



Lieutenant of the war ship
of the 2nd rank Sergej Mašera

THE SLOVENE SEAMEN

1918-1945

PERMANENT EXHIBITION

second completed edition

The love for the sea, the desire to know the world and to defend their own country drew many young Slovene men to the navy even in the period between the two World Wars. Many of them were attracted by the prospect of free education or they simply joined the navy after being drafted. As the Slovene ethnic territory was divided among several states, Slovene seamen served in different navies and merchant marines, for the most part in the Yugoslav and Italian navies. During World War II these men spread further afield to different parts of the world.



POMORSKI MUZEJ SERGEJ MAŠERA PIRAN
MUSEO DEL MARE SERGEJ MAŠERA PIRANO



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OBČINA PIRAN
COMUNE DI PIRANO

1 After the Austro-Hungarian Empire broke up on 29 October 1918, the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs was founded. When Charles, the Emperor of Austria, decreed to hand over the Navy to the newly established state, several flags were raised on the former Austro-Hungarian naval buildings. One of the first flags was flown on the mast of the shipyard in Tivat (30 October 1918). But it was too soon for the Yugoslav seamen to celebrate. After the Treaty of Versailles the major part of the former Austro-Hungarian Navy went to the great powers, while the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, established on 1 December 1918, inherited only some out-dated torpedo steamers and a few auxiliary ships. Nonetheless, most of the former Austro-Hungarian south Slavic personnel decided to serve in the navy and merchant marine of the new state.

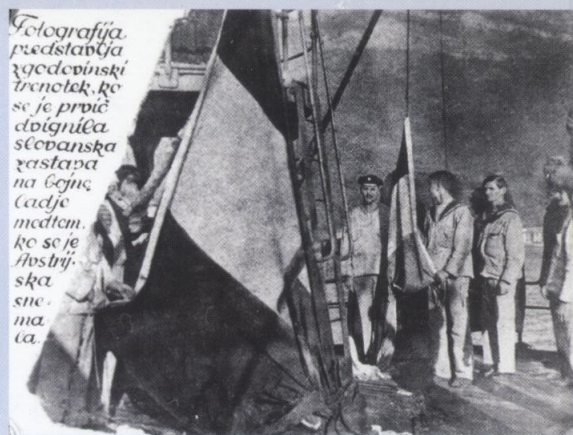
2 THE TRAINING

The young Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes immediately started to train its own naval personnel. Many a naval school based and carried on upon the tradition of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. This was also the case at the Naval Academy in Dubrovnik founded in 1923. Later on some other military navy schools were founded: the Navy School for Petty Officers in Šibenik, the Artillery School in Meljine, the School for Mechanical Engineering in Kumbor and the Naval Air Force Academy in Divulje. Merchant shipping navigators and mechanical engineers were trained at nautical academies in Dubrovnik, Kotor and Bakar. Mechanical engineers and particularly radio-operators were also trained at military schools for petty officers.

3 THE MERCHANT MARINE

After the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes gradually came to possess several of the former empire's shipping companies and their fleets, first the ships of small coasting trade, later those of great coasting trade and ocean-going vessels, totaling 138 ships of 117,166 tones. The number of companies and ships grew over the years. In 1938 Yugoslavia already had 26 shippers, the largest being the Yugoslav Lloyd. The shippers belonged to both local and foreign private owners. They controlled both cargo ships and passenger liners. On the eve of World War II there were 4,982 seamen employed. Among them relatively few Slovenes (1-2 on every ship) who mostly held positions of ship officers.

There were few regular lines. Those that existed, were mostly run by the Oceania company. The tramp shipping was more common. Cargo was transported mostly for foreign countries, usually coal for Great Britain and briquettes for the Netherlands to South America, and grain on return journeys. Another frequent cargo was wood, minerals and phosphates.

