



Bristol Beauforts Mk.II – Kefalonia island Operation “Vettor Pisani” - 24 July 1942

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The target

On 23 July 1942 the Italian motor freighter “Vettor Pisani” (6.339 GRT, built in 1939), escorted by the Italian Navy’s (“Regia Marina”) torpedo boats “Antares” and “Calliope” and by the destroyer escort “Orsa”, departed Taranto in Italy for Tobruk in Libya (N.Africa). Among its cargo were the first three of 30 “Lg.s.F.H.13 (Sfl.) auf Lorraine-Schlepper” vehicles. These were rushed through construction from May to Mid-June 1942 especially for a special action by Rommel’s “Deutsches Afrika Korps” (DAK), following a direct order from Hitler.



Italian m/v «Vettor Pisani» (1939-1971)



Lg.s.F.H.13 (Sfl.) auf Lorraine-Schlepper
(N.Africa 1942).

Signal interception games

In the early hours of 24 July (at 01:40) following intel from the British ULTRA decoding service (dispatches timed 1701/22 and 0023/23), the reconnaissance Spitfire QZ7J aircraft of No.69 Squadron locates the convoy off the coast of Kefalonia.

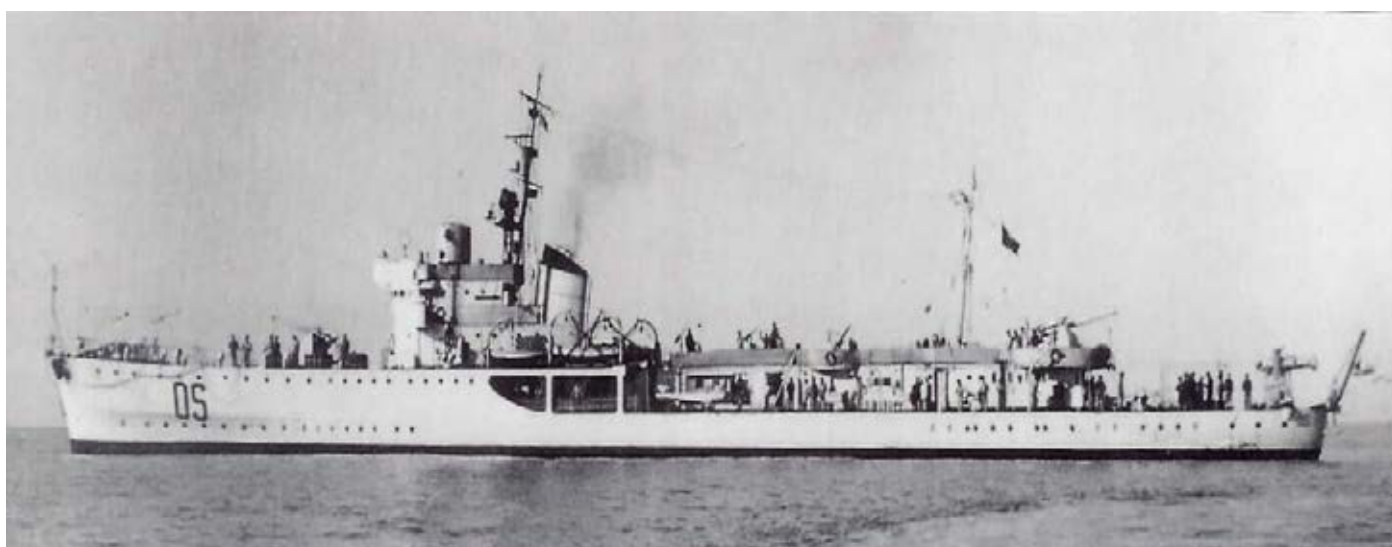
At 02:10 and after intercepting the aircraft’s radio transmissions, the supreme command of the Italian Navy (“Supermarina”) through the naval intelligence agency “SIS” (“Servizio informazioni Speciali “), issues a “PAPA” alert (“Precedenza Assoluta sulla Precedenza Assoluta”, i.e. of absolute priority) informing the convoy for the sighting.

