The information for these presentations comes from a series of informational booklets published by His Majesty's Stationary Office in the 1940's. This is one of a number of books that were bought by my father during WW2. They were sold [usually for 6d or 1s] to keep people informed of various theatres of war and as a boost to morale.

These books have now been donated to the Imperial War Museum archives and other organisations, grateful thanks are due to Arthur for his sterling work in scanning them to digital format, which I appreciate, was no easy task.

PJS

THE AIR BATTLE FOR MALTA

The Official Account of the R.A.F. in Malta, June 1940 to November 1942.

HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

Published 1944

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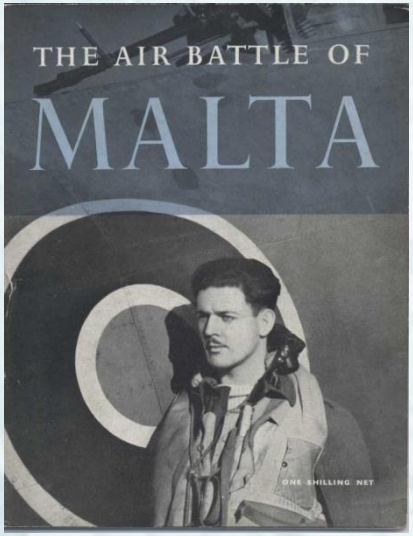
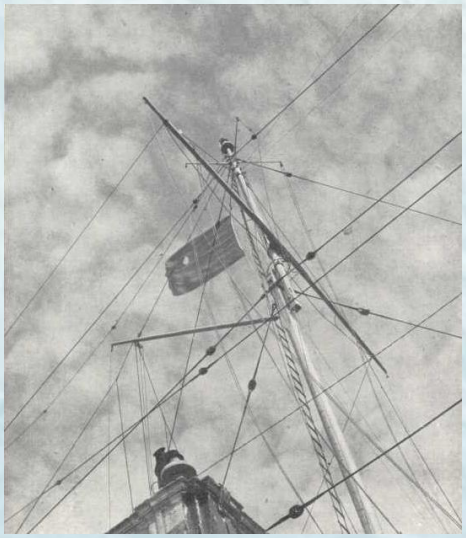


LIKE A LEAF UPON THE SEA

THE KEY TO AFRICA



RED FOR DANGER. MALTA HOISTS HER TATTERED FLAG OF WARNING

AN OUTPOST OF THE BRAVE

In the clear heat of a Mediterranean summer morning, less than seven hours after Italy entered this war, the first raiders came to Malta. Within the rock-carved bastions of the Knights of St John in Valetta, and across Grand Harbour in the area of the Three Cities, Senglea, Cospicua and Vittoriosa, the sirens were heard for the first time.

From that day, 11th June 1940, until the winter of 1942, when siege-raising ships fought through to the island, the Battle of Malta was waged. It was a battle against the Germans and the Italians, against superior numbers, shortage of equipment, isolation, terror and hunger. From this battle Malta emerged in 1943 to dominate the central Mediterranean as a striking base, a bright weapon in the armoury of the Allied forces, more deadly than ever before the long history of warfare in the Middle Sea.

The island was not a single weapon wielded as an isolated arm; it had and integral part to play in Mediterranean strategy as a whole. Malta is linked by air with both extremes of the Middle Sea – with Gibraltar and Egypt. Every theatre of war in the Mediterranean was within range of its aircraft, and not the least important task of its pilots was to watch from their central position all the movements of the enemy. The battles in the Mediterranean hinged upon supplies, on the capacity of both sides to reinforce themselves across a limited area of sea and across desert sand. The geographical situation of the island was vital to the Allies in the supply conflict; but for Malta, Rommel in 1942 might well have pressed on to Alexandria.