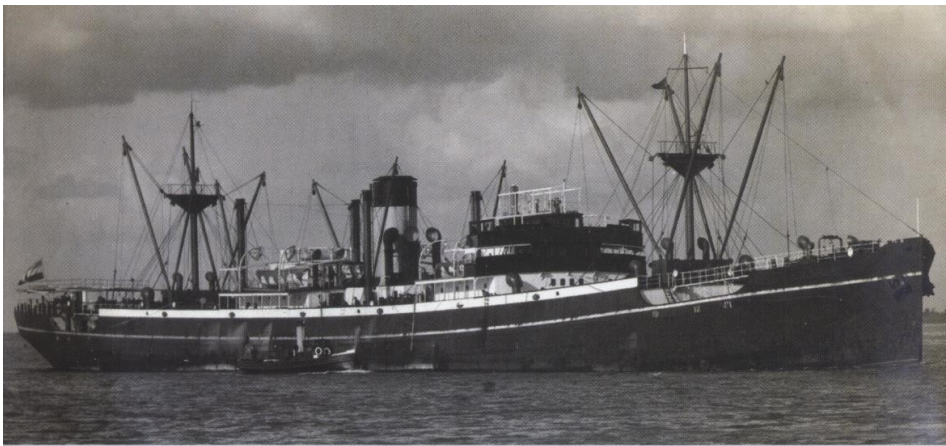


Fotografija predstavja zgodovinski trenutek, ko se je prvič doignila slovenska zastava na ladjah naših mornaric, ko se je Avstrijska mornarica razpadla.

The raising of the flag of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs at the Tivat military arsenal on 30 October 1918 after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy



Students of the VI class of the Naval Academy on the ship »Dalmacija« during the navigation in 1930



Cargo ship »Avala« of the Jugolloyd Company after 1929



Officers on the cargo ship »Nemanja« in 1936

The merchant fleet of the Yugoslav Monarchy was mostly out of date and of little use. As the companies were financially weak, they bought inexpensive older vessels abroad and still made a small profit due to the cheap working force in Yugoslavia. The seamen were poorly paid, the living conditions on ships were bad, which led to frequent strikes. Due to the high unemployment, the companies had no difficulties in hiring new work force.

4 THE MERCHANT MARINE DURING WORLD WAR II

When the war broke out most of the seamen of the merchant ships of the Yugoslav Monarchy found themselves abroad. At the beginning of the war the occupiers took over 8 ships of middle tonnage as well as the ships used for small coasting trade. The ships of great coasting trade and those of foreign trade fell under the administration of the Yugoslav government in London and into the ranks of the merchant marines of the Allies in April 1941. Several Yugoslav seamen sailed on the ships of other allied states. Others disembarked abroad, mostly in New York and Baltimore. There the Yugoslav seamen joined the Yugoslav or American emigrant organizations to try to help their home country. In 1941 the Club of Yugoslav Seamen was founded. In 1944 it called on the seamen on the Yugoslav ships to raise the partisan flag and to refuse obedience to the king. The first to obey this appeal were the crew of the ship "Senga", followed by the crew of "Timok", led by radio-operator Dušan Ivančić.

