SCIRE’ EXPEDITION 2015
A case study from the history of a famous shipwreck

THE EXPLORERS CLUB FLAG N° 211 REPORT
Expedition Leader Fabio Ruberti (FI 10)
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SCIRE’ EXPEDITION 2015
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Flag Number: 211
Club Members:
Fabio Ruberti FI 10
Carla Binelli MI 11
Cesare Balzi FI 15
International Association of Nitrox & Technical Diver S.r.l.
Via Pietro Moriconi 63
56128 Marina di Pisa (PI)
ITALIA
fabio.ruberti@tiscali.it; info@iantd.info;
www.iantdexpeditions.com
Haifa, Israel
Ultimate Destination: 32.54.556 N; 34.58.252 E (Position of the Scirè wreck)
Members (alphabetical order):
1. Cesare Balzi (Italy)
2. Carla Binelli (Italy)
3. Alessandro Brandetti (Italy)
4. Alberto Dabalà (Italy)
5. Gianluigi Da Campo (Italy)
6. Mark Feder (Israel)
7. Ehud Galili (Israel)
8. Edoardo Pavia (Italy)
9. Fabio Ruberti (Italy)
INTRODUCTION

The wreck of the Italian Regia Marina submarine Scirè lays at 35 m depth in Haifa bay. The Scirè was sunk on the 10th of August 1942, at a time when Haifa was a harbour of the British Empire. The Scirè belonged to the Italian Navy Special Forces unit called X M.A.S. This unit was the fiercest enemy of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean and the Scirè was its spearhead. Using innovative underwater warfare in covert operations, the actions of the X M.A.S., particularly those of the Scirè in Gibraltar and Alexandria, made British harbours unsafe, at least until mid-1943. The greatest success of the Scirè was the sinking of two main British battleships in Alexandria harbour: HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Valiant. In the Mediterranean naval struggle, Haifa was an important strategic target because of its oil terminal and refineries and much care was taken to protect these facilities. In this war scenario, Britain redoubled its efforts to combat the actions of the X M.A.S. by improving its harbour defences using asdic, indicator loops, mines, traps and gun batteries.

The last battle of the Scirè in Haifa bay has received little attention over the past 70 years but is one worth revisiting and studying as well as the wreck of the glorious submarine. By combining the underwater research and archival studies within a multidisciplinary research context, a wider and more complete picture can be obtained.

1. Underwater research/study aimed at examining the wreck, in particular the damages attributed to its sinking. This will involve taking samples of artefacts and samples of the hull and accessories and recording the damaged areas.
2. Study of the remains of anti-submarine defences of Haifa, both underwater and inland, and studying the remains of British logistic and military structures.
3. Archival research in Italian and British archives, comparing the documents to obtain a broader understanding of the events, aimed at enlightening the events before and during the battle.

This multidisciplinary method will provide an outstanding opportunity to verify the existing data, add more details and enlighten this important historical event.

With this goal we have studied the matter for eight years, visiting archives in United Kingdom and Italy and conducting two previous expeditions on the field, in 2008 and 2011, to survey and measuring the wreck of the Scirè with the final task to realize a scientific 3D reconstruction.

This third expedition was necessary to make the last wreck survey and to collect the final measurements to accomplish the 3D reconstruction.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Italian Navy - Regia Marina

Italy started considering the British Empire as an enemy during the Abyssinian War of 1935. At that time the Italian Navy begun to develop its underwater naval warfare capacity using the experience gained during WWI and concentrated on underwater war using its submarines fleets and combat divers. The most active unit in that war was the X^ Flottiglia MAS, (the 10th Flottila Motor Torpedo Boat) that attacked Allied ships and ports using commando operations. The underwater detachment of the Flotilla used slow-run human torpedoes (“Operatori SLC” - Siluro Lenta Corsa), and combat swimmers carrying limpet mines (“Gamma Men” or “Uomini Gamma”). Between 1941 and 1943 Italian combat divers sank 28 ships, including 5 warships and 23 merchant ships and tankers. Gibraltar (September 1941) and Alexandria (December 1941) were successfully attacked by human torpedoes. To reach long-distances, divers were transported by remodelled submarines, like the Scirè.
The struggle over the control of the Mediterranean

On 11 April, 1940, the British War Cabinet agreed that war with Italy was a real possibility and that defences at its Mediterranean ports of Alexandria, Gibraltar, Haifa and Malta should be brought to a state of readiness and manned. The cabinet was well aware that should Britain become involved in war with Italy, “the Germans would quickly get a grip on that country, and we should have to face German aircrafts and submarines operating in the Mediterranean”.

