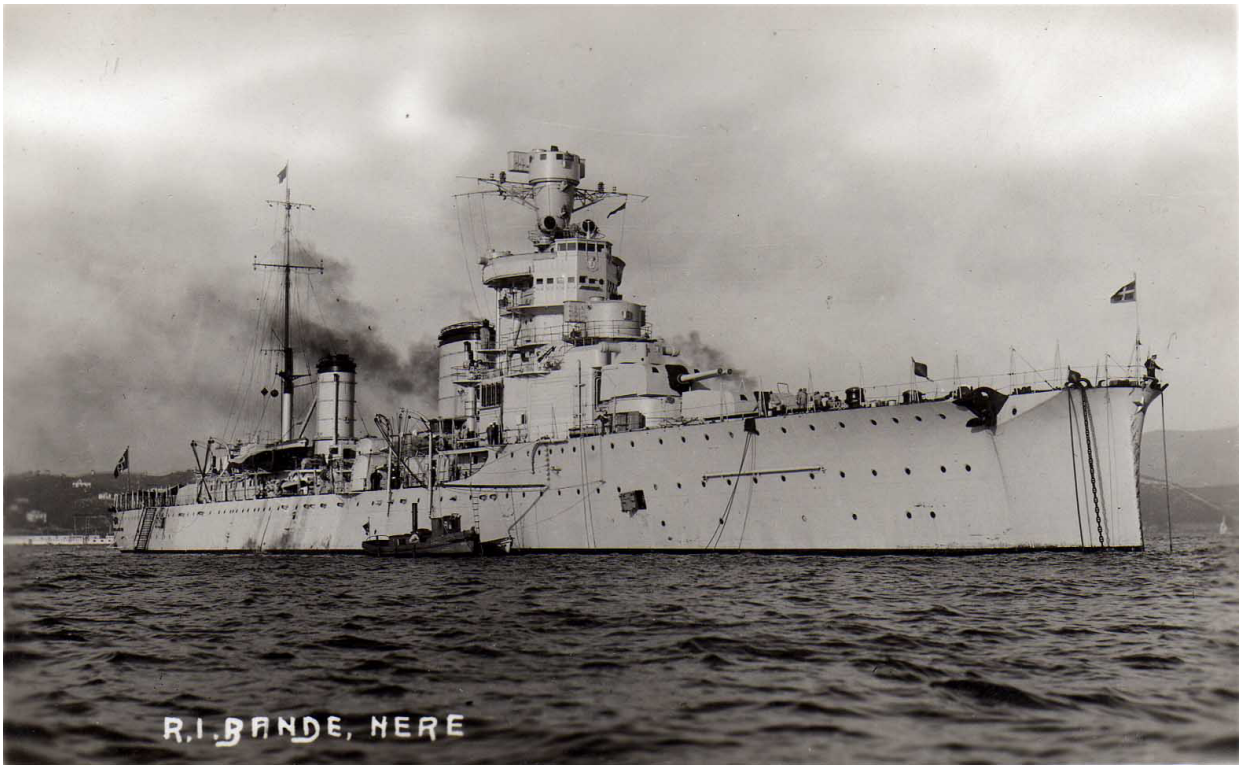
A further two vessels were then ordered principally along the same lines of speed over armour but with some speed traded for additional armour and some other minor design variations addressing weaknesses that had quickly been identified in the first four vessels. They were *Armando Diaz*, lost in February 1941, and *Luigi Cadorna*, the only survivor of the first six vessels. A major change was move of the catapult to amidships, enabling a re-design of the forward superstructure to reduce the top-heaviness of these two vessels. Together with the initial set of four they concluded the first built programme of six *Condottieri*, forming a distinct sub-group. Sometime during this period, the *Condottieri* were also re-classified as light cruisers. All four were lost by the end of 1941

Table 1: Overview of the di Giussano sub-class[xiv]

Vessel	Sub-Class	Patron	Laid Down/ Completed	Fate
Alberto di Giussano	*Di Giussano*	12th century military leader of the *Lega Lombarda* alliance against German Emperor Barbarossa	1928/1931	Lost 1941
Alberico da Barbiano		14th century mercenary leader – the first of the Italian *Condottieri*		Lost 1941
Giovanni delle Bande Nere		16th century mercenary leader – the last of the great *Condottieri,* Lodovico de' Medici.		Lost 1942
Bartolomeo Colleoni		15th century army leader –Captain General of the Venetian army from 1455 to 1475	1928/1932	Lost 1940