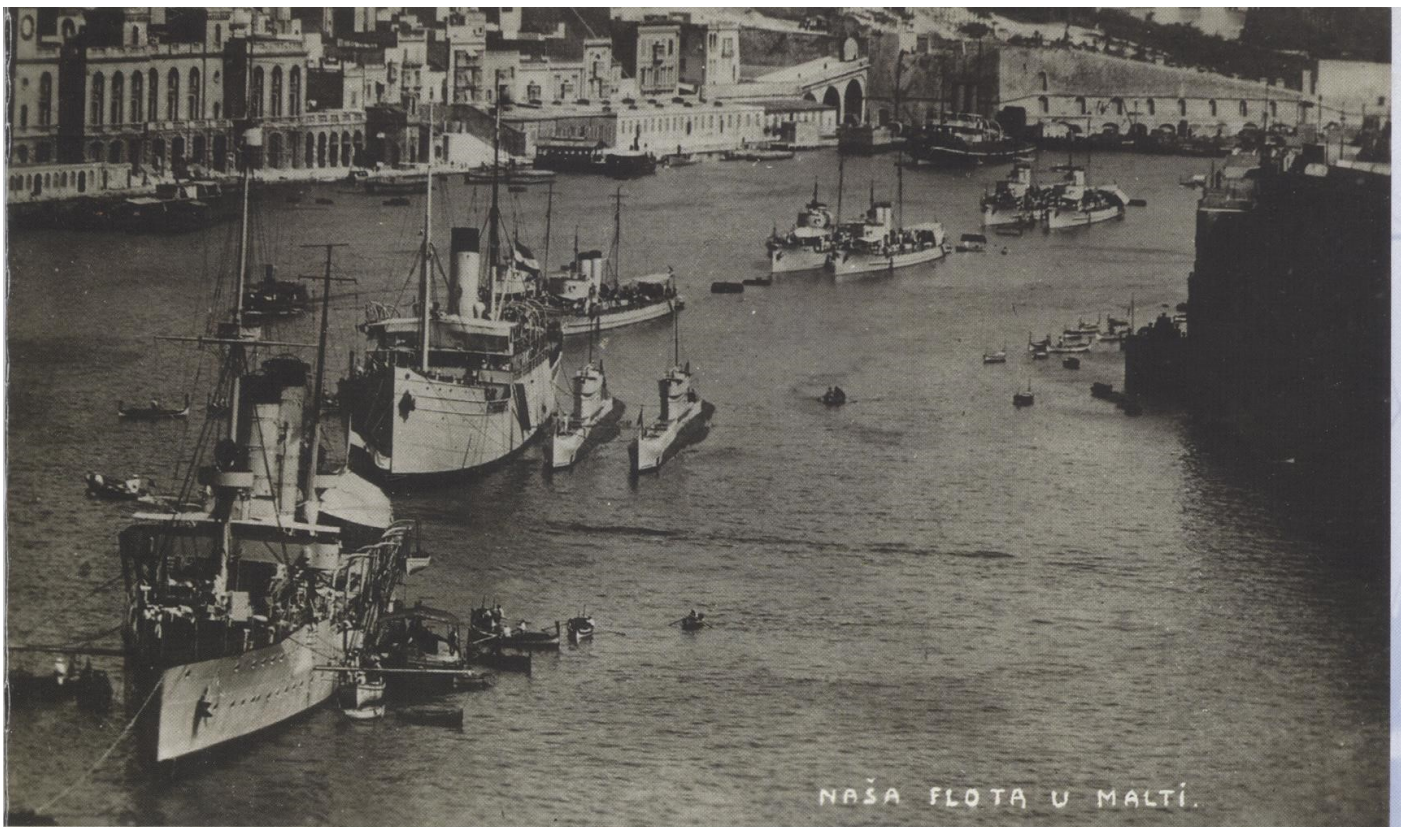


The hoisting of the partisan flag on the merchant ship »Timok«, Bizerte 18 May 1944

5 THE NAVY OF THE YUGOSLAV MONARCHY

The original personnel of the Yugoslav Navy was trained by the Austro-Hungarian institutions and naturally it carried on the traditions of its predecessors, which was notable in training, working as well as daily routine and culture. Initially, the Navy of the Monarchy of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had its new vessels built abroad, most often in Great Britain, France and Germany. Later, after 1930, some ships were built according to foreign plans in the Yugoslav shipyards of Kraljevica and Split. The hydroplanes were built by foreign and domestic plant (Novi Sad and Belgrade).

In 1940 the Yugoslav Navy possessed a cruiser "Dalmacija", 4 destroyers, 6 torpedo ships, 8 motor torpedo ships, 2 torpedo boats, 4 submarines, 6 minelayers, 5 minesweepers, 4 river monitors, 74 different hydroplanes with the hydroplane ship and other training and auxiliary



The Royal Yugoslav Navy fleet in Malta



The crew of a Yugoslav torpedo boat »T 8« in 1936

vessels. The vast majority of the vessels (80%) had its port of origin in the south of the country (Boka Kotorska). The naval bases were located also in Šibenik, Split, Selce and Dubrovnik. The seat of the naval air force was in Divulje near Split and at Kumbor in Boka Kotorska.

The Yugoslav Royal Navy had a relatively large share of Slovene sailors. The Slovenes represented some 8% of the total population of the Yugoslav Kingdom. However among 1,172 officers in the Royal Navy the Slovenes were represented by 27%. The share of Slovenes was even larger among the petty officers as many young Slovenes served their 2-year mandatory service in the navy. Most of the officers were navigating officers, followed by mechanical engineers and engineers holding other civilian degrees. According to their specialization the Slovene boys and men were most strongly represented among the submarine officers (some 40%) and navy pilots (48%). Many Slovene officers held the leading positions. The reason for the high above average representation of the Slovenes was very high estimate for those professions and a quality schooling in Slovenia.

