

COMMANDER TOMA MATEI, ONE OF THE OFFICERS WHO HONOURED THE ROMANIAN NAVY

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In the memory of those who devotedly served the navy and lived the tumultuous alternating decades between peace and war, are the image and name of the commander Toma Matei, one of men who proudly wore the officer's uniform of the Romanian navy.

He was born on the 27th of February 1899, in the village Pantelimonul de Jos, district Constanța, as son of Petre and Dumitra Toma. He attended primary school in the natal village, then the theoretical Highschool "Mircea cel Bătrân" from Constanța. He interrupted his studies because of the evolution on the front Dobrogea, in the First World War, and he participated in war as volunteer scout. Two of his brothers, both officers, heroically died in the great battles from Mărășești. After the war he continued and finished his studies at the Military High school from Iași. In October 1920 was accepted, after a contest, as student at the Navy School in Constanța, for the navy officers class. After graduation, on the 1st of July 1922, was promoted second lieutenant and distributed to the Sea Division.

He distinguished himself as a brilliant student, proving remarkable intellectual skills. He learned very well French, German and Italian, languages that will very much help him on his entire career¹.

The Navy School's commandant, Mihail Constantinescu, noticed that he had real intellectual abilities, that he very much wanted to be educated, he was disciplined, dutiful and a good comrade. The same school's director described him as an industrious man, very energetically and was convinced that he will become a good navy officer².

In August 1922, the young second lieutenant Toma Matei was distributed to the bombardier "Ghiclescu" and on the 28th of September 1926 was promoted lieutenant. Even since 1925, as officer, he begun to teach mathematics, at the I-III years of the Navy's Children School. For a period he was detached at the Commandment of Constanța Market, where his superiors described him: "healthy, robust, very educated, great power of work, conscientious on duty..."³.

In the period 1926-1930 lieutenant Toma Matei worked on the Naval Base Constanța. From the 1st of November 1926 until the 1st of February 1927 he was company commandant at the Crew Corps, proving that he was a serious,

¹ Romanian Historical Military Archives "General Radu Rosetti", Pitești, fond D.C.Î., 1974, dos. Nr. 21.459, f.3 and 73.

² *Ibidem*, f.6.

³ *Ibidem*, f.11.

intelligent, working officer, with good military skills. On the 1st of May 1927 he moved to the Navy Artillery School. Lieutenant Colonel Mihail Constantinescu tells us that he was very good at shootings⁴. During 1928 he was embarked on the school ship “Mircea” where he served as tactical exercise officer. For this activity we received a positive characterization: “respectful with the superiors, a well developed general culture and a professional one in development”⁵. Conscientious and willingly to improve, in 1929 lieutenant Toma Matei got the Law Degree at Iași University and in 1939 the master degree in law, economical and political sciences.

On the 16th of March he was distributed to the bombardier “Căpitan Dumitrescu” as corps help. Also for this period commandant Mihail Constantinescu has only laudatory words: the lieutenant Toma Matei is a “cult and intelligent officer. He promises to become a very useful element for the institution. On board he proved to be endowed with wonderful intellectual skills and with sure and distinguished judgement... He was a tidy, disciplined and respectful officer, a good comrade... From August, when the campaign ended, he was first mate help, proving skills in the ship’s careful management and in leading the crew. He is a valuable officer”⁶.

Meanwhile he was embarked on the “Mărăști” destroyer and starting with the 15th of May 1931 he stayed for a few months on the board of the “Lascăr Catargiu” monitor, participating at all the fighting drills and shootings. The monitor’s commandant considered him a very good marine officer, prepared for the next degree. A similar appreciation was also made by admiral Gavrilescu, the commandant of the Danube Division⁷.

In the interval 10 of April 1932-20 of April 1933, the lieutenant Toma Matei received the responsible function of chief on the 3rd and the 4th Sea Division Commandment Offices. According to captain commander Dumitrescu, lieutenant Toma Matei, deserved to be proposed for promotion, because he had shown discipline, consciousness and skill at work, being a reliable officer on which you could count in any circumstance⁸. In the period between 1st of November 1932 and 1st of November 1933 the lieutenant Toma Matei taught at the Naval School in Constanța, the International Law class, where he obtained good results, confirmed at the end of the scholarly year. Although he was one of the youngest teachers, Toma Matei was described by his superior as “an excellent example for the student officers”⁹.

In November 1934, he was distributed on the “Regina Maria” destroyer as board officer and he remained here until the 1st of April 1935. From the board of this ship he led the Navigation and Drill Service. This was a very useful

⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 13.

⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 14.

⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 19.

