

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 411

“From the Top”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Italy is like a boot; it should be entered from the top.”

Napoleon Bonaparte.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 411. From the Top.

Last week, I took you day by day through an eventful period in July and August 1943, when so many things were happening at once, and as I’m sure you noticed, most of them were Allied victories.

August 17, two days after the invasion of Kiska, which is where I ended the previous episode, was the beginning of the Québec Conference between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. I’ve already talked about this conference in episode 400, so I won’t go over it again, although I will remind you that the opening day of the conference was also the day that the US 7th Army and the British 8th Army met at the city of Messina in northeast Sicily, completing the Allied takeover of that island. Allied artillery immediately began firing across the Strait of Messina into mainland Italy.

That very same day, Allied war correspondents first told General Eisenhower about the two incidents earlier that month in which General Patton struck privates under his command who had been hospitalized for battle fatigue. The news angered Eisenhower, but he judged Patton too valuable to relieve of his command, so he persuaded the reporters to spike the story and ordered Patton to apologize to the two soldiers, to the medical staff who had witnessed the two incidents, and publicly in front of the soldiers under his command. Some of his soldiers welcomed his apology; others continued to resent Patton’s ill treatment of their comrades.

This was also the day the US Eighth Air Force undertook its biggest raid so far, against the Messerschmitt plant in Regensburg and the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt, which I also described in episode 400. And that night, the RAF attacked the German Army's research center at Peenemünde, after receiving reports that the Germans were experimenting with rockets capable of reaching Britain.

Also on this day, in Manhattan, the first and only child was born to Robert and Virginia De Niro, two artists living in Greenwich Village. They named the baby boy after his father, and he became Robert De Niro, Junior.

On August 19, a senior Italian military commander, chief of staff General Giuseppe Castellano, acting in secret and on instructions from the new Italian prime minister, Pietro Badoglio, arrived in Lisbon and contacted officials at the British Embassy to negotiate Italy's surrender.

On August 21, Australia held a federal election, which I've also mentioned before. The result was a landslide victory for the Labor Party and its leader, the incumbent prime minister, John Curtin.

On August 22, in a surprise move, Joseph Stalin recalled the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Maxim Litvinov. His name has come up before in the podcast. Litvinov had served as Soviet foreign minister in the Thirties and he played an important role in building better relations between the USSR and Western powers, especially the United States. Stalin dismissed him as foreign minister in 1939, apparently to placate Hitler and the Nazis, since Litvinov was Jewish. He was succeeded as foreign minister by Vyacheslav Molotov.

In November 1941, Stalin had appointed Litvinov Soviet ambassador to the United States. He was remembered fondly and warmly received in Washington. His arrival coincided with a dramatic change of fortune on the Eastern Front, as winter weather and Soviet counterattacks stopped the German advance on Moscow. That development was also warmly received in the United States. Litvinov was a high-profile ambassador. He gave many speeches in which he described the Soviet struggle against the Nazis to American audiences, but in those speeches he also regularly included pleas for the Western powers to open a second front against Germany. Over time, this got under the skin of Franklin Roosevelt and his administration, who conveyed to the Soviet government that the US would prefer a different Soviet representative in Washington, so Litvinov was recalled and replaced by his deputy, a 34-year-old Belarusian diplomat named Andrei Gromyko.

The following day, August 24, the Soviet Union celebrated the recapture of the city of Kharkov. As you know, this would be the fourth and final time this city changed hands during the German campaign in the East.

Also that day, Adolf Hitler named Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS and the Gestapo, Germany's new interior minister, replacing the 66-year-old Wilhelm Frick, who had held the

post from the very beginning of the Hitler government in 1933. The move was in part a response to the overthrow of Mussolini in Italy. Hitler judged Frick “too old and used up” to properly enforce Nazi rule in Germany. If the goal was to keep Germans in line and squelch any dissent, he could hardly have made a better choice.