On 10th June 1940, Italy declared war on France and Britain and entered WW II. The Italians had the fourth largest navy in the world. However, in the Mediterranean, the Allies had a technical and operational advantage due to three factors: radar, the deployment of British aircraft carriers and highly developed information gathering and processing organizations including the Ultra secret decrypting systems. In response, the Italian Navy continued the development and the use of human (manned) torpedoes and other innovative underwater warfare techniques.

**Scirè - submarine of the X^ Flottiglia MAS**

The *Scirè*, built in Cantieri Odero Terni Orlando di Muggiano La Spezia shipyard was named *Scirè* after a location in Ethiopia, marking an Italian victory in 1936, during the Abyssinian War. It belonged to the “Series 600 Class Adua” standard 680/698 tons and was launched on 6th January 1938, entering the service of the elite X^ Flottiglia MAS. After three unsuccessful attacks against Gibraltar (operation BG1, 30th September 1940, operation BG2, 30th October 1940, operation BG3 27th May 1941), on 20th September 1941 operation BG 4 took place in Gibraltar, when *Scirè* divers successfully attacked the tanker *Fiona Shell* (2.444 tons), the armed cargo ship *Durham* (10.893 tons) and the military tanker *Denbydale* (8.145 tons), an action for which they were decorated by the head of the Italian government, the Duce Benito Mussolini.

**Operations against the Port of Alexandria**

The December 1941 attack on the Port of Alexandria followed two failed operations by the submarines *Iride* (operation GA1 22nd August 1940) and *Gondar* (operation GA2 30th September 1940). By the end of 1941, the two Queen Elizabeth-class 15-inch gun battleships, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Valiant*, were the only major British warships left in the Mediterranean. For protection they were transferred to Alexandria Port, which was protected by harbour defences, already enlarged after several Italian attacks in the Mediterranean: on Souda Bay, Crete (by MTM class surface explosive speedboats, nicknamed “barchini”), on Malta, (combined attack by MAS - Motor Torpedo Boats, *Barchini*, and “Operatori SLC” - Siluro Lenta Corsa nicknamed *maiali* (“pigs”) – underwater mini-vessels carrying attack divers) and on Gibraltar again using "pigs". The *Scirè* left La Spezia on 3rd December 1941, simulating an ordinary exercise. She arrived at Porto Lago on the island of Leros (Italian Navy base in the Aegean) on 9th December. Divers, flown to Leros to avoid the exhausting voyage, went aboard. She left Leros on 14th December to attack Alexandria which was protected by mines, marine cable systems, hydrophones, net barriers and observation posts. Often depth charges were thrown randomly at the harbour entrance. The
Scirè managed to approach the port, and three diver teams were sent into it, using slow-run human torpedos. The battleships HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Valiant and one tanker (Sagona) were sunk, and much damage was caused to a destroyer (HMS Jervis). The Italian crews were captured. Later, after the war they all received the Italian Military Gold Medal. It took the British almost two years to return the warships to service. The Alexandria operation was a daring and successful underwater naval action it changed the strategic balance of naval forces in the Mediterranean for a time. The temporary superiority of the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean helped it moving supplies and men to the axis forces in North Africa but Italy failed to fully exploit the success of Operation Alexandria, allowing the Royal Navy to recover its power in the Mediterranean.

