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1930-1939

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THE MEDITERRANEAN FLEET, 1930–1939

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PREFACE

At the beginning of the 1930s the Mediterranean Fleet, Great Britain's premier naval force, was still operating in the atmosphere of what would soon seem to have been the halcyon days of the 1920s. The fleet in many of its training and exercises seemed to be preparing for a repetition of Jutland with squadrons of heavy warships and massed destroyer flotillas engaged against their enemy counterparts. At the same time, the Navy was endeavouring to integrate new weapons, notably aircraft, into its battle practices. It was, however, a period of world depression and the financial stringency was felt in the fleet, particularly in deferred spending on the defences of the bases of Malta and Gibraltar. It would be difficult to remedy these deficiencies. The world situation was also changing. In 1931 the Japanese, a former ally, embarked on aggressive expansion and in subsequent years became an apparent threat to the British position in the Far East. In the event of war with Japan, the Mediterranean Fleet was designated to move to the Far East. In 1932 the 'Ten Year Rule' – that Britain would not face a major war within ten years – was abandoned. In 1933 Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany and began policies that would lead to war in less than a decade. The technological progress of aviation also cast a growing uncertainty over traditional naval operations: how well were warships equipped to meet the new threat?

The first major crisis came in 1935 with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, a member of the League of Nations. There was a very real possibility the Mediterranean Fleet would be engaged in hostilities against the Italians in support of League policies. The lasting effect of the crisis was that Italy went from being a traditional friend to a potential enemy. This had enormous consequences for the Mediterranean Fleet because of Italy's central position in the Mediterranean. The principal base of the Mediterranean Fleet at Malta was now in easy striking distance of the Italian air force. While the exact effectiveness of air power was still uncertain, and possibly underestimated, the potential danger to a fleet caught at anchor in harbour was apparent and the Mediterranean Fleet for the duration of the crisis shifted its major base far eastward to Alexandria. In the succeeding crises of the 1930s, notably Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the final months of peace, the Mediterranean Fleet would again leave

Malta for the more secure location of Alexandria. The Ethiopian crisis was no sooner over when the Spanish Civil War began and for the next few years portions of the Mediterranean Fleet were engaged on duties off the Spanish coast with the threat of mines, air and submarine attack. The end of the Spanish Civil War by the spring of 1939 brought little real relief when the Italian invasion of Albania in April 1939 began another crisis and a run-up to the events which ended in the outbreak of the Second World War. The challenges grew with not one but three potential enemies, plus a potentially hostile Spain where the victorious Nationalists were indebted to Germany and Italy for assistance during the war. In return, the hostility with Turkey so apparent in the first half of the 1920s was gone, although hopes that Turkey might prove an ally in a potential conflict were overly optimistic. The relationship with the French, relatively cool during the Ethiopian crisis, grew warmer with both navies engaged in conversations for at least distant cooperation in the impending war.

The naval archives for this momentous period are voluminous, continuing the mass of paper records that began with the outbreak of the First World War. It is a real challenge to choose documents to include in this volume from the many that are available and painful to have to make cuts when the manuscript threatened to become too long. Nevertheless, it remains frustrating to discover that, despite the apparent abundance of records, certain documents referred to in other records apparently no longer exist having been ‘weeded’. I have tried to concentrate on naval activity in the documents chosen and resisted the temptation to include, for example, fascinating accounts of local conditions.

The Mediterranean Commanders-in-Chief now seem under tighter control from the Admiralty because of the widespread use of telegrams, mostly transmitted by wireless, although this method of transmission is no longer usually indicated. In the 1930s it became increasingly common to refer to the telegrams by time and date of transmission rather than their number which would also be different for each of the copies that were repeated to different authorities. These references were usually expressed in the form ‘Your 2312/8’, referring to the time and date of the message and usually located at the bottom of the telegram. The original forms and capitalisations have been retained when possible although the salutations and closings have been omitted. A glossary of the numerous abbreviations and acronyms has been included but for reasons of space well-known honours and decorations have not, as they are easily found in most dictionaries. There are also far too many ships mentioned to provide technical details of each; however, the reader will find these in standard references such as J.J. Colledge, *Ships of the Royal Navy, Conway’s All*

the World's Fighting Ships, 1922–1946, and the large and steadily growing number of monographs on ships and classes. When looking up these details it will also be sobering for the reader to learn how many of the ships mentioned in this volume would be lost during the war.

Sources identified as ADM [Admiralty], AIR and FO [Foreign Office] are located in The National Archives (formerly Public Record Office) at Kew, while those designated CHT refer to the Chatfield MSS. at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Minor omissions are indicated by an ellipsis ... while more substantial cuts are indicated by a row of asterisks * * *. Documents are typescript unless otherwise indicated.

For their assistance over the years in the preparation of this volume I would like to thank: the late Roderick Suddaby, Keeper of Documents, the Imperial War Museum London; Robin Brodhurst; the staff at the National Archives, Kew; Captain Christopher L. W. Page, RN and Dr Malcolm Llewellyn-Jones of the Naval Historical Branch, Portsmouth; the archivists at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; and the archivists and staff at the Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge. Peter Krafft of the Florida Resources and Environmental Analysis Center was the cartographer and indefatigable in locating obscure maritime reference points whose names might have changed over the years. Dr Ben Jones, General Editor of the Navy Records Society, guided the manuscript through the press.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

A/A	Anti-Aircraft
A/B	Anti-Boat (Boom)
AC	Admiral Commanding
ACNS	Assistant Chief of Naval Staff
ADGB	Air Defence of Great Britain
Adm	Admiral
Admy	Admiralty
AFO	Admiralty Fleet Order
ALO	Admiralty Liaison Officer (may also be Army or Air depending on context)
Amb	Ambassador
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
AoF	Admiral of the Fleet
ARP	Air Raid Protection
A/S	Anti-Submarine
AS	German Armoured Ship (<i>Deutschland</i> class, commonly known as 'pocket battleships')
ASDIC	Anti-Submarine Detection (later SONAR)
ASIS	Armament Store Issuing Ship
Asst	Assistant
A/T	Anti-Torpedo
BL	Breech Loading
BP	Battle Practice
BS	Battle Squadron
Capt	Captain
CAPTAIN (D)	Captain commanding Destroyer Flotilla (the flotilla number may also be included)
CAS	Chief of Air Staff
CB	Confidential Book
Cdr	Commander
Cdre	Commodore
Chllr	Chancellor
Chmn	Chairman
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence

CIGS	Chief of Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMB	Coastal Motor Torpedo Boat
CNS	Chief of Naval Staff
CO	Commanding Officer
COS	Chief of Staff or Chiefs of Staff Committee
CS	Cruiser Squadron
CSA	Chemical Smoke-making Apparatus
Cttee	Committee
DASO	Deputy Armaments Supply Officer
DC	Depth Charge
DCNS	Deputy Chief of Naval Staff
D/F	Direction-Finding
DF	Destroyer Flotilla
Dir	Director
DNC	Director of Naval Construction
DNO	Director of Naval Ordnance Department (Admiralty)
DNI	Director Naval Intelligence Division (Admiralty)
DOD	Director of Operations Division (Admiralty)
DoD	Director of Dockyards
DP	Director of Plans Division (Admiralty)
DPS	Director of Personal Services (Admiralty)
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
FB	Flying Boat
FO	Foreign Office (also Flag Officer)
FP & MS	Fishery Protection & Minesweeping (Flotilla)
G & T	Gunnery and Torpedo
Gen	General
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Govr	Governor
Govt	Government
G/R	General Reconnaissance
GREEN	Starboard (usually coupled with a bearing expressed in degrees)
HA	High Angle (anti-aircraft)
HACS	High Angle Control Station
HBM	His Britannic Majesty's
HE	High Explosive
HF	Home Fleet
HM	His Majesty's
HMG	His Majesty's Government
HMS	His Majesty's Ship

HSBPT	High Speed Battle Practice Target
IDC	Imperial Defence College
INA	Standing Instructions for H.M. Ships in connection with the Nyon Agreement
IPA	Standing Instructions for H.M. Ships in connection with the Paris Agreement
ISCW	Standing Instructions for H.M. Ships in connection with the Spanish Civil War
JDC	Joint Home and Overseas Defence Committee
KR	King's Regulations
LA	Low Angle
L/T	Land Telegraph
M	Military Branch (Admiralty)
Med	Mediterranean
Min	Minister
MNBDO	Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation
M/S	Minesweeper
MSF	Mine Sweeping Flotilla
MTB	Motor Torpedo Boat
MTM	Mediterranean Tactical Memorandum
NAAGC	Naval Anti-Aircraft Gunnery Commission
NI	Non Intervention (Spanish Civil War)
NID	Naval Intelligence Division (Admiralty)
NLO	Naval Liaison Officer
OC	Officer Commanding
P & O	Peninsula & Oriental Steam Navigation Company
pom-pom	Short Range Rapid Fire Anti-Aircraft Gun
Pres	President
PVs	Paravanes
QF	Quick Firing
Q-Ship	Anti-Submarine warship disguised as innocent merchantman
RA	Rear Admiral
RAA	Rear Admiral Aircraft Carriers
RAC	Rear Admiral Commanding
RA (D)	Rear Admiral Commanding Destroyer Flotillas
RDF	Radio Direction Finding (later RADAR)
RED	Port (usually coupled with a bearing expressed in degrees)
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary
RNAD	Royal Navy Armament Department
SAP	Semi-Armour Piercing

Sec	Secretary
S/M	Submarine
SO (I)	Senior Officer Intelligence
SL	Sea Lord (1 S.L. = 1st Sea Lord, 2 S.L. = 2nd Sea Lord, etc.)
SNO	Senior Naval Officer
SPs	Signal Publications
Sqdn	Squadron
TB	Torpedo-boat
TLs	Their Lordships (Board of Admiralty)
TSDS	Twin Speed Destroyer Sweep
TSMS	Twin Screw Minesweeper
USS	United States Ship
VA	Vice Admiral
VAA	Vice Admiral Aircraft Carriers
VAC	Vice Admiral Commanding
VACBCS	Vice Admiral Commanding Battle Cruiser Squadron
VACRF	Vice Admiral Commanding Reserve Fleet
VAQ	Vice Admiral Commanding Battle Cruiser Squadron
V/S	Visual Signal
WO	War Office
W/T	Wireless Telegraphy



