Courage Against Steel: December 18-19, 1941, the Xª Flottiglia MAS Enters Legend

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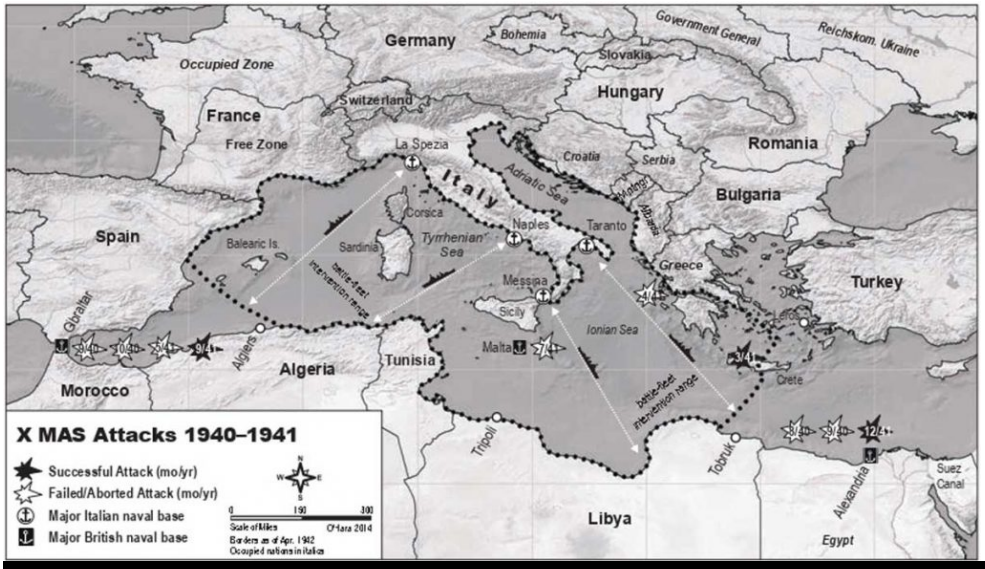
In the history of naval special operations, few actions have had the symbolic power and operational impact of the raid **conducted on the night between December 18 and 19, 1941, in the port of Alexandria, Egypt**. It was an operation of extreme audacity, meticulously planned and carried out by a very small number of men from the **Xª Flottiglia MAS**, using the **Siluri a Lenta Corsa (SLC)**, underwater assault vehicles that the unit's language had nicknamed with a name now ingrained in collective memory: “pigs.”

Xª Flottiglia MAS: The Terror of the Mediterranean

By the end of 1941, the Mediterranean was not a “secondary sea.” It was a network of supply routes and bases that sustained armies and campaigns, especially in North Africa. In that context, **Alexandria** was one of the keystones of British presence in the eastern Mediterranean: a fortified, guarded port, a nerve center for heavy units and convoy interdiction. Striking it

meant attempting to **reduce the Royal Navy's freedom of action** and ease the pressure on an already fragile logistical system.

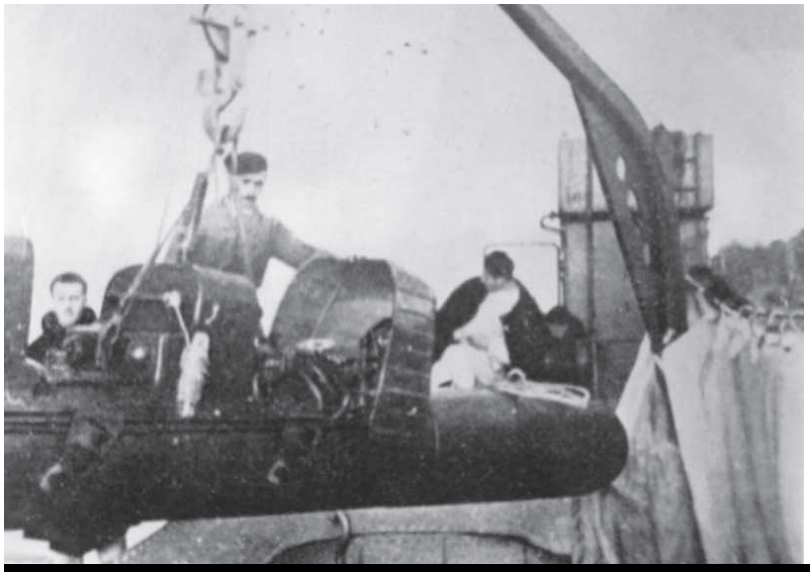
The **first successful action of the Xª Flottiglia MAS** took place on **March 25, 1941** in the bay of **Suda**, Crete. On that occasion, six **MTM explosive boats (Modified Tourist Motorboats)** attacked British naval units anchored in the roadstead, inflicting severe damage. Among the targets hit was the cruiser **HMS York**, struck directly and forced to run aground: reduced to a wreck, it was subsequently used only as a floating battery.



