

THE SEA OF DESTINY

By O. A. Gillespie

SEA of Destiny the historians have named the salty, tideless Mediterranean. Civilisation has been cradled in the countries along its shores and on the islands which dot its blue surface; since the very dawn of history, as we read it, battles have been waged in the Mediterranean. For centuries the nation which controlled it has been master of almost every other sea and the oceans beyond. To-day airplanes of warring nations zoom above that great stretch of water whose surface is cut by the long wakes of warships in search of each other. Along its shores armed men are ready for action, dwarfing in number and armament the fabled armies of Carthage and Rome, Egypt and Greece, which fought so long for mastery on and around that sea. Once more everything on and about it is prepared and ready to destroy or be destroyed.

Britain has intense need of the waterways of the Mediterranean; so has France. Without superior forces stationed in those disputed waters the Suez Canal would be useless and the road to India and Singapore and, in a lesser degree, to New Zealand and Australia, would be greatly weakened. The mechanisation of armies and the vast growth and power of the airplane have made the Mediterranean Sea still more important and essential to both Britain and France, since a continual fleet of stocky tankers moves east and west carrying oil from Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. Millions of tons of oil are carried each year from the pipe lines at Tripoli and Haifa, on the coasts of Syria and Palestine, and from the Persian Gulf, via the Suez Canal, to British and French ports. Until war broke out nearly 100 per cent. of the French oil supplies were landed at Marseilles and Toulon, 39 per cent. of which came from Mesopotamia alone.

For centuries a grim game of chess, international in extent, has been played in the Mediterranean; during the past decade that game has been intensified to a degree never previously witnessed among the nations bordering its shores and beyond. This war will end that game for many years to come—perhaps for centuries.

Magic Names

Two names began the game—Gibraltar and Malta. Every schoolboy soon learns those names and remembers them. They suggest strength. For centuries they have been the two great British guardians of the "Sea of Destiny." They are still strong, though weakened slightly by the power and speed of the airplane which has sent men burrowing into the rock on which both are built. Gibraltar has been fortified since 711, when a Saracen leader first realised its strategic importance; to-day it is impregnable because its defences, facing both Spain on the mainland and the African coast across the water, have been built in solid rock. Britain has held that rock for 227 years. Study the map and you will see that it cuts the Mediterranean from the Atlantic Ocean. Opposite Gibraltar on the African Coast is an international

zone, Tangier, but Spain recently set about countering the strength of the British rock with fortified bases in Spanish Morocco. Only nine miles of water separate Europe from Africa at the Pillars of Hercules, hence the strength and importance of Gibraltar.

Malta stands like an armed rock, 95 square miles of it, at that part of the Sea where it almost becomes two seas—midway between the island of Sicily and the coast of Tunis. For centuries Malta has been witness of humanity's struggles—Rome against Carthage, Byzantium against Rome, Christianity against Islam. From the dawn of history nations have disputed the right to possess that valuable rock. It was colonised by Phoenicians, Greeks, and Carthaginians; possessed in turn by the Vandals, the Goths, Belisarius, Moors, Sicilians, French, and British. It is only a-quarter of an hour by plane from the Italian coast of Sicily.

Beyond Malta and near the French coast of Tunis, is the Italian island of Pantellaria, remains of a group of islands which once cut the Mediterranean in two where what is now Italy joined the African continent.

While Italy was busy fortifying Pantellaria, France took a hand in the game and Bizerta, on the Tunis coast, came into being as a powerful naval station and air base. With another move Italy fortified Catania, on the island of Sicily, and strengthened several of the small bases on the island of Sardinia. Taranto, lying in the heel of Italy, has become a great naval base since the conquest of Abyssinia and the speeding up of the Italian naval campaign.

Complications

Recent reports indicate that Spain has complicated the chess game by granting permission to Italy to fortify one of the Balearic Islands, thus establishing a base facing Marseilles, France's largest seaport and airbase, and Toulon, her great naval base and shipbuilding yards. This base also cuts the French line between Marseilles and Algiers, on the African coast.

Corsica, which lies closer to Italy than to France, has been strengthened considerably in the last few years.

