THE HMS SULTAN DISASTER AT COMINO

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1868 was a leap year and, on 29 February, the keel of a new Royal Navy broadside ironclad was laid down at Chatham Dock.¹ His Majesty Abdülaziz, 32nd Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, had just completed an official visit to Great Britain, and it was decided to name the new ship Sultan in his honour. Abdülaziz was the first Ottoman Sultan to visit Western Europe, a Royal tour which included the visit to England, where he was made a Knight of the Garter by Queen Victoria and shown a Royal Navy Fleet Review.²

Work on the new ironclad proceeded apace and she was launched on 31 May 1870. The design of Sultan, by Mr. (later Sir) Ernest J. Reed, was based on that of HMS Hercules which had been launched at the same Dockyard in February and completed in November 1868. Like Hercules, Sultan was a central battery ironclad, these being the first two ships built by the Royal Navy with this configuration. Previously, with the exception of some small warships designed only for harbour defence, all ironclad warships had their main armament mounted in broadside batteries. Hercules and Sultan, however, carried their artillery in a centrally-placed box battery. Unlike the battery of the earlier ship, that of Sultan was on two levels: the main deck guns provided broadside fire, with limited ahead fire from the foremost gun.

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². http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abd%C3%B6laziz
while the upper deck guns provided additional broadside fire and could also fire astern, the after gun being mounted on a turntable.

HMS Sultan (Fig. 1) was completed in October 1871 and commissioned at Chatham for the Channel Fleet, in which she served until 1876. She was then posted to the Mediterranean Fleet under the command of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. Following service in the Dardanelles and Egypt, where she sustained casualties during the bombardment of Alexandria, she was posted to the Central Mediterranean.3

![Photo: Giovanni Bonello Collection](image1)

Fig. 1 HMS Sultan in Grand Harbour.

The Sultan Disaster

In 1889, Sultan was at Malta and preparing to carry out torpedo firing practice. Self-propelled torpedoes, a relatively new addition to ordnance used in naval warfare, owe their development to the British engineer Robert Whitehead who was working at Fiume on behalf of Austria, then engaged in hostilities with Italy.4 In late 1869, the Royal Navy invited Whitehead to England to demonstrate his torpedoes, and was so impressed that a batch of torpedoes was ordered. The British Admiralty started production at the Royal Laboratories in Woolwich in 1872.5

On Thursday, 6 March 1889, HMS Sultan, under the command of Captain Ernest Rice, was in the waters south-east of Comino in order to carry out her torpedo firing practice. As Sultan sailed past the South-eastern coast of Comino, the worst happened: she grounded on an uncharted rock 600 yards from shore (Fig. 3). Her bottom was ripped open and she started to take on water. A number of Royal Navy vessels under the command of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, rushed to the scene to assist the grounded vessel, including the Alexandra, Temeraire, Albacore, Landrail, Sampson and Hellespont. They were also joined by the German salvage steamer Burger Wilhelm. Grech's 12" pumps were sent for but by the evening the ship had taken on so much water that the ship had to be abandoned but all the crew was saved. By noon of Friday 8 March, the Sultan was full of water and the Burger Wilhelm was alongside working the centrifugal pumps and gaining slightly on the water. Other vessels of the Mediterranean squadron were doing their utmost to render assistance.6 However, all attempts to pull her off failed and, during a gale on 14 March, she slipped off the rock and sank. An excellent detailed account of the incident has been published by Joseph Caruana in an article entitled 'Wreck of the Sultan'.7

The Commander-in-chief, Mediterranean Fleet, who personally coordinated the efforts to free Sultan, was none other than HRH Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, second son of Her Majesty Queen Victoria (Fig. 2). Prince Alfred had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy. He was Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet between 1886 and 1889, promoted to Admiral in 1887, and received the baton of Admiral of the Fleet in 1893. His third child was born in Malta on 25 November 1876 and appropriately christened Victoria Melita.8