The attacks of the Xª Flottiglia MAS between 1940 and 1941 (graphic representation by historians Vincent P. O'Hara and Enrico Cernuschi)

The Weapon of Asymmetry: The Siluri a Lenta Corsa

The SLC was a "poor" and ingenious response to the problem of enemy naval superiority: not to challenge the great ships in battle, but to **bypass** them through infiltration. Two operators, submerged, guided a slow and difficult vehicle, carrying an explosive charge to be attached under the target's keel. Success depended less on pure power and more on human factors: **orientation, calmness, physical endurance, ability to improvise after a malfunction, and above all, discipline in remaining invisible.**



The operation begins with the boarding of the Siluri a Lenta Corsa (SLC) assault vehicles, later universally known as "Pigs," on the submarine *Sciré*, which, under the command of Lieutenant Junio Valerio Borghese, departs from La Spezia at 11:00 PM on December 3, 1941 - Copyright Italian Navy - Historical Office

The Mission: Entering Where It Seemed Impossible

The operation was set up as a **clandestine penetration: minimal costs, maximum risks, high-value targets**. The submarine **Scirè** brought the raiders close to the target, then the responsibility passed to the men and their vehicles. The defenses of a military port are not just nets or barriers: they are currents, reflections, noises, patrols, procedures, chance. It is an environment where error allows no second chances.

The teams were three, each with a specific task:

- **Luigi Durand de la Penne** and **Emilio Bianchi** aimed at the battleship **HMS *Queen Elizabeth*** (SLC no. 221).
- **Vincenzo Martellotta** and **Mario Marino** targeted the large support/tanker ship **Sagona** and adjacent units (SLC no. 222).
- **Antonio Marceglia** and **Spartaco Schergat** were directed at the battleship **HMS *Valiant*** (SLC no. 223).

The members of the 1ª Flottiglia MAS in 1939. Among them Commander Aloisi, Luigi Durand de la Penne, Teseo Tesei, Bruno Falcomatà, and Gino Birindelli. – Copyright photo Ministry of Defense-Italian Navy

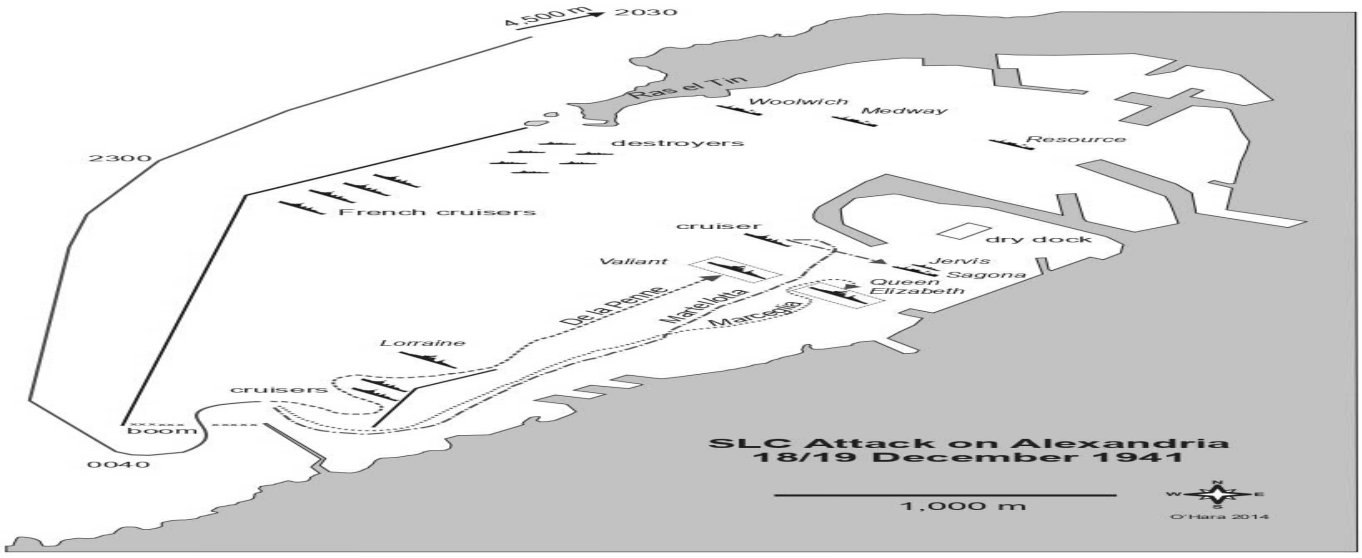
Under the Keel: Technique, Nerves, and Unforeseen Events

