



## The Italian Navy Shipwrecks as the Witnesses of Vlora Bay Strategic Position

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### Abstract

Bay of Vlora, a bay of 315 sq. km, is the resting area of 806 Italian sailors and soldiers. It is also the resting area of nine Italian warships which sank in WWI and WWII. It is the location of the only island of Albania, Sazan Island. As one of the most strategic locations, Vlora Bay and Sazan Island in the last 170 year have been under the control of different naval powers, mainly by Italy. Italy started to have a strategic interest in the Bay of Vlora after its unification in the mid-19th Century due to its ambition as a regional naval power. The underwater Italian fleet in Vlora Bay and surrounding area shows its importance to the Italian maritime strategy, during and between two world wars and later. More than 100 years ago, US Admiral Alfred T. Mahan wrote "the Sea line of communication determines the war at sea". The geography is important to the sea lines of communication, especially chokepoints and safe bays, which are of constant importance throughout history. Otranto Channel is a very important chokepoint which controls the "Adriatic Highway", Adriatic sea line of communication used by coastal states up to Central and Northern European Countries. Bay of Vlora geographically represents a big bay and all year one. Its importance is empowered by the fact that it's located next to Otranto Channel and capable of safely hosting and rapidly deploying large naval forces up to the Central Mediterranean and points beyond. This paper, through historical perspective and underwater cultural heritage, aims to prove the importance of Vlora Bay and surrounding maritime area to the Italian Naval Strategy in two world wars periods and beyond.

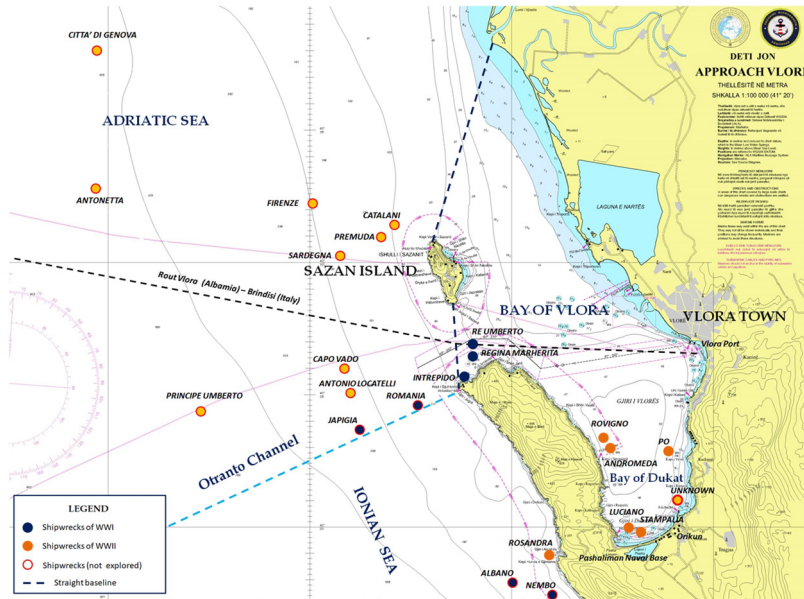
**Keywords:** Naval history, shipwrecks, Bay of Vlora, naval strategy, sea control

### 1. Introduction

In the Albanian national sea, with a surface of 6340 sq. km, there are more than 120 shipwrecks of different flags: Italian, Austro-Hungarian, Albanian, German, French, United Kingdom and Greek. Most of them were military ships sunk during WWI (around 50) and WWII (around 25). The Albanian Navy scuttled 12 ships in 2010 and 2020 and created four recreational diving areas<sup>1</sup>.

In Albanian national waters, there are more than 45 Italian shipwrecks. All sank during WW1 and WW2. During WWI Italy lost 18 ships, while during WWII about 27, in total more than 45 Italian shipwrecks. In Vlora Bay there are 9 Italian shipwrecks, 3 lost during WWI, 6 during WWII, while in the vicinity surrounding maritime area in two wars Italy lost more than 15 military ships. More than half of the Italian ships sunk in Albania in WWI and WWII are located in Vlora Bay and the surrounding maritime area. Bay of Vlora is the resting area of 806 Italian sailors and soldiers, while in the surrounding maritime area there are more than 2500.