3. [Link](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Sultan_(1870)
4. [Link](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Whitehead
6. [Link](http://www.old-liverpool.co.uk/HMS%20Sultan.html
entrance to the Comino Channel’ (Fig. 4). The same page also carries a view of St. Paul’s Island with Malta in the background which, coincidentally, The Graphic artist had just sketched at the time of the Sultan disaster as the spot where tradition says St. Paul was wrecked. ‘Just like the vessel in which St. Paul sailed,’ the writer recounts, ‘the Sultan was firmly wedged on a soft rock, which had yielded at first somewhat to the shock.’

The Illustrated London News article provides further details of the actual grounding:

‘On Wednesday March 6th the Sultan went out of Valletta Harbour for manoeuvres. She was practising with torpedoes in the channel called ‘1 Flieghi’ (sic) and while fishing for a torpedo she had discharged she struck on a sunken rock, about four hundred yards from the shore. The Admiralty charts show no rocks here but a clear channel ten fathoms deep.’

Interestingly, the report points out that, a few days previously, the English steamer Vulcan was grounded in nearly the same place but a bit further south, getting off, however, with little damage:

‘As soon as the Sultan struck ground, she flew the signals of distress; and a merchant steamer, seeing the mishap, put on speed and entered Valletta harbour in haste, to give the alarm to the naval authorities. Immediately the Alexandra, the flagship of His Royal Highness, accompanied by the Temeraire and Albacore as well as by the dockyard tugs went to the scene of the disaster.’

9. The Graphic, 23.iii.1898
The writer continues that the German salvage-steamer *Burger Wilhelm*, which had earlier come to Malta to help the *Vulcan* and was still in port, was employed to pump the stranded ship. Some pumps belonging to Maltese ship-builders were also rigged on board. All efforts were made to lighten the ship, including throwing the guns overboard with marker buoys and the removal of heavy spars.

True to its name, *The London Illustrated News* provides no less than three sketches in support of its article. One is a sketch map of the Comino Channel (Fig. 5) showing the positions of the stranded vessel, of the previously grounded *Vulcan*, and of the various ships which came to *Sultan*'s aid. The other two sketches are captioned ‘The Comino Channel, with the *Sultan* aground’ (Fig. 6) and ‘The *Burger Wilhelm* pumping water from the holds of the *Sultan*’ (Fig. 7). The sketch-map and one of the sketches are credited to ‘Mr. J.S. Galizia B.A., student of medicine in Malta’ while the other sketch is credited to Captain J.C Middlemass R.E. Strangely, though, the two sketches carry the initials ‘J.R.W.’ while the sketch-map is signed ‘C.H.’.

A week later, *The Graphic* carried a sketch captioned ‘The last of the *Sultan* – the ship sinking in the Comino Channel between Gozo and Malta’ (Fig. 8). A short accompanying item stated that the ship sank at 11.45 on the morning of 14 March due to a heavy north-easterly gale which was prevailing at the time. She sank to a depth of about eight fathoms, with the upper parts of the vessel out of water. A *Daily News* telegram is cited saying that the prospects of saving the ship are ‘exceedingly slight – in fact, the task appears almost hopeless’.

An interesting account of the incident is given in an article published in the *New York Times*. After stating that ‘there are various reports afloat regarding the disaster’, the writer goes on to give the following account:

“It is stated by some strange mischance (for which the Admiralty Hydrographer’s Department will have to account) the charts of Malta and Gozo supplied to the *Sultan* had not the rock marked on which she ran, while the rock is marked on the charts of the Admiral Superintendent at Malta. A chart also exists, dating back to Nelson’s time, which shows the rock. The ship’s carpenter has since the accident sounded around the rock and found it to be not wider than the beam of the *Sultan*”.