Map 3 The Central Mediterranean



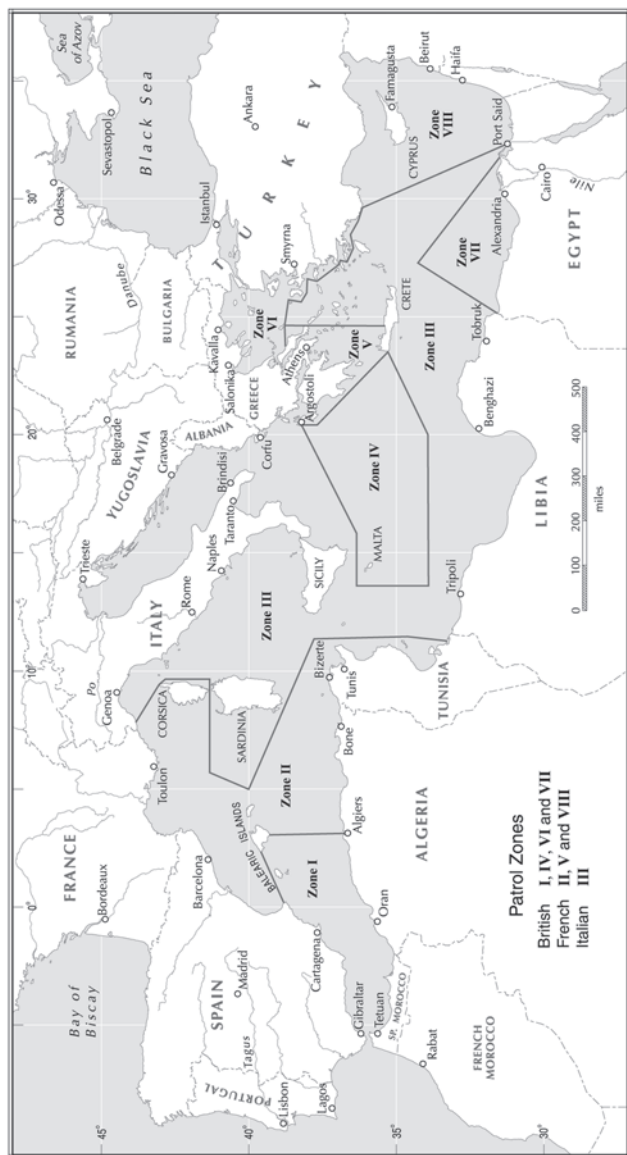
Map 4 The Eastern Mediterranean



Map 5 Southern Red Sea and East Africa



Map 6 Alexandria



Map 7 Zones Established by the Nyon and Paris Agreements

PART I

THE MEDITERRANEAN FLEET FROM 1930 TO THE
ETHIOPIAN CRISIS

The Mediterranean Fleet began the 1930s while still under the command of Admiral Sir Frederick L. Field. He was succeeded in May 1930 by Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, who had been Admiral Beatty's flag captain during the First World War and still had an important career ahead of him as First Sea Lord and Minister for Co-ordination of Defence.¹ With its six battleships, one and often two aircraft carriers, two cruiser squadrons, four destroyer flotillas and a submarine flotilla, the Mediterranean Fleet was Great Britain's premier naval force.² It was still more powerful than the naval forces of the two major Mediterranean naval powers, France and Italy. Moreover, it was also destined to play a key role in case of war in the Far East against Japan, proceeding through the Suez Canal and Indian Ocean to Singapore [24]. With the exception of W.W. Fisher, who died prematurely, every Mediterranean Commander-in-Chief during the 1930s subsequently became First Sea Lord.³ This was in contrast to the preceding decade when for a variety of reasons only Frederick Field (Mediterranean C-in-C June 1928–May 1930) eventually became head of the Navy.

At the beginning of the 1930s there was little to distinguish the activities of the Mediterranean Fleet from those of the late 1920s. The annual routines of training, drills and exercises, cruises and combined exercises with the Atlantic Fleet continued. Chatfield provides a rough outline of the annual routine. There would be a winter cruise in January and a spring cruise in March, generally culminating with combined exercises with the Atlantic Fleet. Rigorous fleet training took place in May and June, a period when the weather at Malta was at its best. The first summer cruise took place in July and August. A much anticipated fleet regatta usually took place during this cruise, often in Greek waters.

¹For Chatfield's account of his time as Mediterranean C-in-C, see Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence* (London, 1942), chap. xxiii.

²In contrast, the Atlantic Fleet (after 1931, Home Fleet) was: five battleships, three battle cruisers, a cruiser squadron, two aircraft carriers, two destroyer flotillas and a submarine flotilla. Admiralty, *The Navy List, July 1931* (London, 1931), pp. 201–2, 207–8.

³Adm Sir Roger Backhouse, the only 1st Sea Lord (November 1938–June, 1939) during the 1930s not to have been C-in-C Med, had been VA commanding First Battle Squadron and 2nd-in-command, Med Fleet, 1932–34.

This would be followed in late August by about a fortnight back at Malta when ships would be refuelled and re-stored. This would be followed by a second summer (later termed autumn) cruise until the end of October. Then came what Chatfield termed a 'self-refit' period back at Malta with the majority of ships laid up for the overhaul of hulls and machinery. The cruises were opportunities for drills and exercises and the fleet had a reputation for playing hard and working hard.¹ The routine could naturally be altered by periodic crises or external events.

Formal visits and relations with foreign fleets were an important part of the diplomatic role of the fleet. A report by the British naval attaché in France of a visit to Toulon in 1931 is included as an example of what was involved [4]. An indication that times were changing appears in the attaché's observation that the conduct of ships' companies ashore apparently reflected a higher standard of education than had been true in the past. Relations with Italy were still cordial and in April 1931 Chatfield could describe his visit to the Italian naval base at La Spezia as 'a happy and informal affair' [3]. He also noted the improvement in appearance of the Italian Navy over the past six years. Not all in the fleet were as sanguine about the Italians and after Mussolini had apparently gotten away with aggressive action against the Greeks at Corfu in 1923 a former officer described the years that followed as 'a period of slow deterioration of the influence exerted upon the Mediterranean Powers by the British Navy'.²

The Mediterranean Fleet could put on an impressive display. This was demonstrated in August 1932 when the fleet was concentrated at Corfu and visited by the heir to the throne, the Prince of Wales, and his younger brother Prince George [8]. The Royal Princes carried out what must have been a strenuous programme of inspections in which a high point, literally and figuratively, was their flight over the fleet in aircraft launched from a carrier. This might have had tragic consequences and there were some anxious moments when the sudden onset of a fog bank prevented Prince George's aircraft from landing on the carrier until the fog cleared.³

The fleet and combined exercises in 1930 in some ways still seemed to be looking back towards Jutland [1, 2]. There were problems, such as

¹Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence*, pp. 233–9. Chatfield's account is generally echoed by the numerous memoirs, letters, diaries and midshipmen's journals by former members of the Mediterranean Fleet now in the Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

²Kenneth Edwards, *The Grey Diplomats* (London, 1938), p. 92. Edwards was writing under the influence of the Ethiopian crisis and the Spanish Civil War then in progress and this may have coloured his remarks on the period preceding it. On the Corfu incident see James Barros, *The Corfu Incident of 1923* (Princeton, 1965).

³Chatfield's anxieties over the sudden fog are recounted in Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence*, pp. 247–8.

preventing the junction between enemy advanced forces and the enemy main fleet and operations when fleets met late in the day and encounters continued into the night. There was an admission that much still needed to be learnt in night fighting [2]. Chatfield later recalled that ‘a large part of my time in the Mediterranean was consequently occupied in developing our night-fighting efficiency’.¹ Nevertheless, naval warfare was changing. Aircraft played an increasingly important role with air attacks executed from a distance of 90 miles and reconnaissance carried out at ‘a record’ 164 miles [1]. The fleet investigated other problems associated with aircraft, such as defending a fleet anchorage against air attack.²

The Mediterranean Fleet may have been imposing at first glance, but it was an ageing fleet. Ships needed refits and modernisation, particularly in regard to countering the developing threat from the air. However, this was also a period of financial stringency with the world entering the Great Depression of the 1930s. A round of pay cuts promulgated in an ill-considered manner resulted in disturbances in the Atlantic Fleet and a temporary refusal of duty that has since been known as the Invergordon Mutiny. The Mediterranean Fleet because of its distance largely escaped these disturbances, although certainly not the hardships caused by the cuts in pay.³ Moreover, the reduction in monies available for the maintenance of the fleet meant that the number of ships in full commission would have to be reduced. In this context the Admiralty faced the problem of balancing the needs of the Atlantic Fleet with those of the Mediterranean Fleet. In destroyers, for example, each fleet was considered to require three flotillas. In October 1931 the Admiralty proposed a redistribution of strength that would reduce the Mediterranean Fleet by one battleship, an aircraft carrier and a destroyer flotilla [5]. Chatfield not surprisingly argued against this, and not merely because it meant a reduction in his command. With an eye towards recent events at Invergordon, he remarked that foreign service at the moment was ‘more wholesome’ than home service for personnel and, noting that the Atlantic Fleet was also to lose a battleship, added that he would not favour retention of a second carrier if it meant the loss of two battleships instead of the one proposed [6]. He

¹Ibid., p. 240.

²On the growing appreciation of naval air power see Geoffrey Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy, 1914–1945* (London, 1979), pp. 161–4.