Profile of *RN Bartolomeo Colleoni* as built. (Courtesy *Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare - USMM*)



Giovanni delle Bande Nere, the second cruiser in IIª Divisione, carrying the flag of Admiral Casardi. Lost to HMS Urge off Stromboli Island in April 1942. Clearly visible the Plancia Ammiraglio (Admiral's Bridge) on top of the ship's bridge. In the other di Giussanos this was an open space. Courtesy Wikipedia.

A Problematic Design

While the high speed of the early *Condottieri* impressed during trials, severe problems soon emerged following their entry into service. These consisted of a range of seaworthiness challenges, partially caused by the design for high speed and light displacement. Problems included strong vibrations at high speeds and an overall lack of stability due to being top-heavy, both of which in turn affected gunnery performance. Immediate measures to address this included the replacement of the rear tripod mast with a simpler and lower structure. Nevertheless, nothing could be done about the fundamental design decisions, such as the narrow beam. To address the serious vibration issues, a project to strengthen the hulls of the first four *Condottieri* was carried out in 1938, concurrently with the installation of more capable air defense. Given the multiple design issues, it has to be considered that the reduction in the initial construction programme from 12 to six was a fortuitous decision by the *Regia Marina*,

since it enabled the design directorate to re-think and improve the later sub-classes, leading to considerably more capable, if also significantly larger vessels.

Considering the *di Giussanos'* full load displacement of almost 7,000 tons, the most comparable Royal Navy class of cruisers was the Leander class, of similar displacement, armament and protection (see Table 2 below). A major difference to the Leanders, driven by the very different needs of the two navies, was that the *di Giussanos* were built for a high design speed of 36.5 knots rather than endurance, having a comparatively short range of 3,800 nm at economical, and only 980 nm at top speed steaming. Range however was no great concern to the *Regia Marina*, given the restricted nature of the Mediterranean waters in which it would fight, and the short distance to a number of bases available to it around the Central Mediterranean and in the Aegean Sea.[xv]

Armament, Armour and Equipment

The *di Giussanos* were armed with eight 152/53 (6") OTO M1926 guns as main battery, placed in four twin-turrets, two forward and two rear. This gun fired a 110lb shell at a rate of 5-per-minute to an impressive range of 31,080 yards, with a very high muzzle velocity of 3,198 ft-per-second. This design was in keeping with the *Regia Marina* philosophy of seeking to commence a naval gun battle at long range and aimed to enable the *di Giussanos* to outrange enemy destroyers, a capability that seems to have influenced Admiral Casardi's tactical approach during the Battle of Cape Spada. In reality however, this doctrine was undermined because the OTO M1926 gun suffered severe accuracy problems, due to the very close placement of the barrels, which led to shells interfering with each other in flight.[xvi] The *di Giussanos* also carried six dual-purpose 100/47 (4") M1926[xvii] guns as secondary battery in three twin mountings amidships as a central battery. These guns, originally an Austro-Hungarian design and also used as main gun on the *Spica* torpedo boats, acted as the main air defense battery and close-in defense. While they were good for range, they were too slow in operation to follow the faster, modern aircraft introduced by the Royal Air Force after spring 1942. Overall, between being top heavy, designed with a narrow beam and equipped with a flawed main gun, the *di Giussanos* were a bad gun platform and they suffered from poor sea-going ability. The rebuild in 1938/39, which aimed to increase stability could only partially address this. The compromised main battery performance had serious consequences during the battle of Cape Spada.

In addition to their gun armament, the *di Giussanos* carried four 533mm torpedo launchers and were designed to lay over 100 mines, albeit at the cost of blocking Y turret from operating while the mines were shipped. They also were designed to carry two float planes in a hangar under the forward superstructure, allowing them to be launched from a bow catapult, although just one was carried when the war started, due to a limited number of the *IMAM Ro.43* floatplanes being available. The location of the catapult was both unusual and impractical and with the design amendments to *Luigi Cadorna* and *Armando Diaz* it was moved to a more conventional central location.