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On 29 March, The Times carried an extensive report of the arrival of Captain Rice and his crew at Portsmouth and referred to comments made by crew members who were ‘very reticent about giving any details in reference to the wreck but a fairly good account of the disaster was obtained.’ An interesting detail emerging from this report is that, on the return of Captain Rice and his men to Malta from the wreck, a Court of Inquiry was held in which

‘Evidence was then given by the most experienced pilots of the port, some with knowledge extending over 50 years, that they had never known or heard of this rock, which stands midway between Malta and Gozo and, moreover, it is not marked on the Admiralty chart. It is reported that while Admiral the Duke of Edinburgh, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Squadron, had a chart on which these rocks are distinctly marked as lying near the south-east part of the island, the charts supplied to Captain Rice bore no reference whatever to this reef.’

The report goes on to state that one of the most experienced captains of the P & O Steamship Company had positively stated that the particular rock was marked on Nelson’s charts as being most dangerous.18

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14. The Times. 8.iii.1889.
16. Ibid. 9.iii.1889.
17. Ibid. 20.iii.1889.
18. Ibid., 29.iii.1889.
Salvage operations

Admiral Sir Percy Moreton Scott also refers to the Sultan disaster in his autobiography, focusing mainly on the salvage attempts. According to Scott, an examination of the hull of the vessel by divers revealed that the damages sustained were so excessive that all hopes of getting her up were abandoned. In spite of this, the Admiralty offered £50,000 to anyone who would raise her and bring her into Malta Harbour, but the representatives of two or three firms who had a look at her agreed that the task was impossible. A French engineer, named Chambon, who was employed with the Italian firm Baghino & Co in the Corinth Canal, paid her a visit and surprised everyone by claiming that she could be raised quite easily. A contract was at once made with the Admiralty by which they were to pay £50,000 if the Sultan was in Malta Harbour before the end of the year. Thus started the long saga of the salvage of HMS Sultan.

Scott continues to relate that M. Chambon arrived in a tiny steamer, the aptly-named Utile, with a crew of twelve, including six divers. Work started on 24 June and the first job was to cautiously blast away the rocks which were close to the ship’s side. This enabled work to be undertaken on the holes which had been uncovered. When this was carried out, the larger fractures in the ship’s bottom were then tackled and sealed up in an ingenious manner. A wooden frame was prepared using templates taken by the divers of the curvature of the ship’s bottom in the vicinity of the hole. This was sent down, and the divers secured it round the hole. Across this frame planks were nailed, and as each plank was put in its place, the space between it and the plating was filled in with a mixture of bricks, mortar and cement (Fig. 9). When all the holes were sealed, pumps which had been supplied by the Dockyard were put into operation and the ship was lifted on 27 July.

Unfortunately, the raising of the Sultan coincided with the onset of a gale. She sank again and her hull sustained further damage. However, rather than being disheartened, M. Chambon was determined to complete the salvage operation. As soon as the weather allowed, the whole patching process was repeated and the Sultan was again brought to the surface on 17 August.

HMS Sultan, however, seemed determined to prove the adage that ‘it never rains but it pours’: while being moved, she was caught by the current and knocked against a rock. One of the fresh patches was displaced and, to everyone’s dismay, she sank again and settled on the bottom. M. Chambon’s staying powers were now being tested to the limit, but he passed the test with flying colours for, nine days later, on 26 August, Sultan was up again and this time was successfully towed into Grand Harbour. Scott goes on to state that

‘the ship must have been splendidly built. After sinking three times and being on the bottom for six months, she showed no signs of structural weakness. As the water was pumped out, we turned the engines and trained the guns, which showed that she was not out of line’.

In Grand Harbour, HMS Sultan was berthed at Somerset Wharf for inspection (Fig. 10). The ship was later docked in Somerset Dock where the task of making her seaworthy for the voyage to Portsmouth was initiated. By December, the necessary repairs had been completed and she proceeded under her own steam to Portsmouth where she arrived on 22 December 1889.

