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PORTUGAL: A WWII ENIGMA?

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What if?.....is a question to be pondered when considering the potential outcomes of WWII had the Germans succeeded in defeating Great Britain. By June 1940 Axis forces had occupied much of Western Europe. During 1941 they had made rapid progress towards removing the Communist threat from the east. In the Balkans German troops were tied down in guerrilla warfare. Iberia could be attacked at Hitler's timing - Operation Felix would have led to the removal of Gibraltar and Malta from Allied control and resulted in Axis command of the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Hitler's dream of world domination would have been within his reach as, from air bases to be established in the mid-Atlantic, long-range bombers would have been able to create havoc along the eastern coast of America. In 1941 the United States was totally unprepared for a major war. In Latin America Nazi infiltration was strong.

Great Britain was the pivot upon which these events would turn but its survival depended upon a continued supply of food and war materials. Britain's jugular lay along four principal sea routes. Firstly there was the northern route passing from North America south of Greenland and Iceland; secondly there was the southerly route passing from North America to Freetown on the west coast of Africa and then travelling northwards; thirdly there was the route northwards from Cape Town, that included much of the traffic from Indian and Pacific Ocean countries; finally there was the Mediterranean traffic via Gibraltar that brought goods from Africa and the Middle East.

Mainland Portugal and its North Atlantic Islands, the Açores, Madeira and the Cape Verde group occupied positions of vital significance along Britain's jugular vein of trade. This was fully

appreciated by the German High Command but, many in a position to influence events in Britain chose to largely ignore its significance.

In 1937 the German Minister of War visited both the Açores and Madeira promising military aid to Portugal. Furthermore, at a military conference in Leipzig in the summer of 1938 General Walter von Reichenau foresaw with exceptional clarity the significance of Portugal's geographic position and recognised how much dependence Britain would place on its historic ally. Reichenau also focused on Portugal's geographic position relative to air and sea routes to Gibraltar and Malta and their links to the Mediterranean theatre.

Portugal's global presence was astutely managed by António de Oliveira Salazar, the country's dictator from 1932-1968. He recognised that Portugal was a small country, largely dependent upon agriculture. However he capitalized on its geographic, colonial and historical strengths. He exploited the country's tungsten mining operations; when processed into wolfram, tungsten became vital for the hardening of steel and thus to Germany's overall war effort. Salazar created an enigma that puzzled the principal belligerents but which had to be resolved because Portugal's geographic position held the key to what was arguably the most important battle of WWII – the Battle of the Atlantic. Salazar distrusted American policy which, he felt, was inherently opposed to the colonial powers.

Salazar's dictatorship can be summarised in the words that he used in 1928 "I know quite well what I want and where I am going, but let it not be insisted that I shall reach my goal in a few months. For the rest, let the country study, let it object, and let it argue, but when the time comes for me to give orders I shall expect it to obey". Under Salazar, the Estado Novo was created

together with its appurtenances of a secret police force. Salazar doubled the size of the country's armed forces from 40,000 to 80,000 during the war years.

During WWI the Germans had demonstrated the effectiveness of submarine warfare in threatening Great Britain's lifeline. Yet, only 30 years later this lesson was not fully absorbed in Britain. However, it was by no means lost on Admiral Karl Doenitz, the commander of German U-Boat forces. Following the German occupation of Northern France, in June 1940, Doenitz established five U-boat bases around the Bay of Biscay. Pens were established at Brest (20), Lorient (55), La Pallice (13) and Bordeaux (15), giving a total of 123 pens.

The principal Luftwaffe base that supported the U-boat campaign in the North Atlantic was located at Mérignac, near Bordeaux. From here the Germans had a 400km advantage over Britain's Coastal Command based at Plymouth.

Doenitz pressed the German High command for preference to be given to the Battle of the Atlantic because he felt that this was the most effective means of removing Britain from the war, which would have permitted the German High Command to focus subsequently on Russia. However, his demands were only met in small measure. Goering persuaded Hitler that, following Luftwaffe victory in the air, Britain could be invaded with ease. He was proved wrong. Throughout the war Hitler was obsessed with the potential threat of a British invasion of Norway and consequently diverted U-boat forces to act as a deterrent. In addition, the Axis campaign in the Western Desert required submarine support. The Russian Front that Hitler had embarked upon in June 1941 drew ever increasing demands for supplies that, when linked to the effects of the Allied bombing of Germany's industrial power base, resulted in limitations on U-

boat construction and operations. Finally, Doenitz complained that the German Intelligence services never provided him with any substantial, regular information throughout the war.