On the defensive side, the armour of the *di Giussano* vessels barely achieved splinter protection and the ships were vulnerable to the standard 4" guns of Royal Navy destroyers. As noted, the idea was to be able to hit any attacking destroyer hard at a range from which they could not retaliate and to use speed to maintain this distance and pound them into submission. The crews nicknamed the *di Giussanos "Cartoni Animati",* a play on the Italian term for the very popular Disney animated cartoons, but also meaning 'Animated Cardboard Boxes'. Again, this design concept was to play a role in the initial phase of the battle of Cape Spada, when the two Italian light cruisers faced only the four destroyers of the 2nd Flotilla but could not close on them due to this vulnerability. The ships were also very vulnerable to torpedo attacks, with all vessels suffering catastrophic damage from torpedo attacks, particularly if hit in the forward section.

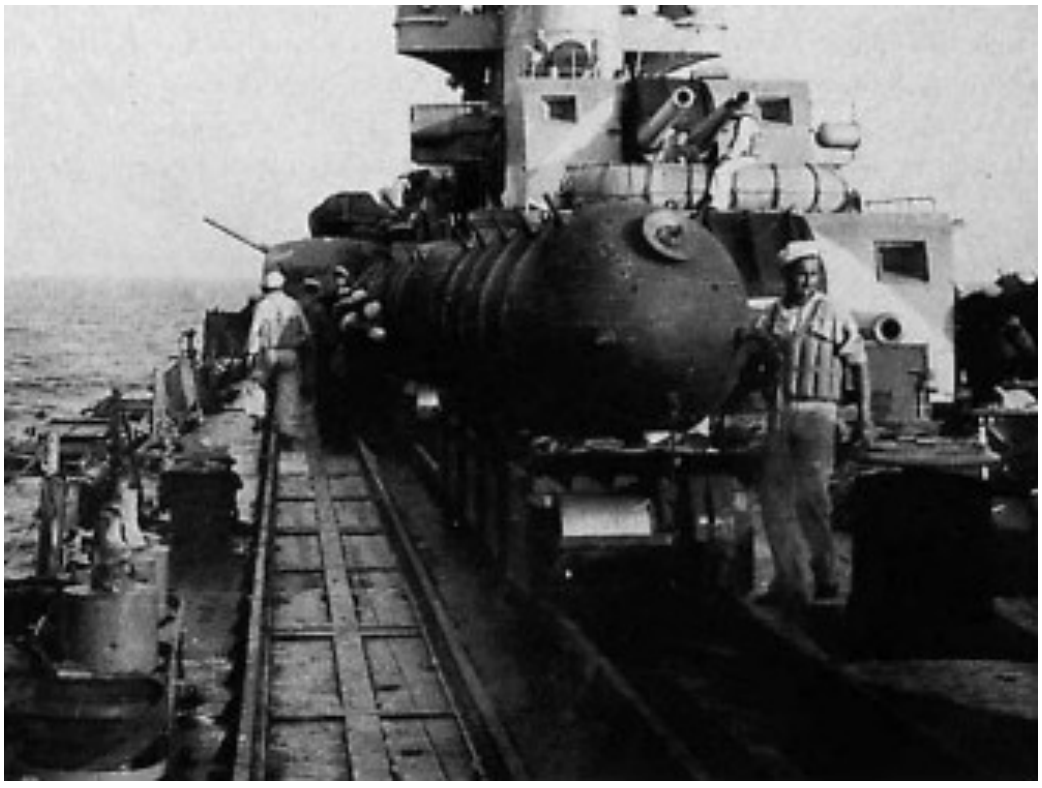
The close-in air defense battery as designed on the *di Giussanos* originally consisted of two First World War-era 40/39 single-barreled AA guns and eight 13.2mm twin-machine guns. During the rebuilding programme in 1938/39, the modern 37/54 AA gun replaced the 40/39 guns and the considerably better, twin-barrel 20/65 AA guns replaced most of the 13.2mm machine guns. During these refits the *di Giussanos* also received depth charge throwers for 40 depth charges, reflecting the changing ideas about their use. Other than these modifications, the *di Giussanos* did not receive improvements such as radar or additional AA guns during wartime, since most of them were lost before these technologies became available.