On August 27, the Italian government moved its most famous prisoner, former dictator Benito Mussolini, for the second time in three weeks, this time from naval base on the island of La Maddelena, north of Sardinia, to a mountain meadow in the Apennine Mountains northwest of Rome named Campo Imperatore, which means “Emperor’s Field.” Who says history has no sense of irony? Italians sometimes call it “Little Tibet,” because of its high elevation, about 2,000 meters. Mussolini, with bitter humor, called it “the world’s highest prison.”

Mussolini reached his 60th birthday while he was on Ponza; at La Maddelena he received a birthday present from Adolf Hitler: a 24-volume set of the complete works of Nietzsche, and no I am not making this up. He would only have enough time to read the first four volumes before...other events intervened.

Mussolini’s health deteriorated sharply during his captivity and he must have feared his execution was imminent. He wrote to his wife Rachele that he had served Italy for 21 years and whatever happened next, his conscience was clear.

The next day, August 28, the head of state of an Axis nation died, but it wasn’t Mussolini. It was Boris III, Tsar of Bulgaria, who died unexpectedly at the age of 49. He had recently returned from a meeting with Adolf Hitler, which by some accounts was testy, with Hitler reiterating his demands that Bulgaria declare war on the Soviet Union and deport its Jewish population into German custody. There have been rumors ever since that the tsar was poisoned, with the culprits variously alleged to be the Germans, the Italians, or the Soviet NKVD. Boris was succeeded by his six-year-old son, Simeon, who reigned as Simeon II until the monarchy was abolished three years later, though of course a group of three regents exercised the actual powers of the crown during this period.

Also that day, the Danish government resigned rather than comply with German demands to turn Danes accused of sabotage over to be tried in German military courts. The following day, August 29, the German Army declared the dissolution of the Danish government, arrested the Danish King, Christian X, and imposed martial law on Denmark.

On August 31, General Castellano traveled to Sicily to complete negotiations with Allied military commanders there. The two sides were not yet in agreement. One of the big sticking points was that the Italians dreaded the inevitable reaction when the Germans found out they were surrendering. The Italian side wanted the Allies to invade Italy and advance rapidly northward along the peninsula, securing as much Italian territory as possible before the agreement was announced. Allied military leaders were not willing to go that far. They wanted the surrender made public first, then Allied forces would advance. They would only promise that

if and when Germany intervened, the Allies would do what they could to free Italy from the Wehrmacht. The Americans did offer to land the US 82nd Airborne Division near Rome to help the Italians secure their capital before the Germans could take it. The talks continued.

On Friday, September 3, one British and one Canadian division crossed the Strait of Messina and landed in Calabria, the “toe” of Italy, making them the first Allied troops ashore on the Italian mainland. They met minimal Italian resistance. The giddy soldiers dubbed the crossing “The Messina Strait Regatta.”

There was a reason for the lack of Italian resistance. On the island of Sicily, General Castellano had just signed an armistice agreement with the Americans and British, following a long and difficult series of negotiations and approval of the agreement by the Italian king and prime minister. Under the terms of the agreement, the Italians agreed to allow Allied armed forces entry into Italian territory and the use of Italian ports, airfields, and other military facilities as Allied commanders required.

The Italians did not object to that demand. Quite the contrary; they wanted as many Allied forces as possible on Italian soil as quickly as possible to defend against the inevitable reaction of the now twelve German divisions in Italy. Technically, the armistice would not go into effect until a time the Allies judged suitable. Until then, the existence and the terms of the agreement were to be a closely held secret. The Italians expected September 12 would be the date and made preparations, including moving military units to secure Rome.

American military leaders on the scene cabled Washington to advise US officials that the agreement had been signed. One of the recipients of the good news was Winston Churchill, who arrived in Washington by train from Québec this same day.

Unfortunately for the Italians, the American cable was intercepted by German intelligence, who were expecting this kind of news. German diplomats again contacted Prime Minister Badoglio, who continued to assure them of Italy’s loyalty. Hitler advised the Wehrmacht that Operation Axis, the German occupation of Italy, was imminent.

