

# How Goa experienced World War II

*Throughout the war, Portuguese colonies served as passageways for Axis and Allied agents. The German and Japanese agents transited through Goa, protected by diplomatic cover*



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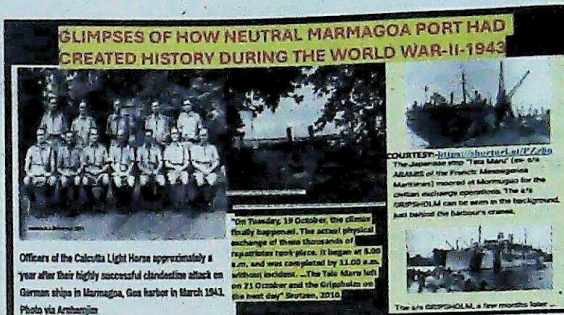
Eighty years after the Allied victory in Europe, the story of Goa during World War II remains a little-known chapter in global history. Yet this small coastal colony played host to one of the most successful covert operations in the Indian Ocean, served as a humanitarian corridor for wartime diplomacy, and offered neutral ground for intelligence activity. It was simultaneously a stage for sabotage and compassion, espionage and mercy. In Mormugao's quiet harbour, the clash of empires played out behind a veil of neutrality. Goa's strategic port of Mormugao hosted a series of dramatic episodes — secret Allied raids, Axis espionage, and even a humanitarian prisoner exchange between Japan and the Allies. By late 1942, Mormugao harbour sheltered several Axis merchant vessels—three German (Ehrenfels, Braunfels, and Drachenfels) and one Italian (Anfora). These ships anchored under the protection of Portuguese neutrality, officially citing mechanical issues. However, British intelligence had intercepted radio transmissions suggesting that at least one of these ships, particularly the Ehrenfels, was clandestinely relaying Allied shipping movements to German U-boats prowling the Indian Ocean. The British suspected that these vessels were, playing a covert but deadly role in the Battle of the Indian Ocean by aiding submarine attacks on merchant convoys. British intelligence feared Goa's use as a radio relay for U-boats. For related documents, readers may see: <https://shorturl.at/mWZMa>.

Constrained by Portugal's neutral status, the British faced a dilemma. Any direct action within Goa's waters risked violating international law and provoking diplomatic fallout with Portugal's Estado Novo regime under António de Oliveira Salazar. The solution came in the form of a covert naval operation led by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). On the night of March 9, 1943, a group of civilian volunteers from the Calcutta Light Horse—mostly retired British officers—embarked on a secret mission. Departing from Bombay aboard a disguised vessel named Phoebe, they reached Mormugao during Goa's Carnival festivities, when local attention was diverted. Under the cover of darkness, they stormed the Ehrenfels. In the ensuing skirmish, the German crew scuttled their ship. Fearing similar attacks, the crews of the Braunfels, Drachenfels, and Anfora sank their vessels over the next day. Without firing a diplomatic shot, the British had eliminated four Axis ships sus-

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pected of espionage. Portugal, aware of the delicate geopolitical situation, limited its response to a mild protest. The operation remained classified for decades and was later dramatised in the 1980 film *The Sea Wolves*. For details, see: <https://shorturl.at/z098U>.

The results of Operation Creek were immediate and significant. Allied records showed a notable drop in shipping losses in the Indian Ocean after the scuttling of the ships (see <https://shorturl.at/feok6>). Later in 1943, Mormugao's strategic value



shifted from sabotage to diplomacy. In a rare humanitarian gesture, it became the site of a high-level prisoner exchange between the Allied and Japanese governments. For a detailed academic account, see Frances Ridgway Brotzen's article in *Diplomacy and Statecraft*: <https://shorturl.at/pxla2> and firsthand accounts and rare photographs appear in *LIFE* magazine's archive at: <https://shorturl.at/PZz8o>. On one side was the Swedish ship Gripsholm, chartered by the United States and sailing under the Red Cross; on the other was the Japanese ship Tei Maru. Their mission was to repatriate civilians and diplomats captured in Asia and the West. Mormugao was chosen because of Portugal's neutrality and its relatively safe location in South Asia. The exchange took place under strict international supervision, with Red Cross officials, Portuguese authorities, and port staff ensuring that no rules were broken. Elderly diplomats, missionaries, women, and children—held in internment camps since the early days of the war—were finally allowed to return home. Postal historians have preserved diplomatic covers with unique Gripsholm markings (check <https://shorturl.at/lv79r>). Throughout the war, Portuguese colonies served as passageways for Axis and Allied agents. Throughout the war, German and Japanese agents transited through

Goa, protected by diplomatic cover (see: <https://shorturl.at/mWZMa>). The British, wary of Goa becoming a secure Axis backdoor, expanded intelligence surveillance in the region. Operation Creek was the most dramatic result of these concerns. Historians suggest that Salazar's government, while officially neutral, increasingly leaned toward the Allies as the war progressed—perhaps recognising that the Axis powers were on a losing path. Hosting the POW exchange at Mormugao could be seen as part of this quiet shift.

Goa's population, largely disconnected from the central theatres of war, nonetheless bore quiet witness to its effects. In one incident reported by local newspapers, three Goan children were orphaned after their parents—crew members aboard a British merchant vessel—were killed in a German submarine attack. Others joined the British Indian Army, worked in logistics, or observed events unfold from a distance. Even in neutral Goa, war left its scars. As the world marks the 80th Victory Day on May 8, Goa's wartime paradox—neutral yet strategic—stands not as a footnote but as proof that even the quietest places are shaped by global conflict.

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