Since the last war the north coast of Africa has become a bristling line of fortresses. Mersa Matruh, where the excellent harbour is ringed about with a semi-circle of low hills, consisted of a few native huts when the New Zealanders used it as a base during their operations against the Senussi in 1915. After the war it became a watering place for Egyptian holiday-makers and tourists. To-day it is a large air base and fort, out of bounds to all but the military. Mersa Matruh lies only 200 miles from the Libyan border, where detachments of Italians were captured last week. Germans established a submarine base at Sollum, on the Libyan frontier, in 1914-15. Further along the coast of Libya Italy has fortified the ports of Tabruk and Tripoli, both of which are within bombing range of Egyptian air stations.



THIS MAP shows the principal naval bases of Europe. In addition to these there are numerous smaller ones. The most intense armament has been in the Mediterranean Sea.—1, Archangel; 2, Murmansk; 3, Bergen; 4, Oslo; 5, Gothenburg; 6, Karlskrona; 7, Stockholm; 8, Turku; 9, Helsinki; 10, Kronstadt; 11, Tallinn; 12, Dagoe; 13, Oesel; 14, Libau; 15, Memel; 16, Danzig; 17, Stettin; 18, Kiel; 19, Wilhelmshaven; 20, Bremen; 21, Scapa Flow; 22, Rosyth; 23, Belfast; 24, Milford Haven; 25, Plymouth; 26, Weymouth; 27, Southampton; 28, Portsmouth; 29, Harwich; 30, Cherbourg; 31, Brest; 32, Gibraltar; 33, Marseilles; 34, Toulon; 35, Spezia; 36, Leghorn; 37, Corsica; 38 and 39, Sardinia; 40, Naples; 41, 42, 43, Sicily; 44, Taranto; 45, Brindisi; 46, Trieste; 47, Split (Spalato); 48, Cattaro; 49, Constanta; 50, Odessa; 51, Leros; 52, Rhodes; 53, Cyprus; 54, Beirut; 55, Haifa; 56, Port Said; 57, Alexandria; 58, Tobruk; 59, Benghazi; 60, Tripoli; 61, Malta; 62, Pantelleria; 63, Bizerta; 64, Algiers; 65, Mers-el-Kebir

As Powerful as Gibraltar

But the most surprising naval base in the whole Mediterranean is Alexandria. A French writer recently stated that it was even more powerful than Gibraltar. The British have taken over the whole port; the Grand Fleet can lie at anchor there and, a few miles away at Abussi, is a vast air base. Only a few British destroyers lay there when the New Zealand Division sailed for France from Alexandria in 1916.

Tripoli, in Syria, and Haifa, in Palestine, are not naval bases, but because four million tons of oil go each year to France alone from the first-named port, they are essential to the Allies. Pipe lines from the oil-fields of Mesopotamia run across 700 miles of rough country to end at those two ports. Loss of that oil stream would be a grave blow to our fighting forces. Almost facing them in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean is Cyprus, with its British naval base and air field at Famagusta. But here again Italy has made a counter move with her strong bases in the Dodecanese Islands, dangerously close to the coast of Turkey and covering the Aegean Sea which, in turn, leads to the Dardanelles.

However there is a counter move to this strength. British stations have been established on the island of Crete, though they are not the strongest of the Allied stations in the Mediterranean. Italy, thrust like a huge boot into the Mediterranean, has a long and vulnerable coastline with naval stations dotted round its whole length. Because of her interests in Abyssinia she, too, has great need of the Suez Canal. Now that is blocked to her, as it is to all other nations. Only ships of war take that narrow sea lane to-day.

This means, also, that while the Italian Navy remains in the Mediterranean, all oil supplies from the Persian Gulf will take many weeks to reach the Allies. From Abadan, in the gulf, go seven million tons of oil a year, most of it to Britain and France. That is why Aden, guardian to the Red Sea, and Alexandria, guardian of the other end of the Canal, have become such fortresses in recent years. Up to the time of writing no naval battle has been fought in the Mediterranean, but a meeting of the fleets is almost certain, and may, who knows, decide the destiny of nations.