³On the Invergordon Mutiny see: Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*. Vol. II: *The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930–1939* (London, 1976), chap. 4; Anthony Carew, *The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy, 1900–39: The Invergordon Mutiny in Perspective* (Manchester, 1981), chap. 8. An excellent short account is Christopher M. Bell, ‘The Invergordon Mutiny, 1931’ in Christopher M. Bell and Bruce A. Elleman (eds), *Naval Mutinies of the Twentieth Century: An International Perspective* (London, 2003), pp. 170–92.

feared this would give strength to the ‘false theories’ expounded in the press that battleships were of ‘questionable utility’. Chatfield recognised that in the confined waters around Europe against minor powers aircraft carriers ‘would appear to be even more valuable than battleships’ but nevertheless, in this difficult choice he apparently opted for the battleship, to all appearances still the ultimate weapon in his eyes. The Admiralty was quick to point out that the proposed reduction did not imply any diminution of the importance of capital ships and that the proposals really reflected the existing situation when ships would be away on long refits [7]. It was also a question of balancing Home Service with Foreign Service and the fact that specialists such as telegraphists were reluctant to re-engage if it meant long service abroad away from their families. This was another indication of the changing nature of the Navy. Chatfield would later write that he considered the Home Fleet more difficult to command than the Mediterranean Fleet. In the Mediterranean there were long commissions, infrequent leaves and a smaller turnover in personnel. At home there were frequent leaves, changes in personnel occurred more often, and the proximity of the sailor’s homes meant that domestic life was apt to ‘over-dominate’ the life of ships.¹

Admiral Sir William W. Fisher succeeded Chatfield as Mediterranean Commander-in-Chief in October 1932. Known in the service as ‘W.W.’, he was one of those flamboyant and commanding personalities that inspire legends.² But for his premature death at the age of 62 in 1937, he might well have succeeded Chatfield as First Sea Lord. The eighth child of eleven in a distinguished and intellectual family – his eldest brother was the famous historian H.A.L. Fisher – he was recorded as able to conduct a correspondence in Latin with a Yugoslav professor he had met at Split.³

Fisher was soon conscious of the vulnerability of the Mediterranean Fleet to air attack and even more aware of the lamentable state of the defences against air attack of the fleet’s bases at Gibraltar and Malta [9]. The problem at Gibraltar had in theory been under study and in November 1931 the Committee of Imperial Defence had made recommendations concerning Gibraltar. There was, however, a big difference between recommendations and action, and while the Admiralty assured Fisher in June 1933 that they understood his concerns, the order of priority to the allocation of scarce funds was to be decided by the Committee of Imperial Defence [11]. Concern about a potential air attack on Gibraltar from North Africa, meaning of course by the French or Spanish, was highly

¹Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence*, pp. 245–6.

²There is a short admiring biography by an officer who served under him. See Admiral Sir William James, *Admiral Sir William Fisher* (London, 1943).

³*Ibid.*, p. 3.

theoretical and part of the common defence planning against all contingencies and vulnerabilities in a future that could not be foreseen with certainty. France had been seen as a potential enemy in a so-called 'Locarno War', that is a war in which the French had been the aggressor against Germany and Britain had been obligated under the provisions of the Locarno Treaty to go to the assistance of the victim of that aggression. By the spring of 1933 Hitler and the Nazi regime were in power in Germany and planning of this sort was highly unrealistic, although within a few years a German-backed Nationalist Spain would become a potential threat.¹ Relations with Italy were still good in 1933, but geographical realities could not be ignored and the base at Malta was in easy range of a number of Italian air bases on the island of Sicily or southern Italy. Mussolini's Fascist regime had made much propaganda over its interest in air power and there were some spectacular mass formation flights by the Italian air force. Malta's defences against air attack in June 1933 consisted of a mere four anti-aircraft guns and an RAF squadron of six Fairey III float planes [12]. Fisher was not satisfied with existing plans for improving the islands A/A defences and urged the Admiralty to emphasise to the Air Council the importance of the island in Mediterranean naval strategy and ask them to at least consider the provision of ground facilities necessary for an 'adequate' force of fighter aircraft.² He was afraid Chatfield would be inclined to put Malta and Gibraltar 'in cold storage for a bit' after the First Sea Lord's recent successful efforts over the Singapore base and stated succinctly that as Mediterranean C-in-C, 'I can't' [13].

The potential danger to Malta did not come solely from the air. The Governor of the island arranged for a combined exercise in which a landing force was able to inflict severe damage on the dockyard and other key points on the island. Although Fisher considered the air threat the greatest, he pointed out that the exercise had demonstrated that the danger of a military attack also existed and the necessary countermeasures that were then lacking had to be taken [14].

Fisher could not have been pleased by the eventual Admiralty reply to his concerns in October that the question of the scale of attack to be guarded against and the scale of defences to be provided were 'still under examination'. This was coupled with a warning that, in view of even more

¹However, as proof that one must prepare against all contingencies, in July 1940 Gibraltar was the objective of air raids by Vichy French aircraft in retaliation for the British attack on the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kébir.

²In the period between the Ethiopian crisis and the outbreak of the world war the Navy and the RAF had differing views on the possibilities of defending Malta from air attack. See Michael J. Budden, 'Defending the Indefensible? The Air Defence of Malta, 1936-1940', *War in History*, vol. 6, no. 4 (November, 1999), pp. 447-67.

serious defence commitments elsewhere, ‘financial considerations’ might ‘preclude the installation of defences at Malta on the full scale at present’ [15]. This discouraging reply came virtually at the same moment as the results of a strategical investigation carried out by the fleet. The problem involved a hypothetical situation in which the British would be obliged through the Covenant of the League of Nations to intervene in the event of Italian aggression against Yugoslavia (later Yugoslavia). The conclusions were that Malta would be untenable as a main fleet base in the event of a war with Italy because of the air menace and that the battleships of the fleet would be unfitted for operations where they would be exposed to frequent or heavy attack from the air [16]. Fisher appreciated that Chatfield as First Sea Lord had to weigh the urgency of the Far East as compared to the Mediterranean but argued that ‘we are taking an impossible risk about Malta’ [17]. At this time there were far too many unfulfilled British defence requirements and far too little available to meet the demands. Fisher reflected this in his rhetorical question: must they leave Malta defenceless so as not to retard the mechanisation of the army?

Approximately fifteen months after assuming his command Fisher reported in January 1934 that he was convinced his flag officers and commanding officers had done and were doing all that was possible to make their squadrons and ships ready for war. There was, however, a serious weakness that owing to a lack of material it was beyond their power to remedy. Chatfield and the Admiralty could not have been surprised after previous reports when Fisher identified the weakness as the fleet’s inability to repulse an attack in force from the air [18]. The fleet needed at least double the number of anti-aircraft guns, suitable high angle and anti-aircraft control positions, more anti-aircraft ammunition both aboard ships and in reserve at Malta and a greater allowance of practice ammunition and more suitable targets for practice. The preceding spring the fleet had conducted an interesting trial with an experimental radio-controlled drone, the ‘Fairey Queen’, as a target for a cruiser and two battleships, but the drone had been shot down by the cruiser relatively quickly and before the battleships had their chance to shoot [10]. Now Fisher argued that until these anti-aircraft requirements were met he could not say the fleet was as ready for war as it should be for, in his view, air attack was the only form of attack that could really harm them. Fisher also pointed out that the Royal Air Force still had no aircraft based at Malta capable of participating in either the defence of the island or an attack on enemy air bases. The questions Fisher had raised about anti-aircraft armament of ships and the defences of Malta were ‘under consideration’ by the Admiralty at the beginning of 1935, less than a year before the crisis over Ethiopia [23].

The potential role of the Mediterranean Fleet in a war in the Far East coupled with the modernisation programme of the Royal Navy's ageing battleships promised to bring about another redistribution of naval forces. The modernisation programme included extensive modifications – not all completed by the outbreak of war – to the *Queen Elizabeth* class [19].¹ Chatfield proposed transferring the Royal Navy's battle cruisers to the Mediterranean Fleet. These fast ships were intended to act as an advance guard and from a central position in the Mediterranean could operate either in the Far East or in Home Waters [19]. Initially, the manning situation would require the Mediterranean Fleet to lose a battleship in exchange for two – and eventually in 1938, all three – of the Navy's battle cruisers. Chatfield also indicated the Mediterranean Fleet would eventually have two aircraft carriers. The Mediterranean flagship *Queen Elizabeth* was due for a long refit and modernisation and, since none of the *Royal Sovereign* class seemed suitable for conversion to a fleet flagship, the Board of Admiralty finally decided in October 1934 that for reasons of homogeneity all of the *Queen Elizabeth* class would be transferred to the Mediterranean and the slower *Royal Sovereigns* gradually transferred to the Home Fleet between the summer of 1935 and the autumn of 1936 [22]. The large repair and modernisation programme meant, however, that for the next five years there would actually be only four battleships on the station [22].

While relations with Turkey had improved significantly since the crises of the 1920s, incidents could still occur. One of the nastiest happened in July 1934 when Turkish border guards fired on a small skiff carrying British naval officers that had sailed too close to the Turkish coast near the Greek island of Samos. A Surgeon-Lieutenant was killed, his body never found. Fisher interrupted his stay on Cyprus to rush to the scene with other ships of the fleet. In the end the incident was smoothed over, the Turkish government eventually agreeing to pay compensation to the family and render honours – possibly with bad grace – in a memorial ceremony [21]. This was one of these incidents when conflicting emotions were likely. A show of force would be the natural reaction but there were also higher considerations likely to be advanced by the Foreign Office. These included Turkey's position in the diplomatic scene and the possibility of Turkish defence orders from British industry. There were apparently elements within the Turkish government anxious for better relations and the situation ought not to be compromised by the actions of unnamed and possibly trigger-happy frontier guards. Chatfield accordingly

¹For details of these modifications, see Alan Raven and John Roberts, *British Battleships of World War II* (London, 1976), chap. 11.

urged Fisher to put aside the bad taste left by recent incidents and welcome an anticipated Turkish proposal for a visit by the Turkish Fleet to Malta [25]. The very successful visit by the Mediterranean Fleet to Istanbul in 1929 had for varying reasons never been reciprocated by the Turks.¹ This would be the opportunity to do so, although the onset of the Abyssinian crisis delayed the actual visit until the following year.

The majority of the Mediterranean Fleet returned home in the spring of 1935 for the naval review held in honour of King George V's Silver Jubilee. Only a few cruisers and a flotilla of destroyers were left in the Mediterranean. Chatfield was anxious to put on a good show for the first real naval review since 1914 and the Home Fleet alone would not suffice without temporarily mobilising ships from the reserve [20].