6 THE FALL OF THE YUGOSLAV ROYAL NAVY

For the Yugoslav Monarchy the war came unexpectedly. After 11-day long defending, the Navy headquarters in Boka Kotorska accepted an unconditional surrender on 16 April 1941. The seamen had to leave the vessels and the base and surrender them to the Italians. Most of the personnel returned home, only a few refused the orders.

On the very same and the following day, some pilots took off with several hydro planes to Greece and then to North Africa where 9 of them successfully landed. On 16 April 1941 the submarine "Nebojša" set off for Alexandria to join the Allies. On 17 April captain Ivan Kern led torpedo ships "Durmitor" and "Kajmakčalan" into the same direction with a slightly different crews.

The base commander of Selce, the captain of the warship Mirko Pleiweiss, ordered the destruction of the base before the retreating of his army.

Ceremonial winter uniform of the captain of the war ship Ivan Kern after 1936

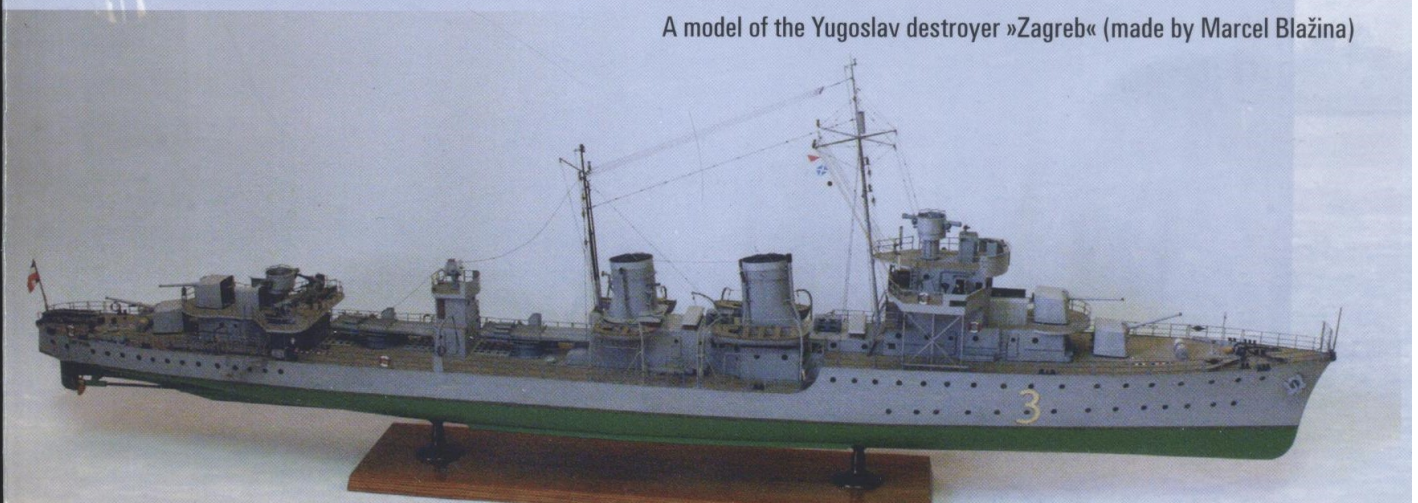
7 In Alexandria (Egypt), the run-away naval units constituted the Units of the Yugoslav Navy Abroad, while a group of pilots joined the RAF. The Units of the Yugoslav Navy Abroad consisted also of the officers from the Slovene Coast and the Istrians from the Italian Army and Navy and from some other armies. After the capitulation of Italy also the prospective pilots of the Yugoslav NLA were transferred, among them the former pilots of the hydro planes of the former Royal Yugoslav navy. They were trained and equipped with the planes by the allied. In April 1944 the First Squadron of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (No. 352 Yugoslav squadron RAF) was founded at Bengasi and returned to Yugoslavia in august 1944. After the capitulation of Italy numerous seamen of different oversea units returned to Yugoslavia.