The *di Giussanos* originally carried a crew of 21 officers and 500 men. This increased by about 30% following their rebuild in the late 1930s, to enable the manning of additional weapons and to account for wartime requirements and *Colleoni* carried almost 650 men when she was sunk.

Table 2: Design comparison, Condottieri di Giussano sub-class and Leander-class HMAS Sydney (II)[xviii]

Armour Section/ Design Parameter	*Condottieri di Giussano* sub-class	*Leander-class HMAS Sydney (II)*	*Difference Sydney/di Giussano %*
Length, m (deck level)	169.3	171.4	+1
Width, m	15.5	17.3	+12
Draft, m	5.3	5.26	-1
Main armament	8x152mm	8x6" (150mm)	n/a
Main armament range, yards	31,080	25,480	-18
Secondary armament	6x100mm	4x4" (100mm)	-25
Horizontal, mm	20	25	+25
Vertical (belt), mm	24	51-76	+113-+217
Turrets, mm	23	25	+8
Control Tower, mm	40	n/a	
Engine Power, hp	95,000	72,000	-24
Displacement full load, tons	6,954	7,198	+3.5
Design speed, knots	36.5	32.5	-11
Range, nautical miles	3,800	7,000	+84
Crew (peacetime as designed), men	521	570	+9

IMAM Ro. 43 floatplanes of Armando Diaz, 1937 (Courtesy Italian State Archives)



Mines and mine rails on an unknown early Condottieri class cruiser. The very close spacing of the M1926 OTO 152mm guns is clearly visible. Date unknown. (Courtesy USMM*)*

Service and Utilisation Considerations up to the War

Despite rapidly approaching obsolescence within just a few years of being launched, the *di Giussanos* performed a number of roles in the confrontations with Great Britain in 1935 and 1936 during the Ethiopian crisis and again in 1937, during the Spanish civil war. They also showed the flag around the world and *Colleoni* served on the China station during the early years of the Sino-Japanese war in 1938-1939. Nevertheless, the question of what to do with these ageing ships continued to occupy *Supermarina*, the Italian Admiralty.

To address the increasing air threat to naval vessels, the introduction of dedicated anti-air cruisers was considered by navies across the world and the Royal Navy converted its obsolete C-Class cruisers in this way in the mid-1930s. In Italy, studies were undertaken to follow the same path with the four *di Giussanos*, to provide the fleet with AA cruisers for protection against air attack. At this time, a modern medium artillery weapon had become available in the Italian arsenal, in the form of the stabilized and electrically controlled 90/50 gun. This gun was destined for the new *Littorio* class battleships, the modernized dreadnoughts of the *Duilio* class and the second of two light cruisers of the final, *Abruzzi* group of *Condottieri light* cruisers, *Giuseppe Garibaldi*.

Two plans were made for converting the *di Giussanos*. The first proposed removing their main and secondary armament, replacing it with 16 single-mounted 90/50 guns, six each in place of A/B and X/Y turrets, with another four replacing the central artillery. The second plan proposed to use only 12 90/50 guns in single turrets, and add four of the modern 135/45 guns, considered the best gun design of the *Regia Marina,* in two twin turrets replacing the 152/53 A/B turrets. In addition, modern fire controls, rebuilding of the super-structure, and improvements to the armour scheme were considered, as well as replacing the light AA artillery by 10 20/65 Breda guns in a concentrated central battery. Neither project progressed beyond the drawing stage, and instead of a costly conversion project, disposal was considered. Thus, while on the China station, the Italian government offered *Colleoni* as a purchase to Japan, instead of bringing her back to the homeland. While negotiations progressed somewhat, they ultimately failed, and she returned to Italy via the Suez Canal in August 1939. Similarly, *da Barbiano* had been offered to Sweden during the winter of 1939/1940, but again the negotiations were not concluded, and only two early *Spica* class torpedo boats, *RN Spica* and *Astore,* were ultimately sold to the Swedish navy.

When war commenced, the early *Condottieri* were thus considered obsolete due to insufficient protection and being an unstable gun platform. Even their once impressive top speed was by now just a memory, despite Jane's perpetuating it for eternity. In the case of *Armando Diaz,* the top speed seems to have declined from 39 knots at her trials to 31-32 knots by 1941 and a still impressive maximum speed of 32 knots was reached by *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* at Cape Spada, just sufficient to be faster than their opponents, allowing *Bande Nere* to escape.