In the event of a war in the Far East the security of the Suez Canal was of vital importance and plans were made for the seizure and control of the canal in case of an emergency. Chatfield informed Fisher it was important that the Mediterranean Fleet had forces which could be sent immediately to the canal once a state of emergency was declared [19]. A major concern was the possibility the Japanese would attempt to block the canal with blockships thereby dividing the British forces or, if the fleet had already passed through, severing its lines of communication [24]. Fisher proposed that two cruisers of the Third Cruiser Squadron and the Third Destroyer Flotilla act as an advanced Canal Control Force, sailing from Malta as soon as possible. The remaining two cruisers of the squadron would proceed to Port Said as soon as they were ready and strengthen the defences of the canal [26].

The Mediterranean Fleet during the first half of the 1930s continued its usual activities: namely training, exercises, and showing the flag. When necessary it could also act as an Imperial police force, providing ships and men when required to reinforce the civil and military authorities in Egypt or Cyprus.² At sea the fleet and its commanders were confident they could handle any rival naval force likely to face them. But the fleet was ageing. The Mediterranean was becoming something of a 'closed lake' as the performance of aircraft improved and this represented a threat the ships were not completely prepared to face. This was particularly evident to Fisher who regarded air attack as the only thing that could really hurt them. Unfortunately, as Chatfield made clear, it was a hard struggle in the era of financial stringency to prise sufficient funds from the

¹On the visit in 1929 by the Mediterranean Fleet see Paul G. Halpern (ed.), *The Mediterranean Fleet, 1919–1929* (Farnham, 2011), Docs Nos 327 and 328.

²For example, Chatfield in his flagship accompanied by the battleship *Ramilles* proceeded to Alexandria after rioting occurred there in September 1930 and ships of the fleet were also sent to Cyprus following severe disturbances in the autumn of 1931.

Treasury for modernisation, let alone for a naval construction programme, at a time when the other services had equally pressing needs. In the spring of 1935 the threats had been to a certain extent theoretical, planning for all contingencies, some highly unlikely. With the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, a fellow member of the League of Nations, the threats of air attack became all too real if the British were drawn into conflict as a result of their obligations under the Covenant of the League. The year 1935 became one of crisis for the Mediterranean Fleet and the relatively peaceful decade which had preceded it would not return until years after the Second World War when Great Britain would be in very different circumstances. It is not surprising that many looked back on the late 1920s and early 1930s with a great deal of nostalgia.

1. *Summary of 1930 Mediterranean Fleet¹ Exercises (1)*

[ADM 186/147]

Tactical Division, Naval Staff
November 1930

C.B. 1769/30 (1)

* * *

No. 1. Exercise O.P. [9–11 March 1930, Atlantic and Mediterranean Fleets] *A strategical and tactical exercise in which an attempt is made to prevent a junction between enemy advanced forces and their reinforcing main fleet.*

The principle of drawing lots for certain alternative conditions was again employed satisfactorily. Aircraft and submarines played particularly important parts in the exercise. The depth of successful air reconnaissance reached a record of 164 miles, and air attacks took place at a distance of more than 90 miles from the point of departure.

No. 2. Exercise Z.C. [17–18 March 1930, Atlantic and Mediterranean Fleets] *A tactical exercise with two fleets meeting late in the day without decisive results. Operations continue during the night and action is renewed next morning.*

This exercise demonstrated the two-edged nature of a smoke screen. Flotillas were able to advance under the cover of the enemy's screen, which also hampered their own secondary armament fire, and made their attacks on the battle fleet, which was then still in the process of re-forming for the night. During the night, both Commanders-in-Chief were placed out of action and subsequent operations were conducted by the Seconds-in-Command.

* * *

No. 4. Exercise D.A. [2 April 1930] *A tactical exercise in which the chasing fleet endeavours to delay the enemy's retirement by means of destroyer and air attacks.*

Destroyers attacked in the two-divisional formation – torpedoes being fired. The torpedo bomber, fighter and bombing attacks by aircraft were well synchronised with the arrival of destroyers' torpedoes.

* * *

¹Exercises conducted by the Atlantic Fleet are not reproduced.

2. *Summary of 1930 Mediterranean Fleet Exercises (2)*

[ADM 186/148]

Tactical Division, Naval Staff
November 1930

C.B. 1769/30 (2).

* * *

No. 7. Exercise O.X. [29 October 1930] *A tactical exercise with two fleets meeting late in the day without decisive results. Operations continued during the night., and included a night action between heavy ships.*

This exercise showed how much there is to be learnt in night firing. An interesting feature was the illumination of the enemy battle fleet by the searchlights of a detached force.

This exercise was framed similarly to Exercise Z.C. (C.B. 1769/30 (1)) but in that exercise no night action materialised.

No. 8. Exercise O.Y. [28 October 1930] *To investigate the methods of defending a fleet in harbour against air attack. The exercise was arranged to continue the investigation begun in Exercise O.L. (C.B. 1769/29 (2)).*

A satisfactory anchorage plan was arranged and separate arcs of fire for H.A. and L.A. were allocated

Seventeen aircraft took part.

Several targets were selected by the attackers, with satisfactory results. In 'O.L.' the attack was concentrated on one ship.

Several points requiring further investigation were brought out.

* * *

3. Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield¹ to Admiralty

[ADM 1/8752/198]

Queen Elizabeth at Villefranche
24 April 1931

CONFIDENTIAL

No. 676/561/114.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the following report on my visit to Spezia in *Queen Elizabeth*, 8th–10th April, 1931.

2. My visit was intended primarily as a personal one on Vice-Admiral F. Gambardella, Commanding the First Squadron, who had been good enough to come to Rhodes to meet me in October last.

* * *

4. On the evening of the same day [8 April] an official dinner was given by Vice-Admiral Gambardella on board his flagship, *Trieste*, to myself, my Staff and ten officers of *Queen Elizabeth*. It was also attended by the principal civil authorities. Although this was an official function and speeches were made, the very friendly attitude of our hosts made it, in actuality, a happy and informal affair and quite free from the initial reserve that officers of two different nations usually experience when meeting for the first time. I was very impressed by the evident desire on the part of the Italian Admirals and their officers of taking that earliest opportunity of displaying such complete friendliness and appreciation of our visit.

Vice-Admiral Gambardella in a speech lasting some five minutes, warmly welcomed myself and my flagship. He referred particularly to the comradeship between the two navies during the War and stressed the pleasure felt by himself and the Italian Navy at the visit of one of H.M. Ships. He spoke in Italian which was translated paragraph by paragraph into English by Lieutenant Mimbelli.² I replied in English and my speech was translated into Italian by Captain Bevan.³

* * *

¹Adm [later AoF] Sir Alfred Ernle Montacute Chatfield (1873–1967). Created Baron, 1937. Flag Capt to Beatty in battlecruiser *Lion*, 1914–16; Flag Capt and Fleet Gunnery Officer to Beatty when latter was C-in-C Grand Fleet, 1917–19; 4th Sea Lord, 1919–20; ACNS, 1920–22; commanded 3rd LCS, 1923–25; 3rd Sea Lord and Controller of the Navy, 1925–28; C-in-C Atlantic Fleet, 1929–30; C-in-C Med, 1930–32; 1st Sea Lord and CNS, 1933–38; Min for Co-ordination of Defence, 1939–40.

²Attached to Chatfield and his staff as personal liaison officer.

³Capt [later RA Sir] Richard Hugh Loraine Bevan (1885–1976). Flag Capt and COS to C-in-C Africa Station, 1924–26; Naval Attaché in Italy and Greece, 1928–31; commanded Signal School, Portsmouth, 1934–35; retired, 1935; recalled and Naval Attaché, Rome, Feb–June 1940; Senior British Naval Officer, North Russia, 1941–42; Flag Officer-in-charge, Belfast, 1942–45; KBE, 1946.

7. I am glad to report that this visit was an undoubted success and has certainly strengthened the good feeling between the two navies. The good will of the two Commanders-in-Chief¹ and of all officers in their commands was unmistakably sincere and the happiest relations existed throughout our stay between the personnel of the two nations. It was a great personal pleasure to me to meet Vice-Admiral Gambardella again and I trust that the Mediterranean Fleet will have the honour of receiving an early visit from him and his squadron at Malta.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the fine bearing and smartness of the officers and men of the present-day Italian Navy. The improvement in appearance of both the personnel and their ships in the last six years has been striking and the state of the units at Spezia and their officers and ships' companies was very creditable.

The references in the principal Italian newspapers to the presence of the *Queen Elizabeth* at Spezia were lengthy and were expressed in very cordial terms, particular reference being made to the 'comradeship and friendship between the two navies'.

* * *

4. *Captain Guy W. Hallifax² to Lord Tyrrell³*

[ADM 1/8752/198]

British Embassy, Paris
8 May 1931

[Carbon]

France No. 8/31.

I have the honour to report that the reception accorded to Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, K.C.B., Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, at Toulon recently [25–27 April] was very cordial.

The *Queen Elizabeth*, the Commander-in-Chief's flagship, only stayed 3 days in the port, but they were crowded days and the festivities arranged included an official dinner and a ball on separate nights at the Prefecture Maritime, an official lunch on board the *Provence*, flagship of the French

¹VA Gambardella (Commanding 1st Sqdn) and VA Monaco Duca di Longano (Commanding Upper Tyrrhenian).

²Capt [later RA] Guy Waterhouse Hallifax (1884–1941). Naval Attaché in France, 1928–31; retired 1935; commanded South African 'Seaward Defence Force', 1940–41.

³William George Tyrrell (1866–1947). Created Baron, 1929. Sec of Cttee of Imperial Defence, 1902–04; Private Sec to Sir Edward Grey, Sec of State for Foreign Affairs, 1907–15; Asst Under-Sec of State for Foreign Affairs, 1919–25; Perm Sec of State for Foreign Affairs, 1925–28; Amb at Paris, 1928–34.

Commander-in-Chief of the 1st Squadron,¹ and a gala performance at the opera which was preceded by a dinner given by Admiral Chatfield on board the *Queen Elizabeth*, to which all the local naval high authorities were invited. There were also ‘matinées dansantes’ on board both the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Provence*.

Sports and entertainments were arranged for the ship’s company, and it was gratifying to see in the streets a considerable amount of sober fraternising between the sailors of the two Countries. It was not so many years ago that our men seldom fraternised with foreign sailors, except under the influence of drink. I think it is one of the beneficial results of the higher educational standard attained in the Navy that the men not only realise the importance of these visits, but try to ensure their success by fraternising with the local sailors.