The Germans had been moving divisions into Italy since the fall of Mussolini’s government. The Italians were told they were there to join Kesselring’s army group, which was fighting in the defense of Italy, but Italian military commanders questioned why so many of these units were deployed into central Italy. The Germans explained those units were meant to be a “strategic reserve.”

The Germans were also secretly securing the Alpine passes between the Reich and northern Italy and deploying a second army group, commanded by Erwin Rommel, so it would be ready to swiftly occupy northern Italy.

The following day, September 4, units of the British Eighth Army seized a port in the Italian province of Calabria: San Giovanni di Gerace.

In New Guinea, elements of the Australian 9th Infantry Division executed an amphibious landing near Japanese-held Lae, in support of the 7th Division's overland advance on the port town. The next day, September 5, the US Army's 503rd Parachute Regiment joined in, landing at and seizing a Japanese-controlled airfield just outside Lae. This was the first use of paratroopers in the Pacific Theater.

On September 7, as the German Army continued its retreat on the Eastern Front under pressure from the Red Army, Heinrich Himmler issued a scorched-earth order, commanding the withdrawing Wehrmacht to destroy everything on territory abandoned to the Russians: homes, factories, villages, mines, livestock, crops, railroad tracks, and more. With regard to railroad tracks, the Germans employed what was known as a "railroad plow." This was a railway car that dragged along a huge steel hook as it was pulled forward by a locomotive. As the locomotive pulled the car forward, the hook would drag through the ground between the rails, breaking every railroad tie in half along the way. This caused the rails to lose their alignment, rendering the track useless until it was rebuilt with new ties.

In Rome that same morning, the Italian naval minister met with senior commanders of the Regia Marina, the Italian Royal Navy, including Admiral Carlo Bergamini, commander of the Navy's main battle fleet. That fleet was currently stationed at La Spezia, in northeastern Italy; it had been ordered there to keep it out of reach of Allied bombers. The fleet wasn't capable of much anyway, owing to Italy suffering critical fuel shortages. But the force was on high alert, prepared to sortie against any Allied attempt at an amphibious landing on the Italian mainland, even though no one was under any illusion that such an action would be anything but suicide.

The minister did not tell the admirals that a surrender to the Allies was pending; indeed, the minister did not know that himself. He presented the admirals with a set of orders from the government said to have been prepared for the possibility that the Germans might attempt to use force to overthrow the current Italian government and reinstall Mussolini. In such an eventuality, these orders instructed the admirals to put their ships to sea rather than allow them to fall into German hands. Ships that could not be put to sea should be scuttled, and any German ships in Italian ports should be seized if possible, or else destroyed. The orders also directed that the Navy should be prepared to fire on German warplanes, but specifically directed them *not* to fire on Allied planes. That was a clue that there might have been more to these orders than the government was acknowledging.

[music: Verdi, Overture to *La Forza del Destino*.]

On September 8, American general Maxwell Taylor, second in command of the 82nd Airborne Division, met in Rome with Badoglio and his military leaders. It was a dangerous assignment that involved Taylor landing secretly behind enemy lines. He wore his US Army uniform to this

meeting, so that if he were captured by the Germans, he would be entitled to POW protections. If he were captured while not in uniform, he could be executed as a spy. In any case, he was not captured, but the meeting with the Italians went poorly. Taylor told the Italians that the armistice was to be made public and put into effect that very evening. Tomorrow morning would see an Allied amphibious invasion in southern Italy and the 82nd Airborne landing at drop points around Rome.

The Italians told Taylor there were German Army units stationed around the city, some at the very drop points Taylor had identified. They begged him to recommend to Allied command that the announcement be delayed four more days, until the 12th, which would give the Italian military more time to prepare for the German response. The meeting left Taylor with the impression that the Italian military were incapable of defending Italy against the Germans, now or later. He reported back to Allied command and recommended they scratch the air drops around Rome, which they did.

