IMPONDERABLE BUT NOT INEVITABLE

Warfare in the 20th Century

MALCOLM H. MURFETT

Greenwood
PUBLISHING GROUP

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PRAEGER
An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC CLIO

Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Imponderable but not inevitable: warfare in the 20th century / Malcolm H. Murfett, editor.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-313-37882-9 (hard copy: alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-313-37883-6 (ebook)
1. Military history, Modern—20th century. 2. Naval history, Modern—20th century.
3. Military art and science—History—20th century. 4. Naval art and science—History—
20th century. 5. Military policy—History—20th century. 6. Strategy—History—20th century.
7. Uncertainty—Political aspects—History—20th century. I. Murfett, Malcolm H.
D431.I47 2009
355.0209'04—dc22 2009029584

ISBN: 978-0-313-37882-9
EISBN: 978-0-313-37883-6

14 13 12 11 10 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.
Visit www.abc-clio.com for details.

Praeger
An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC
130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911
Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper ♾

Manufactured in the United States of America

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Preface

OUR APPRECIATION OF imponderability and the notion of the improbable occurring when one least expects it have been given a massive jolt by the breathtaking success of *The Black Swan,* Nassim Nicholas Taleb's highly idiosyncratic but immensely stimulating book on the subject. While this book has no bell curves to circumvent and probably won't be translated into forty languages, as the fictional Yevgenia Krasnova's *A Story of Recursion* was supposed to have been, it still represents a fascinating plunge into a world that we habitually take for granted, namely, life and what happens to us when we are brought face to face with the more violent aspects of it.[1]

A resort to arms is always unfortunate, for it is an expression of failure—a failure shared by all those who have created the problem in the first place or by their often unworthy successors. Those who take up arms do so, of course, for a variety of causes. Perhaps not all believe that warfare will cut the Gordian Knot that talk has failed to do, but for whatever reason they prefer violent action to consensual diplomacy. If history teaches us anything—and it ought to—warfare rarely solves anything and often complicates the mess that preceded it. Unfortunately, this realization is often subordinated to a vigorous belief that "this time" it will be different. One senses that the advocates of war firmly believe that victory on "this occasion" will be theirs. Past failures can be safely attributed to unwillingness on the part of certain belligerents to take drastic action against their foes. If one eliminates the constraints imposed by social conscience or moral imperatives, therefore, the act of war can be successfully applied and victory won, or so the theory goes. Warfare when applied without restraint is seen by these individuals as being truly

predictable. If a certain force is applied to a particular situation, the result will be x. It almost smacks of laboratory experiments at school. These individuals, whether officers in military fatigues or civilians in august positions of power, are so convinced that they have the secret of future success in their hands that it becomes enormously difficult to deflect them from their task of putting that theory into practice and waging war. Their confidence in a military solution to a vexatious problem is often catching, particularly if all other avenues to a peaceful resolution to a crisis have continued to fail.

Launching a military strike at one's enemy may appear to be a logical progression from a situation of perpetual failure, but the results rarely conform to the policy appreciation drawn up for it in the first place. Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke, who knew a thing or two about warfare, was inclined to think that military plans hardly survived the first shot of a campaign.[2] This volume of essays helps to explain why warfare isn't so easily reduced to a quantitative and qualitative model that will bear a set of predictable results. Instead the clinically methodical approach to war soon dissolves into something that resembles chaos theory. People don't perform as they are supposed to under all circumstances; equipment doesn't always work flawlessly; mistakes happen; nature intervenes to wreak havoc with man's plans; accidents occur when they are not supposed to; ill health inhibits decision making; and luck or fate takes over without recourse to any sort of logic.

Inevitability is also a much overworked and misused concept. Few things in life are inevitable. Benjamin Franklin thought that there was little beyond death and taxes that fell into this category, but blessed by confirmatory hindsight, some people who ought to know better (sports commentators particularly) are apt to resort to the inevitability syndrome with astonishing facility. Unerring foresight is an unlikely virtue to possess. I can't imagine many people being right 90 percent of the time, and the idea that any human being can always be right about everything he or she predicts is too weird and uncanny to even contemplate for more than a few nanoseconds. Our opening essay looks at four situations in which the inevitability concept looked as though it would apply in advance but didn't in reality.

While such case studies should puncture the myth of inevitability, they fail to do so because there are plenty of instances where things have happened as they were predicted to. In sport as in life, favorites do win more often than not, but even so. sometimes an extraordinary upset occurs that catches many by surprise. In the rubric of Taleb, a "black swan" appears out of nowhere to confound both punters and specialist experts alike.

Peter J. Dennis's essay on the extraordinary clash between the light cruiser HMAS *Sydney* and the German armed raider *Schiff 41 Kormoran* in November 1941 reveals the inexplicable nature of warfare and exposes more of a black hole than a black swan. What happened when these two vessels met to condemn them both to a watery grave remains pure guesswork. What

isn't speculation any longer is where they settled on the bottom of the Indian Ocean off the coast of Western Australia.

Daniel K. R. Crosswell's lucid and rather disturbing portrait of General George S. Patton Jr. removes us from the realm of the black swan and into an examination of the murky psychological reaches of military leadership. Brilliant but mad, Patton proved to be a truly inspirational figure for those whom he commanded and the most resolute opponent that any adversary might care to have. Whatever his undoubted military gifts were—he would claim a "sixth sense" that enabled him to grasp the initiative instantly and exploit the military situation as it was unfolding—more often than not he appeared to be an accident waiting to happen. While we have nowadays become conditioned to recognizing that our heroes have feet of clay, there was much about Patton that still almost defies belief. Imponderable undoubtedly; a genius possibly; he was almost invariably larger than life.