8 In April 1941 the elite destroyer division was lay off Boka Kotorska. There there was also the destroyer "Zagreb" with lieutenants Sergej Mašera and Milan Spasič aboard. When the order to surrender the ships and raise Italian flags was given on 16 April, Sergej Mašera and Milan Spasič saw no escape. They refused the commander's order to land, blew up the destroyer and sank with it.



The crew of the Yugoslav torpedo boat »Durmitor« that joined the Alliens, Alexandria 15 june 1941

A model of the Yugoslav destroyer »Zagreb« (made by Marcel Blažina)



9 IN THE ITALIAN NAVY

According to the Treaty of Rapallo, signed on 12 November 1920, the Slovene coast, Istria and northern Dalmatia, the territories that had belonged to the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire, were annexed to Italy. Thereafter, Slovene seamen served in the Italian navy, mostly as conscripts, and some as officers in the Italian merchant marine. After Yugoslavia was attacked, there began a systematic conscription of Slovene and Croatian men. The Slovene seamen did not hold high posts in the Italian Navy. The reason for that was the rise of fascism and policy of distrust of non-Italian elements on the high level army posts. Consequently the interest to serve in the Italian Navy diminished strongly among the Slovenes.

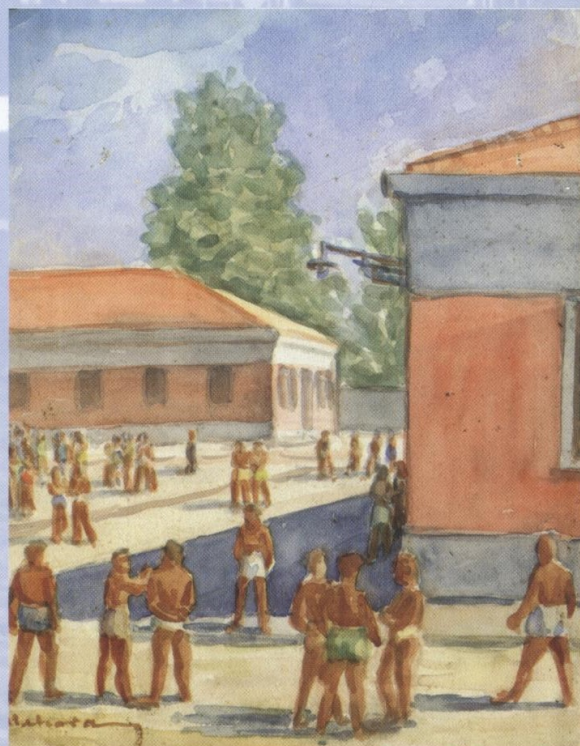
When Great Britain entered the war against Germany and Italy on and off the coasts between the Mediterranean sea and the Indian ocean, these seamen found themselves on the side of the occupier. However, some of them joined the Allies as volunteers, others were taken prisoners and sent to camps along the shipping routes towards India and the Far East. From there many were taken to the Agami camp which was selected by the English to be the gathering point for volunteers for the Yugoslav Royal Army. In Haifa (Palestine) some of these men joined the naval guard battalion, while most of them refused obedience to the king and went to the Abasi camp near Cairo where they joined the British troops. When the Haifa centre closed down, the sailors were sent to the Units of the Yugoslav Navy (SJPS) in Dihejla (Egypt). This is where Yugoslav seamen from the Italian, German, Yugoslav, English, French, Soviet and Turkish armies gathered. From there they could join the National Liberation Movement in 1943.

Some Slovene seamen spent the war on the corvette "Nada", but several spread across Italy and Malta, and from there many joined the Yugoslav partisans, especially after the capitulation of Italy.



A seaman of the Italian military navy Anton Škrlj after 1938

Miloš Mehora: Prisoners at Padua concentration camp in 1943



10 THE CAMPS

The seamen of the Royal Yugoslav Navy that returned to their homes did not stay at large for a long time. The occupiers considered the high military educated men dangerous and many were soon caught and taken to Italian and German concentration camps. In a major raid in the Province of Ljubljana in March 1942 the majority of the members of the former Yugoslav Army and Navy was captured. The prisoners were taken to a camp in Gonars and then to a camp in Chiesanuova near Padua, where most of them stayed until the capitulation of Italy. There were many Italian citizens of Slovene and Croatian background in these camps who opposed fascism. After the capitulation of Italy most of the prisoners escaped, but many were captured by the Germans and taken to German