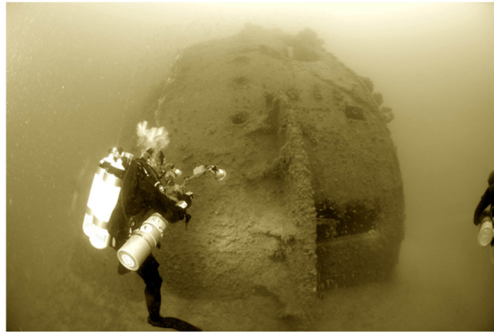
The most catastrophic loss the Italian Navy in Vlorë Bay is the sunken Battleship "Re Umberto", on December 11, 1916, 675 sailors and soldiers lost their lives. On June 8, 1916 the Italian ship "Principe Umberto" sunk and more than 1700 people lost their lives.



### *Italian Royal Navy ships lost during WWI and WWII in Vlorë Bay and surrounding maritime area*

During WWI, between 4-12 December 1916, the Italian Royal Navy lost three ships in Vlorë Bay. All three ships sank at the entrance of Vlorë Bay which struck naval mines put by a German minelayer submarine UC-14. Due to their sinking, the Italian Navy lost 735 sailors and soldiers, including ex-Commandant in Chief of the Italian Expeditionary Forces in Vlorë General Oreste Bandini. In a short period of time the Italian Royal Navy lost the Auxiliary Ship "Re Umberto" on December 4, 1916, the Destroyer "Intrepido" on December 4, 1916 and the Battleship "Regina Margarita" on December 11, 1916. All three ships are fully identified and explored.

During WWII, from March 17, 1941 until September 22, 1943 Italian Royal Navy lost six ships in Vlorë Bay. All ships have been lost in the Southern part of Vlorë Bay, after the Italian Navy lost full sea control. Most of the ships have been torpedoed by the British Royal Air Force, while one of them by the British Royal Navy. Due to the loss of six ships in Vlorë Bay, Italian Royal Navy 73 sailors and passengers, including three Red Cross nurses. One of the ships is still unidentified. In WWII Italian Royal Navy lost the Hospital Ship "Po" on March 17, 1941, the Destroyer "Andromeda" on March 17, 1941, Cargo Ships "Luciano" and "Stampalia" on April 15, 1941 and the Auxiliary Destroyer "Rovigno" on September 22, 1943. Five, out of six ships are fully identified and explored.



**Shipwreck of Italian Battleship "Regina Marcherita"**

Italian shipwrecks in Vlorë Bay have a concentration four times greater than in Albanian national seas. Bay of Vlorë has an intensity of one shipwreck for 35 sq. km. , while in the entire Albania it is about 140 sq. km.

### 1.1 Geostrategic position of Vlorë Bay

Bay of Vlorë is the largest bay in Albania, situated along the middle of the Albanian coastline and in the very southern part of the Adriatic Sea. Bay of Vlorë has a surface of 315 sq.km, extending from the North-West toward the South-East<sup>2</sup>. The high altitude of the surrounding terrain allows the maritime surveillance of SLOCs from Mid Adriatic Sea through Central Mediterranean, while the accommodation capacities of the Vlorë Bay allow immediate response in Otranto Channel, Adriatic Sea and Central Mediterranean.



**Maritime traffic in Adriatic Sea**

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 benefited primarily the sea trading powers of the Mediterranean countries<sup>3</sup>. This shortened the maritime route to the Far East, avoiding the Atlantic routes around Africa, altering the destination into Mediterranean Sea, avoiding European ocean states such as UK, Netherlands and even Germany. Adriatic Sea line of communication became a new maritime trade for Mediterranean and northern European countries. Starting from Suez Canal up to Northern Adriatic destination ports, Otranto Channel is the only choke point for effectively controlling maritime traffic in "Adriatic Maritime Highway".

<sup>2</sup>Albanian Navy. Albanian Hydrographic Service. Sailing direction in Adriatic and Ionian Seas. 2016

<sup>3</sup>Max E. Fletcher. The Suez Canal and World Shipping, 1869-1914. The Journal of Economic History. Vol. 18, No. 4. December 1958.

The Bay of Vlorë, situated in the eastern part of Otranto Channel (choke point), is considered an important control point for Adriatic maritime traffic. Sazan Island, the only island in the bay is situated in the Otranto Channel. Because of its strategic location, it has played a crucial role throughout modern maritime history. To control Sazan Island means controlling the Otranto Channel and Vlorë Bay as well. The Bay of Vlorë, is a large and all year safe bay. It is a key strategic position supporting maritime activity in both, the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas.