At 6:30 that evening, Dwight Eisenhower announced the armistice with Italy over Radio Algiers. An hour later, Badoglio made his own brief announcement over Italian radio. Here is his statement, in full:

The Italian government, recognizing the impossibility of continuing the unequal struggle against an overwhelming enemy force, in order to avoid further and graver disasters for the Nation, sought an armistice from General Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the Anglo-American Allied forces. The request was granted. Consequently, all acts of hostility against the Anglo-American forces by Italian forces must cease everywhere. But they will react to possible attacks from any other source.

I wonder whom he meant by “any other source.”

Early the following morning, the Allied invasion of Italy began in earnest. There were already British and Canadian troops in Calabria. That morning, British and American warships carried the British 1st Airborne Division to Taranto, which is in Apulia, the “heel” of Italy, as it were. Specifically, it lies on the “front” of the heel, along the “arch.” The Allied interest in Taranto was, of course, because here was the home port of the Italian Navy. Most of the Italian Navy had been moved to La Spezia months ago, but a few ships remained at Taranto. The Allies were happy to accept any Italian ground or air units that wanted to join the fight against the Germans, but it was the Italian Navy they wanted most, and if they couldn’t have it, they wanted it scuttled rather than fall into the hands of the Germans.

The Allies were also very interested in the Italian merchant fleet, given that they were suffering a shortage of shipping capacity and Operation Overlord was just eight months away.

In fact, there were no German ground forces anywhere in or near Taranto. It's very far south and also far to the east of Calabria, where Allied troops were already on the ground. It was there that Kesselring had focused his attention. This was fortunate for the Italian Navy. The force at Taranto consisted of two battleships, *Caio Duilio* and *Andrea Doria*, two cruisers, *Pompeo Magno* and *Luigi Cadorna*, and one destroyer. These ships left Taranto and headed for Malta the previous evening, as per the terms of the armistice. Along the way, they passed the British and American ships headed in the opposite direction, toward Taranto to deliver those British paratroopers.

The situation at La Spezia was more complicated. Here was a larger force: the battleships *Vittorio Veneto*, *Roma*, and *Italia*, plus three cruisers, eight destroyers, and four torpedo boats, along with three additional cruisers stationed at the nearby port of Genoa.

As a side note, the Italian battleship formerly known as *Littorio* was renamed *Italia* after the fall of Mussolini. That's because *Littorio* is the Italian version of *lictor*, a Latin word for an attendant to a Roman magistrate. Among the *lictor's* duties was to bear the magistrate's fasces, which in the twentieth century were the symbol of fascism. Hence, once Mussolini was gone, the name *Littorio* also had to go.

Many of the senior naval officers at La Spezia, including the overall commander, Admiral Bergamini, bristled when the order came to sail to Malta. They disliked the idea of surrendering their ships, which is what they thought they were being ordered to do. At first, they contemplated scuttling their ships, but eventually agreed to take them to La Maddelena, the Italian naval base just off Sardinia, the one that until a couple of weeks ago had been where the government was holding Mussolini.

The Italian fleet arrived at La Maddelena to discover the naval base had been seized by German soldiers. Admiral Bergamini had seen enough; now he ordered the fleet to turn south and seek the safety of Allied-controlled Malta or perhaps North Africa. But the Germans spotted the fleet and a squadron of German naval bombers was sent to attack it. These bombers were armed with a new German weapon, the Fritz X. Yes, they called it Fritz. The original Fritz was an armor-piercing bomb, which is what you want for attacking an armored warship. This new version, the Fritz X was an upgrade, kind of like the iPhone X (remember that?). The Fritz X was different from its predecessor because it had no home button. Oh, wait, that's the iPhone X. The Fritz X was different because it had radio-controlled tail fins, which meant that after the bomb was released, the bombardier in the plane could steer the bomb by remote control, which greatly increases the chance that it would hit the intended target. It was in fact the world's first precision-guided munition.