For those brought up on the Ultra story and the brilliant (if not decisive) dissemination of OPINTEL in World War II, Brian P. Farrell's absorbing essay on the groping and inchoate nature of Allied intelligence during the period of *Konfrontasi* is a useful corrective. Here in the early to mid-1960s the intelligence picture about the real intentions of the Indonesian leadership was confused to say the least. Nothing looked certain, little was fixed, and much was speculative. Trying to work out what to do to confront such a moving target proved largely beyond even the multifarious capacities of the Allies, a cautionary tale indeed for all concerned.

Although aircraft ultimately came of age during the Second World War and performed an assortment of vital roles in distinctly different theaters of operations, possession of overwhelming air power was never enough to ensure victory in the multifaceted conflicts of the post-1945 world. Christopher Clark's essay in this volume illustrates why air power as a force multiplier wasn't always effective, but, as befits an air historian, he sketches in those instances where it has been applied in the latter years of the century with devastating results. Cliché or not, therefore, one size clearly does not fit all, for even when air power was applied vigorously in the past, the results were far from inevitable.

Geoffrey Till's essay returns to the theme of personal leadership—an imponderable element at the best of times—but stays onshore on this occasion to explore the art of policy management as devised and promulgated by those three radical scions (sirens) of the naval establishment: Fisher, Rickover, and Gorshkov. Vastly different though they were, all three visionary individuals saw themselves as modernizing transformers of the service that they had devoted their life to. All were determined to manage change according to their own principles, and each of them tended to see opposition to their plans as a form of heretical deviance that would have to be thwarted come what may. Unfortunately, such a dictatorial approach ensured that the era of strong, sustained leadership they imposed came at a significant price both for the navy

they tirelessly led and the nation they loyally served. And what of their long-term influence? Read on.

Ronald Spector's paper grapples with the vexatious problem that the Americans experienced in the 1960s and 1970s of attempting to gauge the degree of their success or failure in the Vietnam War. Can such progress be reliably measured? In many ways Vietnam became a litmus test for the inevitability syndrome and the imponderability of war. How could one of the two superpowers suffer defeat at the hands of a much smaller, physically divided, and far poorer Southeast Asian nation? It defied the statistical odds, and, therefore, surely it couldn't be true? Or could it?

Our final essay settles on a whole range of random factors that can inhibit the success or failure of a particular mission, a larger campaign, or even the entire war itself. Most of these imponderable factors can easily be overlooked, ignored, or taken for granted when military action is being contemplated. Even if they are taken into consideration by the war planners, translating the theoretical awareness of their existence into an effective contingency plan for dealing with them in practice is quite another matter. After all, what allowance can be reliably made for such volatile things as "friendly fire," mishaps, and bad luck? What price can be put on extraordinary courage and self-sacrifice, displays of decisive initiative when it's most needed in the heat of battle, or flagrant acts of insubordination caused by hubris or other personal quirks of nature? Add a bout of bad weather, malfunctioning equipment, command failures, and the unexpected to the mix, and the results defy the precision of even the best plans and often make them immediately redundant. Surprise, therefore, remains a key feature of life. Imponderable as well as improbable things happen in war. How one adapts to them remains the key; but who on earth can tell in advance whether that challenge will be met with distinction, mediocrity, or failure?

NOTES

1. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 23–25, 229–252.

2. Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 289.

Acknowledgments

I HAVE FELT for a long time that tertiary institutions could do more to engage the general public than they do at present. Too often communication between the two involves a request for financial assistance from the one to the other. A public outreach program is, therefore, a small but valuable way for a university to give something back to the wider community in its midst, and not just the alumni whose names appear on its database and who have benefited from its teaching and research facilities.

If such a lecture series is going to take off in a positive way, however, it needs an interesting and coherent theme that will attract and retain the interest of the public. Imponderability and the nature of the unexpected had fascinated me even before Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *The Black Swan* made its riveting impact on the international book market. My own work on naval warfare had cemented my interest in the unpredictable and the often overlooked features of warfare and encouraged me to think of "The Imponderables of War" as the theme for the first series of these public lectures.

Armed with a topic, I thought the Department of History at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was well endowed with both the academic and institutional means to offer just such a lecture series to the public, and I was delighted to receive warm and enthusiastic support for this initiative from my colleagues and friends, who helped in various ways to establish the monthly series of talks in September 2006 and make them a great success. This was particularly true of the head of my department, Associate Professor Albert Lau, whose commitment to the series was unwavering throughout. At a time when our financial resources were fairly tight, he still found the departmental

funds to bring in one of our speakers from Canberra. It helped to have him and his deputy, Associate Professor Brian Farrell, on board in an active way.

Christine Khor, the director of the NUS Centre for the Arts, whom I approached in the spring of 2006 with this idea, was keen on the project from the outset. She set aside the Celadon Room in the Cultural Centre as a place where we could hold our talks in the evenings from 7 to 9 P.M. and waived the rental fees for it. Christine's range of contacts from her days in tourist promotion and journalism is vast, and she used her influence with her friends and former colleagues in a number of telling ways.