The planned attack on Haifa port as part of the submarine battle in the East Mediterranean
The battles in North Africa threatened the port of Alexandria and British warships were evacuated to Haifa and the Red Sea. The oil refineries and oil port in Haifa were major British strategic assets. The Italian Navy high command (“Supermarina”) decided to attack Haifa port using divers equipped with limpet mines. They expected it to be unprotected, thinking it was of secondary importance to the British. The Axis naval war in the Eastern Mediterranean was conducted mostly by underwater forces and the Scirè attack on Haifa was part of a wider struggle between Axis Naval forces against the Allied forces in that theatre of war. The Scirè was lost on 10th August 1942 off Haifa, much about the fate of the Scirè remained unknown. Witnesses who participated in the event told different and contradictory stories. Italian publications in the years immediately of the WW II left doubts concerning the fate of the Scirè. It was rumoured that the RN had previous knowledge of the attack. That thesis was based mainly on interviews with the late Israeli statesmen A. Eliav. On 10th August 1942, Eliav was a gunner in the 14th Coast Regiment Royal Artillery of the Haifa defences, participating in the last battle of the Scirè. He stated that about a day prior to the attack harbour defences were alerted, as an attack on Haifa by an enemy submarine was imminent and ships and planes were searching for it. Operation SL 1 - attack on Haifa port - began on 27th July 1942 when the Scirè left La Spezia, the operation being managed from the island of Rhodes, the Italian Admiralty headquarter in Eastern Mediterranean. The liaison officer Capitano di Corvetta (Lieutenant Commander) Max Candiani, flew from Brindisi to Rhodes on 1st August. He stopped at Crete and met the Luftwaffe Chief of Staff of the X. Fliegerkorps concerning German air support, which included mainly high altitude air observation and photography by Junker Ju 86. Five Italian attack divers flew to Rhodes on 2nd August meeting Commander Candiani there. The same day the Scirè arrived at Leros, the Italian navy base in Dodecanese. Seven attack divers, including an MD Doctor Gnecco, flew to Rhodes on 4th August. On the 5th all the divers were in Leros. It was an identical routine to the one used previously in attacking Alexandria. The same day Candiani met the new Scirè commander Bruno Zelik (Capitano di Corvetta). On 6th August the Scirè left Leros. On the 10th the submarine should have released eight attack divers one and a half miles from the port of Haifa entrance. There were eleven combat divers: eight attack divers, a doctor, and two reserve attack divers serving as pre-attack scouts, “civette” (owls). The divers were supposed to attack British ships with limpet mines. Air photographs of Haifa port taken by the Germans on 9th August showed potential target vessels:
two cruisers, two destroyers, five escort ships, four tankers and four cargo ships. The Scirè was expected to report to base on the 13th. No transmissions were received on that day, and the coming day. The Italian Navy asked the Luftwaffe for assistance in locating the Scirè. However, searches carried out on 16th and 17th August between Rhodes and Haifa were unsuccessful. Aerial photos of the port of Haifa revealed no damaged vessels. The Scirè was declared missed with all hands aboard.

THE RESEARCH

The archive research
That was the state of the art of the historical knowledge about the Scirè submarine and her demise until I decided to initiate the research in 2008 to prepare our first expedition. The research was planned to be firstly in archives and then on the field as underwater survey and study of the wreck. It started in Rome at the Archivio Storico Marina Militare (Historical Archive Italian Navy) searching for all documents involving the facts that lead to the Scirè sinking, but all the documents were not telling anything new or clearing the reasons of her demise, but facts already well known. I decided then to research in British archives, because I supposed that the British superiority in intelligence warfare was the winning weapon against the Scirè and the relative documents could have been only there. Since the British Ultra Secret machine was able to intercept and decrypt Italian and German crypto messages, I decided to begin the research at Bletchley Park, the former decrypting base of the British Secret Service during WW II. It was the right choice because almost immediately I discovered the true reasons of the Scirè demise. Examining the XX Vol. G.C.& C.S. Naval History “The Mediterranean 1940 – 1943” at page 216 I read in a footnote: “On 10th August, the parent submarine “Scirè” was sunk off Haifa with her human torpedoes aboard. Her intention and her approach had been elaborately followed by Special Intelligence, and she was destroyed according to plan”, was following a series of alphanumeric identifications of decrypted Italian and German messages. That declaration unveiled the true reason of the Scirè demise unknown to history until today.

