



Durand de La Penne

## *Patria e Onore*

"An extraordinary example of courage and geniality" with these words Winston Churchill described an action of an enemy. This man and his comrades, Bianchi, Martellotta, Marino, Marceglia, Schergat, accomplished one of the most effective naval victories of the WW2 without killing anyone. During November 1941 the British Mediterranean Fleet was in a critical situation: only battleships *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*, based at Alexandria, were available. The Italian Navy studied carefully how to take advantage of that: if these two battleships would have been destroyed all the convoys to Lybia could sail safely with an extremely positive effect on the African war. The mission to destroy the British battleship was relied on X Flottiglia Mas. On December 18, submarine *Scirè*, commanded by Junio Valerio Borghese, approached stealthily Alexandria harbour after having overtaken a thousand of difficulties and obstacles. Then were released 3 "*Maiali*" (hogs) or *Slc* (Slow Run Torpedo) driven by Durand de La Penne and his men. Durand and Bianchi's target was the *Valiant*, Marceglia and Schergat's target was the *Queen Elizabeth*, Martellotta and Marino's was a 16.000 tons tanker. After having accomplished the mission, the crew would have met again the *Scirè* to come back home. But the British were not so unwise not to protect adequately their ports: there were everywhere protective metallic nets with explosive charges and sentries. So penetrating the harbour was even harder than expected for the Italian commando. Finally Durand de La Penne and Bianchi overcame the barriers and reached the *Valiant*, but at that moment their *Maiale* sunk to the depth of the port just under the battleship and Bianchi disappeared. Durand de La Penne managed to recuperate alone his maiale with a huge muscular effort and finally hooked it under the battleship's keel. Almost exhausted Durand de La Penne emerged from the depth, found his comrade (fainted for a failure of his scuba equipment), and tried to reach the pier but it was spotted by the sentries and captured. The commando was interrogated by the *Valiant's* officers but they answered only stating their rank and their number. Admiral Cunningham was woken up and informed about the facts: he immediately realized what could happen anytime. He ordered to jail Durand de La Penne and Bianchi into the *Valiant*, well below the floating line, hoping to scare the Italians and thus discovering if the battleships were in danger. Durand de La Penne told Bianchi (of course in Italian) that there was no hope for them but they could die happy because soon the mission would be accomplished (the charge would explode in 3 hours). Some time after a huge explosion was heard: Marceglia and Schergat destroyed tanker *Sagona* and damaged destroyer *Jervis*. After thrilling and long hours Durand de La Penne looked at his watch: 10 minutes to the explosion! He asked to talk to *Valiant* Captain Charles Morgan.

"Captain, I suggest you to evacuate your ship saving your crew's lives: *Valiant* is about to explode in few minutes." said Durand de La Penne.

Morgan asked where the charge was, Durand de La Penne did not answer and was taken again in his cell while the British crew was abandoning the ship. A terrific burst of might shook the *Valiant* but Durand de La Penne could get out (it must be said that the British once again were loyal and did not lock him). All the British crew stood up at his passage. Some minutes after a third huge bang: the *Queen Elizabeth* exploded as well! All the Italians were captured later. On one day of 1945 Bianchi and Durand de La Penne received the Gold Medal for Military Valour and it was appointed to their chests by Vice-admiral Charles Morgan, chief of Mediterranean Fleet and former *Valiant's* captain. Durand de La Penne died in 1992 and his name is now the one of the new Italian super-destroyer class.