**HMS Sultan in Parliament**

The shipwreck created a lot of interest in England and was mentioned several times in Parliament. Immediately following the mishap, several

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Lord Hamilton further confirmed that a supplementary estimate of £45,000 had been issued that morning in connection with the Sultan.\(^{21}\)

Four days later, on 18 March, Viscount Sidmouth asked for definitive information about the mishap and was informed that Sultan had run on to

\[\text{a rock or patch of rocks unmarked on the charts and where deep water is shown. Of course, whether this is due to defective survey or to recent volcanic action cannot be determined.}\]

It was further stated that the channel was last surveyed in 1857 and that enquiries were being made locally ‘from fishermen and others likely to know’ as to any information regarding the position of this rock. It was also confirmed that a court-martial would be held at Portsmouth.\(^{22}\)

On 25 March, an exchange took place following a question put by Sir John Colomb who asked for information as to the prospects of raising the Sultan, whether she was carrying a considerable amount of ballast and by whom she had been designed. The short debate which followed revealed that ‘the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean speaks very discouragingly of any hopes of raising the Sultan’, that she had been designed by Sir Ernest Reed and that the ballast was ordered by Reed himself in order to stabilise the ship because of an extra deck battery. In reply to Lord Beresford, who opined that raising the vessel would be a waste of money, Lord Hamilton stated that ‘of course the expense will be a serious matter for consideration.’\(^{23}\)

On 4 April, Sir W. Lawson asked whether there is any truth in the report in the Press that on the Charts belonging to some of the other Powers this wreck was marked? The reply was that ‘There was a rumour that there was a Chart in the possession of the Admiral Superintendent at Malta, which had this rock marked on it. We telegraphed out to know if the information is true, and we learn that it is not true.’\(^{24}\)

The salvage operations also elicited interest in the House of Commons. On 7 June, the vote amounting to £1,565,000, Shipbuilding, Repairs, Maintenance, &c.—Contract Work was discussed in Committee on the Navy Estimates. Captain Bethel asked whether there was any hope of raising the Sultan. Lord Hamilton’s reply, though expressing the hope that something could be saved, was rather pessimistic:

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\(^{21}\) Hansard, 14.i.1889.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 18.i.1889.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 18.i.1889.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 4.iv.1889.
A salvage company did make proposals to the Government, the last of which was that if they brought the Sultan into dock, they should receive £50,000. As my hon. and gallant Friend is well aware, there are a number of valuable fittings on board the Sultan, and it is possible that the Salvage Company, though unable to raise the ship, may be able to save a portion of them, in which case the Company will receive a remuneration of 40 per cent of the value of the fittings saved. In the opinion of the most competent men at the Admiralty there is no chance of raising the vessel itself.25

On 29 July, Sir George Baden Powell asked for further information as to the safety of HMS Sultan, whether the cost to raise her would be £50,000 and whether the Government would repossess the hull and all that is on board. In his reply, Lord Hamilton quoted a telegram from the Admiral Superintendent at Malta which stated that pumping had started but that no further news of importance was expected for the present. He also confirmed the salvage cost of £50,000 and that she was the property of the Crown.26 On 22 August, Sir George Baden Powell again asked for information regarding the salvage operations and, this time, Lord Hamilton was able to reply that he was ‘glad to be able to inform the House that the following telegram, dated the 20th instant, has been received from the Admiral Superintendent at Malta — Sultan — Kingston valve forward discovered open, now plugged. Water rapidly decreasing. Ship afloat. Hope to bring her in to-morrow.’27

