

When the main part of the Royal Italian Navy's Battlefleet set sail from La Spezia in the early hours of 9 September 1943, its objective was not to give battle or even to carry out yet another sweep, but to surrender to the Allies at Malta. Before this operation was completed, however, the Italian fleet was to suffer its worst ever single loss, not at the hands of her recent enemies but her Axis partners, Germany.

This little known engagement in the Mediterranean had come about because of Italy's collapse and subsequent signing of an armistice with the Allies in early September 1943, at this stage in the war the Allies controlled the Southern part of Italy and the Island of Sicily, while Northern Italy was still under virtual German occupation, but it was here that the remains of the once great Italian fleet was now based, and to comply with the conditions of the armistice this fleet had to be extricated from this very vulnerable position, and then be interned by the allies.

Because of the certainty of a ruthless German counter reaction to the Italian 'betrayal', the fleet had to leave immediately. All that could be removed had to be got away to prevent its imminent capture by Germany and its possible use against the Allies, ships and equipment that could not be removed from the ports were either scuttled or immobilised to prevent this eventuality, and the remaining ships of the Italian fleet started to prepare for departure.

At La Spezia there were a considerable number of the very best ships in the navy, all modern powerful units of the latest design, amongst their ranks were the battleships *Vittorio Veneto*, *Italia* (ex *Littorio*) and the new *Roma*, along with no less than six cruisers, eight destroyers and four torpedo boats, all were now prepared to set sail for Malta and internment, under the command of Admiral Bergammi in his flagship the *Roma*.

At 0300 on 9 September the last great Italian battlefleet started to leave La Spezia, upon finally clearing the harbour it formed itself up into an open steaming formation and headed South towards the Allies and safety.

German reaction to this series of events

could only be expected, they clearly saw it as a betrayal that must not succeed. Since they were unable to prevent the fleet departure, the only thing they could now do was to stop it from achieving its objective. German surface naval forces to check the Italian advance were non-existent, the only effective arm left to them was the Luftwaffe, and in particular the men and weapons of Kampfgeschwader 100.

III KG 100, under the command of Major Bernhard Jope, specialised in anti-ship air strikes, and to perform this task they had recently been equipped with twin engine Do 217 K-2s, capable of carrying the latest device for inflicting telling damage to even the largest capital ship, it was the potentially very effective Fritz X (SD 1400 X) anti-ship guided bomb, this was a 'free fall' bomb which had limited control surfaces to enable it to be remotely directed onto a target by the bomb aimer in the mother craft, who would use a small joystick to give corrections to the free falling Fritz X, which had a prominent tracer flare in its tail to facilitate its control into the target. With its terminal velocity of nearly the speed of sound, and weight of 3,000lb which included a bursting charge of around 700lb of high explosives in an armour-piercing casing, it could easily penetrate the armoured decks of most battleships.

Fifteen Do 217s took off from their base at Istres near Marseilles in Southern France, accompanied by a number of Ju 88s from KG 26, each Do 217 carried two Fritz Xs, this powerful force headed towards the now located and shadowed Italian battlefleet in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

After the fleet had cleared harbour it had initially headed south towards the Straits of Messina and safety in Malta, it was steaming at high speed just to the East of Corsica on this course when for some reason never fully explained, Admiral Bergammi delayed his Southern advance to safety and headed West for Sardinia and the port of Maddalena, which he must have presumed to be still in Italian control. By the time he realised that Sardinia was also occupied by the Germans and he again changed course South, valuable time had been lost in this fruitless detour, time lost that was eventually to prove to be fatal.

When a large formation of high flying aircraft were seen approaching the fleet later that day, it was assumed that they were an escort sent out from either an Italian or Allied fields. Exactly why the Italians believed this is very hard to understand since a ruthless German reaction to their flight must have been expected, but the fleet did not change its formation, course, or speed and never opened up any AA fire on the closing formation. So as the Battle-

THE SINKING OF THE ROMA

THE STORY OF HER LOSS IN SEPTEMBER 1943

fleet steamed majestically on its way, the aircraft of KG 100 began their unopposed bomb runs, with no interceptors or disruptive AA fire to distract them, the DO 217s with their glider bombs, launched their attack upon the unsuspecting fleet.

