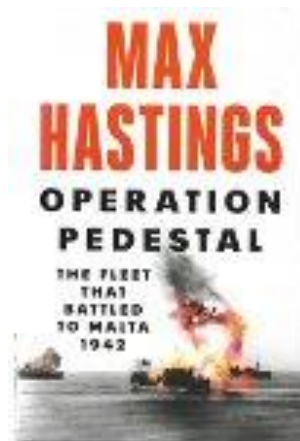


# OPERATION PEDESTAL

Author Max Hastings  
Reviewed by John Cox

In August 1942, beleaguered Malta was within weeks of surrender to the Axis forces, because its 300,000 people could no longer be fed. Winston Churchill decided that at all costs, the 'island fortress' must be saved.

The largest fleet the Royal Navy committed to any operation of the western war was assembled to escort fourteen fast merchant ships across a thousand miles of sea defended by six hundred German and Italian aircraft, together with packs of U-boats and fast torpedo boats. The Mediterranean battles that ensued between 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August were the most brutal of Britain's war at sea. The losses were appalling and defeat seemed inevitable.



The Royal Navy fleet included four aircraft carriers, two battleships, seven cruisers, scores of destroyers and smaller craft. The book describes catastrophic ship sinkings, including that of aircraft-carrier HMS Eagle. The fast, nimble and well-armed destroyers proved particularly effective throughout.

The ferocity of three days and nights of battle were so great that huge volumes of ammunition were expended by all the ships and many gun barrels becoming worn out through wear and overheating. Royal and Merchant Navy seamen displayed amazing courage and stamina. Many becoming so exhausted they could barely stand having to remain at constant battle stations and absence of sleep.

The shortcomings of current radio communications became very evident, as well as breakdowns in command and control by all sides. The Italian navy was wary of confronting the Royal Navy and failed to commit its main fleet. Whilst reading through this book it was becoming increasingly evident that the Pedestal convoy were not going to make it. The odds were so heavily weighted in favour of the German and Italian forces.

Some see Operation Pedestal as a failure as so many ships were sunk or damaged. However, five of the fourteen merchant ships made it to Malta, providing much needed food, fuel and ammunition sustaining the island for several crucial months.

Max Hastings describes this as one of the most extraordinary tales he has ever recounted. Until the very last hours, no participant on either side could tell what would be the outcome of an epic of wartime suspense and courage. I learnt much from reading this book and recommend it to those readers who enjoy a bit of action.

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