Significant promotional support was thereafter provided by Foo Su Ling, one of Christine's senior staff members, who could always be relied upon to get the message out to friends of the NUS Museum, NUS alumni, and through the entertainment columns of the *Straits Times* to the general public beyond Kent Ridge. Apart from sourcing the iconic image that became the face of our series on all of our posters and advertising literature, Su also arranged for the cheese and wine that was offered before each lecture began. Sponsorship in liquid form by Top Wines was greatly appreciated by many of our audience, who found Flora Loh's monthly selection of reds and whites evidently much to their taste. Wine and cheese are a very civilized way of starting proceedings in the early evening and gave the lecture series an added touch of class.

No matter how good the marketing and administrative arrangements are for any new undertaking, the most critical feature remains the contributions made by the lecturers themselves. Once again fortune smiled on this enterprise. Apart from Brian Farrell and me from within the Department of History, we also could rely on our astute associate member of staff Dan Crosswell and two distinguished visiting professors, Peter Dennis and Ron Spector, to keep the NUS flag flying. To add to the mix, we were lucky enough to have Geoff Till with us in Singapore during the early months of 2007 when he was a visiting professor in the S. Rajaratnam School of Strategic Studies at the Nanyang Technological University. This meant we only needed to reach beyond the equatorial shores of "One North" to procure Chris Clark from the Australian Department of Defence in Canberra to bring an aerial dimension to our series. These lectures were very well received, and the question-and-answer sessions with our audience afterwards were always lively and very illuminating affairs. This volume of essays represents the product of our labors in this series. I hope you will like them as much as the Singaporean public did.

Finally, it's all very well having a great theme for a book and interesting and evocative essays to buttress the concept, but it still needs a discerning and innovative acquisitions editor to see the strengths and value of the work as clearly as the person promoting the manuscript does. In this and other respects I was fortunate in finding Tim Furnish at Praeger Security International and Steve Catalano at ABC-CLIO, both of whom believed in "the imponderables" and promoted it at every stage. I should also like to extend my thanks to Randy Baldini and his excellent production crew from Cadmus Communications

who made my task as editor much easier than I had any right to expect. I hope it will be the first of a number of projects that we will all be able to work on together in the future.

I feel that the last word of thanks should go to my wife, Ulrike, and our children Marianne, Caroline, Nicolas, and Stephanie for always believing in me and by extension the idea that has come to fruition in this book.

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Abbreviations

A.A.	Antiaircraft
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADFA	Australian Defence Force Academy
AEC	Atomic Energy Commission
AMDA	Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement
ANZ	Archives New Zealand
ANZAM	Australia, New Zealand, and Malaya
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand, United States
A/S	Antisubmarine (bomb)
ASDIC	Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (acoustic detection of underwater objects)
ASV	Antisurface Vessel (radar)
ASW	Antisubmarine Warfare
AURI	Angkatan Udara Republik Indonesia (Indonesian Air Force)
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BAP	Beatrice Ayer Patton
BG	Brigadier General
BPI	Badan Pusat Intelijen (Central Intelligence Agency, Indonesia)
CAB	Cabinet Office Papers (UK)
CCO	Clandestine Communist Organization (Sarawak)
CDS	Chief of Defence Staff

CGS	Chief of General Staff
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.)
CINCFE	Commander-in-Chief, Far East
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific
CO	Colonial Office Papers (UK)
COL	Colonel
COMUSMACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CRO	Commonwealth Relations Office
CSR	Commonwealth Strategic Reserve
DC	Defence Committee (Australia)
DEA	Department of External Affairs (Australia)
DEFE	Ministry of Defence Papers (UK)
DGFP	Documents on German Foreign Policy
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency (U.S.)
DO	Dominions Office (UK)
DOPC	Defence and Overseas Policy Committee Papers (UK)
FEC	Far East Command
FHW	Fremde Heere West (German Intelligence Evaluation Service, Western Section)
FO	Foreign Office Papers (UK)
FUSAG	First U.S. Army Group
GC&CS	Government Code and Cypher School
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
GCM	George Catlett Marshall
GEN	General
GI	General Infantry
GSP	George S. Patton, Jr.
GSP, Sr.	George S. Patton, Sr.
GVN	Government of Vietnam
HES	Hamlet Evaluation Survey
HMAS	His Majesty's Australian Ship
HMS	Her/His Majesty's Ship
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IAF	Independent Air Force (UK)
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy

JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee (UK)
JICFE	Joint Intelligence Committee, Far East (UK)
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
LTG	Lieutenant General
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam (U.S.)
MAD	Magnetic Anomaly Detection
M-day	Malaysia Day
MG	Major General
M.I.A.	Missing in Action
MI5	Security Service (UK)
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service (UK)
MTB	Motor Torpedo Boat
MV	Motor Vessel
NA	National Archives (UK)
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NRB	Nuclear Reactors Branch
NUS	National University of Singapore
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht
OPINTEL	Operational Intelligence
PGM	Precision Guided Munitions
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PKI	Partai Komunis Indonesia (Communist Party of Indonesia)
POL	Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RANC	Royal Australian Naval College
RDF	Radio Direction Finding
REPT	Ruth Ellen Patton Totten
RMA	Revolution in Military Affairs
RN	Royal Navy
RP	Robert Patton
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (German Security Department)
SEATO	South East Asia Treaty Organization
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force