⁹ *Ibidem*, f. 20.

experience for him to find the optimal solutions for the different military problems the destroyer had in its missions. Although he leaded successfully these tasks they reproached him that he didn't stimulate enough those around him. Still, he had a solid general culture and beautiful professional knowledge and skills¹⁰.

Thanks to his qualities and experience and being positively and eulogistic appreciated by his superiors, the marine officer Toma Matei was promoted captain, on the 1st of January 1934. Because he had good results also in the teaching career he was promoted in the highly responsible position of studies director at the marine officers Naval School in Constanța.

In 1936, commander Alexandru Constantinescu, commander at the Marine and Naval Schools, mentions that officer Toma Matei, studies director at the marine Officers School successfully fulfilled his entire activity "because of his culture and dedication to study"¹¹. It was also mentioned that he didn't possessed any fortunes, that he translated *Învățămintele din 1914 și Războiul Viitor*, being an officer inclined rather to desk and school work¹².

Significant for the prodigious didactical activity are the descriptions of colonel Panteli, commander of the Naval School, who mentions that in the period between 1st of November 1936 – 18th of June 1937, when he was studies director, captain Toma Matei contributed to the evolution of this military school institution. He was seen as "a cult, working officer with beautiful marine studies. Quiet, with plenty methodical spirit. Very disciplined and with nice behaviour. Bachelor of law, he taught the International Law course. He translated *Cucerirea Mărilor* and others. Outstanding work power and resistance"¹³.

During summer 1937 he was sent on the "Mărăști" destroyer where he had the important mission of second officer. He distinguished for his efforts to improve the fighting technique and for the ship's maintenance. Captain Moiceanu, the commander of the "Mărăști" destroyer, speaking about the young captain Toma Matei's activity (he was 38), stresses: "He obtained very good results due to his tact and methodical sense. Disciplined to his superiors, correct with the subordinates, modest, honest, dignified. He has a beautiful marine culture and made many French translations"¹⁴. In conclusion, the destroyer commander remarks: "I was satisfied, from all the points of view, by this second officer's activity and I have the belief that the future will emphasize this valuable element"¹⁵. The Sea Force's commander, rear-admiral Schmidt, is short, but eulogistic in appreciation: "As second officer of the "Mărăști" destroyer, captain Toma did very good. Cult, serious, working officer, with irreproachable conduct. Very good officer"¹⁶.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, f.23.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, f.24.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, f.25.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

In the period between 1 November 1937 and 9 May 1938, captain Toma Matei continued to be studies director at the marine officers Naval School. Aside teaching International Law, Pedagogy and Rational Arithmetic, he presented several conferences about military education and he wrote for the school new regulations. Although he presented a report to be embarked, he didn't got his superiors approval because he was very appreciated as studies director and because his presence at the Naval School was necessary. Both commander Paul Zlatian and commander of the Marine Schools, Alexandru Constantinescu described him as "excellent marine officer, valuable element which makes real services for the Marine, serious, hard-working, skillful, conscientious, deserving to follow the Superior Officers Preparing School"¹⁷.

Between 1 November 1938 and 1 May 1939 captain Toma Matei was commander of the "Ghiculescu" gunboat and he obtained good results, positively appreciated by counterarmiral Schmidt, commander of the Sea Naval Forces, who remarks: Cult and intelligent officer, with remarkable power of work, serious, modest, irreproachable conducts... Good attitude in front of the troupe. He did very well as commander of a Sea Unit... Very good marine officer"¹⁸.

After disembarking from the "Ghiculescu" gunboat captain Toma Matei was appointed commander-director and studies director at the Specialties Marine School from Constanța. Speaking about his work here, vice-admiral Petre Bărbuneanu, commander of the Romanian Royal Marine, says that officer Toma Matei is well trained, that he is taking good care of this weapon's progresses and that he fulfilled his duty with the best results, deserving to become a superior officer¹⁹.

After the departure of the master commander, in the period 1 November 1939 and 1 July 1940, captain Toma became the Specialties School commander, a mission fulfilled successfully. Meanwhile he taught the courses of Political Economy and Moral Education. Writing new regulations for school, he systematize the analytical programs for the courses of International Law and Commercial Law.

Because he was appreciated for his entire activity and he had shown real military qualities and skills, in May 1940 he promoted the exam to become superior marine officer. He was promoted commander lieutenant.