As usual the two Navies got on very well together, but I fancy that the local population were not so enthusiastic about the visit – or at least not so demonstrably so – as was the civilian element at Brest on the occasion of the *Nelson*’s visit last year.

5. Admiralty to Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield

[ADM 116/2860]

23 November 1931

SECRET.

[Carbon]

M.02804/31.

I am to acquaint you that in connection with the probable redistribution of the Fleet mentioned in Confidential Admiralty Fleet Order 2572/31 of the 30th October, 1931,² the following alterations in the strength of the Mediterranean Fleet are tentatively under consideration, and it is requested that you will forward your remarks on the subject.

Capital Ships.

2. It is proposed that the number of Battleships should be reduced by 1. This would mean that H.M.S. *Ramilles*, on her return from the Mediterranean during 1932, to pay off and to be taken in hand for large repair, would cease to belong to the Mediterranean Fleet. The ship would,

¹Vice Amiral Georges Robert (1875–1965). Second and subsequently first sous-chef of naval general staff, 1924–28; commanded torpedo boat flotilla of 1re escadre, 1928–29; Dir of Military Personnel, 1929–30; C-in-C, 1re escadre, 1931–32; Inspector Gen of Maritime Forces in the Med, 1932–35; head of French delegation at London Naval Conference, 1935; retired 1937; recalled to service on outbreak of war and named C-in-C West Atlantic Zone and High Commissioner for the Antilles, September 1939–July, 1943; dismissed in September 1944 and subsequently tried and condemned by the High Court for his support of the Vichy regime, but the punishment was set aside.

²Not reproduced.

however, be available subsequently as a relief for another ship of the class (probably H.M.S. *Royal Oak*) when the time arrives for the latter to undergo large repair.

Aircraft carriers.

3. It is proposed that the number of aircraft carriers should be reduced by 1. This would mean that H.M.S. *Eagle*, now paid off for repairs, would not rejoin the Mediterranean Fleet, which would therefore have only one Aircraft Carrier.

4. As regards Destroyer Flotillas, it has been decided that the 2nd Destroyer Flotilla, due to return home in 1932, will not return to the Mediterranean, but will be attached to the Atlantic Fleet. Each of these Fleets will then have 3 Destroyer Flotillas. Separate instructions have been given in Admiralty Letter M.02672/31 of the 23rd instant¹ to this effect.

5. An early reply to this letter is requested.

6. A copy of a letter addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet, on the subject of alterations proposed in the strength of the Atlantic Fleet is enclosed.

6. *Chatfield to Admiralty*

[ADM 116/2860]

at Malta, 21 December 1931

SECRET.

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION

No. 2060/596/88.

STRENGTHS OF MEDITERRANEAN AND ATLANTIC FLEETS.

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the following remarks on Admiralty letter, M.02804/31, of 23rd November, 1931, on the above subject.

2. I fully appreciate that the reduction of the money granted for the maintenance of our Naval strength renders inevitable measures of reduction in the number of ships in full commission; at the same time, it appears desirable, in considering the best steps of this nature to be taken, that it should be guided partly by any action of a similar nature to be taken by the navies of our possible enemies.

I have no information as to this and, therefore, such remarks as I am able to make lack this basis of consideration.

3. Although Their Lordships have only requested my remarks on the proposals affecting the Mediterranean Fleet, they have been pleased to send me a copy of the corresponding proposals for the Atlantic Fleet. I

¹Not reproduced.

find it impossible to deal suitably with the proposals for one fleet only, in view of our possible dependence in war on a two-fleet combination (wholly or partial) and I have therefore ventured to deal with the problem in a more general manner than was perhaps Their Lordships' intention.

4. The reduction of three capital ships is one that I know Their Lordships will have proposed only with great regret and anxiety.¹ Not only is it a 20 per cent reduction of immediate fighting strength but it is a 20 per cent reduction in capital ship training for Captains, officers and men. The capital ships are the most important schools afloat for all ranks and ratings; in them every branch of naval warfare and weapon technique can be seen and taught.

On the correct handling of the British main fleet much may in the future depend. Adequate practice is sufficiently difficult to obtain already; with the reduced number of ships it will be still rarer.

Further, in view of the false theories now expounded in the press, any impression that might be gained by the paying off of three capital ships, such as that battleships are of questionable utility, would be specially unfortunate.

5. Experience has already been obtained both in the Mediterranean Fleet, in 1920–23, and in the Atlantic Fleet in later years with the Third Battle Squadron, of having a fleet with some ships fully and others partly manned. It did not prove satisfactory, as the fleet life and training were much handicapped by the inequality of what could be expected from complements of such different strength. I suggest, therefore, that a general and equal reduction of complements in one fleet (as proposed in paragraph 3(b) of Admiralty letter, M.02804/31, of 23rd November, 1931, addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet) is far preferable to any unequal reduction.

6. Further, I am of opinion that a general reduction of complements in one fleet is a better step than paying off ships. If war were to break out unexpectedly, the reduced ships would only need filling up, they would be in running order and have onboard a strong nucleus of trained personnel.

I would, therefore, favour an even larger reduction in complements in the Atlantic Fleet, i.e. by, say 30 per cent and the maintenance of a correspondingly larger number of ships in commission.

7. If this can be accepted in principle, I am in favour of the maintenance of the Mediterranean Fleet at its present strength and any unavoidable reduction in big ships in commission being made in the Atlantic Fleet.

¹The Admiralty, in addition to reducing one battleship in the Mediterranean Fleet, had also proposed reduction of the Atlantic Fleet by one battleship and one battle cruiser.

There are indications that foreign service is, at the moment anyhow, more wholesome than home service. For that reason, any reduction of strength in the Mediterranean seems inadvisable; the tendency should be the other way.

I believe there is generally a desire among the younger men for foreign service, the older and married preferring to stop in Home waters. I am of the opinion that the pressure of the married men to increase Home service should be resisted. A stay-at-home navy is undesirable; joining the Navy should be synonymous with going abroad and those who do not wish to do so are not wholly fitted for a sailor's career. A scheme of complement that could differentiate between home and foreign service could, I believe, be accepted on stations abroad but would doubtless involve a reduction in the number of higher ratings (to avoid superfluity at home) but some such reduction would be welcome, to stimulate the flow of promotion.

8. I hope it will not be considered that in expressing this opinion I am in any way prejudiced by being myself in the Mediterranean Fleet. I have considered the matter solely from the broadest aspect of our naval policy.

9. If these suggested slight modifications of Their Lordships' proposals are not acceptable, I concur in the reductions in the Mediterranean Fleet proposed in the Admiralty letter under reply. The reduction of an aircraft carrier is, of course, regretted. This question is again largely governed by the nature of any war menace for which the Mediterranean Fleet may be called on to train. If such may be expected to occur in the confined waters around Europe against minor Powers, aircraft carriers would appear to be even more valuable than battleships, but I should not advocate the retention of a second carrier if it necessitated the reduction of two battleships instead of the one now proposed.

10. The decision of Their Lordships regarding the flotillas is noted and, I admit, follows on the combined recommendations of the Commanders-in-Chief, Mediterranean and Atlantic Fleets, that the Atlantic Fleet needs three flotillas. Nevertheless, I submit that the reduction of the Mediterranean Fleet flotillas to three will decidedly affect the development of destroyer tactics, particularly at night. Both by day and night three flotillas are the minimum required to form a proper striking force and they must be faced with opposition if incorrect lessons are to be avoided. The progress that I feel may be claimed in night destroyer work in the Mediterranean Fleet in the past two years has only been possible by the possession of four flotillas.

11. If, therefore, only six flotillas in all can be afforded, the present distribution appears to me soundest. If, however, Their Lordships are unable to approve this, I consider it most desirable that the flotillas of the

two fleets shall meet annually for longer periods, to continue the work already begun. Skeleton forces can, of course, be used, but to trust too much to the lessons drawn from skeleton forces is undesirable, apart from the breaking up of the flotillas that is entailed in this method.

7. *Admiralty to Chatfield*

[ADM 116/2860]

1 March 1932

CONFIDENTIAL.

[Carbon]

M.0308/32.

Their Lordships desire me to refer to your submission No. 2060/596/88 of the 21st December, 1931, concerning the strength of the Mediterranean and Atlantic Fleets.

2. The decisions of Their Lordships as to the future constitution, etc., of these Fleets are being communicated separately to yourself and to the Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet, and are also being promulgated in A.F.O.'s ...

3. Before Their Lordships' decisions were reached, the various relevant factors, including the present and prospective naval strength of other Powers, the maintenance of our prestige, and our possible dependence in war upon a two-fleet combination, had received the fullest consideration.

4. Their Lordships' decision to reduce the number of Capital Ships in the Mediterranean from six to five, and to treat three of the total number of Capital Ships, viz. fifteen, as being in reserve, was based partly upon the fact that already at any given date two, and sometimes three of our Capital Ships, including one and sometimes two of those allocated to the Mediterranean Fleet, are undergoing Large Repair or refit (for which they may be paid off or reduced to special complement) and would on this account be unable to proceed on active service at short notice.

5. In these circumstances, the total number of Capital Ships available at any given time, either for service or for the training of personnel, does not exceed twelve or at most thirteen; nor does the number so available in the Mediterranean exceed five, and it may not, on occasions, exceed four. The decisions now taken are, therefore, little more than a recognition of a situation which already exists and is inevitable.

6. I am to state in this connection that Their Lordships intend that during the prolonged absence for Large Repair of any one of the five Capital Ships to be allocated in future to the Mediterranean, one of the three Capital Ships in reserve shall be commissioned for temporary service in the Mediterranean in her place, should this appear to them to be necessary.

7. Your suggestion that, as an alternative to the course which is being taken, there should be a general and equal reduction of complements (say by 30%) in the Atlantic Fleet, would not have similarly have accorded with the actual situation, would have impaired the effective strength of the Fleet affected, and would have involved serious difficulties on account of shortage of personnel both for training and for the ordinary running and maintenance of the ships. Their Lordships have, however, decided that the complements to be carried by the seven Capital Ships which are to be kept in commission at Home are to be on the same basis for all.