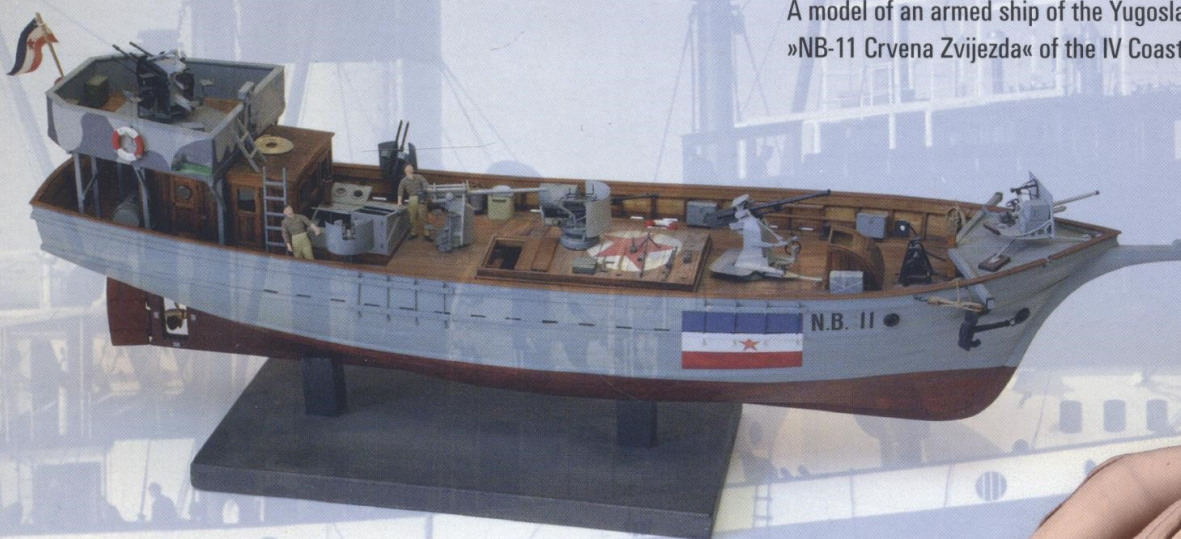
camps, where several died. Most of the released prisoners joined the NLA, some of them joined the collaborators' forces.

11 THE NAVY OF NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY

After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 the units of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Units of Yugoslavia grew significantly, which brought about a new organization of the partisan units. The Navy of the National Liberation Army (NLA) was formed in October 1943. It developed from the units of NLA who transported fighters, the wounded and food among the islands and from the islands to the continent, and had already started with sabotage actions in the summer of 1941. The Navy was first under the command of the Headquarters of the VIII Army Corps, but it became independent in January 1944 when its base was set up on Vis island. In April Vis became the main military naval base, while the one in Monopoli became a rear base in February. Besides combat action, the Navy took over the transport of fighters and cargo from the naval base in Southern Italy, and the wounded and civilians from Yugoslavia. It possessed warships and cargo ships, the Marines, shore artillery batteries and divisions, the Naval Command Headquarters, and the administration of schools and naval bases.

In November 1944 the Naval Headquarters divided the Eastern Adriatic coast into 6 Coastal Sectors (POS) that became basic combat sectors.

A model of an armed ship of the Yugoslav NLA
»NB-11 Crvena Zvezda« of the IV Coastal sector



12 THE SLOVENE SEAMEN IN THE NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMY

In October 1943 following the order of the Supreme Command of the National Liberation Army and the Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, the Main Headquarters of the NLA of Slovenia gathered the Slovene seamen and pilots from their units and sent them to Dalmatia. Many Slovene seamen went to the island of Vis where they were assigned to various units. The navy pilots could join either the navy or the air forces. The oversea units seamen (the members of the Yugoslav and particularly of the Italian Army, conscripts, internees, and prisoners) who wanted to join the National Liberation Movement, arrived at Bari, Gravina and the Naval base of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia in Monopoli from all over Italy and the camps in Northern Africa. From there most of them set off individually or as members of the Oversea Brigades for the island of Vis, where they were assigned to the naval