SSBN	Ballistic Missile Submarine
SSN	Nuclear Attack Submarine
SUPP	Sarawak United People's Party
TNI	Tentara Nasional Indonesia (National Army of Indonesia)
TNI-AL	Tentara Nasional Indonesia–Angkatan Laut (National Navy of Indonesia)
TNKU	Tentara Nasional Kalimantan Utara (North Borneo National Army)
UN	United Nations
USAAF	U.S. Army Air Forces
USAMHI	U.S. Army Military History Institute
USN	U.S. Navy
USS	U.S. Ship
VC	Viet Cong
VLR	Very Long Range
VMI	Virginia Military Institute
WWI	World War I

1

Casting Doubt on the Inevitability Syndrome

Malcolm H. Murfett

INEVITABILITY IS A much misused concept, and foregone conclusions are not quite as guaranteed as we may think they are. Four case studies taken from the European theater of the Second World War will help to illustrate this point. In all cases the odds were stacked in favor of only one possible outcome, and yet in each case those odds were spectacularly overturned. If examining these incidents does nothing more, it should help to confirm the fact that things are not quite as inevitable as they are often claimed to be.

A start can be made at the extreme western end of the Mediterranean Sea, where the famous rocky fortress of Gibraltar, a modest 8.5 square kilometers in surface area, shared a land border with Spain, which had been coveting it ever since the Treaty of Utrecht had given it to Britain in 1713. Over the years Gibraltar had become an important naval base for the British, a role enhanced by the growing commercial vitality of the Mediterranean once the Suez Canal had been opened for business in 1869. Its key strategic value, however, derived almost exclusively from its geographical position, since possession of the Rock of Gibraltar and the vast array of ordnance built on it ensured that the British would continue to exercise dominant control over all surface shipping passing through the narrow chokepoint of the Strait in either direction.[1]

While Gibraltar was a more than useful asset to have in peacetime, in time of war it was likely to be crucial, not least for its role as an assembly port for convoys. By the late 1930s, however, the future prospects for continuing British rule over the Rock looked extremely bleak. After a merciless three-year civil war in Spain, victory had gone to the Nationalists—the fascist grouping led by Francisco Franco and the Falangists—with more than a little help from their ideological partners in crime Italy and Germany.[2] Thereafter, it appeared inconceivable to many that Spain, which had looked enviously at Gibraltar for more than two centuries, would not hesitate to burnish its fascist

pretensions by using military might to overrun the rocky fortress and block off the British from using the Mediterranean. Franco's sympathy for the Axis cause had already been shown by his adhesion to the Anti-Comintern Pact in February 1939, and his eulogizing of Mussolini and admiration for Hitler's achievements were already well known.

For the British and their French allies, therefore, the situation was especially grave when the European phase of the Second World War opened in September 1939. It became even worse once the Italians had joined the fray on 10 June 1940, and the French had left it in demoralizing defeat less than a fortnight later. Standing alone against the marauding Axis powers and with the Japanese making increasingly threatening noises in East Asia, the British Commonwealth looked acutely vulnerable. Savaged on the high seas by the U-boat war, the British military forces were in no position to lose the Mediterranean and Middle East as well. And yet a Spanish takeover of Gibraltar would almost certainly ensure that they would. Worse still, if Franco let Hitler use Gibraltar as an air base for the Luftwaffe, German bombers would be situated to pick off British mercantile shipping that was using the route around the Cape of Good Hope to get goods and supplies from Asia and the Australasian dominions to the home country.[3] Given the fact that Franco was already expressing his support for the Axis cause by permitting German U-boats to use Spanish territorial waters for a range of profitable activities, allowing German reconnaissance aircraft to fly with Spanish markings, and passing on Allied shipping information to the German intelligence services, the early entry of Spain into the war and the rapid demise of Gibraltar as an Allied naval base looked inevitable. Confirmation of this likelihood seemed evident when officially sanctioned cries of ''Gibraltar espanol'' were to be heard during the Civil War parade in Madrid on 18 July 1940.[4]

Despite Gibraltar's vulnerability and the air of impending doom that hung over its future, things didn't pan out in the way many political commentators and military analysts might have suspected that they would. Why? A clue lies in the Spanish caudillo himself. Franco was the arch pragmatist. Although he was almost wholly identified with the Axis cause and had no sympathy for democracy or its supposed virtues, he knew that his economically ravaged country was on the cusp of a famine.[5] While he could talk of joining in common cause with his Axis partners, he knew he couldn't commit himself to active entry into the war on their side unless he received a mountain of economic and military resources from them to make up for the very real shortages that the Spanish people were experiencing at this time. If the Germans couldn't or wouldn't provide him with these resources and commit themselves to underwriting a slew of Spanish colonial claims in North Africa, Franco was prepared to listen to a series of economic overtures from London and Washington.[6]

Franco was more than just a poseur. While far from being a genius in anything, he was to prove very adept in playing off one side in the war

against the other to the maximum benefit of Spain itself. Both sides courted him because he held an invaluable bargaining chip, the future of Gibraltar, which the British sought to retain and the Axis powers desperately wanted under fascist control once the Luftwaffe had lost the Battle of Britain to the RAF and Hitler had been forced to postpone the cross-Channel invasion of the British Isles (Operation Sealion). Hitler instructed General Jodl and Grand Admiral Raeder on 6 September 1940 that a military plan for conquering Gibraltar must be devised (Operation Felix). It would be given further impetus during the autumn by growing problems for the Axis war effort in the Balkans and by the inconclusive negotiations that bedeviled German-Spanish relations in these months.[7]