On 20 August, following the court-martial of Captain Rice for the stranding of Sultan and the holding of a Naval Court of Inquiry, Mr Ballantine asked some searching questions concerning these procedures, stating that Captain Rice should also have been tried for the loss of the ship and hinting that the Duke of Edinburgh was being screened from being tried by court-martial through the holding of the Board of Enquiry. The questioner also implied that the Duke of Edinburgh was in command of the Sultan after she was stranded. This raised quite a hornet’s nest and, during the long and sometimes acrimonious debate which followed, Lord Hamilton flatly denied that the Duke was in command of the Sultan after the stranding but had only superintended the attempts to pull her off the rock. He also hotly denied any attempts at screening the Duke or of keeping information away from the Members of the House and of the general public. However he refused to

lay any Papers before Parliament’ relating to the loss of the Sultan, saying that all necessary information had been given to the Press.28

On 27 August, Sir H. Tyler asked whether the Sultan had yet been toed into harbour, Lord Hamilton replied that the contractors, Messrs. Baghino, had telegraphed that the ‘Admiral took consignment of Her Majesty’s ship Sultan this morning’ and went off to praise the contractors: ‘Great credit is due to them for their successful exertions, and the raising of the Sultan is a distinct advance upon any salvage operations hitherto attempted and attended with success.’29

But the longest, and perhaps the harshest, debate on the Sultan disaster took place the following day, 28 August, during the Third Reading of the Consolidated Fund — Appropriation Bill. Mr E. Robertson had the floor at the end of a long debate on the question of Education in Ireland when he suddenly changed track and stated that he wanted to raise the subject of ‘the loss of Her Majesty’s ship Sultan, and the inquiries which have taken place.’ After briefly reviewing the case, Robertson referred to the question of responsibility for the loss, that is, the sinking rather than the stranding of the Sultan. In a speech full of guarded innuendo, he again pointed to the evasiveness of the First Lord of the Admiralty in refusing to place the reports of the court-martial and the naval inquiry before the house and made veiled allusions to the possibility of a cover-up to protect the Duke of Edinburgh, so much so that, at one point, Lord Hamilton stated: ‘In plain English the hon. Member desires in some way or other to insinuate that I have made use of my official position for the purpose of screening the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, the Duke of Edinburgh.’ Robertson: ‘I never said anything of the kind.’

An interesting point raised by Mr. Robertson concerned the last day before the Sultan slipped off the rock. He stated that the Duke was informed that

Captain Rice was anxious to have a “pull at the ship that afternoon.” The Duke went to the Sultan and decided not to make the attempt that day, taking upon himself, as commanding officer, the responsibility of that course. This delay appeared to be the proximate cause of the ultimate loss of the ship. Meanwhile a gale sprang up, the ship was forced off the rocks and suddenly went down.’29

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25. Ibid., 7 vii. 1889.
26. Ibid., 29 vii. 1889.
27. Ibid., 22 vii. 1889.
28. Ibid., 20 viii. 1889.
29. Ibid., 27 viii. 1889.
30. Ibid., 28 viii. 1889.
This acrimonious debate was closed by Lord Hamilton who concluded:

'The proceedings from first to last were perfectly straightforward and open. I have explained over and over again the reasons for the course I took, and I have now only to say one more word. The Commander in Chief has a very heavy responsibility resting on him. He was not disposed to shirk it, and I say it would be a monstrous thing to hold him responsible for his subordinate when he was not on the spot. The loss of the ship was due to the stranding — if she had not stranded she would not have been lost. I cannot help thinking that if the Commander in Chief had been a person of less exalted position, the hon. and learned Member would not have brought the matter before the House on the Third Reading of the Appropriation Bill.'

The Court-Martial

The following account of the court-martial of Captain Rice, held aboard HMS Victory at Portsmouth, is based on reports of the trial appearing in The Times. Sketches of the court-martial (Fig. 11) were also published in The Graphic. The court-martial, appointed to inquire into the stranding of HMS Sultan, opened on 5 April 1889 under the presidency of Admiral Sir J. Edmund Commerell, V.O., Commander-in-Chief. Captain Rice was the only officer placed on trial and the charge was as follows: 'For that he, the said Ernest Rice, captain of the Royal Navy, belonging to Her Majesty's ship Sultan, then being a person subject to the Naval Discipline Act, did, on the 6th day of March, 1889, negligently or by default strand Her Majesty's ship Sultan in Comino Channel, Malta.' By permission of the Court, the prisoner was allowed to have Rear-Admiral Colomb as his friend.