From the 1st of July until 31st of October 1940 he was detached in the Second Maritime Detachment Constanța where he activated as commander of Underwater Defense (A.S.A), then he was appointed commander of the **mine ship** "Durostor". He kept this function until 31 October 1941. In the same time he lead the Specialties School and as commander was considered a working officer, good teacher, endowed with wonderful military qualities and a very good marine

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, f.26.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, f.27.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

officer²⁰. Between 1 April and 5 June 1941 he was moved to the Naval School as assistant of corps chief and professor of International Law. His activity was described: "Intelligent officer, with well developed general and professional culture. Serious, dignify, modest, great power of work. Disciplined at work and off duty. He presents himself well in front of the troop"²¹.

Due to this appreciation, on the 5th of June 1941 lieutenant commander Toma Matei was named commander of the Naval School. In this function he proved to be extremely valuable because of his didactical experience, his professional value and a vast general and specialty culture. Administating the school he obtained special results in the difficult conditions of Romania's participation at the military operations of the World War Two.

During 1942 he continued his activity in the Naval School from Constanța, where his qualities and experience allowed him to defeat the numerous difficulties raised by finding food or equipment. Once again he proved to be a valuable superior officer. For the period 1 November 1942-20 April 1943, the commander Alexandru Stoianovici, commander of the marine Officers Schools speaks highly of him. After an eulogistic presentation of his physical, military and intellectual skills and his moral qualities, he underlined that as studies director he proved to have a lot of experience in organizing and developing the educational process. He obtained very good results despite the difficulties caused by the war. He was therefore appreciated as a very good and skillful marine superior officer²².

On the 24 Mai 1943, lieutenant commander Toma Matei was appointed commander of the "Mărăști" destroyer. This ship had a displacement of 1.410 tons, had 4 cannons of 120 mm., 2 cannons of 37 mm, 2 double machineguns of 13,2 mm., 4 torpedo launchers tubs of 450 mm., 2 throwers and inclined plans to launch antisubmarine grenades²³.

During 1943 the sea transport activity of the Romanian navy developed in such a rhythm, that we might say that it was the convoy period of the Black Sea. In this year were put in convoys 2.030 ships that transported 1.350.000 diverse tons, necessary for the front provisioning. Only for the Cuban military actions necessities, in the interval March – August 1943, were transported 337.000 tons of materials, 6.365 militaries, 200 cannons, 520 vehicles etc²⁴.

The ships that composed the convoys, navigating mainly on the route Constanța – Crimeea, were escorted by military vessels. At these missions participated also the "Mărăști" destroyer, commanded starting with the 24th of May 1943 by lieutenant commander Toma Matei.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, f.31.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, f.33.

²³ Nicolae Koslinski, Raymond Stănescu, *Marina Română în al II-lea război mondial*, vol. I, (1939-1942), București, 1996, p. 85.

²⁴ Nicolae Koslinski, Raymond Stănescu, *op.cit.,(quated op.)*vol. II (1942-1944), București, 1997, p. 15.

With his ship he took part at 21 battle missions, especially to escort transportation ships on the route Constanța-Sevastopol (220 miles in direct line). He covered 7.120 miles in 577 hours, fighting an enemy with a superior military technique. He faced many Soviet aerial attacks with bombardiers and torpedo boats and he successfully rejected many enemy submarine attacks. During these dramatic confrontations he sank or destroyed a Soviet submarine (unconfirmed), took down several planes and avoided many mines²⁵.

Between 1 November 1943-19 April 1944, he continued to lead the “Mărăști” destroyer. He participated at special missions on the Black Sea to escort convoys which transported troops and equipment between Constanța and the front from southern U.R.S.S.. He also took part at the dramatic retreat from Sevastopol (Crimea) to Constanța and he successfully counteract the aerial, naval and submarine attacks of an enemy with modern fighting techniques. He developed 19 escort missions, seven of them of high responsibility, as convoy commander. On the 19th of April 1944, returning in a convoy which evacuated troops from Sevastopol, the destroyer Mărăști, having on board over 200 soldiers from the mountain troops units, lacking visibility because of the thick fog and strong currents, got into sand banks near Tuzla. After useless manoeuvres the destroyer was pulled on the “land” by three tugboats and brought to Constanța. The ship had only torn a propeller blade and twisted the ax²⁶. The “Mărăști” destroyer remained in Constanța harbor until autumn 1944, when the entire Romanian fleet was captured by the Soviet “ally”.