Franco's personal envoy was his brother-in-law Rámon Serrano Súñer, the interior minister and noted Germanophile.[8] He did not make a favorable impression on his German hosts in Berlin when he began these talks in mid-September by setting out Franco's extensive shopping list of desired economic, military, and territorial items as the minimum price for Spanish entry into the war.[9] Franco's prohibitive price did not come down in the following month, as could be seen from his tortuous round of talks with Hitler when the two leaders and their staffs met at the small border town of Hendaye in the Pyrenees on 23 October 1940. Meeting in Hitler's suite of railway carriages, Franco reiterated the fact that he wasn't prepared to enter the war or attack Gibraltar at this stage unless he received a prodigious military and economic bonanza in advance of this action.[10] Refusing to be bullied, Franco adopted an intransigent stance that frustrated the German dictator and made him so exasperated at the inconclusive nature of the interview that he was heard to mutter to one of his aides: ''*mit diesem kerl ist nichts zu machen*.''[11]

Who would have thought that the limited but underestimated caudillo would have been able to stand up to the demonic genius Hitler in this way? Although dismissive of Franco as only an average officer and a subaltern in temperament, Hitler had been unable to persuade him to do his bidding. On the contrary, Franco had proved to be extremely elusive and quite impossible to pin down to any fixed commitment. Hitler was to observe afterwards in a message to Mussolini that negotiating with the Spanish dictator had been such an excruciating experience he would prefer to have three or four of his own teeth removed rather than go through it again.[12]

As his mind turned toward a forthcoming invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa), Hitler was reluctant to transfer so many economic and military resources to Spain when they would be needed on the Eastern Front. His views were shared by his commander-in-chief Field Marshal Walter von Brauschitsch and the chief of the Wehrmacht's General Staff Franz Halder, who went on record as stating that ''Spain's domestic situation is so rotten as to make her useless as a potential partner.''[13]

While Franco's price for turning his alleged neutrality (actually nonbelligerency) into a combative presence in the war may, therefore, have been too

high for the Germans to pay, the British Allies and their American friends, knowing what was at stake in retaining control of Gibraltar, were prepared to go to considerable economic lengths to provide Spain with some of the wheat, cotton, gasoline, aviation fuel, fertilizers, chemicals, and agricultural machinery that he needed, while blockading all German military supplies from entering any Spanish ports.[14] Because he didn't have the means to conduct active warfare, this aid reduced Franco's truculence to some extent, and he remained dependent on the economic imports that the Allies (particularly the Americans) could provide to him.

Where Hitler and Ribbentrop, the foreign minister, had failed, Admiral Canaris, the head of the Abwehr (Military Intelligence Division), was deputed to go to Spain, meet Franco, and gain his permission for German troops and their supplies to begin entering the country on 10 January as a prelude to launching the attack on Gibraltar (Operation Felix). Canaris was no more successful than the führer and his foreign minister had been in persuading Franco to agree to an attack being made on Gibraltar. Felix was postponed, only to be replaced in May 1941 by Operation Isabella, a plan for a wholesale German attack on Spain and the Rock of Gibraltar if the British seized either Tangier or landed in Portugal. It too would be shelved and replaced by an OKW directive, Operation Ilona, on 29 May 1942, should Anglo-American forces have the temerity of landing in French and Spanish Morocco or on the Iberian peninsula itself.[15] Ilona, which was renamed Gisela as a result of a security breach, shared the same fate as Felix, being progressively postponed and finally abandoned altogether. Without the consent of Franco, therefore, Hitler could not secure his desired objective of sealing off the western end of the Mediterranean. Dönitz, Raeder's successor at the helm of the Kriegsmarine, was still pushing for an attack on Gibraltar and a closing of the Strait as late as May 1943. It did no good. Gisela became another casualty of Franco's guile.[16]

Franco had played his cards very well. He was canny and alert to changes in the tempo of the war and began to sense in the closing months of 1940 that an Axis victory in the war could no longer be guaranteed. It didn't stop him from identifying with his ideological cronies, or indeed from either sending volunteer units of Falangists (known as the Blue Division) to fight in Russia in July 1941, or arranging for 100,000 Spanish workers to go to Germany a month later, but it was sufficient for him to stop short of fully embracing the prospect of entering the war on their side.[17] Instead he allowed himself to be bought off by the Allies. In the end, they alone could provide him with the economic resources that Spain so desperately needed.[18] They obviously wouldn't provide Franco with military aid that could then be used against them, nor would they agree to his outrageous colonial demands, but they did enough with their economic aid to improve matters domestically and win his commitment to remaining out of the war for its entire duration.[19] Having gone from neutrality to nonbelligerency in June 1940, Spain returned to relative neutrality in 1944. Who would have thought it possible?[20]