The Fritz X had only been put into service a few weeks earlier, and this was not the first time the Germans used it in combat; it was just that the Allies hadn't noticed it before. Well, they sure noticed it today. Two of these bombs struck *Roma*. The first put the aft engine room out of

commission; the second detonated in the forward engine room, setting fires and detonating one of the ship's magazines, setting off a huge explosion. Within 20 minutes, *Roma* capsized and sank, taking with it nearly 1,400 Italian sailors, including Admiral Bergamini. Another bomb damaged *Italia*, but it and most of the other ships made it safely to Malta on September 11.

In Italy, Operation Axis was in full swing. Two German divisions near Rome began to move on the city the night of the 8th, immediately after the surrender was announced. By the morning of the 9th, they had fought their way into the streets of Rome, even as its citizens were celebrating what they believed to be the end of the war, at least for them. With Rome's defenses collapsing, the King fled the city, along with the royal family, Prime Minister Badoglio and his government, and Italy's most senior military commanders. They escaped in a fleet of automobiles and headed east, across the width of the Italian peninsula to the coast town of Ortona, on the Adriatic, where they were picked up by *Baionetta*, an Italian Navy corvette, which took them to the port of Brindisi, which lies on the back of the heel of Italy and by this time was in the hands of the British 1st Airborne Division, the unit that had landed at Taranto. The King and the government would set up shop in Brindisi, which would function as the provisional capital of Free Italy.

Allied forces had landed in Calabria and Apulia, the two peninsulas in southernmost Italy, but the main Allied attack was to be made the US Fifth Army, which also included British units, in an amphibious landing at Salerno, just south of Naples on the west coast of Italy. The plan here was that the British units in southernmost Italy would bait the Germans southward, then the Fifth Army would land in their rear, seize the port of Naples for its own supply needs, then move west and cut off and surround German forces in the south.

General Montgomery, in command of those British units in southern Italy, expressed skepticism that the Germans would take the bait. He would be proved correct.

The American experience in the Pacific had shown that amphibious landings were far more successful and less costly when the landing area was first put under a heavy naval bombardment, but in this instance, General Mark Clark, commander of the Fifth Army, opted against such a bombardment, hoping to surprise the Germans, but no such luck. As the first wave of landing craft approached the beaches, Allied soldiers heard a German voice, amplified over a loudspeaker, declare in English, "Come on in and give up. We have you covered."

Field Marshal Kesselring, commander of the German army group in southern Italy, had an impossible mission. He was supposed to take Rome with two divisions against five Italian divisions. He was also expected to disarm Italian military units in southern Italy, hold the line against the British down in the south, and also prepare for an Allied amphibious landing at Salerno. Many Wehrmacht commanders expected Kesselring and his troops were likely to end up surrounded by superior Allied forces. Field Marshal Rommel advised Kesselring to withdraw his army group all the way north to the Po Valley and concede the entire Italian peninsula to the Allies.

For the Germans had guessed an Allied landing was coming, and that it was most likely to land at Salerno. An amphibious landing behind German lines was an obvious move, and Salerno was as far north as Allied air cover could reach, so there it was. The German 16th Panzer Division had been sent to hold the beaches there, and by the time the Allied invasion came, the Germans were ready to meet it with hundreds of prepositioned artillery guns and machine-gun nests.

Allied troops landed anyway, but they faced heavy resistance. They were mostly pinned down on the beaches, or in low-lying farmland and orchards, subject to German fire from higher elevations farther inland. It took until the following day, September 10, for sufficient mines to be cleared to allow Allied warships to approach the landing sites closely enough to identify and fire on German positions. By the end of that day, the Allies controlled a strip of Italian coastland about sixty kilometers long and ten kilometers deep.

