



Malta, July 25 and 26, 1941: 85 years ago the sacrifice of Teseo Tesei, Alcide Pedretti and the raiders of the Xª MAS

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On the night between July 25 and 26, 1941, the men of the Xª Flottiglia MAS of the Regia Marina attempted one of the most daring operations of the war in the Mediterranean: to penetrate the fortified port of Valletta, Malta, and strike the British units at anchor.

The action, named **“Malta 2”**, involved the coordinated use of slow-running torpedoes, explosive MTM boats, support vessels, and MAS torpedo boats. The objective was to create a breach in the obstructions at the entrance of the port, allowing the explosive-laden boats to break into the Grand Harbour and head towards the British ships.

Malta, a fortress in the Mediterranean

In 1941, Malta was one of the most important strategic bases of the United Kingdom. From the island, located along the routes between Italy and North Africa, British forces could threaten

convoys destined for Axis troops engaged on the African front.

The neutralization, even temporary, of the port infrastructure and naval units present on the island could therefore have **significant consequences on the course of the war in the Mediterranean.**

The mission was entrusted to the men of the assault vehicles of the Regia Marina, already protagonists of operations conducted with great technical preparation, an extreme level of risk, and innovative tools that would forever change naval special operations: the **raiders of the Xª Flottiglia MAS.**



British soldiers man an anti-aircraft position overlooking the Grand Harbour of Malta. The island, a crucial naval and air base for the United Kingdom in the Mediterranean, was protected by a complex system of coastal defenses, barriers, and anti-aircraft batteries. Malta, January 1942. Photo: Imperial War Museums.

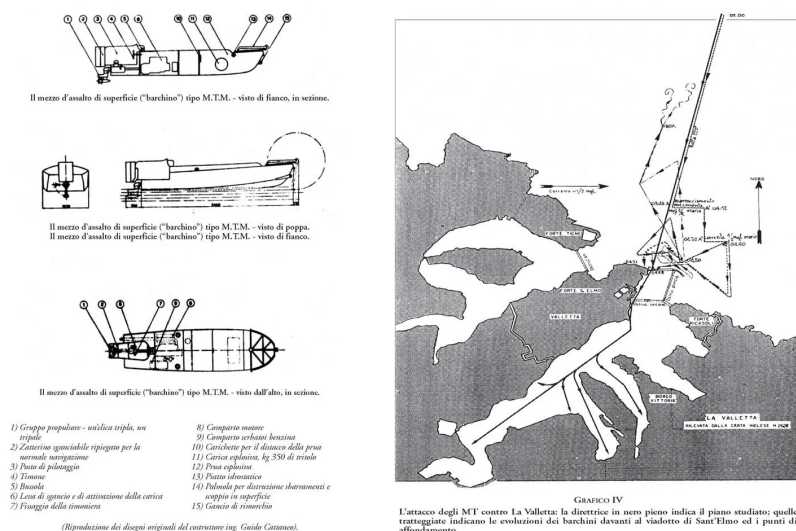
The attack plan

The Italian formation reached Maltese waters at night. The plan was for one of the slow-running torpedoes, led by Major of the Naval Engineering **Teseo Tesei** along with second chief diver **Alcide Pedretti**, to place an explosive charge under the obstructions of the Sant'Elmo viaduct.

Once the passage was opened, the explosive boats were to cross the entrance and launch against the targets in the port. A second slow-running torpedo was instead supposed to head towards the British submarines.

The operation, however, was delayed due to technical issues and navigation difficulties. Meanwhile, the British defenses had already been put on alert. The Italian units had been

spotted as they approached the island, and the coastal positions were awaiting the attack.



Source: Marina Militare Italiana

The sacrifice of Teseo Tesei and Alcide Pedretti

Teseo Tesei and Alcide Pedretti were not on their first mission together. In August 1940, they were supposed to participate in the attack against **the British base of Alexandria**, which was interrupted by the sinking of the submarine *Iride*. On that occasion, they distinguished themselves in the rescue operations of sailors trapped in the wreck.

On the night between October 29 and 30 of the same year, they took part in **operation B.G.2 against Gibraltar**, transported by the submarine *Scirè*. They managed to approach the enemy base aboard their slow-running torpedo, but malfunctions in the vehicle and breathing apparatus prevented them from reaching the target. After abandoning the device, they reached the Spanish coast and managed to return to Italy.

Nine months later, they were again assigned to the same crew for the attack against Malta. Their task was to destroy the obstruction at the entrance of the port, near the Sant'Elmo bridge, opening the passage for the explosive boats.

Understanding that the accumulated delay risked compromising the entire mission, Tesei decided to proceed towards the obstruction. Pedretti, fully aware of the risks, voluntarily chose to follow him.

According to the reconstruction handed down by the Marina Militare and recalled in the motivation for the Gold Medal for Military Valor, Tesei consciously gave up the possibility of saving himself and brought his vehicle to the port defenses, sacrificing himself along with his second operator.