A 0103/24 broadcast from a different British aircraft leads to the generation of a second PAPA alert at 02:35, while a follow-up report from QZ7J at 02:37 provokes a third PAPA at 04:05. Until 07:30 more aircraft reports and corresponding PAPA alerts follow, but the convoy’s fate has already been determined...

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Antares (AN) torpedo boat (1936-1943)



Orsa (OS) destroyer escort (1936-1964)

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Sighting the target

At 7:30 a flight of 6 Beauforts in two sections of three aircraft of No.86 Squadron RAF led by S/Ldr (squadron leader) James Robert Hyde and three of No.217 led by F/Lt (flight lieutenant) Stevens take off their base at Malta with a load of torpedoes.

They are escorted by 8 Beaufighters of No.235 Squadron, which with their 20mm cannons will provide high-cover against enemy fighters. At 9:30, after a long flight over the Ionian Sea, the convoy is sighted 10 nautical miles bearing 240° from Gherogombo Cape, in position 38,05N 20,12E.



Beauforts No.217 Sqn RAF



Beaufort No.86 Sqn RAF, 15-6-1942

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The raid

The allied flight approaches the convoy in “vic” formation (with the leader at the apex and the rest of the flight in left and right echelon), at an altitude of 100 metres. About two miles from the target, anti-aircraft fire greets the flight and scores a direct hit in leader’s aircraft (James Robert Hyde) resulting in mid air explosion, with fragments slicing through his number two aircraft (D. L. Furphy).

The latter is thought to have crashed in the sea near the convoy. Seconds later the third aircraft of No.86 Squadron (L. C. Thompson) is hit in the port engine, sets course back to base but with the other engine stopping, it ditches in the sea 2-3 miles away. In a few minutes, the hunters have become prey...

However the raid goes on. Under the cover of high-flying Beaufighters, the three Beauforts of No.217 Squadron (led by FL Stevens) are brought down low above the surface into a devastatingly accurate attack with their torpedoes, hitting Pisani twice.

An explosion, dark smoke, and a reddish blaze are observed. “Vettor Pisani” though not sunk, is badly damaged and has to be towed and beached near Argostoli.

There, the next day, she is bombed following a new raid of RAF bombers and the vessel becomes a total loss. ULTRA confirms the attack’s success at time 1051/24.



Bristol Beaufort MkII of No. 39 Squadron RAF based at Luqa, Malta, flying at low level during an attack on an Axis tanker in the Ionian Sea. (This aircraft retains the unit codes “BX” of No. 86 Squadron RAF which, with Nos. 39 and 217 Squadrons RAF, was disbanded to form a new 39 Squadron at Luqa in August 1942.) (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205209049>)

Epilogue

By 1951 “Pisani” was resting wounded in shallow water on the west coast of the Gulf of Argostoli. Then it was towed to Italy, rebuilt and used until 1971. However, the sacrifice of the aircraft and their crews deprived Axis forces of the services of one more ship when it most needed and Erwin Rommel never received a load very valuable to him at the time.

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RAF losses on 24-7-1942 in south-western Kefalonia:

1. Bristol Beaufort Mk.II «AW355/G» (No.86 Sqn RAF). Crew: S/Ldr (squadron leader) James Robert Hyde, DFC, RAF (Pilot). P/O (pilot officer) W.A. Lowing, RAAF (Observer). Sgt (sergeant) R.C. West, RAF (Pilot). Sgt Sarene, RAF (Wireless Air Gunner).

2. Bristol Beaufort Mk.II «AW308/H» (No.86 Sqn RAF), P/O D. L. Furphy.

3. Bristol Beaufort Mk.II «AW356/Z» (No.86 Sqn RAF), F/Sgt (flight sergeant) L. C. Thompson.