Portugal with its Atlantic Islands was the key to control of the Atlantic and none appreciated this better than Salazar who successfully played on his strengths to the irritation of all protagonists, not finally deciding to favour the Allies until towards the end of 1943 when it became abundantly clear that the Allies would prevail against the Axis forces.

The Treaty of Windsor, originally signed in 1373 and reaffirmed in 1386 during the marriage of King John I to Philippa of Lancaster, was of major importance in influencing Salazar's decisions since he firmly adhered to its concept of mutual assistance between Britain and Portugal in time of external threat. The Germans also understood the strength of this Treaty, the German Foreign Minister in 1938 stating "Portugal could do nothing against the desire of England". Later, when The United States entered the war, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) found it difficult to grasp the significance of a Treaty that dated back some 600 years.

In 1826 Britain's Prime Minister George Canning, a former Ambassador to Portugal, said, ".....Whilst Great Britain has an arm to raise, it must be raised against the efforts of any power that should forcibly attempt to control the choice and fetter the independence of Portugal".

The position that Salazar took for Portugal during WWII had its roots during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Salazar was acutely aware that success for the Republicans would lead to Communist Russia expanding into Iberia and would inevitably lead to the toppling of the Estado Novo. Salazar was not a

Fascist, but he nevertheless sided, with some caution, on the side of the Nationalists. In 1938 the British sent a 129-strong military mission to Portugal that included some military supplies. This action strengthened ties between the two countries and added strength to Salazar's positioning.

Britain, and later the United States, favoured Portugal remaining neutral. In the early war years Britain was in no position to come to Portugal's defence in the event of Nazi invasion. Whilst the threat of Operation Felix still existed a neutral Portugal better preserved Allied Mediterranean and Atlantic strategic interests. Nevertheless, control of the Açores remained a running sore that irritated Allied decision making until the matter was finally resolved at the end of 1943. The German High Command finally shelved Operation Felix in 1941.

The Açores archipelago was pivotal to the outcome of the Battle of the Atlantic. The nine islands are divided into three groups. The two most westerly lie west of the North American Plate and, since the time of 'The Monroe Doctrine' that was enunciated by the then President of the United States in 1823 the view was enshrined that America would not countenance new colonial territories west of the Greenwich Meridian – existing colonies being excepted. Consequently, The Açores were viewed by Americans as lying within their sphere of influence. The five islands in the middle of the Archipelago included Terceira where the critically important Lajes air base would be constructed in 1943. The two most easterly islands, closest to the European mainland, consisted of São Miguel on which is located Ponta Delgada the capital, and Santa Maria which was to host the longest runway. In 1941 Salazar, with British support, had planned to move his Government and the bulk of his military to the Açores in the event of German invasion.

The Açores archipelago covers some 2,500 sq. km and is 600 km from east to west. The distance to the mainland and to Labrador is somewhat similar, about 1,700 km. To the east coast of the United States it is some 3,600 km.

In the early years of the war Hitler appreciated the strategic importance of the Açores and proposed an invasion. However, this was opposed by Grand Admiral Raeder who, whilst acknowledging the possibility of successful initial capture recognised the impossibility of holding them against British, and later American, naval power. Salazar wanted to see Allied success in North Africa before formally allowing the Allies access to the Açores.

Because of the vital importance of Portugal and its Atlantic Islands to the Allies in successfully waging the 'Battle of the Atlantic', diplomatic links became pivotal to the outcome. Britain's links were historically strong with the Treaty of Windsor as its base. But, in addition, the country was well served by its Ambassador, Sir Ronald Campbell, who established close links with Salazar. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, was typically prone to more aggressive diplomacy driven by his desperate desire for access to the Açores archipelago. The Americans were ill-served in the early stages of the war by Ambassador Burt Fish who was not a well man and who made little effort to establish close relations with Salazar. Subsequently, the American diplomatic position was superbly served by Chargé d'affaires George Kennan. However, he was placed in an acutely difficult position because the American JCS pressed the military case – for arbitrary take-over of the Açores, regardless of the delicate diplomatic circumstances.

In these circumstances Salazar presented an enigma to the Allies whereby he continually obfuscated, evaded and obstruct-

ed in regard to providing Allied access to the Açores. This infuriated and frustrated military commanders, particularly Americans, irritated such as Churchill and presented great problems of diplomacy.