For more than 100 years the control of Vlorë Bay and Sazan Island has a contested area among maritime powers. By 1815 the Sazan Island became part of the Ionian Island Autonomous Republic under the protectorate of Great Britain. It included 11 Greek Islands in the Ionian Sea and Sazan Island, which at that time was known by the name of "Diapontia". In 1864, Great Britain passed control of the Diapontia Islands to the Greek Kingdom. It was a "de jure" act, because Vlorë Bay and Sazan Island were under the control of the Ottoman Empire, which had occupied Albanian territories for more than 400 years. At that time, in 1989, the first publication on Sazan Island and Bay of Vlorë, was written by Italian Biologist Antonio Baldacci.

During the First Balkan War, on 8 November 1912, after 50 years of controlling "de jure", Greece seized "de facto" Sazan Island. Albania proclaimed Independence from the Ottoman Empire on November 12, 1912, independence which included Sazan Island as its continental territory. In 1914 Great Powers recognized the borders of the newly independent Albania and forced Greece to leave Sazan Island. On July 2, 1914, 25 Greek forces left Sazan Island passing its control to the new Albanian Government.

After the First World War started, the Italian Kingdom and Austro-Hungarian Empire, as two states of the Adriatic Sea with notable naval power, were in alliance within the Central Powers. In 30 October 1914, within a few months after Greek forces left Sazan Island, Italy moved a medical team to Vlorë Town and a military company to Sazan Island<sup>4</sup>, composed by 10<sup>th</sup> Bersalieri Regiment and one mountain battery<sup>5</sup>.



*Italian Royal Navy ships in Vlorë Bay during WWI*

On April 26, 1915, the Italian Kingdom shifted its alliance to Entente Powers through a secret agreement, signed in London, called the London Treaty. The Treaty gave Italy the right to control Vlorë Bay, Sazan Island and surrounding territories. On December 2, 1915, Italian forces occupied Sazan Island, Vlorë town and the surrounding areas, as was signed in the London Treaty. The Italian forces in Albania increased gradually arriving up to an Army (XVI), composed by three divisions with around 100 thousand soldiers<sup>6</sup>. This occupation lasted for the next four years. Vlorë Bay was an operational base for the Italian Army who marched toward Durrës in February 1916 against Austro-Hungarian forces.

Italy was a victorious power of WWI enjoying control of Vlorë Bay, until the war with Albanian of June 1920 ended its reign. Albanians forced Italians to leave Vlorë and surrounding areas, but not Sazan Island. Through an agreement signed on 2 August 1920 with the Albanian Government, Italy legitimized its presence for control of Sazan Island and the

<sup>4</sup>Nuova Rivista Storica - I (2018). *L'Albanian nella strategia diplomatica italiana*. Page 375.

<sup>5</sup>Esercito Italiana. <https://www.esercito.difesa.it/storia/grande-guerra/Pagine/Gli-altri-fronti.aspx>

<sup>6</sup>IDEM

Otranto Channel. Over the next 27 years, Sazan Island became part of the Italian Kingdom territorial administration. On December 18, 1920, Sazan became part of the Lagosta Province, on 18 January, 1923 it became part of the Zara Province and on January 7, 1941 part of the Cararo Province. Sazan Island from 1920 until 1943 has been administered by an Italian military officer.

Days before the Italian armistice of September 1943, Sazan Island was occupied by Germans on September 10, 1943, until its liberation by the Albanian National Forces on October 22, 1944. From that day on Sazan Island became a "de facto" part of Albania. Sazan Island finally passed "de jure" to Albania by the Paris Peace Treaty of February 10, 1947. During the communism time in Albania, Bay of Vlorë, especially Sazan Island has been military bastions.

From 1998 until 2012 by two states' agreement, the Italian Navy maintained a small naval unit presence in Sazan as an anti-trafficking unit, which was also used to control regional maritime traffic in Otranto Channel and Adriatic Sea.

