HMS Sikh was the twelfth and ‘cheapest’ vessel at £510,046 of the Tribal Class destroyers to be built, having been ordered as part of the 1936 program[i]. Like the rest of her sisters she was originally fitted out with four twin 4.7in guns mounted, and despite being a classed by the London Naval Treaties as a ‘Destroyer leader’, the single set of torpedoes highlight their orientation towards the light cruiser role; but which also meant they were a very balanced, ‘general purpose’, design. This orientation was necessity due the RN’s shortage of cruisers, of ships in general in this period, but in particular cruisers. Principally for the roles of reconnaissance, and to support destroyers engaged in torpedo attacks. This was a class built though with the knowledge that war was coming; something shown most starkly when their displacement is considered. As ‘destroyer leaders’ the Tribals were in theory designed to be 1,850 tons[ii], but in reality upon completion the class varied between 1,959 tons (standard) and 2,519 tons (deep)[iii]; a symptom no doubt of the reality that by 1938 and 1939 when they were commissioned, the Treaties had stopped being so relevant. Anyway, the first action that will be discussed, requires a little fast forward to December 1941, to the Mediterranean.

Whilst escorting convoys was a key role for any destroyer, including those of the Tribal class it was she was acting in the ‘cruiser’ role of surface sweep that Sikh (along with her sister ship HMS Maori, a Dutch ship, HMNS Isaac Sweers, and the Laforey-class destroyer HMS Legion), achieve the victory of the Battle of Cape Bon[v]. In this case, sinking two Italian Light Cruisers which in design were reminiscent of a design
which had been preferred by the then Mediterranean Fleet's command over the Tribal destroyers during their conception(s). What is most interesting about this battle, is that is only really the Tribal destroyers which get involved in fight, Cape Bon was a battle that was over very quickly. However, as the accounts below demonstrate, it was very illustrative both of the capabilities of the RN destroyer force as a whole, and the Tribal's in particular:

The Allied force was steaming south in line ahead at high speed in a narrow channel off Cape Bon between the coast and an Italian minefield when two Italian cruisers were sighted ahead steaming on the same course. Commander Stokes was about to overtake and attack the cruisers, when the latter turned 16 points; he therefore reduced speed to avoid showing a big bow wave, kept on the landward side and successfully avoided being sighted by the enemy. "Sikh" obtained two hits with torpedoes on the leading cruiser, which burst into flames, and attacked the second cruiser so successfully with gun fire that she only fired one ineffective salvo and was destroyed by Legion and Maori. A small destroyer which appeared on "Sikh's" starboard side was engaged with pom-pom and 0.5inch guns and was damaged; a second destroyer, or E-boat, was probably destroyed by the Allied force.

Malta – Cape Bon – Vice Admiral Sir Wilbraham Tennyson Randle Ford, Commanding Officer, HMS Sikh and the Senior Officer of Group I, including HM Ships Legion and Maori and HNMS Isaac Sweers. [vi]

I immediately reduced the speed of the force under my command in order to avoid showing a big phosphorescent bow wave and led inshore so as to get between the enemy and the land, which, I judged, would give me a chance of getting in unobserved. The manœuvre was successful beyond my wildest expectations and after passing the customary warning signals to the ships astern, I engaged the leading cruiser with torpedoes and the second with guns at a range of about one thousand yards. Two of my torpedoes hit the leading ship which immediately burst into flames forward and after, and the second ship fired one salvo from her main
armament (which salvo burst on the foreshore of Cape Bon) before she was silenced by three well directed salvoes from “Sikh” and a torpedo amidships from “Legion”, and she disappeared in a cloud of smoke and I did not see her again. I afterwards engaged a torpedo boat, thought to be of the “Spica” class, with my short range weapons only as she passed so close and at such a high rate of change of bearing that the main armament could not be brought to bear.”