Another Mediterranean redoubt, the island fortress of Malta—all 316 square kilometers of it—was another vital British naval base, and it shared Gibraltar's fate in another way too: it was vulnerable to enemy attack not least because it was only 92 kilometers south of the Italian island of Sicily. Once Italy had joined the war in June 1940, the threat to the island's three serviceable airfields and the main naval dockyard in the Grand Harbour at Valetta was quite obviously substantial. Although the British government had no intention of writing off Malta and was willing to defend it for the foreseeable future, few even in Whitehall could have reasonably expected this island to survive if the Italians and their Axis partners decided that it shouldn't. Even Churchill, who remained among the most bullish of all the Allied political and military elite, sensed that if the Italians didn't invade Malta, their bombers could make it untenable as a major naval base. On 3 May 1940, more than five weeks before the first bombs began falling on Malta on 11 June, the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, under the command of Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham (ABC to his friends and subordinates), had prudently sailed east to Alexandria, leaving behind only four submarines to guard the waters of the island. As the danger signs increased and signals intelligence—yielded through the brilliant work of the cryptanalysts at Bletchley Park—pointed to an early entry into the war by the Italians, all merchant shipping was forbidden to use the Mediterranean on 16 May 1940.[21]

Mussolini, the archetypal poseur and role model for Franco, wanted to enter the war on the winning side. He had no intention of fighting a long costly war, not least because he didn't think Italy was sufficiently prepared for such a thing, and he didn't believe one was necessary in any case. As he told Marshal Badoglio on 26 May: ''I assure you the war will be over in September, and that I need a few thousand dead so as to be able to attend the peace conference as a belligerent.''[22] Hardly inspiring leadership, but what do you expect from an exploitative bully?

Rather than invade Malta, the Italian service chiefs decided that the defenses of the island could best be reduced by aerial bombardment and that an amphibious invasion could come much later, when the island had been bombed into rubble and its offensive capability had been totally eclipsed. It was not to be. Despite bombing the island 2,154 times over the course of the next twelve months, the Italians were no closer to invading Malta in mid-1941 than they had been when they had joined the war on 10 June 1940.[23] This was surprising, to say the least, as the island's existence and the naval and air forces present on it remained a constant irritant to their Italian opponents. It was amazing what half a dozen light cruisers and a similar number of destroyers supported by a couple of submarine flotillas could do to sabotage the Italian war effort both at sea and in the air. Along with the fighter and bombing planes based on Malta, these naval forces contributed to the attacks made on the Italian supply routes to their Axis forces in North Africa, sinking 851,861 tons of shipping, together with all their supplies. Put into

some sort of perspective, the Italians lost an overall total of 16.3 percent of all their shipping using these convoyed supply routes over a three-year period from June 1940. Out of this total, Malta's contribution to those losses was a not insignificant 9.45 percent.[24] Rommel could ill afford to lose this amount of materiel. It didn't guarantee he would lose the North African campaign, but there is little doubt that it hurt it. As if that were not sufficient, the aircraft based on Malta continued to undertake vital reconnaissance duties for the Allied war effort. Furthermore, the continued use of the Maltese airfields meant that they could be used as a vital staging post and refueling center for those aircraft that were in transit and scheduled to go on to the Middle and Far East. As Douglas Austin points out: ''It is no coincidence that Rommel's two successful campaigns in early 1941 and early 1942 were carried out when Malta was neutralized by Luftwaffe attack and supplies flowed freely, and that British successes were achieved in periods of greater Malta pressure on the stream of Axis supplies.''[25]

Given Malta's steadfast commitment to the Allied cause, why didn't Mussolini or Hitler decide to finish the island off, as Marshal Graziani, Grand Admiral Raeder, and Field Marshal Erwin Rommel suggested they should?[26] Again, surely, wasn't it inevitable that they would? One way of doing so, of course, was to find some way of preventing the replenishment of the island's aerial defenses. Usually twice a month the Allies sent at least one of their aircraft carriers based in Gibraltar to the Balearic Islands, where they would fly off substantial numbers of Hurricanes (in 1941) and Spitfires (in 1942) bound for Malta and the defense of the island.[27] Strangely, no systematic attempt was ever made by the Italian submarine arm, let alone its surface fleet, to interfere with these supply runs. Italian and German fighter planes would try to mount an attack against the incoming aircraft once they were in Italian airspace and claimed some victims, but most of the Allied aircraft making these journeys landed in a relatively serviceable state.[28]

After demurring on the prospect of invading Malta for eighteen months, largely because the leading officers in the Regia Marina Italiana (the Royal Italian Navy) had been reluctant to commit themselves to such a hazardous amphibious operation against what they sensed would be an obdurate foe, the Italian High Command, under pressure from their German equivalents, resumed planning for the elimination of the island at the end of 1941. A joint plan was devised for an invasion of Malta, known to the Germans by the operational codename Fall Herkules and as Operazione C3 to the Italians.[29] Despite the renewed impetus to wipe Malta off the map, the project was deferred until after Rommel had launched his attack against the British Eighth Army at the Gazala Line in late May 1942. Once he had seized Tobruk on 21 June, the operation was postponed again in favor of an all-out attack on Egypt (the Battle of Alamein), which he was to launch later in the year.[30] In the meantime the siege of Malta continued. Axis confidence that the island could not be sustained by the Allies in the long run remained high, a feeling boosted

undoubtedly by Rommel's success in North Africa. As the Afrika Korps began homing in on Egypt and looked only weeks away from seizing Alexandria and sealing off the Suez Canal in the autumn of 1942, the Italian High Command complacently assumed that Malta would eventually fall into the lap of the Axis forces without any need for an amphibious invasion being mounted against it.[31]

