

CALL THE HANDS

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THE GUSTAVO STEFANINI STORY

The following story was provided by Commander Stephen Youll, OAM RAN Retd in relation to the matter of the first RAN ship to sink a submarine in World War 2. HMAS STUART has this honour. As Italian submarine GONDAR was off Alexandria, enroute to Tobruk, carrying human torpedoes for an attack on the base, she was found by a RAF Sunderland of No 230 Squadron and attacked by HMAS STUART with depth charges on the night of 29/30 September 1940. The following morning the submarine commander was forced to surface and abandon his vessel, which then sank after the explosion of scuttling charges. STUART and HMS SINDONIS rescued all but two of Gondar's crew. Gustavo Stefanini was human torpedo commander embarked in GONDAR.



Regia Marina
WW2 Italian Navy

In 1974 I was the Staff Officer Weapons in the office of the Australian Naval Representative, United Kingdom (ANRUK) in Australia House, London.

My “parish” was pretty much all of Europe, from Sweden to Italy, and all stops in between. In these duties, I was much involved with OTO Melara, whose 76mm gun was a candidate for our subsequent FREMANTLE Class patrol boats.

OTO Melara was based in La Spezia, and the CEO was one Gustavo Stefanini. He was a charming man and engaged with me to a degree that other such elevated executives would not normally do.

When, in early 1977, I was due to leave for other horizons, I called on him, and he enquired “Where are you going?” I explained, in some halting Anglo–Italian, that I was posted as the Executive Officer of HMAS STUART. “Ah, my old ship!”, said Eng. Stefanini, pointing to a crest of STUART, that I had not previously noticed, on his crowded office wall.



So, the story is that, in 1940, Gustavo was an Engineer Commander in the Regia Marina’s elite frogmen-based special forces unit, Decima Flottiglia Mezzi d’Assalto, known as La Decima MAS.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decima_Flottiglia_MAS.

The MAS operated two tonne motor assault boats (MTs or *barchini*) with a 300kg bow charge that crippled the cruiser HMS YORK in Suda Bay on 25 March 1941. They also operated manned torpedoes known as SLCs (*Siluro Lenta Corsa* – slow running torpedoes, also known as “*maiale*” (pigs)), with a crew of two and a 225kg limpet charge and which spectacularly sunk QUEEN ELIZABETH and VALIANT in Alexandria harbour on 3 December 1941. (See the Emilio Bianchi obituary at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/military-obituaries/naval-obituaries/11814603/Emilio-Bianchi-human-torpedo-obituary.html>)

In late September 1940, the Italian submarine, GONDAR, carrying three SLCs, of which Gustavo was CO of No.3, was dispatched to attack Alexandria harbour. En route, however, they passed the Mediterranean Fleet headed for Malta. Without viable targets, GONDAR was re-routed to Tobruk. Whilst recharging her batteries on the 29th, she was spotted/detected by the destroyer HMAS STUART, who had been sent back to Alexandria due to a burst steam pipe.

On the night of 29/30 September, STUART attacked the GONDAR with depth charges. In the morning, by which time STUART had the assistance of a RAF Sunderland and the trawler HMS SINDONIS, the submarine commander was forced to surface and abandon his vessel, which then sank after the explosion of scuttling charges. STUART and SINDONIS rescued all but two of GONDAR's crew.

Thus Stefanini was rescued, captured and accommodated in STUART, where he and the other Regia Marina officers were treated with respect, even hosted, commensurate with their rank.

Stefanini was subsequently sent to a POW camp in India, in company with one Franco Belgiorno–Nettis, a fellow engineer, but who had enlisted as an artillery officer and who was captured in North Africa.

Belgiorno went on to emigrate to Australia and to establish, with, Carlo Salteri, the Transfield company. See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franco_Belgiorno-Nettis

After the war, Stefanini returned to the Italian defence industrial scene, becoming CEO of OTO Melara and the father of the 76mm gunmount - arguably the most prolific and successful naval gunmount of modern times.