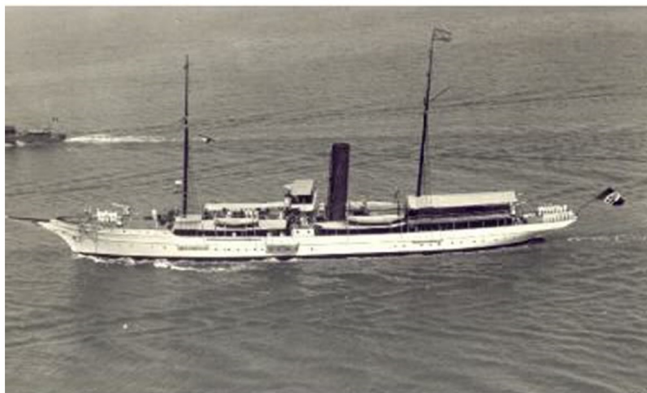
Bay of Vlorë, for most of WWI was considered a safe area for the Italian Royal Navy, who exercised full sea control and partially during WWII. After November 1940, the Italian Royal Navy maintained only partial sea control in Vlorë Bay, which led to the loss of many ships. In both wars Vlorë Bay has been used as an operational base for the Italian Royal Navy to exercise its sea control in Otranto Channel and beyond.

## 1.2 Vlorë Bay and Italian maritime strategy

After the unification of Italy as a state in 1833 and its ambition to rise as a naval power, Italian Foreign Policy started to view Vlorë Bay and Sazan Island as an area with a strategic interest in controlling Otranto Channel.

In 1875, when insurgencies started in Bosnia Herzegovina against the Ottoman Empire, Emilio, Visconti Venosta<sup>7</sup>, Foreign Minister of the Italian Kingdom drew a detailed plan about its Italian policy over Albania<sup>8</sup>. Since 1873, that basic idea remained intact, that is, Albania would place a line of defensive from the south-eastern shore of the Adriatic<sup>8</sup>. The original idea elaborated in 1873 consists of "to form an Albania state that would be very strong and powerful to withstand the Greek infiltrations and to resist the Slavic invasions: a state that, due to its position, would maintain (together with us) the freedom of the Adriatic, the Ionian...."<sup>9</sup>.

At the beginning of 1901, Prenetti, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, ordered the establishment of two new vice-consulates, one in Durres and one in Vlorë. As soon as it was official, on May 7, 1901 the Austro-Hungarian warship "Taurus"<sup>10</sup> visited Vlorë Bay to reinforce the idea "that Austria is very concerned with the Albanians, and that it would not easily give up its protectorate, whoever it may be"<sup>11</sup>.



*Austro-Hungarian Warship "Taurus"*

<sup>7</sup>Emilio Visconti-Venosta. (22 January 1829 – 24 November 1914) He is one of the longest-serving Ministers of Foreign Affairs in the history of the Italian Kingdom. He served for terms as a Minister of Foreign Affairs for about 16 years from 1863 till 1901.

<sup>8</sup>Nuova Rivista Storica - I (2018). L'Albanian nella strategia diplomatica italiana. Page 322.

<sup>9</sup>IDEM. Page 322.

<sup>10</sup>Steamer "Taurus". An Austro-Hungarian military ship. It is the first military ship to sail with the Albanian Flag. Taurus moved the Albanian King William de Wied, from Trieste to Durres between 5 and 7 March 1914.

<sup>11</sup>Nuova Rivista Storica - I (2018). L'Albanian nella strategia diplomatica italiana. Page 360.

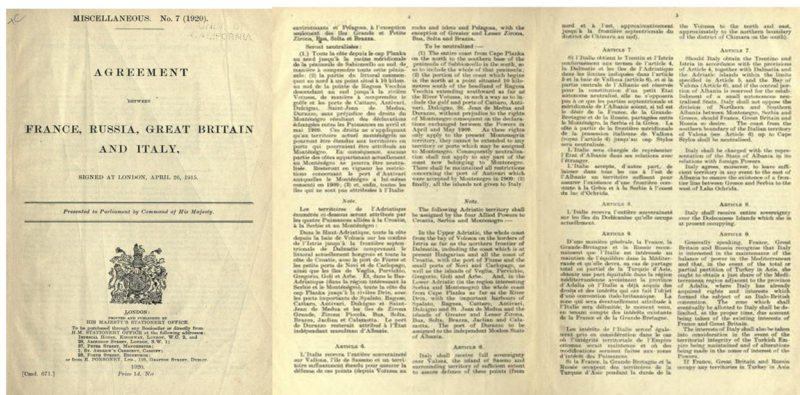
By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the increased economic interests on the eastern shore of the Otranto Channel had prompted a large part of the Italian political class to consider it necessary for the Italian Kingdom to acquire a bridgehead on Albanian land. Vlorë Port and Bay has started to consider as a key role of the Adriatic.