On September 12, at about 2:00 in the afternoon, ten German gliders landed silently on the Campo Imperatore. Each glider carried nine soldiers plus the pilot; the soldiers were German paratroopers or SS soldiers, among them Otto Skorzeny, the SS officer who'd wanted the German military to do more British-style commando raids. They approached the Campo Imperatore Hotel, where Benito Mussolini was being guarded by 200 Italian soldiers.

Skorzeny had brought along a hostage: Italian General Fernando Soleti, who had been captured when the Germans took Rome. Soleti ordered the Italian soldiers not to shoot or otherwise interfere with the Germans.

They complied. Skorzeny and his SS troops entered the hotel and found Mussolini, who embraced Skorzeny and told him he knew his friend Adolf Hitler would not abandon him. Skorzeny then escorted Mussolini to a waiting plane. They flew to Rome, where they changed planes and flew on to Vienna. A couple of days later, Mussolini was at the Wolf's Lair to meet with Adolf Hitler. Hitler and the Germans were shocked at how weak and broken Mussolini appeared. Hitler asked Mussolini to lead a new fascist state in German-controlled Italy, which would be known as *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, the Italian Social Republic, and would function as a German puppet government.

Germany was distinctly short on good news, so the daring operation that had freed Mussolini and brought him safely to Germany was trumpeted by the German ministry of propaganda, which depicted Skorzeny as a daring Nazi hero. The name Otto Skorzeny would soon be known around the world, spoken in Allied nations with a mix of anger and grudging admiration.

That same day, the 12th, the Germans began an offensive at Salerno, aimed at driving the Allied forces into the sea. The fighting was bloody as the Germans advanced. Some German units got within sight of the beach. General Clark began planning a withdrawal. When word of this dire situation reached Admiral Cunningham at Malta, he sent the British battleships HMS *Warspite* and *Valiant* to add their firepower to the bombardments of German positions. American bombers pounded the German rear to cut their supply lines. One bomber unit, commanded by General

James Doolittle, he of the Doolittle Raid, bombed an Italian town so thoroughly that his superior, General Spaatz, sent him a message that read, “You’re slipping, Jimmy. There’s one crabapple tree...still standing.”

The purpose of destroying a town in that manner was the exercise of a tactic the Americans called “putting the city in the street,” by which they meant destroying buildings so that the rubble would clog the streets and block the flow of traffic through the town.

The British Eighth Army moved as fast as they could across the 400 kilometers that separated them from the American Fifth Army. They encountered no German resistance, but the Germans had done a very thorough job of blowing up bridges and placing obstacles, which slowed them considerably. Montgomery sent Clark several messages that amounted to: “Hang in there; we’re coming!”

The Fifth Army held out, thanks to naval and air bombardment and the timely arrival of one regiment of the American 82nd Airborne Division, which had been held in reserve since the operation to capture Rome had been cancelled. General Clark would later remark that Churchill had called Italy “the soft underbelly,” but what he had found was “one tough gut.”

The Germans did not throw the Fifth Army into the sea, but they certainly bloodied it. Once it became clear that the Fifth Army wasn’t going anywhere, Kesselring ordered his units in southern Italy to withdraw to defensive positions behind the River Volturno.

So by late September, the situation in Italy was something like this. The southern quarter of the Italian peninsula, not quite as far north as Naples, was occupied by the Allies and was home to the Badoglio government. The northern third of the peninsula and the Po Valley region was at least nominally governed by Mussolini’s Italian Social Republic. The middle part of the peninsula, including Rome, was under German military occupation. Despite the fig leaf of Mussolini’s government, in fact Italy was now one more European nation under German occupation.

As for the Italian Army, they were left without guidance. Badoglio’s surrender announcement said the Army would not attack the Allies, but gave no instructions on what they should do about the Germans. So mostly they did nothing. In the south, Kesselring added whatever Italian units still wanted to fight into his army group. The others he disarmed and sent home. Most of the Italian Army falls in this category. In the north, in lands under Rommel’s control, Italian soldiers that did not want to fight were taken prisoner and shipped to Germany for slave labor, about 650,000 in all. The few Italian units that actively resisted the Germans were attacked; some of them joined the Allies. In other cases, Italian soldiers who resisted cooperation with the Germans were executed.