Stefanini and Belgiorno kept in touch, Belgiorno invariably summering in his villa in Port Venere, and once, on Stefanini's introduction/recommendation, I visited him there.

I subsequently saw Belgiorno regularly in Australia, together with his sons, and those of Carlo Salteri, as Transfield acquired the Williamstown Dockyard, won the ANZAC Ship Project and morphed into Tenix.

At my farewell meeting/lunch with Gustavo (there was a Michelin starred restaurant specialising in gnocchi in a nearby corn field), Stefanini offered me a job as the South East Asian representative of OTO Melara, which I said that I would consider, but really had no intention of accepting.

He also advised that his son, Stefano, had been appointed as the Italian Consul in Perth, Western Australia. I promised to look him up.

Later in the year, in STUART, on our way back from a South East Asian deployment, we were due to join STALWART, with the Commander Australian Fleet, Rear Admiral Neil McDonald AO RAN, embarked, in Fremantle for a series of "Shop Window" events. I signalled the Admiral's Secretary, requesting that Signor and Signora Stefanini be invited to the Official Reception, etc.

All was effected, and, on the night, I waited on the wharf for my invited guests. Up bubbled a red Alfa Romeo convertible and the Consul emerged in tight pants, a silk shirt almost open to the waist and significant gold chains. Signora Stefanini was in the super model category.

I escorted them up the gangway of STALWART to the reception line of gawking COs commanding officers and the Admiral, where I made a succinct resume of Sr Stefanini's relevance – HMAS STUART, etc., to which the Admiral replied "Don't go on about it. I had to get out of my bunk for his father!" N E McDonald was a Midshipman in STUART in 1940.

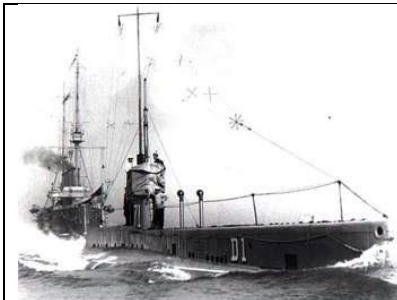
I subsequently learned that Gustavo had been to Australia in the 1960s, had been dined by the Naval Board and presented with the aforementioned crest.

Stefano Stefanini has gone on to greater things - he has been Diplomatic Adviser to the President of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano, Italian Permanent Representative at NATO and Deputy Chief of Mission at the Italian Embassy in Washington. He had previously served at the United Nations in New York and in Moscow.

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/about/experts/list/stefano-stefanini>

He was recently appointed the Deputy Chairman of Finmeccanica, somewhat in his father's footsteps.

There is a Gustavo Stefanini Centre for Advanced Robotics, established in La Spezia, in memory of Gustavo. <http://www.cgsrobotics.it/?lang=en>



Italian Submarine GONDAR



A manned Torpedo with Crew members



A maiale breaking the surface

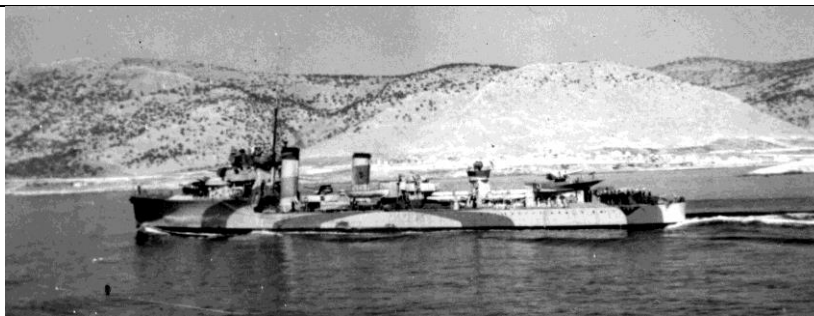
Images sourced from the UK Telegraph Newspaper, 20 August 2015



Original 1939 members of the 1st Flotilla of the frogmen based special forces unit, the MAS. Probably taken in 1945. Gustavo Stefanini is 2nd from right



Gustavo Stefanini, 1980



HMAS STUART (1) near Greece 1940



HMAS STUART (1), battle honour board