HMS Sikh – Cape Bon – Commander Graham Henry Stokes R.N. [vii]

After your torpedoes had damaged the leading cruiser, “Maori” opened fire with gunfire and a large number of hits were observed on the bridge of the enemy. When she was abeam, “Maori” fired two torpedoes, one of which was seen to hit; the other was unobserved. This cruiser the passed astern in flames and was undoubtedly sinking. The second ship was lost sight of, but a sheet of flame was seen away to port and it was presumed that she was sinking. One torpedo-boat was seen and passed, very close, down “Maori’s” starboard side. Fire from 4.7” guns was opened but was not very successful owing to the very short range. Close range weapons unfortunately jammed. I did not pursue this torpedo-boat as you made the signal to “Dis-engage.”

HMS Maori – Cape Bon – Commander Rafe Edward Courage R.N. [viii]

Rate of fire was critical to this action, just as it had been for Sikh’s sisters at the 2nd Battle of Narvik. However, it was more than just the rate of fire, it was the rate of fire combined with manoeuvrability of the Tribal Class vessels managed to provide the necessary cover, just as it had been theorised they would when they were conceived, for a torpedo attack to be pressed home strongly – aided of course by the cloak of surprise[x]. This attack highlights the potency of an aggressively handled destroyer force; the Tribals, thanks to the confidence of their captains and the esprit de corps of crews, always epitomised this – if any crew could get the best out of their ship it would be a Tribal crew[x]. They didn’t believe they were the elite of the elite, they knew they were. As a result they expected conduct of themselves worthy of that. However, it was in 1942, when Sikh and her crew really demonstrated this. An occasion where the can do attitude of her crew, and fighting strengths of the Tribal design really paid dividend for British success.
The Second Battle of Sirte, is a battle which arouses diverse opinion, as the historian Peter C. Smith makes clear in his work on Laforey-class destroyers, but on one thing they all agree – it was important. It wasn't just another convoy battle. Although one side was the British Convoy, MW10, making an urgent run under the command of the by then Rear Admiral Philip Vian, because Malta was running was once again out of everything. Due to its importance the escort was pretty large, comprised of four light cruisers, an AA cruiser and eighteen destroyers including two Tribal destroyers, Sikh and HMS Zulu. Large then, but weak as due to damages and other problems the convoy had no battleships, and no carriers; so it was entirely dependent upon its destroyers and cruisers. In contrast, the Italian force which confronted the convoy (found thanks in large part to the Axis Mediterranean air dominance in March 1942) was numerically smaller, but far more powerful as it contained a battleship, the Littorio, two heavy cruisers, and ten destroyers. On paper therefore Italian battleships 15in guns out matched and out ranged anything the British had available making an Italian victory all but certain. That was on paper though, Tribal destroyers were made of steel...

During the height of the battle, whilst the British light cruisers were engaged by the Italian heavy cruisers and some of their destroyers, the Littorio tried to work its way around the escort force and get to the convoy. Unfortunately for Littorio this was to an extent successful, this was unfortunate because all that was left in her way was the operationally grouped "5th Division", comprised of HMS Sikh, the Laforey-class HMS Lively, and two "H" class vessels, HMS Hero & Havock. These destroyers, hurled themselves at the battleship and its escorts, Havock was damaged out of action quite quickly.

The remaining three destroyers though, through sheer aggression, willingness to expose themselves to danger, as well as maintaining a constant barrage of fire from any weapons that would bear, straddling the Littorio consistently, managed to hold off the battleship for 40 minutes till reinforcements could arrive and take on the challenge. Sikh was the leader of this division, it was Sikh that had spotted Littorio first, engaging at a range of 16,000 yards. It was Sikh making smoke that provided cover for the convoy and prevented the battleship being able to engage the merchant ships; smoke which was so thick it often prevented the other destroyers from firing.