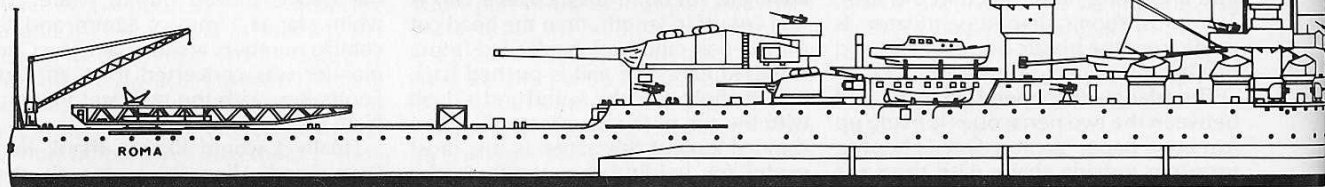
These individual attacks were directed at the large lumbering battleships, the nimble light units were ignored, in the sudden confused action that followed the *Vittorio Veneto* escaped serious damage, but the *Italia* was struck by a bomb forward on her forecandle and, near-missed, by another aft, but she still managed to survive the attack. But the fate of Admiral Bergammi's flagship, the *Roma*, was tragic, one Fritz X struck her between the after two 90mm AA mountings and pierced the entire ship from upper deck right through to the outer bottom to finally detonate just under the keel, this single hit alone would have been crippling but another Fritz X launched from the aircraft piloted by Oberleutnant Schmetz was now rapidly approaching the slowed down and severely damaged *Roma*.

With such a target the Fritz X could not miss, the bomb after its 20,000 ft fall, hit her on her portside between 'B' barrette and the forward 152mm port mounting, and it easily pierced the *Roma's* armour deck here and entered her forward main magazine before exploding, the resulting detonation completely destroyed the forward section of the ship and broke her back resulting in her very rapid sinking, taking Admiral Bergammi and 1,523 men of her crew with her.

The number of bombs actually launched against the fleet is not recorded, but the effectiveness of just a single hit had been clearly demonstrated in this action against modern battleships. With their weight,

ROMA

1943 ~ by M.W. Williams.



ANKING ROMA

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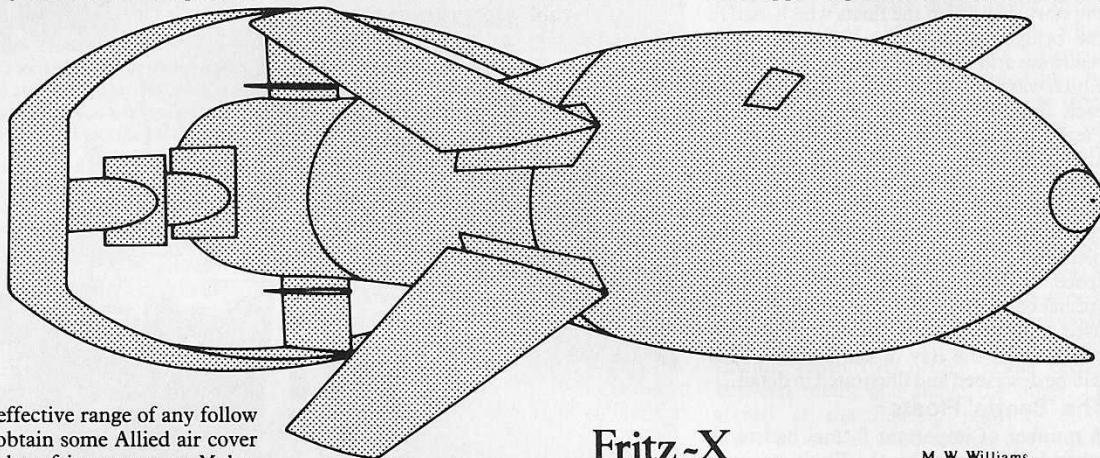
terminal velocity, heavy bursting charge and penetration qualities these guided bombs had proved to be very formidable weapons.

