

# THE RISK APPROACH OF ADMIRAL ANDREW CUNNINGHAM



## ABOUT THE RISK APPROACH SERIES

This study is part of THE RISK APPROACH series which examine the risk attitude of naval leaders. The objective of this series is to uncover elements that shaped these leaders' risk approach, understand their philosophy towards risk and draw lessons for today's leaders in any sectors of activity.

## ADMIRAL ANDREW CUNNINGHAM 1883-1963

Admiral Andrew Cunningham served in the British Navy for nearly fifty years between 1897 and 1946. Notably, he participated in World War I as captain of the destroyer HMS *Scorpion* and in World War II as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean theatre and subsequently as First Sea Lord.

Cunningham was a highly demanding officer who applied a decentralised command approach. He delegated responsibilities to his subordinates and expected in return the ultimate standards of performance.

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*NDBGZ – No Difficulty Baffles Great Zeal.*

Admiral Andrew Cunningham

## A NAVAL CAREER MASTERING RISKS

Cunningham was a combat commander rather than an office man. During World War II, he conducted numerous naval operations attacking enemy supply lines, while protecting Allies' lanes of communication and amphibious landings in the Mediterranean.

He also planned and directed fleet actions against enemy navies, such as the daring air raid targeting the Italian fleet anchored at Taranto in November 1940 or the night battle of Cape Matapan in March 1941. These victories shattered the Italian Navy's ability to fight at sea and provided the Allies with a decisive advantage in the Mediterranean theatre.

## A RATIONAL RISK TAKER

As a fighting officer, Cunningham's most marked traits in the face of uncertainty were courage and exceptional audacity. Yet, strong leadership and pragmatic intellectual abilities were also part of his risk taking approach. Cunningham took risks not only based on intuition but also on careful anticipation and evaluation of the overall situation. Once a decision to take risks was made, it was fully embraced.

- 1 **TAKING INFORMED RISKS**
- 2 **ACCEPTING HIGH LEVELS OF RISK**



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1

## TAKING INFORMED RISKS

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*It is therefore a question of whether these risks must not be accepted in view of the advantages of this policy despite its chances, and I am giving this matter careful study with a view to early action.*

(Cunningham's summary, Mediterranean Fleet War Diary 10-14 June 1940)

*Let intelligent anticipation be your watchword.*

A risk taking approach involves sound judgement supported by a conscious intellectual process. This enables to stay ahead of the circumstances by anticipating emerging threats and latent issues. It also allows to identify potential ramifications, and to assess if expected advantages taking a risk outweigh drawbacks.

2

## ACCEPTING HIGH LEVELS OF RISKS

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*Had the enemy shown more enterprise [...], our losses might have been uncomfortably high. This had of course been recognised as an unavoidable and acceptable risk.*

(Cunningham's Report of Proceedings on Operation Torch 30 March 1943)

*[a]ll concerned met the demands that were made on them with the same cheerful spirit with which they faced the not inconsiderable risks that had to be run.*

(Cunningham's Report on Operation Retribution 13 November 1943)

Even the best mitigation efforts will not eliminate all perils. A certain level of risk will remain and it is crucial to recognise the level of risk that an organisation will be exposed to. Risk acceptance becomes in this case an intentional decision taken with purpose.

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*He thought always in terms of attack, never of defence. He was vigorous, hardy, intelligent and straightforward [...]. He was a real sea-dog.*

General Dwight Eisenhower on Cunningham's contribution to Operation Torch

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

André Fournier is a risk management practitioner and naval historian with more than 25 years of professional experience. He is a risk researcher and the founder of MARITIME STRATEGY RESEARCH.