Little did they know Churchill. He was absolutely determined that Malta should not follow Singapore and fall to the enemy. He inspired and cajoled his service chiefs both at home and in the Mediterranean to continue supplying Malta regardless of the dangers involved and the losses that must be borne in doing so. It was estimated that Malta required 40,000 tons of food and supplies a month. Without them, a system of rationing wouldn't work for long and the island's population would eventually use up their stockpiled supplies and be starved out. Under such circumstances, surrender would have been almost inevitable. Churchill was determined that this scenario wouldn't be played out, and his hand can therefore be seen in the mounting of relief convoys, such as those of Halberd, Harpoon, Pedestal, Substance, and Vigorous, when the going got rough in 1941–1942.[32] It isn't an exaggeration to state that his contribution to the island's resistance was crucial in ensuring that the Allies didn't just cut and run from Malta when most observers assumed they would. Despite the fact that over 11,000 tons of bombs had fallen on Malta in the first five months of 1942, causing damage and destruction on a wide scale sufficient to drive the light surface fleet from Valetta and the submarine arm from Lazaretto Creek in April, the Allied air forces stubbornly and defiantly remained.[33] They were able to do so, of course, as a result of outstanding radar facilities and the strong A.A. gun capability that the Allies had installed around Valetta even before the Italian war had begun; the superb air-handling ability of the fighter pilots based at Luqa, Hal Far, and Ta Kali; the Ultra signals intelligence windfalls from the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) that warned of impending air raids; and the quite outstanding repair teams that kept all the airfields and the maintenance base at Kalafrana somehow in working order amidst all the chaos that was going on.[34] Who could have believed it possible? It stood to reason that Malta couldn't survive in the face of such a sustained Axis attack. And yet survive it did, and with Rommel's defeat at El Alamein and the launching of the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa in November 1942 (Operation Torch), the siege was lifted and the tide turned as far as Malta was concerned. Thereafter it was to play a decisive role in the buildup for the Allied invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky) in July 1943, providing more cause for Hitler to curse the Italians for failing to crush Malta at the outset of the war in 1940, and supplying further proof, if such was needed, for Rommel to look back and lament that Malta rather than Greece ought to have been taken by the Axis forces in the spring of 1941.[35]

So what did it cost the Allies to maintain this island fortress while the Italians remained in the war? From the naval arm of the services, the

following were sunk: two aircraft carriers (*Ark Royal* and *Eagle*), five light cruisers, nineteen destroyers, a 40,000-ton floating dock, and the 10,000-ton semitanker *Breconshire*. Of the nearly eighty submarines that were operationally based at Manoel Island near Sliema for some part of the war, at least forty were lost. Among those naval vessels that were damaged were three aircraft carriers (*Furious, Illustrious,* and *Indomitable*), the battleship *Nelson*, the monitor *Centurion*, eleven light cruisers, and at least a score of destroyers. If one adds the rest of the minor classes of warship, the auxiliaries and other vessels that were either sunk or damaged to this list, the total number of ships that paid some sort of price for keeping Malta in the war far exceeds, as Tony Spooner tellingly indicates, the total strength of the Royal Navy in the 1990s.[36] As far as the Royal Air Force was concerned, it lost 547 aircraft in the air and another 160 on the ground. Amazingly, perhaps only 1,486 Maltese civilians lost their lives in the total of 3,340 enemy air raids that were conducted over the island—testimony to the success of the deep shelters that had been constructed to protect the civilian population from the torrid nature of the bombing blitz. Their endurance and the astonishing resilience of those fighting to defend them were recognized by the awarding of the George Cross, the highest civilian award for gallantry, in April 1942 by His Majesty King George VI.[37] At the time the award was conferred upon the island, it was facing its greatest peril. Would gallantry be enough to ensure its survival? It looked exceedingly doubtful. But war, that ultimate imponderable, would tear up the inevitable script in any case and dictate a quite different and unexpected conclusion.

One incident that combines impertinence and incompetence in roughly equal measure to shake the inevitability syndrome occurred for the most part in British coastal waters in February 1942. What became known as the ''Channel Dash'' involved the extraordinary escape of two mighty battleships—*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*—and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* from the French Atlantic port of Brest into the busiest waterway in the world, the English Channel, through the narrow Strait of Dover, where the coast of Kent and that of the Pas de Calais are little more than 37 kilometers (or roughly 20 nautical miles) apart at their narrowest point, and on up through the southern North Sea and finally into the safety of German waters and sanctuary: at the naval base of Wilhelmshaven in the Jade estuary for the *Scharnhorst* and at Brunsbuttel in the mouth of the River Elbe for her sister ship *Gneisenau* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*.[38] This is a story that almost defies belief. After withstanding repeated bombing raids over the course of the eleven months that the two battleships were holed up at Brest, Vice Admiral Ciliax, the commanding admiral of battleships, sent a coded signal to Hitler requesting permission to break out of the harbor at Brest with his ships and make a dash for home in the dark on the evening of 11 February 1942, accompanied by half a dozen destroyers and a number of S-boats (fast MTBs). Hitler, sensing that neither Ciliax nor his surface fleet was doing much good to the Axis cause by

being marooned in a French port, approved of the plan and encouraged him to begin at his earliest convenience.[39]