Regardless of their weaknesses, in April 1940 the *Ufficio Piani* planning department of the *Regia Marina* stated, after long consideration, that the *di Giussanos* could again be considered suitable for service with the battlefleet, even if they would have to be considered as expendable ships. The four *Condottieri* of the *di Giussano* sub-class were then divided between two divisions, the *II[a] Divisione* with *Colleoni* and *Bande Nere*, and the *IV[a] Divisione* with *Alberto di Giussano, Alberico da Barbiano*, *Armando Diaz* and *Luigi Cadorna*. It was the *II[a] Divisione* that would meet with HMAS Sydney and her accompanying destroyers in the Kythera Straits off Crete in the early morning hours of 19 July 1940.

Further Reading

ANMM: Photographs by Able Seaman Arthur Thomas Wood (HMAS Sydney I(II))

AWM: The Sinking of Bartolomeo Colleoni

Con la Pelle Appesa a Un Chiodo: Bartolomeo Colleoni

Gay, Franco and Gay, Valerio: *The Cruiser Bartolomeo Colleoni*, Naval Institute Press

Hyperwar: The Mediterranean and the Middle East Vol. I

Stille, Mark: *Italian Cruisers of World War II*, Osprey New Vanguard 258

Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare: di Giussano class

Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare: *La Marina Militare nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale Vol. IV: Le Azioni Navale in Mediterraneo – dal 10 Giugno 1940 al 31 Marzo 1941*

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[i] I am grateful to Karl James of the AWM for providing a high-quality file of this impressive painting.

[ii] Despite the title of the painting, this is likely to show the final phase of the battle, with HMAS Sydney pursuing the fleeing cruiser *Giovanni delle Bande Nere* while the destroyers finished off *Bartolomeo Colleoni* and rescued her survivors.

[iii] Admiral Cunningham on Capt. Collins R.A.N.'s performance in command during the battle.

[iv] Author contact: Andreas Biermann rommelsriposte@gmail.com – Andreas owns the Crusader Project blog on http://rommelsriposte.com He is deeply indebted to Enrico Cernuschi who reviewed an earlier version of this article and to Karl James at the AWM for the provision of a high quality digitalisation of Frank Norton's painting. All errors remain those of the author.

[v] Italian Royal Navy.

[vi] *RN* = *Regia Nave* = Royal Ship, His Majesty's Ship.

[vii] The *Regia Marina* also had two obsolete light cruisers in service, which had been transferred by the German *Reichsmarine* as reparations at the end of World War 1, named *Bari* and *Taranto*. These did not play a significant role in the hostilities.

[viii] 'Leaders' - Middle Age and Renaissance military commanders

[ix] Literally 'Explorers', meaning scout cruisers.

[x] Both *Brindisi* and *Venezia* were struck off the naval list in 1937, while *Ancona* was decommissioned in 1937 to provide parts for the other two vessels. Having undergone two modernizations since cessation, *Bari* and *Taranto* served into World War 2 where *Bari* was lost to air attacks and *Taranto* was scuttled by her crew at the Italian armistice, to prevent her from falling into enemy hands.

[xi] The sub-class did not have an official designation, and is here referred to by the name of the first vessel on the stocks.

[xii] In contrast, the *Regia Marina's* heavy cruisers constructed during this period were named after cities that were added to Italy after the end of the First World war

[xiii] Really large destroyers and re-classified thus in 1938.

[xiv] Data from USMM *USMM Almanacco Storico Navale* at http://www.marina.difesa.it/storiacultura/storia/almanacco/Pagine/home.aspx

[xv] In 1938, a during cruise to Latin America, confirmed that, in spite of the fueling support provide by the tanker *Urano,* the Italian light cruisers did not have the endurance to conduct a cruiser war in the open ocean – a conclusion also reached by the *Kriegsmarine* regarding its light cruisers.

[xvi] Only the last two *Condottieri* cruisers would receive an improved armament, which addressed these issues.

[xvii] M1927 and M1928 in later sub-classes, with no substantive difference.

[xviii] Data from *USMM Almanacco Storico Navale* at http://www.marina.difesa.it/storiacultura/storia/almanacco/Pagine/home.aspx