

alone—the whole Axis against us. Our cities were being blitzed night after night. Hitler, stopped by the Battle of Britain, was doing what Napoleon did when he also could not cross the Channel, attempting to break out of Europe southwards across the Mediterranean. He had called Italy into the war—Italy with half a million troops on the far side of the Mediterranean—Italy with a battle fleet twice as large as our Mediterranean Fleet. Only one thing could give our Navy a chance to stop the Axis from pouring unlimited men and supplies into North Africa—



[British official Photograph.]

A Swordfish going down into one of Britain's escort carriers. A second aircraft with its crew in charge is waiting.

could keep the ring of sea power round the aggressor and hold him in Europe till the forces of freedom were ready. That was a fleet action in which the Italian superiority in battleships could be decisively reduced.

The battleships cannot attack a battle fleet covered by land-based aircraft. Battleships can only fire 15 miles. The Italian airfields could fire 200. Our need was a capital ship that could fire 200 miles. And in the fleet aircraft carrier, with its death-dealing torpedo-bombers, we had one. On the night of November 11 two squadrons from the "Illustrious" and "Eagle," flying off the "Illustrious," and manned by men who had been practising for just such a chance for years, dived on the Italian battle fleet as it lay asleep under the guns of Taranto. And by next morning the Italian Fleet's two-to-one advantage was down to parity.

Taranto proved, a year before Pearl Harbour, that carrier-borne aircraft, adequately trained and handled, can inflict damage equal to the guns of the strongest battleship and at a far greater range. It reintroduced into war the principle that Nelson taught the Navy—that the best defence for the country is to lay one's ships alongside the enemy and annihilate him. That was what the Swordfish of H.M.S. "Illustrious" did. They had their reward three years later when the Italian Fleet steamed into Malta.

Even when carrier-borne aircraft fail to destroy the enemy's battleships, they can cripple and delay them till their own battleships arrive. This happened at Matapan. It happened too, with the "Bismarck." The strongest ship in the world, after sinking the "Hood," and damaging the "Prince of Wales," was winged by the Swordfish of the "Ark Royal," taking off and flying in the teeth of an Atlantic gale. They left her slowly and helplessly revolving in circles till our ships closed in and finished her off—much to the disappointment of the Swordfish pilots, who were hoping for that pleasure themselves.

Now cast your mind back just one year from to-day. It is the worst time of the Malta convoys and of the Russian convoys, too. The Germans are right up to the Nile Delta. The British-American landings have still to come, and the whole North African coast-line is in Vichy or Axis hands. The Russians are back to the Volga and have suffered terrible losses. The United Nations are grimly holding on till they can stage a come-back. Everything depends on getting convoys through to Russia and Malta, where our aircraft and submarines are alone preventing the Axis from building up invincible strength in Africa. And for days those convoys