8. In reaching their decisions concerning Capital Ships, Their Lordships have been far from overlooking the importance of Capital Ships to any great Naval Power – they are mindful of the inestimable value of our Capital Ships to the allied cause in the European War, and their present decisions are not to be taken as implying any lack of conviction that in any future Naval War in which this country may be engaged an adequate number of modern Capital Ships will be a prime necessity. These decisions are related solely to the distribution and status of our Capital Ships at the present time.

9. The decision to reduce the number of destroyer flotillas in the Mediterranean from four to three was made after the fullest consideration and Their Lordships are satisfied that the change made is in the best interests of both Fleets. Your suggestion that the Flotillas of the two Fleets should meet annually for longer periods will receive due consideration.

10. As regards the incidence of Home and Foreign Service, the question is one of practical expediency. Before and during the war and for a few years after it, policy demanded a large concentration of ships in Home Waters, and the portion of ships abroad was in consequence comparatively small. Latterly, there has been a reversal of this distribution, and a resulting large alteration in the percentage of Home and Foreign Service. The transfer of four '*Queen Elizabeths*' from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Fleet in 1929 modified the position but against this must be placed recent policy to station abroad a greater proportion of large new cruisers. The percentages of Home and Foreign Service in 1921 and 1931 respectively are as follows:

	<u>Home</u>	<u>Foreign</u>
1921	78.7%	21.3%
1931	56.7%	43.3%

Great difficulty in manning is now resulting from the unwillingness of ratings in certain branches, e.g., Telegraphists, to re-engage. This is said to be due partly to their long hours when serving in the large Fleets and partly to the reduced amount of their Home Service. Moreover, without

a proper proportion of men at home it is not possible to arrange for the requisite numbers to undergo the qualifying courses for promotion. The whole matter of Home and Foreign Service, however, together with kindred questions, is at present under consideration.

8. *Chatfield to Admiralty*

[ADM 1/8761/245]

H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth*, at Malta
25 August 1932

No. 1371/109/14.

VISIT OF THEIR ROYAL HIGHNESSES THE PRINCE OF WALES AND THE PRINCE GEORGE TO THE MEDITERRANEAN FLEET.

Be pleased to inform Their Lordships that the Mediterranean Fleet under my command assembled at Corfu¹ on Saturday, 13th August, in preparation for inspection by Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales² and Prince George.³

* * *

2. Their Royal Highnesses arrived at Corfu at 2115 (Corfu time – Zone minus 3) on Saturday, 13th August by Imperial Airways Flying Boat *Satyr*, which was accompanied by the R.A.F. Southampton flying boats *S.1058* and *S.1302*.⁴

As Their Royal Highnesses arrived after dark and therefore too late to permit them to be received with the customary ceremony that day, they came onboard H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* in plain clothes, the Standard of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales being broken in that ship.

In the evening I gave an official dinner at which the Flag Officers and a number of Captains and other Senior Officers of the Fleet had the honour of meeting Their Royal Highnesses.

The official dinner was followed by a searchlight display by the Fleet and a tattoo performed by the Royal Marine Band of the Fleet Flagship.

¹The ships present during the period of inspection included: 4 battleships; 1 aircraft carrier; 3 8-inch gun cruisers; 4 6-inch gun cruisers; 22 destroyers and destroyer repair ship *Sandhurst*; 5 submarines and submarine depot ship *Cyclops*; fleet repair ship *Resource*; despatch vessel *Bryony*; hospital ship *Maine*; target service ship *Chrysanthemum*; and RFA auxiliary (store carrier) *Perthshire*.

²Edward, Prince of Wales (1894–1972). Eldest son of King George V. Succeeded father as King Edward VIII, 20 January 1936; abdicated 10 December 1936 and given title Duke of Windsor; liaison officer with French army, 1939–40; Govr of the Bahamas, 1940–45.

³George, fourth son of King George V (1902–42). Created Duke of Kent, 1934. Served in RAF rising to rank of Air Cdre, 1939–42; killed in air crash, August 1942.

⁴The Princes had flown from Brindisi to which they had travelled by train from Venice.

3. On Sunday, 14th August, at 0800, ships dressed overall and a Royal Salute was fired.

During the early part of the forenoon the officers of my Staff and of H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* were presented to Their Royal Highnesses, and the Prince of Wales then inspected H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* and attended Divine Service.

Prince George inspected *Chrysanthemum* and *Sandhurst* and attended Divine Service in the latter ship.¹

* * *

6. On Monday forenoon, 15th August, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales inspected H.M. Ships *Revenge*, *Coventry*, *London*, *Colombo*, *Cyclops* and the submarines were berthed alongside her, *Douglas*, *Codrington* and *Keith*.

H.R.H. The Prince George inspected R.F.A. *Perthshire*, Hospital Ship *Maine*, *Bryony* and the eight destroyers of the First Flotilla.

* * *

By His Royal Highness's command ships' companies were given a 'make and mend clothes' in the afternoon and spliced the main brace in the evening.

7. In the evening an official dinner was given on board *Queen Elizabeth*, to which the Greek Minister of Marine, the A.D.C. to the President and the principal local authorities at Corfu were invited in addition to a number of officers of the Fleet.

After dinner Their Royal Highnesses attended an entertainment and an 'At Home' given on board *Queen Elizabeth*, when opportunity occurred to present a number of officers of all Branches.

From 2130 to 2330 H.M. Ships were illuminated.

8. On Tuesday forenoon, 16th August, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales inspected H.M. Ships *Royal Oak*, *Resolution*, *Resource*, *Sussex*, *Curlew*, *Ceres* and *Shropshire*. H.R.H. The Prince George inspected the destroyers of the Third and Fourth Flotillas.

9. At 1330 on Tuesday, 16th August, the Fleet weighed and proceeded to sea. When clear of the channel H.M.S. *Glorious* closed and Their Royal Highnesses were transferred to her to witness from the air a Torpedo Aircraft attack on the Fleet.

As reported to Their Lordships in my message 0025 of 17th August, a sudden bank of fog developed after the aircraft had completed their attack

¹The remainder of the day involved activities arranged by the Greek authorities on shore.

and were returning to the Carrier. The Fairey IIIIF carrying the Prince of Wales landed-on immediately before the fog enveloped H.M.S. *Glorious* but the remaining machines, including the Fairey IIIIF carrying Prince George, had to delay landing-on until *Glorious* had passed through the fog bank.

* * *

10. It had been intended to carry out a submarine attack on the Fleet on conclusion of the air exercise but, owing to the delay reported in the previous paragraph, the re-embarkation of Their Royal Highnesses in H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* could not be effected in time to carry out the submarine exercise.

After dark a Night Destroyer Attack on the Battlefleet was carried out, but, owing to the risk of fog, Air Shadowing was not carried out as had been intended.

11. On Wednesday forenoon, 17th August, an exercise was carried out designed to continue the investigation of chasing and retiring tactics and the employment of smoke by a retiring fleet.

In the afternoon the Fleet was exercised at Junior Officer Manoeuvres and subsequently H.M.S. *Revenge* carried out a demonstration firing from her Mark 'M' Pom-pom.

After dark a night encounter exercise, designed to demonstrate the use of all types of illuminants including aircraft flares, took place.

12. On Thursday forenoon, 18th August, a Day Destroyer Attack on the Battlefleet, combined with target and throw-off firings by the Flotillas, was carried out off Malta.

13. Very keen interest in all the exercises at sea was taken by Their Royal Highnesses. The whole sea programme had been designed before the visit of Their Royal Highnesses was known and was not altered in any respect.

14. At 1100 the Fleet entered the Grand Harbour, H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth*, wearing the Standard of His Royal Highness, following H.M. Ships *London* and *Revenge* into harbour.

15. A Royal Salute was fired by the Army as H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* entered, and ships were dressed overall on securing.

The Rear-Admiral, Malta, the Surgeon Rear-Admiral, R.N. Hospital and the Captains commanding Establishments and H.M. Ships which had not been present at Corfu, came on board H.M.S. *Queen Elizabeth* and were received by Their Royal Highnesses.

At 1220 Their Royal Highnesses embarked in the Royal Barge to proceed on shore. A royal salute was fired and Their Royal Highnesses were cheered as they passed each ship. On landing at the Customs House

they were received by His Excellency the Governor¹ and proceeded to San Antonio Palace where they stayed until their final departure on Saturday night, 20th August, in H.M.S. *Shropshire*, for Cannes.

16.

* * *

I should like to take this opportunity of submitting the deep appreciation of myself and the personnel in my command at the generous action of Their Royal Highnesses in coming so great a distance to visit this Fleet and gladly undertaking a heavy programme of inspections during the very hot weather experienced at Corfu.² The visit has been most impressive and has been of immense value and encouragement to every officer and man under my command.

[*Enclosure*]

COPY OF MESSAGES.³

* * *

From....His Majesty The King.

ToThe Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Station.

Date24th August, 1932.

On the conclusion of the visit of my two sons to the Mediterranean Fleet, I wish to express my warmest appreciation of your kindness to them. It was especially good of you to send them to Cannes in the *Shropshire*. I am glad that you were able to arrange for their visit to so many ships at Corfu and that on the way to Malta they witnessed the normal fleet training at sea. From all I hear the Fleet under your command is in a high state of efficiency and the tradition not only of the Mediterranean Fleet but of the whole Service is worthily maintained.
George R.I.

REPLY.

With my humble duty I thank Your Majesty for your most gracious message which is deeply appreciated. That Their Royal Highnesses should have visited the Fleet and also have watched its work at sea has given the greatest encouragement to us all. It will be our continuous endeavour to be worthy of the confidence Your Majesty places in us.

¹Maj Gen Sir David Graham Campbell (1869–1936). Commanded 21st Division, 1916–18; Military Sec, 1926; GOC, Aldershot, 1927–31; Gov of Malta, Oct 1931–Mar 1936.

²A midshipman in the *London* thought the Prince of Wales looked very tired and considered the programme a lot for him to do in one forenoon. Midshipman H.H.E. Kemball to his parents, 22 Aug 1932, Imperial War Museum, Kemball MSS.