On the 22nd of June 1944, the officer Toma Matei was promoted commander captain and developed a prodigious activity at the Historical Service of the High General Staff²⁷. In the period between 9 November 1944 and 19 April 1945, when he became chief of the Marine Bureau, in the Coordination and Research Office, he studied and wrote numerous records useful for the history of the marine operations developed in 1917. He offered, in this way, data for many works asked by the High General Staff. General Gorski, chief of the History Department, described him as a very good superior officer who wrote clear and documented historical studies and all the demanded papers. During 1945, captain commander Toma Matei also became the Regulations Office’s chief in the High General Staff, being very appreciated by his superiors for his activity. Very relevant are the comments made by the Marine’s General Secretary, who underlines the fact that thanks to his general and specialty knowledge, he mastered well the huge material regarding the marine regulations and that he published numerous papers and studies regarding different marine themes, especially the marine law²⁸. He is described as a good marine officer. Admiral Bărbuneanu, speaking about captain commander Toma

²⁵ Romanian Historical Military Archives, *op.cit.*, (*quoted op.*), f.34.

²⁶ Nicolae Koslinski, Raymond Stănescu, *op.cit.*, (*quoted op.*), p. 225.

²⁷ Romanian Historical Military Archives, *op.cit.*, (*quoted op.*), f.6.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, f.39.

Matei's activity during 1945, notes: "as a teacher and writer, this officer contributed to the development of the marine culture with his numerous papers, published in different magazines. He is a very good officer"²⁹.

In 1946 on the 22nd of May, the officer Toma Matei was promoted commander³⁰. In the same summer, for personal reasons, he demanded his retirement from the military marine service.

In token of recognition of his incontestable merits in the service of the Romanian Marine, the commander Toma Matei was decorated with the following medals and decorations:

- The Cross "Sanitary merit", cl. I-a; 1936;
- The Commemorative Cross (1916-1918); 1937;
- "Romania's Crown" Order, in knight rank; 1936;
- The War Badge of the Scouts; 1937;
- "Victoria" Medal of the Great War for Civilization (1916-1918); 1939;
- "Ferdinand" Medal, with swords; 1941;
- The Croat Order "Zvonimira", cl. II-a; 1943;
- "Romanian Star" Order, with swords, in knight rank, with ribbon of "Military Virtue" and "Oak Leafs"; 1945;
- "Romania's Crown" Order, with swords, in officer rank, with ribbon of "Military Virtue"; 1945;

Characterized by a straight spine, unwilling to accept the Soviet domination regime, commander Toma Matei took part of the initiative nucleus to found the Resistance National Movement, with ramifications all around the country, leaded by admiral Horia Măcelariu. He was the contact person between this organization and Iuliu Maniu.

The resistance movement didn't have a military character and was an organization which, using democratic means, contested the Communist regime installed by the Soviets and defended the national independence.

On the 9th of April 1948, along with his promotion as counteradmiral, was arrested by the special order of the Internal Minister, Teoharie Georgescu. After very hard investigations was sent to judgement in a group of 44 people. The trial developed in secrecy at the Military Court in Bucharest and, after a typical Communist procedure was convicted to "25 years of hard work and 10 years of civic degradation for high treason, 25 years for the guilt of organizing and developing activities against the regime, 10 years for the crime of plotting to revolt"³¹.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, f.6.

³¹ Tribunalul Militar București, Secția I-a, Dosar 4541/948, Extras din Hotărârea Penală nr. 2195 din 13.XII.1948.

He passed through many prisons with isolating regime, (Internal Minister, Jilava, Pitești, Aiud and Gherla). He was beaten and tortured in numerous investigations, enduring hunger and cold for almost 17 years and he couldn't have any communication with his family. He was released on the 3rd of August, after the Pardon Decree 411/ 1964, being badly ill. He had suffered a strange cerebral stroke, probably provoked, with only a week before his release, due to the political pressures of the prison's authorities that forced him to sign "conversion" declarations. His refuse to sign was harshly punished! He died few months later, on the 10th of February 1965.

The activity developed in the military marine – for over 25 years – in the cultural and social file, during numerous historical events and challenges, speaks about commander's personality (or counteradmiral, a rank officially granted, but not used). Toma Matei was an example of comradeship, marine professional belief, democratic and patriotic behaviour, all these modeled at the school of the sea, a school of courage, dignity and sincerity.

COMANDORUL THOMAS MATEI, UNUL DINTRE OFITERII DE ONOARE AI MARINEI ROMÂNE

- Rezumat -

În timpul activității sale, de peste 25 de ani, în cadrul marinei militare române, în viața culturală și socială, ca și în timpul celui de al doilea război mondial (1941-1945), când a fost comandantul crucișătorului "Mărășești", comandorul Thomas Matei a reprezentat un exemplu de profesionalism, camaraderie, de comportament democratic și patriotic, modelat de școala mării, școală a curajului, demnității și sincerității. Între anii 1948-1964 a fost arestat de către autoritățile comuniste, fiind deținut politic. A ieșit din acest calvar grav bolnav, murind în 1965.