The independence of Albania from the Ottoman Empire in 1912 created a new dimension for Italy to achieve its strategic goals. In mid-1914 pressured by European Powers, Greeks withdrew from Sazan Island. In the new weak independent Albania, while WWI had broken out by the end of 1914, Italy, still in alliance with Austria-Hungary, started the first presence in Vlorë and Sazan Island.

The London Treaty of April 26, 1915 shifted the Italian alliance to Great Britain, France and Russia. By this treaty Italy achieved many strategic goals. It granted Italy sovereignty over Sazan Island, the Bay of Vlorë and surrounding areas. The Italian occupation with full military forces of Vlorë, Sazan Island and surrounding areas in April 1916 was strictly a military parade. Italy from that moment gained full sovereignty of Vlorë Bay, and two side control of Otranto Channel. "The occupation of the Island of Sazan by a military contingent, the Savoy Kingdom finally acquired the much-needed control of the two banks of the Otranto Channel"<sup>12</sup>.

### 1.3 Italian Navy sea control in Vlorë Bay

From April 1916 until Italian Forces left Vlorë and surrounding area, Italian Royal Navy maintained full control of Vlorë Bay and Sazan Island. After June 1920 Italy only had control of Sazan Island. During this time, it was used mainly as a surveillance point for controlling Otranto Channel. "Sazeno's most important functions were as a radio station for traffic control in the Adriatic and as a "spy" of what was happening in the nearby Balkans."<sup>13</sup>. "Sazan Island was considered an indispensable key point for controlling the Adriatic and the upper Ionian Sea"<sup>14</sup>.



London Treaty of April 26, 1915

With the occupation of Albania in 1939 and the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War, the Italian Marine Command was transferred to Vlorë and the island was fortified: anti-aircraft batteries, observation posts and many connecting roads were built, but it was not involved in any war actions. Italy lost full control of Vlorë Bay after the British attack on Taranto Naval Base in November 1940. During the contested sea control, Italy lost most of all its ships in Vlorë Bay and the surrounding area. Italy lost 'de facto' the entire control of Vlorë Bay on September 1943, after Italy declared an armistice and "de jure" on February 10, 1947, by the Treaty of Paris.

<sup>12</sup>Sette, Alessandro. "Albania nella strategia diplomatica italiana". *Nuovo Rivista Storica*, Volume CII. Fascicolo II. Gennaio-Aprile 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Guglielmo Evangelista. *Il possedimento di Saseno, il territorio più piccolo e più vicino*. <https://italiacoloniale.com/2021/01/07/11-possedimento-di-saseno-il-territorio-piu-piccolo-e-piu-vicino/>

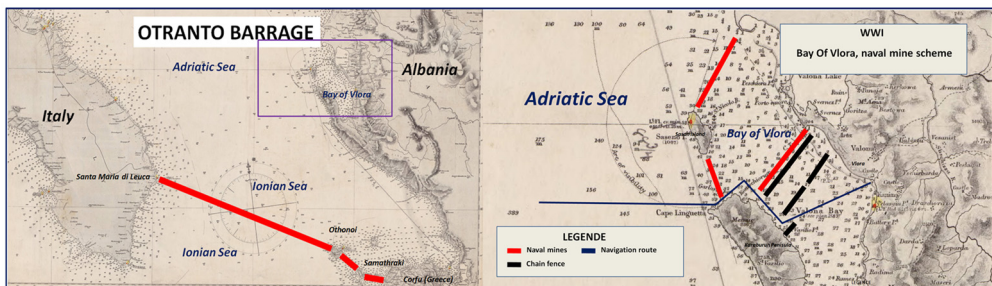
<sup>14</sup>IDEM

#### 1.4 During the First World War

During WWI, The Bay of Vlorë was mined by the Royal Italian Navy, denying access to the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Navy and its allies. It was deemed a safe area for Italian ships. This explains why, during WWI, no ships were sunk inside Vlorë Bay. During those years, from 1915-1918, there were only three Italian flags sunk in the Southern Channel of the bay. However, there were more than 10 ships sunk in the surrounding area.

Most of the naval actions that occurred in the Southern Adriatic Sea started after the Treaty of London was signed on April 26, 1915. This is when Italy shifted its alliance. Soon thereafter, control of the Adriatic Sea between the Italian Royal and the Imperial Austro-Hungarian Navies became contested. This was now a bitter dispute among the rivals and their new alliances.