³The telegrams exchanged between the Prince of Wales and Chatfield are not reproduced.

9. *Admiral Sir William W. Fisher¹ to the Admiralty*

[ADM 116/3473]

10 April 1933

SECRET

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION.
Med. 081/040.

Subject: GIBRALTAR – DEFENCES.

Be pleased to lay before the Board a request, that I may be informed what steps have been taken by the War Office to provide and install the military material necessary to render Gibraltar secure as a Naval Base in war.

2. It appears that to date little, if any, of the recommendations by the Committee of Imperial Defence set out in C.I.D. Paper 365-C entitled 'The Defence of Ports at Home and Abroad – Gibraltar' and dated November, 1931, have been put into effect.

3. Other forms of defence will have to be provided before Gibraltar can be considered in a proper state to discharge its function in war, but I regard the lack of adequate defence against air attack launched from North Africa as the most important deficiency [of] the existing defences.

4. If there is any chance of hostilities in Europe, the proper defence of Gibraltar, as well as Malta, does not brook indefinite postponement, and I consider the early provision of the necessary anti-aircraft guns and anti-aircraft lights at Gibraltar [to] be a matter of great importance.

10. *Fisher to Chatfield*

[CHT/4/5]

Malta, 29 May [1933]

[Holograph]

We were to have gone out today for the Fairey Queen² trials but it is blowing hard from the westward – quite a sea so I have postponed it 24 hours. The F.Q. did a successful trial flight from Halfar – pilot controlling and I hope that both 'operations' – firing will be successful.

¹Adm Sir William Wordsworth Fisher (1875–1937). Commanded battleship *St Vincent* at Jutland, 1916; Dir Anti Submarine Division, Admy, 1917–18; COS in Med Fleet, 1919–22; COS in Atlantic Fleet, 1922–24; RA in 1st Battle Squadron, Med Fleet, 1924–25; Dir of Naval Intelligence, 1926–27; 4th Sea Lord, 1927–28; Dep CNS, 1928–30; VA commanding 1st BS and 2nd-in-command, Med Fleet, 1930–32; C-in-C Med, Oct 1932–Mar 1936; C-in-C Portsmouth, 1936–37.

²An experimental radio-controlled, auto-stabilised gunnery target version of the Fairey IIIIF. Only three were built: see H.A. Taylor, *Fairey Aircraft since 1915* (Annapolis, 1974), pp. 154–7.

Sussex will tackle the High bombing mission.
Revenge " " " Medium height ".
R.[oyal] Sov[ereign] " " " Mark M. Pom-pom

I am satisfied that the ships have been well trained – but to produce hits with such a small volume of fire as is given by a pair of guns only in the bombing runs may prove difficult. If we can't I think that we shall probably be able to say that it is not the system which is at fault but the inadequate number of guns.

There is lots of interest going on. *Adventure's* mining trials – TSDS¹ sweeps – which went very well, Combined Operations with the Army 2 nights ago, CMB firings, Mine bumping trials & 15" Day concentration next week.

The Combined Operations were great fun. Landing RMSF² + Worcesters to attack vulnerable points in the Dockyard. Invading Forces were put ashore anywhere between [?] Marsa Scala and Vico Nunico – about 8 different parties in all of which two got right through with their demolition parties into the yard.

Our first summer cruise brings all ships into the Adriatic and we are going to have a H.A. competition in the middle of it and the Regatta at Kotor at the end. Everyone says yours last year was such a great success there.

The 2nd summer cruise will be to the Levant with another HA competition in the middle of it in order to keep main & secondary armaments 'alive' during the 2nd part of the cruise. I am making the experiment of doing the 15" & 6" competition shoots at the end of the 2nd summer cruise before ships go into harbour. That provides an incentive & a shoot to break up the long no-gunnery period July–February though the results will not be comparable to those that we should get at the end of the training period.

Tue., May 30., 7 p.m.

Just back from Fairey Queen trials. Started off at 8.30 but low cloud & then no wind prevented a start. At last at 2.30 p.m. the conditions became well nigh ideal & to our relief. *London* shot the F.Q. off & she sailed away without a falter. An hour after she had climbed as high as they could get her but it was short of 10,000 ft. (nearer 9000 I believe) and Run 1 was started, F.Q. coming in at roughly right angles from the port beam of *Sussex*.

She managed to pick her way through all the bursts the first run which was average shooting, not more than that, 1 or 2 very close but not

¹Twin Speed Destroyer Sweep.

²Royal Marine Striking Force.

consistent fine [?] rate of fire. The 2nd run started about 10 mins. later and I think *Sussex* had got over stage fright for the bursts were close from the start and before it was 1/3 over the F.Q. was hit, threw her nose up into the air, altered course right round & came spinning down into the water. I'm afraid she sank before anyone could get to her. The *Sussex's* gave a great cheer but the *R. Sov.s* and *Revenge's* were very glum about being baulked of their go at her. One can't help feeling glad that she only lasted about 3 minutes altogether (this is a guess only, I not sure really[?]) and at the same time sorry that so splendid a target couldn't have had more ships firing at it. The shoot was witnessed by the Governor, all Military & Air Force chiefs, etc.

The First Lord will have told you so much of what I could otherwise write that I'll finish this up now & just catch the mail.

[P.S.] It was good to read of your going up to Invergordon. I'm sure the H.F. [Home Fleet] appreciated it tremendously. Come to us soon when fed up with Geneva or Parliament.

11. Admiralty to Fisher

[ADM 116/3473]

2 June 1933

SECRET.

[Carbon]

M.01354/33.

With reference to your submission No.081/040, of 10th April last,¹ I am to inform you that some progress has been made with the modernisation of the defences of Gibraltar, three of the eight 9.2-inch guns being in process of conversion to 35° mountings and half of the A/A guns and lights (eight guns and six lights) having been provided.

2. Their Lordships fully appreciate the inadequacy of the defences of many ports at home and abroad and the necessity for augmenting the defences at Gibraltar in conjunction with those elsewhere, and quite understand your anxiety in the matter. The order of priority in the allocation of available funds to rectify the position is now under the consideration of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

3. In this connection, Their Lordships fully realise the importance of our bases in the Mediterranean in the event of hostilities in Europe.

¹Doc. No. 9.

12. Fisher to the Admiralty

[ADM 116/3473]

at Malta, 20 June 1933

MOST SECRET.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION.
Med.0163/040.

AIR DEFENCE – MALTA

Be pleased to inform Their Lordships that I have recently had under consideration the Air Defences for the Naval Establishments in Malta and to lay before them the following remarks and recommendations on the subject.

2. Estimated Air Threat – Malta is within air striking distance of Sicily, South Italy and North Africa. In estimating the probable scale of attack, the case of aircraft operating from Sicily has been taken since, due to the proximity of its Air Bases to Malta, it would be possible to develop a greater weight of attack from there than from either of the other two areas.

3. The scale of attack calculated for the Malta Command Defence Scheme, 1933, from information available in 1932, outlines this threat as follows:–

‘Syracuse, Augusta and Marsala are already established as Seaplane Bases and there are two Civil Bases at Palermo and Milazzo, which could be taken over.

It is estimated that the Italians would have no difficulty in rapidly concentrating among the above bases, 50 land-planes and 50 seaplanes, even supposing that the strategical situation called for considerable air commitments elsewhere. With these aircraft, excluding any subsequent expansion accommodated at improvised landing grounds, the total weight of attack that could be launched would be some 30–35 tons per day.’

4. From this statement and from the fact that there is an extensive plain in the neighbourhood of Catania on which many temporary aerodromes and refuelling bases could be secretly constructed within a month, it is clear that the total of 30–35 tons per day is the minimum that may be expected at the present time; and that, unless Italy has heavy air commitments in other spheres, this total can be largely exceeded.

5. Counter measures – The counter measures at present available consist only of four 3" H.A. Guns and one R.A.F. Squadron of six III.F. Floatplanes, but I am given to understand that the Military Authorities have had the A/A Defences of Malta under review for some considerable time and that an A/A re-armament scheme is in existence though its details have not yet received final War Office approval.

This scheme allocates sixteen 3" H.A. Guns to the defence of the Grand Harbour and Dockyard Area and is intended to meet the threat outlined in paragraph 3 above.

6. There are three important points in connection with this proposed re-armament scheme to which I desire to draw Their Lordships' attention:—

(a) The scale of attack which it is designed to meet is the minimum which may reasonably be expected at the present time (vide paragraph 4).

(b) It assumes that the total of 30–35 tons per day will be arrived at by comparatively small formations of aircraft attacking at frequent intervals, so that the A/A Guns will not be called upon to engage more than, say four separate formations at any one time. No provision is made to counter attacks delivered by really large formations of say 50 aircraft such as, it is known from Press Reports, have been practiced in the Italian Air Force.

(c) The most probable direction from which an air attack on the Grand Harbour will come is the North Eastward and the 3" Gun has insufficient reach to bring hostile aircraft under effective fire before they reach their bombing positions.

7. For these reasons it is my considered opinion that the proposed A/A re-armament scheme cannot be accepted as being adequate to meet the existing air threat and that a considerably greater number of guns is required and that they should be of larger calibre. If, as I am given to understand, there is no Army A/A Gun of a larger calibre than 3" at present in production, I would suggest that Naval 4" H.A. Guns should be adapted for the purpose and mounted at Malta without delay.

8. Aircraft for Defence – It appears that when the substitution of three Iris Flying Boats for the existing floatplanes of No. 202 Squadron is completed, there will be no aircraft permanently based on Malta capable of acting in a defensive role.

It is suggested therefore, that this state of affairs should be brought to the notice of the Air Council and that they should be invited to consider the provision of at least the ground facilities necessary for an adequate force of fighter aircraft. Also I consider that both the War Office and the Air Ministry should be urged to investigate the possibility of employing any ancillary devices such as sound mirrors, protective curtains, smoke screens, etc., which might hamper the tactics of the enemy, or adversely affect his morale.

9. Another consideration to which I desire to draw attention is that, in the event of the present Disarmament Conference failing to come to some agreement as to the future limitation of military aircraft, it must be supposed that the Italian Air Force, which has been steadily growing in

the past, will continue to do so. Also, improvement in aircraft construction can be looked forward to so that each individual bombing aircraft must become an increasing potential menace.