The proceedings opened with the reading of a letter explaining the circumstances of the stranding from Captain Rice, wrongly attributed by The Times to the Duke of Edinburgh. This letter gives a remarkably detailed account of the events leading to the stranding, including the torpedo firing practice which preceded it. The first day of the trial continued with the evidence of several officers and men relating to the circumstances of the stranding. Further evidence by crew members was heard on the following day and the Court was adjourned at a quarter to five to allow the prisoner to prepare his defence. The Court reassembled 25 minutes later, whereupon Captain Rice read a written statement in which he explained at length why he believed that 'if had been made plain to the Court that no blame attached to him.' He also stated emphatically that if no blame attached to him, neither did any attach to the officers and men under his command. Captain Rice's defence was supplemented by Admiral Colomb who read out letters from various naval captains serving in the Mediterranean. These all agreed 'as to the prudence of the precautions taken on the occasion, and...stated that they would not have hesitated to take their vessels over the same water under the same circumstances.' Following other evidence given by defence witnesses, the Court adjourned to the following day to consider its findings.

31. The Times, 6.iv.1889; 7.iv.1889; and 8.iv.1889.

Fig. 11 Scenes from the court martial of Captain Rice: Top left the President, Admiral Sir J. Edmund Commerell; Bottom right: the accused with Admiral Colomb.
The court-martial was concluded the following morning. Prior to the Court’s verdict, the Deputy Judge Advocate, Mr. G. P. Martin, read an extract from the return of ‘Naval Courts-martial, 1883,’ showing that on February 17, 1882,

‘Captain Ernest Rice was charged with having negligently or by default stranded Her Majesty’s ship Iris under his command on the Avola shore off Cape Augusta, Island of Sicily. The charge

was proved, and the prisoner adjudged to be reprimanded, and he was admonished to be more careful in future.’

After further deliberation by the Court behind closed doors, the Deputy Judge Advocate then read the findings of the Court as follows:

‘The Court finds that Her Majesty’s ship Sultan stranded on the 6th day of March, 1889, on an unknown rock on the north side of the South Comino Channel, Malta. The Court further finds that the charge of negligence is not proved against Captain Ernest Rice, but the charge of default is partly proved, inasmuch as he committed an error in judgment in running the Sultan so close as he did to the five fathom line on an uneven and rocky bottom without adequate necessity. The Court therefore adjudges him to be reprimanded.’

The dual reprimand of Captain Rice, first for the stranding of the Iris and then for that of the Sultan, does not appear to have had any negative impact whatsoever on his naval career. The course of Rice’s progress after the Sultan incident can be followed in his Obituary which appeared in The Times, following his death on 15 April 1927 at the age of 88. Under the heading ‘A Distinguished Career’, the obituary outlines Rice’s career from 1854 to his retirement. Following the Sultan court-martial, he was promoted to flag rank in May 1893, but rather significantly did not see any further service at sea. After serving as vice-president of the Ordnance Committee at Woolwich and as Admiral Superintendent of the Dockyard, he was promoted to Vice-Admiral in July 1899 and to Admiral in March 1904. He retired from the service in February 1905 and was created K.C.B in the King’s birthday honours of 1914. He survived his only son, Commander Arthur Rice R.N., who was killed in a seaplane accident just before Sir Ernest was knighted. Although the obituary mentions Rice’s command of the Sultan, no reference whatsoever is made to the stranding or to his two courts-martial and subsequent reprimands, clearly a case of not wishing to speak ill of the dead!