To deny access of the Central Mediterranean to the Imperial Austro-Hungarian Navy and its ally, the German Imperial Navy, the Italian Royal Navy and its allies during in 1915 built the Otranto Barrage. This was a combined naval force effort fence, which started from the tip of the Santa Maria di Leuca, Cape in Italy, and extended south and eastward to Corfu Island in Greece. This was accomplished by connecting the Greek Ionian Island of Othonoi and the island of Samothraki. Italy also, after the occupation of Vlorë and Sazan Island, built three naval mines lines and fences to block the Bay of Vlorë in order to preserve it as a safe area for its Navy.



*The barrage of Otranto Channel and the minefield of Vlorë Bay*

During those three years in the Southern Adriatic Sea, there were many sea contest encounters among and between ships of the maritime powers. The major battles in which most of the ships had been sunk: The First Battle of Durres which took place on December 28-29, 1915; The Battle of Otranto Channel, on May 14-15, 1917; The Second Battle of Durres on October 2, 1918, and during the naval evacuation operation from Durres to Bridisi, in February of 1916. All ships that were sunk during WWI in the Albanian maritime area occurred after the signing of the London Treaty on April 26, 1915, and between the years October 1915 and October 1918. During WWI, in the Bay of Vlorë three Italian Royal Navy ships were sunk: "Intrepido", "Re Umberto" and "Regina Margherita".

#### 1.5 During the Second World War

Even though Albania was officially free from Italy, beginning on 2 August 1920, a portion of it remained under Italian control due to the Ambassador Treaty of 1915. It was during this period, between the two World Wars, and due to that same agreement that Sazan Island became an operational base for the Italian Navy. This was an accepted formal agreement between the two governments. At the beginning of WWII, on April 7, 1939, Italy would begin yet another occupation of Albania, through naval operations and in two short weeks it would eventually take over the entire country. During WWII, the Bay of Vlorë, until 1941, was completely controlled by the Italian Royal Navy, while at the same time it maintained a contested sea control of the Adriatic Sea. The entire eastern coastline of Albania along the Adriatic Sea was seized by Italy, or its ally, Germany. It remained a safe maritime bridge or passageway between Brindisi and Vlorë for the Italian Navy through the end of 1940.

However, a successful British attack on the Italian Taranto Naval Base, on November 11-12, 1940, would end this full sea control in Vlorë Bay. This attack resulted in the sinking of more than half of Italy's Navy capital ships. This forced Italy to transfer the rest of its fleet back to the Naples Naval Base in the Sea of Tyrrhenian. The attack on Taranto shifted the balance of power in the Central Mediterranean and Southern Adriatic Seas. By the beginning of 1941 British

Forces in the Mediterranean were able to relocate a Squadron of Swordfish Aircraft to Paramithi Greece, close to Albania.

Over the next two years, through September 1943 Italy declared an armistice, within Vlorë Bay British forces with the use of its Swordfish Squadron stationed in Paramithi, attacked and sunk five Italian Navy ships inside Vlorë Bay: "Po", "Andromeda", "Stampalia", "Luciano" and "Rovigno".

## 2. Conclusions

Controlling Otranto Channel maritime traffic for Italy was a strategic objective. The Italian idea of building a bridge on the other side of Adriatic, controlling Vlorë Bay, was a strategic objective, starting from 80s of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The alliance shift in WWI and the London Treaty of 1915 gave Italy the opportunity to seize Vlorë Bay, Sazan Island and the surrounding area. Italy enjoyed this control, fully or contested until 1943.

Bay of Vlorë, due to its characteristics and strategic position regarding Otranto Channel and beyond, has been a safe operational base for the Italian Royal Navy in Adriatic and Ionian seas. It has also been an operational base for land operations in both wars. The number of ships sunk in Vlorë Bay and surrounding area, the variety of their classes and the concentration of shipwrecks, shows the importance of Vlorë Bay in Italian Maritime Strategy.

Nowadays maritime traffic is moving 90% of global goods, maritime traffic is an important sea line of communication for the Adriatic Sea and Northern European countries. The Vlorë Bay by the 60s was important for the former Warsaw Treaty, Albanian Navy later and NATO today. By the request of Albanian Government in 2019, NATO is looking for and evaluating the possibility to use Pashaliman as a forward logistic base.

In Vlorë Bay, there are a total of 28 shipwrecks, nine of them Italian Flag. The shipwrecks in Vlorë Bay and surrounding area are part of Albanian and Italian cultural heritage, as well as part of its maritime history. Exploration for scientific purposes and their usage for tourism and entertainment is one of the initiatives taken by the UNDP and Albanian Government.

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