Tens of thousands of Allied POWs being held in Italy simply walked out of their prison camps after the surrender was announced. Their Italian guards let them go.

The Allies, technically the United Nations, accepted Italian military support but refused to call Free Italy an “ally,” or a member of the United Nations. Free Italy was designated a co-belligerent. With regard to the Italian Co-Belligerent Navy, it remains to this day a point of pride in the Italian Navy that in 1943 it did not surrender or scuttle or abandon its ships. Italian ships still flew the Italian flag and still answered to the Italian King and his lawful government. When the King and government switched sides, the Navy switched with them, as was its duty.

As for Jewish Italians, while they had previously been subject to legal discrimination under the Fascist government, they were not deported to the German-run murder camps. Now, with most of Italy under the control of the German military, deportations quickly began, with the full cooperation of Mussolini’s new government in the north. Some 8,000 Jewish Italians were sent to the camps; only one thousand of them survived the war.

But many Italian authorities would not cooperate with the Germans in arresting Jews. A much larger share of the Jewish population in Italy, more than 30,000, survived the war, in many cases by fleeing south, into Allied-controlled territory.

Before I leave you today, I do want to mention one other military operation that took place at this same time: the British attempt to occupy the Italian-controlled Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea, especially the large island of Rhodes, just off the coast of Turkey. This was another one of Winston Churchill’s bright ideas. The island of Crete was too heavily garrisoned, but Churchill figured if the Allies could drive the Germans and Italians out of the Dodecanese, a fearful Turkey would at last be willing to join the Allies, which would open the straits to Allied Lend-Lease shipments to the Soviet Union.

The Americans were not keen on this idea. They saw it as another example of the British prioritizing their own position in the post-war world over defeating the Axis. So the British went it alone, on September 8, right after the Italian surrender took effect.

But the British effort was hampered by inadequate numbers of soldiers and ships, while the Germans aggressively moved soldiers and planes to the Dodecanese as part of Operation Axis. Most of the 50,000 plus Italian soldiers stationed in the islands only wanted to go home, but about 10,000 of them joined 7,500 Germans in the fight to seize and hold the islands. Those troops, plus German airpower, won the day in what some call the last German victory of the war.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I’d like to thank George and Nicholas for their kind donations, and thank you to Zander for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like George and Nicholas and Zander help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look to the Pacific, where the Allies go on the offensive in the Solomon Islands, and a once-great plane becomes not so great. Hero to Zero, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. A Glaswegian seaman by the name of Alistair MacLean served in the Royal Navy during the war. Among his many wartime experiences, the ship on which he served was part of the ill-fated PQ17 arctic convoy. After the war, he returned to his native city where he earned an English degree from the University of Glasgow. In 1955, at the age of 33, he published his first novel, *HMS Ulysses*, in which the titular fictitious Royal Navy cruiser is part of an ill-fated arctic convoy.

HMS Ulysses became a bestseller and earned critical acclaim. His second novel, published in 1957, was another fictionalized wartime thriller, this time set during the 1943 British campaign in the Dodecanese Islands, which I talked about a few minutes ago. It was called *The Guns of Navarone*, Navarone being a fictional island in the Dodecanese. This novel was an even bigger success, and was adapted into a 1961 film with the same title, directed by J. Lee Thompson and starring Gregory Peck, David Niven, Anthony Quinn, and James Darren. It was the second-highest grossing film of that year, topped only by *West Side Story*.

The Guns of Navarone was the high point of MacLean's career, though he would continue to publish one or two books every year until his death in 1987, including *The Satan Bug*, *Where Eagles Dare*, and *Ice Station Zebra*, a number of which were also made into films.

[music: Closing War Theme]