The Sultan after the shipwreck.
As already mentioned, repairs of the Sultan to make her seaworthy for the voyage back to England were undertaken at the Naval Dockyard in
Marsa. Here her holes were patched up and her engines and boiler-room cleaned and overhauled. When these works were completed, she left Grand Harbour under her own steam for the voyage to Portsmouth escorted by *HMS Temeraire*. (Fig. 13). She arrived there on 22 December 1889 and was placed in the Reserve. Between 1893 and 1896 she was modernised. The sum of £200,000 was spent to bring her back to fighting condition, including additional guns and anti-torpedo defence, a new set of engines, a couple of military masts, two tall funnels, a number of cowls, and a double bridge forward (Fig. 14). In 1896, she went out to sea again for manoeuvres, after which she remained in the Reserve, lying at Portsmouth Steam Basin until 1902.  

The *Sultan* was later partially dismantled and became an artificers training ship under the name of *Fisgard IV*. In 1931, she was converted into a mechanical repair ship and was again given her original name *Sultan*. Somewhat surprisingly, she also saw service during World War II, as a Depot ship for minesweepers at Portsmouth. She was finally sold in 1947 to be broken down. Thus ended the eventful life of this fine ship, 76 years after her completion and 58 years after she came to grief at Comino. But the name lives on: *HMS Sultan* is today the name given to the Royal Navy’s Training Establishment at Gosport, Hampshire.

**Unanswered questions.**

In spite of the naval inquiry and the court-martial, as well as the extensive reports about the incident in the press, a number of questions concerning the wreck of the *Sultan* remain unanswered. Foremost among these is: why did Capt. Rice sail the *Sultan* so close to the Comino shoreline, just outside the 5-fathom line? Joseph Caruana, in his excellent account of the *Sultan* incident⁵, suggests a number of possible reasons. He refers to Rice’s previous episode involving the *Iris*, in which his ship was grounded when it sailed too close to the shore at Avola in Sicily. The Comino grounding was something of an encore by Rice and Caruana opines that Rice could have ‘had the type of mind that occasionally surrendered to the thrill of passing just outside the shallows’. In other words, Rice liked to live dangerously!

Another possibility considered by Caruana concerned the fact that some ladies were present on board and this led Rice to show off to the fairer sex by passing within a stone’s throw of the imposing Comino cliffs, comforted by the fact that ‘he had a safe 4 metres of water under his keel’ except, of course, for the uncharted rock. A show of bravado which had unforeseen results!

There exists another possible reason, not mentioned by Caruana, why *Sultan* was steering a course in relatively shallow water: this concerns the cost of a torpedo. Apparently, Naval Regulations stipulated that torpedo practice should always be carried out in shallow water in order to facilitate the recovery of the ‘dummy’ torpedoes. These rather novel weapons cost a lot of money and the loss of a torpedo could expose the responsible officer to the possible payment of the cost of such a loss. In an article in *The Graphic*,⁶ it was stated that

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35. Caruana, 6.
"...it is a standing regulation of the Admiralty that torpedo practice shall always be carried on in shallow water. Had Captain Rice disobeyed this injunction, he would probably have been made to pay for any torpedo lost in deep water."

The sea bottom near Comino slopes away from the shore and the 5-fathom depth where Rice was sailing doubled in the space of about 100 metres. Could Price have been over-cautious in trying to avoid the costly repercussions of losing a torpedo in deep water?

Other questions which beg an answer concern the true role played by the Duke of Edinburgh in this saga. Was he or was he not in command of Sultan after the stranding? Why did he postpone the second attempt to pull Sultan off the rock on 13 March? Was he in any way responsible for her eventual sinking, with the costly consequences of the lengthy salvage operation? As stated earlier, Lord Hamilton flatly denied this in Parliament, maintaining that His Royal Highness had only superintended the attempts to pull her off the rock. His refusal to lay before Parliament any papers relating to the wreck and salvage of the Sultan, however, gives rise to serious doubts as to whether a cover-up operation to screen the Duke from further investigation was taking place.