The explosion damaged the Sant'Elmo bridge, but the breach was not sufficient. The first boats launched against the obstruction exploded without managing to open a usable passage.

On the eve of the mission, July 25, 1941, Tesei would have spoken words destined to become the symbol of the spirit with which he faced the action:

The whole world must know that there are Italians who go to Malta in the most daring way. Whether we sink a ship or not matters little. What counts is that we are capable of blowing up with our aircraft under the eyes of the British. In this way, we will show our children and future generations at what cost one serves one's ideal, and they will draw from it the example and the strength to win.

Teseo Tesei, July 25, 1941.



Teseo Tesei and Alcide Pedretti

The British Reaction

The coastal batteries opened intense fire against the Italian vessels. Several small boats were destroyed or immobilized, while some operators ended up in the sea and were subsequently

captured.

At dawn, British Hurricane fighters also intervened, attacking the Italian torpedo boats and support vessels during their retreat. The clashes also claimed the life of the commander of the Xª Flottiglia MAS, frigate captain **Vittorio Moccagatta**, and other men of the unit.

The operation ended with a dramatic toll: **15 men of the Xª Flottiglia MAS fell, 18 were taken prisoner, and only 11 managed to return**, some of whom were wounded.

A Military Defeat, a Page of Valor

The mission showed the limits of an extremely complex plan, in which success depended on perfect coordination between different men and means, surprise, and adherence to very strict timing. The British alert, malfunctions, and the violent reaction of the coastal defenses made it impossible to achieve the set objectives.

However, the failure did not erase the valor demonstrated by the raiders.

The men of the Xª MAS continued the action even when it was evident that the enemy was waiting for them and that the chances of returning were minimal.

The Praise from the Enemy Itself

The valor of the Italian raiders was recognized even by their adversaries. On October 4, 1941, recalling the attack on the British base in Malta, the island's deputy governor, Sir Edward Jackson, wrote:

«Last July, the Italians conducted an attack with great determination in an attempt to penetrate the harbor, employing MAS and “human torpedoes” maneuvered by “suicide squads”. This undertaking required the highest qualities of personal courage».

A particularly significant recognition, coming from someone who had witnessed the action from the opposite side, testifying how the courage and spirit of sacrifice of the Italian raiders had impressed even the enemy.

The Legacy of Teseo Tesei

Born in Marina di Campo, on the island of Elba, in 1909, Teseo Tesei was an officer of the Naval Engineering Corps, a diver, and one of the main creators of the slow-running torpedo, the underwater vehicle that would become famous with the nickname “maiale”.

His activity contributed decisively to the development of Italian underwater raiders and operational techniques destined to profoundly influence the history of special naval operations worldwide.

For his conduct during the attack on Malta, he was posthumously awarded the **Gold Medal for Military Valor**. Today, the **Comando Raggruppamento Subacquei e Incursori “Teseo Tesei” - COMSUBIN** of the Italian Navy is named after him.

July 26, 1941, thus remains a central date in the memory of the Italian raiders: the memory of a mission failed on the military level, but faced by men who carried the sense of duty, courage, and loyalty to their comrades to the extreme consequences.

Motivation for the Gold Medal for Military Valor to Teseo Tesei

Senior officer of the naval engineering corps, in long years of tenacious, intelligent, passionate work, he managed, overcoming difficulties of all kinds, to realize, in cooperation with a few other valiant technicians, and subsequently to perfect the underwater assault vehicle of the R. Marina. Not satisfied with the decisive contribution brought by his brilliant intelligence and profound culture, he personally wanted to test, trial, and employ in war the extremely insidious weapon. Despite being physically impaired by this activity, he inflexibly wanted to participate in the breach of one of the most powerful and well-equipped enemy naval bases, leading the instrument he had devised. When a delay occurred during the action due to unforeseen technical incidents, which could have compromised its outcome, in order to make up for the lost time and complete his task at all costs, he decided to forgo moving away from the weapon before it exploded against the target. With the sacrifice of his life, he rose, together with his second man who remained faithful to him until death, to the pure glory of conscious sacrifice. An example of noble military virtues and sublime dedication to the Homeland beyond duty.

Waters of Malta, dawn of July 26, 1941.

Motivation for the Gold Medal for Military Valor to Alcide Pedretti

As a volunteer in the assault units of the R. Marina, he participated in a daring operation to breach one of the opponent's most powerful and well-defended naval bases. During the action, a delay occurred due to unforeseen technical incidents, which could have compromised the outcome. Faithful to his officer until death, he refused to leave his weapon before it exploded against the target. With the sacrifice of his life, he rose to the purest glory of conscious sacrifice. A sublime example of courage, spirit of self-denial, and dedication to the Fatherland beyond duty.

Waters of Malta, dawn of July 26, 1941.

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