In the final phase, the action became almost surgical: identify the correct point, attach the charge, arm the timers, move away. And do it without light, with limited visibility, often with equipment that did not forgive malfunctions.

The **Durand de la Penne–Bianchi** group had to face serious technical problems with the vehicle and ended up operating in even more difficult conditions than expected. Despite this, they managed to complete the objective, but the two were **captured** before they could escape the searches.

It is here that one of the most famous passages of the story arises: shortly before the explosion, Durand de la Penne **warned** a British officer of the imminent danger, without revealing the exact position of the charge. It is a detail that has fueled different interpretations, but it is often seen as an act of responsibility towards human lives, within the harshness of war.

The other teams, despite difficulties and arrests, completed the placement of the charges. The mission, in essence, succeeded.



Graphic representation of the attack by historians Vincent P. O'Hara and Enrico Cernuschi

The Targets Hit and the Operational (and More) Impact of the Raid

In the early hours of **December 19, 1941**, the explosive charges placed by the raiders of the **Xª MAS** hit the designated targets in the port of Alexandria, producing an immediate and heavy operational effect on the British naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean.

The **HMS Queen Elizabeth** was attacked by the pair **Antonio Marceglia – Spartaco Schergat**, who managed to bring the SLC under the hull and place the charge in a useful position: the explosion opened the ship from below, causing severe deformations and flooding in the internal compartments, with damage such as to render it **helpless and unavailable** for an extended period.

The **HMS Valiant** was instead the target of the SLC conducted by **Luigi Durand de la Penne – Emilio Bianchi**. Here too, the explosion, although matured in difficult conditions and close to the hull, had devastating effects: the battleship suffered serious damage to the hull and apparatus, being **put out of action** and removed from operational needs at the most delicate moment of the war.

In the same action framework, the tanker ship **Sagona** was hit by the SLC of **Vincenzo Martellotta – Mario Marino**. The explosion was particularly destructive, concentrated in the stern area, with severe structural damage that turned the tanker into an unusable wreck. That impact reverberated on nearby units: the destroyer **HMS Jervis**, alongside Sagona during refueling, was **damaged by the direct effect of the blast**, forced to stop for repairs.

In operational terms, the result was clear: in a single night, the Royal Navy saw **two capital ships** taken away and suffered further losses and logistical limitations, in a theater where even a few days of unavailability could shift balances, timings, and strategic choices.

It was not a “decisive” blow to the entire war in the Mediterranean: the strategy also depended on aircraft, radar, intelligence, industrial and logistical capacity. But it was a blow that demonstrated a truth destined to become a rule: **even the most defended ports are vulnerable** if the adversary knows how to think asymmetrically.

The HMS Queen Elizabeth surrounded by torpedo nets in the port of Alexandria before the attack. – Copyright ADNO 8064 Imperial War Museums

Why It Became Legend

The feat of Alexandria has remained in memory for several reasons:

- **Disproportion between means and result**: few men, few means, enormous targets.
- **High probability of capture**: naval special operations of that era often expected that returning was more a hope than a plan.
- **Technical competence and training**: diving, underwater navigation, explosive management, improvisation.
- **Ethical and human dimension**: recognized fear, discipline, and that thin line between hitting the enemy and limiting unnecessary sacrifice.

Legacy: A Foundational Chapter of Naval Special Operations

Alexandria is not just a war chronicle episode: it is a piece that has helped define the culture of modern naval special forces. It anticipated concepts central today: targeted attack, surprise, infiltration, economy of forces, and the value of individual preparation. In the post-war period, many navies around the world would invest precisely in that direction, perfecting doctrines and countermeasures.

That is why that action became “legend”: not for easy rhetoric, but because it tells how, in war, **technology alone is not enough and how the outcome can depend on very few men capable of entering, silently, into the most protected point of the adversary's setup.**