Despite the strength of his naval force, Ciliax faced a hazardous journey to safety. Even if he broke out of Brest and evaded the Allied naval vessels waiting outside the harbor for just such an eventuality, the first part of the journey home would take him around the tip of the French Atlantic coast to Cherbourg in Normandy, a distance of roughly 240 nautical miles (444 kilometers). Once there he had a further 120 nautical miles (222 kilometers) to go to reach the Dover Strait. Ciliax knew he could do one or other of these two legs in darkness, but not both.[40] Vice Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the architect of Operation Dynamo (the evacuation of Dunkirk) and in command of the Dover station, knew that too and was convinced that no sane person would take these heavy ships through the busy and narrow Strait in the hours of daylight. It would be sheer madness and tempting fate. He suspected that German naval officers were too disciplined to do such crazy things. Really? For once Ramsay was wrong. Ciliax was prepared to gamble, and Hitler expected him to succeed in his quest because he thought the aerial threat posed by Coastal Command, the Fleet Air Arm, and Bomber Command had been exaggerated and that British military decision making was too ponderous to react to a crisis with élan and dispatch.[41] How right he was on occasion.

Delayed for at least ninety minutes by an Allied air raid that had taken place on Brest earlier in the evening, Ciliax managed to clear the harbor at 2245 hours (10:45 P.M.) on a pitch black night and move off into the calmness of the open sea completely undetected by the Allies. Twelve hours later his force still remained unspotted by the enemy. Equipment failure on two of the three Coastal Command aircraft patrolling the Channel—in this case their vital ASV Mark 2 radar sets—plus a spell of ground fog that saw the third Hudson plane curtail its patrol coincided with Ciliax's dash up the Channel. Ramsay remained oblivious to the equipment failures. No one from Coastal Command had thought or troubled to inform him.[42]

Bad weather intervened elsewhere to restrict his options still further. Thick snow had fallen on Norfolk overnight, carpeting its airfields and making them inhospitable places to land. As a result, fourteen Beaufort torpedo bombers that were due to be transferred southward remained in Scotland until conditions improved. Ramsay could have done with them on 12 February. German jamming of British radar stations had begun at 0920 hours and immediately aroused suspicions that something was afoot. But what was it? A reconnaissance mission spotted what was taken to be a convoy of twenty-five to thirty vessels, but Ramsay received no word that the three heavy ships were in it. It was only at 1125 hours that he finally discovered that Ciliax's force was under way.[43]

While the late news wasn't ideal, it stood to reason that the German ships would now come under sustained attack both at sea and from the air as they moved up toward the narrowest part of the Dover Strait. At least that is what

anyone would have a right to expect. Did it happen? After a long-distance torpedo attack by five MTBs from Dover had proved futile, Ramsay pressed six lumbering Swordfish torpedo bombers into action. Despite the exemplary courage of their pilots, they were ruthlessly destroyed by the guns of the German fleet.[44] What was left? Seven torpedo-carrying Beauforts based at Portsmouth—except that three of those were not immediately serviceable. None of the remaining four managed to rendezvous with their fighter escorts; two, impatient at the delay, left of their own volition, leaving the other two to make the best of a very poor piece of aerial coordination. In the end none of the four knew that they were supposed to attack three heavy ships. They had been bizarrely instructed instead to attack three large enemy merchantmen—a rather different quarry from the *Scharnhorst, Gneisenau,* and *Prinz Eugen*—particularly since the mythical merchant vessels were supposedly doing between 8 and 10 knots, whereas Ciliax's warships were making 27 knots at this time. Why they had been so ordered is quite unfathomable. Unfortunately, by basing their calculations on their preflight briefing, the Beauforts began looking in the wrong place in the Strait and obviously didn't find what they were looking for.[45]

After this shambles, things could only get better. Or could they? Once the other three Beauforts from Portsmouth finally got into the air, they made a beeline for Ciliax's force. They found the *Gneisenau* and *Prinz Eugen* and attacked them without hitting either ship.[46] By this time a thaw had set in and the Beauforts from Scotland eventually landed at their new bases in Norfolk. Coastal Command sent them on to the airbase at Manston in Kent to meet up with their fighter escorts and a group of Hudson bombers who would lead them to the German ships. When the Beauforts arrived at Manston at 1450 hours (2:50 P.M.), they found the Hudsons already circling the airfield. Knowing that they should form up behind them, they attempted to do so, but every time they went in behind the Hudsons the latter circled round to back up the Beauforts! It was, as David Hamer puts it succinctly, ''pure farce,'' but it took 30 minutes to resolve. Eventually the commanding officer of the Beauforts set course for the German ships and took his squadron of nine planes with him. Six of the Hudsons went with them, but the rest continued to aimlessly circle the airfield before retiring from the scene. Fourteen of the fifteen planes found the German ships but didn't succeed in hitting any of them, and one nearly attacked the British destroyer *Worcester*, which had been badly damaged in an earlier attack on the German foe that had been beaten off.[47]

While this was going on, the commander-in-chief of Bomber Command, Air Marshal Pierse, was beginning to rue his earlier decision made two days previously to put 100 of his bombers on four hours' notice. When he was informed just before lunchtime that the German ships were on the loose, he didn't have any bombers immediately available to deal with them. If Bomber Command was going to be successful, it would have to drop armor-piercing bombs on the heavy ships, but in order for these to be effective, they needed