Hence, should the Nations still retain their freedom of action in these matters at the conclusion of the conference, I am of the opinion that the estimated scale of attack from which the necessary counter measures are deduced, should be greater than that which actually exists at the moment when the estimate is made. The provision of defence today must take account of the increasing power of offence tomorrow.

10. Strategical Importance of Malta – It is certain that the British Fleet will require to use Malta in war time, frequently, if not continuously, and whilst the ships are there they must be reasonably protected, and when they are not there, the services on shore on which their operation and maintenance depend must, as far as possible, be made impervious to attack. Inability to use such a large Central Fleet Base would most seriously affect strategy and have political effects of far reaching importance.

11. These facts are admittedly obvious but are set forth since they must be equally obvious to Foreign strategists. It must be assumed that the state of the Anti Aircraft Defences of Malta is known abroad, and that the certainty of a large measure of success in the air when none can be looked for on the sea, will not only dictate the conduct of war operations but influence policy during peace.

12. Conversely, were the Anti Aircraft Defences of Malta brought up to a proper standard, this knowledge might tend to curb a possible hostile attitude.

13. I am of the opinion, therefore, that to remedy the comparatively defenceless state of this most important Naval Base from the Air is essential and that the mounting of a sufficient number of H.A. Guns, 4" or above is a matter of urgent priority. The cost of installing the necessary number of guns and lights is considered to be trivial when set against the value of all they would protect and I would submit that the necessary measures to provide them and the ammunition, should not be delayed by considerations as to how they should be manned or maintained.

14. Though a matter outside my province I cannot help thinking that the making of Malta as impregnable as Malta should be, would have a wholesome effect in that Island as well as elsewhere.

13. *Fisher to Chatfield*

[CHT/4/5]

Queen Elizabeth, at sea, Abbazia to Brioni
21 July 1933

[Holograph]

* * *

I had a good long talk with im Thurn¹ when he arrived² but I fear I have not quite met your wishes in raising the question of Malta air defences so soon after your successful efforts over Singapore. I felt, however, that (a) you would put Malta (& Gib.) In cold storage for a bit if you thought it best whereas I can't., and (b) with a National Govt. awakened by you to a proper sense of our vulnerability as they have been, now might be the time to 'go on hitting'.

I do feel it is a futility to put 20– 3" guns into Malta. When they are there it seems to me it will be more difficult to get the proper thing done than it will be when none are there (or only 4 as at present). And so Malta will remain without proper AA protection for years to come unless a great effort is made now.

I suppose few tears have been shed over the demise of the Disarmament Conference. My view has always been however that as the U-Boat was our greatest source of anxiety in the last war so the aeroplane (attacking merchantmen) will be our greatest in the next. It may be that whatever we do in peace beforehand you will not safeguard against such attack in war but if you delay the initiation of such attack or reduce its scale it is of paramount importance for us and outweighs the 'police conveniences' in disturbed areas, etc.³ For some time I had hoped that British reluctance to subscribe to total abolition of military aircraft was in the nature of a smokescreen to hide what I should call the incalculable benefit that we should receive – e.g. other nations saw how great it was to our advantage to abolish the submarine and therefore cold shouldered the project – but I'm afraid that that is not the case. Every extension of the military side of the Air can be said to discount the value & power of a Navy. Par contra, the elimination of military aircraft enhances all military waterborne craft.

¹VA John Knowles im Thurn (1881–1956). Dir Signal Dept, Admy, 1920–21; commanded cruiser *Ceres*, 1921–23; commanded battlecruiser *Hood*, 1923–25; commanded Signal School, Portsmouth, 1925–28; COS in Med Fleet, 1928–30; ACNS, 1931–33; commanded 1st CS, Med Fleet, 1933–35; retired list, 1935; Cdre RNR (Convoys), 1940; served at Admy, 1941–44.

²Probably to convey the news that this would be his final appointment before being replaced on the retired list.

³A reference to the use of the RAF in so-called 'air control' of areas such as Iraq or the Northwest Frontier of India.

Balbo¹ & his menagerie will give a great impetus, I fear, in an undesirable direction. In 10 years time will the Navy be to England what it was! A different attitude at Geneva might, I feel, have provided an answer in the affirmative!

I have very carefully absorbed your remarks about the Fleet's attitude if there is agitation in other quarters to remove the 10% cut.² I entirely agree that the Lower Deck must be silent. As you say, they have to regain their good name & can't possibly lose by standing aloof. I am proposing to say this to Flag Officers but think it best to withhold more active measures or propaganda till the time appears ripe. At the moment, out here, interest in these matters seems to have subsided and it would be a pity to revive it. If your information leads [?] you to think otherwise I know you will have me informed.

* * *

14. *Fisher to the Admiralty*

[ADM 116/3473]

at Malta, 29 August 1933

SECRET

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION.
Med.0231/181/17.

COMBINED OPERATIONS, MALTA, 1933.

Herewith is forwarded for the information of Their Lordships a copy of the report by His Excellency the Governor on the Combined Operations, 1933, together with a report³ by Vice Admiral Chetwode,⁴ then Commanding 1st Cruiser Squadron.

¹Italo Balbo (1896–1940). Served with Alpini [Mountain troops] during First World War; joined Fascist movement, 1921; Under-sec of Aviation, 1926–29; Min of Aviation, 1929–33 and famous for leading a series of mass flights including one to Brazil and another across the North Atlantic to Chicago; Govr of Libya, 1934–40; killed when his aircraft was mistaken for an enemy and shot down over Tobruk by Italian A/A batteries, June 1940.

²A reference to the pay cuts imposed in September 1931 as a result of the financial emergency. The initial scheme had been far more drastic and resulted in disturbances in the Atlantic Fleet, commonly known as the Invergordon Mutiny. The Government cancelled the original order and placed a limit of 10 per cent on the cuts imposed with the exception of higher-ranking officers. The Mediterranean Fleet had been dispersed on manoeuvres at the time of these events and was not seriously affected. See the full discussion in Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars* Vol. II: *The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930–1939* (London, 1976), chap. 4.

³The reports are too lengthy to reproduce.

⁴VA [later Adm Sir] George Chetwode (1877–1957). Capt (D), 5th DF in Med, 1917–19; Dep DNI, 1923–25; commanded battleships *Queen Elizabeth* and *Warspite*, 1925–27; Naval Sec to 1st Lord, 1929–32; commanded 1st CS, Med Fleet, 1932–33; Adm commanding Reserves, 1933–36; retired list, 1936.

2. This operation was designed by His Excellency the Governor to test the Malta Defences as they now exist against a raiding force of picked men, landed, during the precautionary period as the first act of war, with the object of obtaining control of the dockyard for a period sufficient to render it incapable of fleet repair work.

3. This form of attack has not been tested hitherto, and has recently been added to the forms of attack set out in the Malta Defence Scheme, being considered as constituting the most likely threat of land attack to which Malta is exposed.

4. The naval side of the Combined Operation presented no unusual aspect.

The outcome of the operation ashore, namely, that a comparatively small force of 1138 officers and men who succeeded in leaving the raiding squadron off shore, were adjudged to have been able, in spite of heavy casualties on some beaches and elsewhere, to damage beyond local repair important installations in the Yard, evidently requires serious consideration.

5. Although the exercise showed that the Military Defence with existing strength of personnel is capable of some improvement, it appears that a certain defence against this threat is not possible without some increase in infantry of the garrison.

6. In the revised Malta Command Defence Scheme – as tested in this exercise – all guards at vulnerable points have been cut down, to provide a maximum of troops to defend the beaches. In spite of the increased strength thus obtained, at the cost of security elsewhere, landings were not prevented. Not only was the Dockyard crippled by the raid, but other vulnerable points (e.g. Rinella W/T Station, etc.) were damaged, or lay open to damage in the course of the exercise.

7. Although I consider that Malta as at present defended offers a better target for an air offensive than for Military attack the threat of the latter exists and the necessary counter measures now lacking are requisite to the security of Malta in its role as a Naval Base.

15. *Admiralty to Fisher*

[ADM 116/3473]

3 October 1933

MOST SECRET.

[Carbon]

M.01930/33.

With reference to your submission No. 0163/040 of 20th June last,¹ I am to acquaint you that the whole question of the defences of Malta,

¹Doc. No. 12.

including A/A defences, is still under examination by the Committee of Imperial Defence and a decision has not yet been reached as to the scale of attack on which the defences are to be based, nor as to the scale of the defences.

2. With reference to your remarks on the calibre of A/A guns, the Army have a 4.7" gun now under trial. Although Their Lordships are fully in agreement with your views as to the inadequacy of the 3" A/A gun, after full consideration of the circumstances they do not see their way to suggest to the Army Council that Naval 4" A/A guns should be mounted at Malta.

3. The provision of additional aircraft and the necessary ground facilities, as well as the use of ancillary devices, are being considered in the course of the examination referred to in paragraph 1.

4. The general situation in regard to the defence of our bases in the Mediterranean and Their Lordships views thereon were communicated to you in Admiralty Letter M.01354/33 of 2nd June, 1933.¹ Their Lordships and indeed the other Service Departments fully realise the total inadequacy of the existing A/A defences at Malta but, in view of even more serious defence commitments elsewhere, financial considerations may preclude the installation of defences at Malta on the full scale at present.

16. *Fisher to the Admiralty*²

[ADM 116/3473]

at Milo, 6 October 1933

MOST SECRET

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, MEDITERRANEAN STATION
Med. 0274/721/17.

STRATEGICAL INVESTIGATIONS CARRIED OUT BY
MEDITERRANEAN FLEET.

Be pleased to inform Their Lordships that among other Strategical Investigations carried out by H.M. Ships of the Mediterranean Fleet during the winter 1932–1933 was set the following problem:–

PROBLEM A.

Feeling has been running high between the Jugo-Slavs and the Italians, which has culminated in an anti-Italian outburst at Zagreb on September 9th. The Italians have demanded a large indemnity and an official apology, and have threatened to bombard Split if they are not given satisfaction within 48 hours, which will be up at 1200, September 13th.

¹Doc. No. 11.

²Copy to VA Commanding, 1st Battle Squadron.