All that the scattered and wounded remains of the Italian battlefleet could do after the attack was to resume its interrupted Southerly course as soon as possible

'Pugliese' protection system all combined into a graceful-looking structure, ensuring this class a special place in the history of the modern capital ship. It is a pity therefore to record that their service careers did not reflect the excellence of their design in action. These fine ships throughout their service in the Italian Navy were never permitted to fully exploit their potential, over cautious tactical handling and restrictive strategic (a fleet in being) considerations hampered their deployment throughout the war. Indeed their only memorable 'actions' were the *Vittorio Veneto's* participation on the fringes of the Battle of Cape Matapan, the *Littorio's* sinking and subsequent raising at Taranto, and of course the subject of this article, the *Roma's* last voyage in September 1943.

disrupting the KG 100's 20,000 ft high bomb run. With an average rate of fire of 12 rounds per minute the six pieces on one side could have put up a very heavy barrage during their steady run in or more importantly, distract the aimer during the remotely controlled drop period of the attack, even a heavy barrage of light 37mm and 20mm tracer put up around the ship could have resulted in the aimer losing his Fritz X tracking flare amongst the clutter during the final stage of the attack resulting in a miss, but from all my reading into this action it appears that AA fire was never opened up upon the attackers.

For those interested in obtaining a model of the *Roma*, the only available kit of this subject is the 1:1200 Esci example. This small model has been around for some time now, appearing under a number of labels



Fritz-X

M. W. Williams.

and get out of effective range of any follow up attack and obtain some Allied air cover for the remainder of its voyage to Malta, where it finally arrived on 11 September for internment under Allied control. At the scene of the *Roma's* sinking a solitary cruiser and a couple of destroyers completed their picking up of the few remaining survivors from her complement and followed the battlefleet to Malta.

The *Roma* and her sisters, *Vittorio Veneto*, *Italia* (the ex *Littorio*) and the never completed *Impero*, have been generally regarded as one of the best ever all-round battleship designs. Their high speed, heavy main and secondary armament and novel

The Roma

The *Roma* was built at the Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico yard in Trieste, she laid down on 18.9.38, launched 6.9.40 and finally completed ready for service on 14.6.42. She was intended to carry a war complement of 1,960 officers and men.

She had a maximum displacement of 46,215 tons, and her dimensions were 240.7m overall with a 32.9m beam, and a maximum draught of 10.5m. Her machinery of eight boilers and four geared turbines could produce 130,000 shp and drive her to over 30 knots. For protection the *Roma* had a very complex distribution of armour with a maximum thickness of 350mm on the belt and 162mm on the armoured deck.

The main armament of nine 381mm (15in) guns in three triple turrets was supported by twelve 152mm guns in four triple installations, her impressive anti-aircraft outfit consisted of twelve single 90mm pieces with numerous 37mm and 20mm lighter multiple mountings completing her outfit.

It might be of interest to point out that the *Roma's* 90mm AA guns were capable of

over the years, because it is aimed at the inexpensive wargame/beginners market this model is basically crude and simple in detail and construction, but all in all it still captures the general overall features of the original. As for the *Roma's* final appearance in September 1943, this appears to have been an intricate three-tone splinter camouflage pattern, different from the one proposed by Esci, overall photo coverage of this non-symmetrical scheme has been impossible for me to obtain, so I can appreciate Esci's difficulties in their final paint instructions.

As far as I know there has never before been an article or publication dealing with this event, my small coverage has been compiled from brief mentions and references in about six books, to form a rough portrait of this tragic event. But if any reader can correct my text, provide details of her final camouflage or supply any further information on the *Roma's* last voyage, then I am sure that such material would be very welcome to every naval enthusiast interested in the sinking of this ship forty years ago.