The research followed in The National Archives in Kew, London, searching for the related documents mentioned with alphanumeric identifications in the G.C.& C.S. Naval History footnote. The task was not an easy one, but at the end of a two years research, 48 documents were found, revealing all details of the interception and decrypting of Italian and German messages related with Mission S.L. 1 against Haifa harbour and a report of the last moments of the Scirè submarine.

The end of the Scirè
The British intercepted almost all the Italian messages between the Italian Navy high command (“Supermarina”) in Rome and the Eastern Mediterranean Admiralty in Rhodes, and the messages of the German X. Fliegerkorps which task was the aerial reconnaissance over Haifa. They intercepted twice the submarine during her course to Haifa: first south-east of Cyprus, then off the border between Lebanon and British Palestine. The submarine was then caught by an innovative antisom system of the Haifa defences, called Indicator Loops. She was chased by the armed trawler HMS Islay and depth charged. She was hit and surfaced for surrender, but the coast gun batteries over Mount Carmel hit her to death. This is what came out from the recovered documents; I published these findings in Italian magazines and scientific journals.

The shipwreck site was located by the British immediately after the sinking of the submarine. They sent hard-hat divers to inspect her and looking forward to recover an S.L.C (slow-run human torpedo), but unsuccessfully, because the mission was using only attack divers with limpet mines.
When the British left Palestine in 1948 the location of the wreck site was missed, it was found again in 1952 by an Israeli Navy officer: Yohai Ben Nun. It was in the shipping lane to access the port of Haifa. Since our first expedition in 2008 we succeeded to have the assistance and support of the Israeli underwater archaeologist Ehud Galili and the help of some local divers to facilitate our underwater tasks.

THE EXPEDITIONS

The 2008 and 2011 expeditions
Preparation was intense. The initial task was to survey the wreck with means of measurements, recognition of type and signs of the sinking damages, assessment of the wreck conditions. We accomplished all our goals of that first expedition.

Coming back I evaluated the high importance of the wreck for the Italian history, the Scirè was honoured of the Gold Medal to her flag for the bravery in war missions, and I decided to better study, with archaeological methods, her shipwreck with final goal to realize a detailed 3D reconstruction. The 2011 expedition was aimed to take more detailed measurements and survey, but during the making of the 3D we realized that some measurements were missed and other were not enough precise, another expeditions resulted to be necessary in order to realize a correct 3D reconstruction of the shipwreck site.

The 2015 Expedition
Once we had a clear idea of the work to be done and of the list of all the measurements to take, I begun to organize the expedition. The team was composed by two divers responsible of the survey (Cesare Balzi and Alessandro Brandetti), one u/w photographer (Alberto Dabalà), one u/w video-operator (Edoardo Pavia), one safety diver (Mark Feder), one dive doctor (Gianluigi Da Campo), one local archaeologist (Ehud Galili), one secretary (Carla Binelli) and me. We received the patronage of the Italian Foreign Ministry, of the Association of Italian Navy Special Forces and of the Institute of Rescue Medicine. Few days before the departure the Explorer Flag N° 211 arrived and we had the honour to carry the flag with us in the expedition. On November 1st the Italian team reunited at Roma airport (Italy) to take the flight to Israel. At the evening of the same day we arrived at our base in Haifa. The day after we gathered together the Israeli team, and the whole was dedicated to organization, preparation of equipment, briefings and diving duties assignments. The most difficult part to measure and reproduce was the starboard bow, because the depth charges and the gun shell hit in that place and to accomplish this task a detailed plan of
measurements, pictures and video-shooting was implemented. A set of detailed underwater slates with the specific part to be measured were appositely prepared. In our work we have been assisted by the Israeli underwater archaeologist Ehud Galili. The first diving day a very strong wind was blowing from north-east and we had to postpone dives of two days which were used to visit the remains of WWII British defences of Haifa. Finally we succeeded to accomplish all dives and goals. Not real emergencies were experienced, only inconveniences easily handled and solved. During the last dive two Israeli underwater photographers joined us (Dan Ashkenazi and Shlomi Palnitsky). The data collected are now being used to study the sinking damages and finally producing the 3D reconstruction which is in process; presentation and articles are planned in order to spread the knowledge we have acquired with our exploration and study of the wreck of the Scirè.

Fabio Ruberti (FI10) Expedition Leader