In late 1942 the United Kingdom sent an undercover high-level military mission to Lisbon that achieved much in setting the stage for Allied use of the Açores that was to take place a year later. Salazar was essentially comfortable with the establishment of bases on the Açores by the British because of the terms of the Treaty of Windsor by which Salazar set great store. Use of the Açores by the Americans gave Salazar concern because there was no governing treaty and because he feared that this would weaken Portugal's position in regard to its colonial possessions. This was carried to the point that Portugal would "resist invasion by force if necessary".

Towards the end of 1940, with Salazar's approval, Humberto Delgado, then Major of the Portuguese Air Force, carried out the first of what would be a number of low-profile missions to Britain, unknown to the Nazis. During these visits Delgado established a close working relationship with Wing Commander Roland Vintras of RAF Intelligence. This resulted in a number of unheralded visits to the Açores by Delgado, and others undercover by Vintras during the period 1940-43. They were assisted by certain prominent Açoreans. The purpose was to determine the location of a suitable airstrip and to prepare for its eventual construction. Salazar signed the agreement on 18th August 1943 when he became confident of ultimate Allied victory – Axis forces in North Africa had surrendered in May 1943. Because survey work had been completed by July 1942, what was then the longest runway in the world became operational in early September 1943.

The Lajes airfield on Terceira Island was constructed by the Portuguese, with British involvement. Its principal runway was 3,280 meters long, constructed of interlocking steel strips – ‘Marston Matting’. This permitted use by long-range aircraft and provided an extension of air surveillance into the surrounding Atlantic of a radius of 1,130 km. On October 19th 1943 RAF Flying Fortress long range bombers commenced sorties from Lajes and the first U-boat kill occurred in November 1943. From this time onwards, the balance of power in regard to controlling the North Atlantic shifted strongly and decisively in favour of the Allies.

Operation Alacrity consisted of a force of 3,000 men commanded by Air Marshal Bromet charged with the task of establishing the air base at Lajes. Whilst the Portuguese military commander on the Açores accepted the British entry, within the terms of the Treaty of Windsor, he was prepared to use force if necessary to prevent American usage. Bromet was required to exercise considerable diplomacy to avoid being required by the Portuguese to act in unison against what was seen as an external threat - ‘American invasion’. Eventually, Americans were permitted to establish port facilities only in the first instance on the basis that they were ‘friends of friends’.

United States construction battalions (Seabees) landed at the end of 1943 to extend the Lajes airstrip and construct an even longer runway on Santa Maria Island that became operational in 1945. However, whilst this facility played an important role in the Berlin Airlift (June 1948-May 1949) it did not affect WWII.

The Battle of the Atlantic consisted, in the main, of convoys of merchant ships supported by escort groups battling their way across and up the Atlantic against U-boat attacks, many of which operated in groups termed wolf packs. The convoy sys-

tem’s effectiveness in reducing losses from submarine attack had been demonstrated during WWI. The biggest convoy of WWII consisted of 167 ships sailing at 2 cables (400 meters) distance between ships in 19 columns. Initially, naval escort vessels equipped with sonar detecting devices and armed with depth charges sailed in close protective proximity. However, this tactic subsequently changed to one of aggressive attack on submarines, particularly as demonstrated by Captain ‘Johnny’ Walker who, the Admiralty stated on his death from exhaustion in 1944 before the end of the war, did more than any other single man to achieve victory in the battle of the Atlantic. During the Battle of the North Atlantic over 3,500 merchant vessels were sunk totalling more than 6 million tons of shipping. Losses peaked in 1942 when more than 1,000 ships were sunk. Some 30,000 seamen lost their lives.

Convoy destination was mainly to Liverpool, The Clyde and London. Traffic was dense with one convoy being received daily at one or other of these ports.

Notably, in the early war years, American naval policy as promoted by Admiral Ernest King, did not favour the convoy system and shipping losses along America’s eastern seaboard became unsustainable until the policy was changed. Statistically, it was shown that unescorted vessels had a 300% greater likelihood of being sunk than when escorted.

Convoys were commanded by a Convoy Commander. Escort Groups came under separate naval command. Convoys included tugs and rescue ships each able to succour some 150 men. But convoys were restricted to the speed of the slowest vessels, some 7.5 to 9 knots. This compared to the surface speed of U-boats of some 18 knots. However, submerged, speed was reduced to some 4 knots. Large liners generally travelled unescorted

because their speed, up to 30 knots, permitted them to outpace submarine attacks.