The partisan cap »Titovka« belonging to the
3rd Coastal Combat Sector
commander lieutenant colonel
Kazimir Renčelj

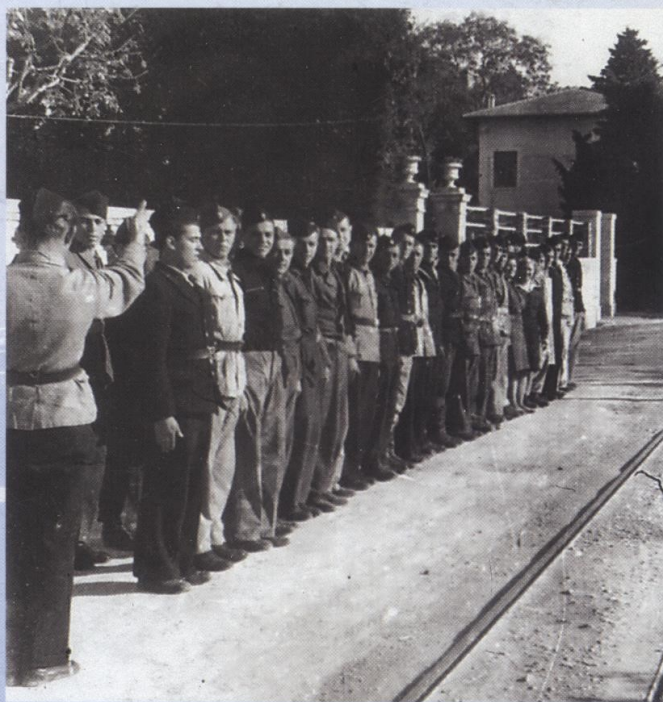
units of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia. Most Slovene seamen fought in Monopoli and in the IV Coastal Area. The commander of NLA Navy was Josip Černi.

13 THE NAVAL UNIT WITHIN THE IX ARMY CORPS

In August 1944, Supreme Command Headquarter gave the order to establish the Naval Unit in the coastal area between the Soča river and the Lim Canal. According to this order a naval unit within the IX Army Corps under the command of Janez Tomšič was formed. His assistants were Major Baldomir Saje who later replaced Janez Tomšič, and lieutenant Radko Pečovnik. The first task of the Naval Group was to form the I Coastal Sector and to organize naval and expert personnel to form the basic naval units. The commander in chief of the I Coastal Sector became Slavko Kavšek. The group was active in Trnovo Forest, Banjice Highland and Cerklje Area. It comprised of the head of the group, the Marine detachments at the XXX Division, the Naval detachment of Koper and the intelligence group "Radko" in Trieste.

14 THE NAVAL DETACHMENT OF KOPER (MOK)

In late October 1944 lieutenant Franc Dermota led the founding of a Naval group in the territory of the Command Sector of Koper. The group soon grew larger as some fighters from the Alma Vivoda battalion joined in, and soon afterward the general conscription brought about even more fighters. By the end of November it had grown into the "MOK" (Naval Detachment of Koper) with Franc Dermota as its Commander in Chief. Its operation zone lay between Muggia and the Mirna River. The "MOK" was active mostly in Lopar, Labor, Topolovec, Boršt and Koromači. Its tasks were actions on the sea, the coast and the neighboring hinterland, the organization of sea traffic, technical services, liaison services, the organization of the district detachment and the organization of the fleet. The most outstanding success of the detachment was the attack on Izola (14-15 April) followed by another attack on the same town and the conquest of Portorož, Piran (1 May) and Savudrija.



The Naval detachment of Koper, May 1945

15 THE MARINES DETACHMENT OF THE XXX DIVISION

At the initiative of the naval command unit of the IX Army Corps, a naval battalion was founded on 7 January 1945. At the end of the same month it was renamed the Marines Detachment. The detachment was made up of its headquarters, the headquarters garrison, the 1st and 2nd groups, the miners' squad, the liaison squad and escort squad. In February 1945 the detachment moved from Gorenja Trebuša to Predmeja. It became an independent unit of the XXX Army Division. Later in was incorporated into the Bazovica Brigade and it fought actively in the norther Primorska. Due to serious losses inflicted upon it during the German offensive "Winterende" it joined a naval group and it took part at the liberation of Trieste.