In this battle Sikh was the epitome of what Tribal had been conceived for, whether fulfilling cruiser or destroyer rolls, they were designed to fight, and perhaps just as importantly lead the fight. In this case a Tribal-class destroyer, Sikh, virtually on her own outfought a ship 18x her displacement. To make use of modern phraseology, she really punched above her weight that day. The lessons therefore that can be drawn from Sikh, is that when building a ship giving it a 'general purpose' or all round capability is a good way to go. Giving the ship some weapons which allow it to be a threat to even the biggest enemies doesn't hurt either. Most importantly though, and especially as many nations seem to be going forward...
with smaller navies of fewer ships, this lesson cannot be overstated, it is the crews that make the ships; Sikh's crew would never have even considered running from Littorio, or doubted for one moment they would win at Cape Bon – because they were RN Destroyermen, and even more so, they were Tribalmen.

References


[iv] TNA – ADM 1/12325 (1942, March 8). HMS “Sikh”, “Maori”, “Legion” and HNLMS “Isaac Sweers”; Sinking of two Italian cruisers off Cape Bon 13th of December 1941; HNMS Isaac Sweers often accompanied the Tribals on operations, in fact it was she which played a crucial role (in spite of a submarine being in the vicinity, stayed stopped for over an hour) in picking up the Laforey Class destroyer HMS Ghurkha’s crew, when the latter was torpedoed; whilst escorting a convoy from Alexandria, along with two other ships from the Battle of Cape Bon team, HMS Legion & the Tribal HMS Maori(TNA – ADM 1/12287 (1942, January 17), Loss of HMS Gurkha)

[v] TNA – ADM 1/8828 (1934-1935), New Construction Programme for Cruisers 1936

[vi] TNA – ADM 1/12325 (1942)

[vii] Ibid

[viii] Ibid

[ix] TNA – ADM 1/8828 (1934-1935)

[x] Some historians argue that it was the aggressiveness of the RN’s destroyer force which was the decisive factor in forcing the European Axis powers to adopt a defensive mind-set (Smith, P. C. (2010), Fighting Flotilla; RN Laforey Class Destroyer in World War II (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Maritime))

[xi] Smith (2010), p. 156


[xiv] Ibid


[xvi] Britannia Naval Histories of World War II, 2013, p. 110
About the Author

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The Tribal class, or Afridi class, were a class of destroyers built for the Royal Navy, Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Australian Navy that saw service in World War II. Originally conceived as a failed design for a light fleet cruiser, the Tribals evolved into fast, powerful destroyers, with greater emphasis on guns over torpedoes than previous destroyers, in response to new designs by Japan, Italy, and Germany. The Tribals were well admired by their crews and the public when they were in service due to their speed and maneuverability.

Notes on class:

The Tribal class destroyers trace their roots to 1934 when the British Admiralty evaluated the threat posed by much larger destroyers being built in Japan, Italy and even Germany than the Royal Navy had. These ships were all around 2000 tons while the British destroyers were closer to 1300 tons. During the second half of 1940 the Royal Navy ships (except the war losses HMS Gurkha and HMS Afridi) had one twin 4.7" gun turret replaced by a twin 4" AA gun turret. The Canadian and Australian ships carried this arrangement upon completion. The original Tribals were a batch of twelve ships built for the Royal Navy in 1905 - 1908 and were the forerunners of the Modern Class of Royal Navy destroyers. Roughly of 1,000 tons displacement. The truth is though HMS Exeter, thanks in large part to her moving assignments, her pre & war time deployments, her successes and her failures, make her the perfect entry point into the RN interwar cruiser story. More importantly than all that though, is the history - HMS Exeter, might have had a short life, but not only did she cram a lot into it, she really lived it – whether it was charging a German commerce raiding pocket battleship or fighting off an air attack, whatever came her way, HMS Exeter could be relied upon to do her level best to. For some, it was a brilliant concept that might have dramatically shortened the First World War and saved millions of lives. For others, it was fundamentally misconceived and doomed to fail. Tribals Class Destroyers (1); the Bravery of HMS Sikh.