Air support was critical in early detection of U-boat activities, following which aggressive attacks could be mounted by sea or, more effectively, by air. In the early war years this was often rudimentary consisting of merchant vessels with converted flight decks or aircraft being catapulted from merchant vessels, aircraft being subsequently ditched and the crews rescued. Later more aircraft carriers became available, equipped with aircraft designed for anti-submarine activities.

Intelligence proved of decisive importance in the Battle of the Atlantic. The Germans had the initial advantage through their B-dienst breaking of Allied convoy radio exchanges until the Admiralty changed the codes late in 1941. Subsequently, the intelligence war swung decisively in favour of the allies through the work carried out at Bletchley Park in the creation of Ultra that broke the German Enigma codes, despite the U-boat network being on a four-wheel encoding device as against the standard three-wheels used elsewhere in the German military.

Both protagonists made significant advances in technology over the war years. But, whilst improved, 1,000-ton, hull-strengthened long-range U-boats were produced with improved submerged breathing apparatus (schnorkels) the balance of technological advances swung in favour of the Allies with advanced radar, submarine detection devices (ASDIC), and improved detection and destruction capability from aircraft. Depth charges, having a lethal radius of only some 10 meters in 1939, had to be placed with great accuracy. The Germans were well served by aircraft, notably the Focke Wulf 200 C-4 Condor with a range of 4,800 km which Churchill termed 'the scourge of the Atlantic' because of its long range that was used with devastat-

ing effect in both spotting and attacking convoys and their escorts.

Detection of a target was, for an aircraft, a matter of visual sighting; for a surface ship, possibly visual detection followed by acquisition of ASDIC which had a range of 1500/2000 yards at about 15 knots. ASDIC could not detect a surfaced target and therefore in darkness a surfaced submarine remained safe. ASDIC contact is lost on approaching a submerged target as the sound transmission eventually overshoots the contact and fails to record an echo.

Up to the war's end in 1945 1,150 U-boats were built. However, a relatively small proportion was ever operational at one time, 91 in 1942 and 140 in 1943. The reason for this was other demands on manufacturing, particularly exacerbated by heavy equipment losses on the Russian Front, Allied bombing of industrial plants, four-month training periods and even, in 1942, the freezing of the Baltic which prevented training of crews for several months. Some 500 of the larger 1,000-ton submarines were manufactured and these included the 'milchkoen' supply submarines, generally operating in the region between Flores Island in the Açores and the Canary Islands. These 'milk cows' replenished 6-7 U-boats providing for one additional week of operations and increasing their range by some 6,000 km. Under The Hague Convention neutral countries such as the Spanish-controlled Canary Islands, were only permitted to provide port facilities at not more than three-monthly intervals. However, Franco's Spain chose to ignore this restriction. For a period U-boats operating from Canary Island locations gave them dominance against convoys assembling in Freetown.

The principal U-boat of WWII was the Type VII which had a range of 15,000 km and an ability to travel at about 18 knots on

the surface but only some 4-7 knots when submerged. Later, the Type IXs had a much longer range of 40,000 km. U-boats were equipped with torpedoes, initially operated by compressed air with a range of 8,000 meters. Later, electrically powered torpedoes were introduced that were more difficult to detect but which had a reduced range of 5,000 meters. A major defect that remained undetected by the Germans for some considerable time was that torpedoes tended to run deeper than their settings thus frequently missing their targets.

U-boat passage from their Bay of Biscay bases into the open Atlantic was particularly hazardous because they were within range of RAF coastal command aircraft operating from Plymouth. Consequently, they were forced to make the passage largely submerged at slow speed and subject to frequent attack. Sinkings in this area were exceptionally high.

In May 1943 a combination of increased escort strength and capability, more efficient detection devices unknown to the enemy, deployment of escort aircraft carriers and long-range, land-based, anti-submarine aircraft and especially intelligence break-throughs greatly reduced the mid-ocean danger area on Atlantic convoy routes, the notorious 'black-pit', and practically eliminated the submarine threat. Thereafter U-boats focused on areas where convoy escort was minimal.

In WWII 30,000 of 40,000 Kriegsmarine U-boat personnel were killed or captured, a similar number to that of Allied seamen lost. During WWII 450 U-boats were lost, peaking at 205 in 1943.

Winston Churchill summed up the gravity of the Battle of the Atlantic when he said, "The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril". Towards the end of the

war, when the Battle of the Atlantic had been won, Churchill was able to comment with hindsight, "The U-boat attack was our worst evil. It would have been wise for the Germans to stake all upon it". Doenitz recognised this but, fortunately for the Allies, German war effort was diverted elsewhere.

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