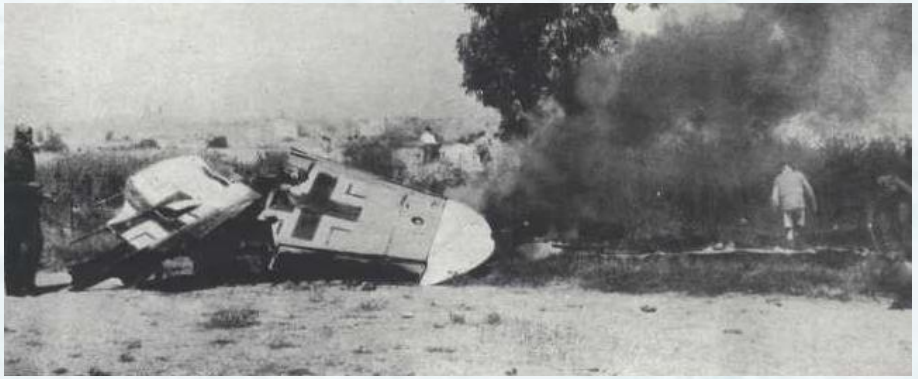
Aircraft and submarines from the island, with perseverance and daring worthy of the traditions of the Knights of St John, ravaged the enemy's supplies. Malta-based aircraft alone sank or damaged over half a million tons of his shipping. The island's reconnaissance aircraft sought and brought news of the enemy in Italy, Sicily, North Africa and the Greek Archipelago. Malta was always linked with the fortunes of the armies of the Western Desert. Never in history was the island's strategical significance greater.

To one approaching from the air, as many of its enemies have approached it, Malta looks at first like a leaf, green or yellow according to the season, floating upon the sea. The whole of the island, owing to its small compass, is visible for a long time, its airfields and defences, its churches and farms close-knit and compact. Once the navigator has found it, Malta seems a simple, rather fragile and easy target. It is a memorable view, either to friend or foe.

It was because of the daily prosecution of the war by this outpost that during the period of the battle the Axis caused 3,215 alerts to sounded upon the island, persisting month after month in the effort to neutralise it; and finally, in the six months from December 1941 to May 1942, attempting wholly to reduce the garrison by aerial assault.

The spirit and endurance of the Maltese, which played so great a part in winning the battle, can only be done justice in a book devoted to their problems and triumphs while living besieged upon a target of rock. This is the story of Malta's war in the air, but it must be emphasised that the island's resistance was a unique example of a combined operation in which the Royal Navy, the Merchant Navy, the Army, the people of Malta and the Royal Air Force were all indispensable and inseparable.

With the Royal Air Force were men from all parts of the British Commonwealth and from the United Nations. Conspicuous in the island's defence were Australians, New Zealanders and Rhodesians, while during 1942 never less than twenty-five per cent of the air crews were Canadians. Although most of them remain anonymous in this account, their individual exploits gain a worthier tribute in the joint success they achieved. Such was the comradeship of fighter and bomber crews, of the British and their brother nations, that this composite honour is the one they would themselves prefer.



The sirens, sounding at seven o'clock on that June morning, was the prelude to two and a quarter years of air assault and blockade from an enemy only just over fifty miles distant at the nearest landfall. By the end of 11942 over 14,000 tons of bombs had fallen upon the 143 square miles of Malta and Gozo; an average of some ninety-nine tons per square mile, though this tonnage was concentrated to a far greater density upon the dockyards, airfields, and inhabited places of Malta. During those two and a quarter years, 1,468 civilians [or about one to every 200 of the population] were killed or died of injuries and over 24,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged.

The enemy lost 1,129 aircraft in this assault, of which 236 were destroyed by anti-aircraft fire. In the island's defence 568 aircraft were lost; but for every aircraft bombed on the ground, the anti-aircraft gunners destroyed one Axis machine in the air. For every civilian killed, the Axis paid approximately one raider.

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THE FIRST ONSET.

Italian Cants, bombing through cloud gaps, strike at the naval base in a high-level attack. The bombs go down through a sky blotted with the bursts of anti-aircraft shells.

THE ITALIANS TRY THEIR HAND

JUNE – DECEMBER 1940

When the first siren sounded, on 11th June 1940, Malta's airborne defence consisted of four Gladiator aircraft, two of which maintained a continuous stand-by during daylight hours. As the ten Italian bombers approached at 14,000 feet they were engaged by anti-aircraft fire and by the Gladiators, which had been at readiness since dawn. They dropped their bombs round the Grand Harbour and upon the airfield at Hal Far. The first military casualties were sustained at Fort St Elmo where six Royal Malta Artillerymen, who were firing at an aircraft with rifles, were killed by a bomb falling among them.

It was the busy time of the day and people were on their way to work. *Carozzins*, the high, graceful, curtained carriages which ply for hire in Valetta, were crowding the streets. The painted water-craft, know as *dghaises*, were ferrying workers and shoppers across the harbours. Few took shelter during the half-hour of the first alert. The value of deep rock shelters was learnt later. Seventy persons were killed or died of injuries in that month of June, a total exceeded only during the heaviest months of the assault in 1942.

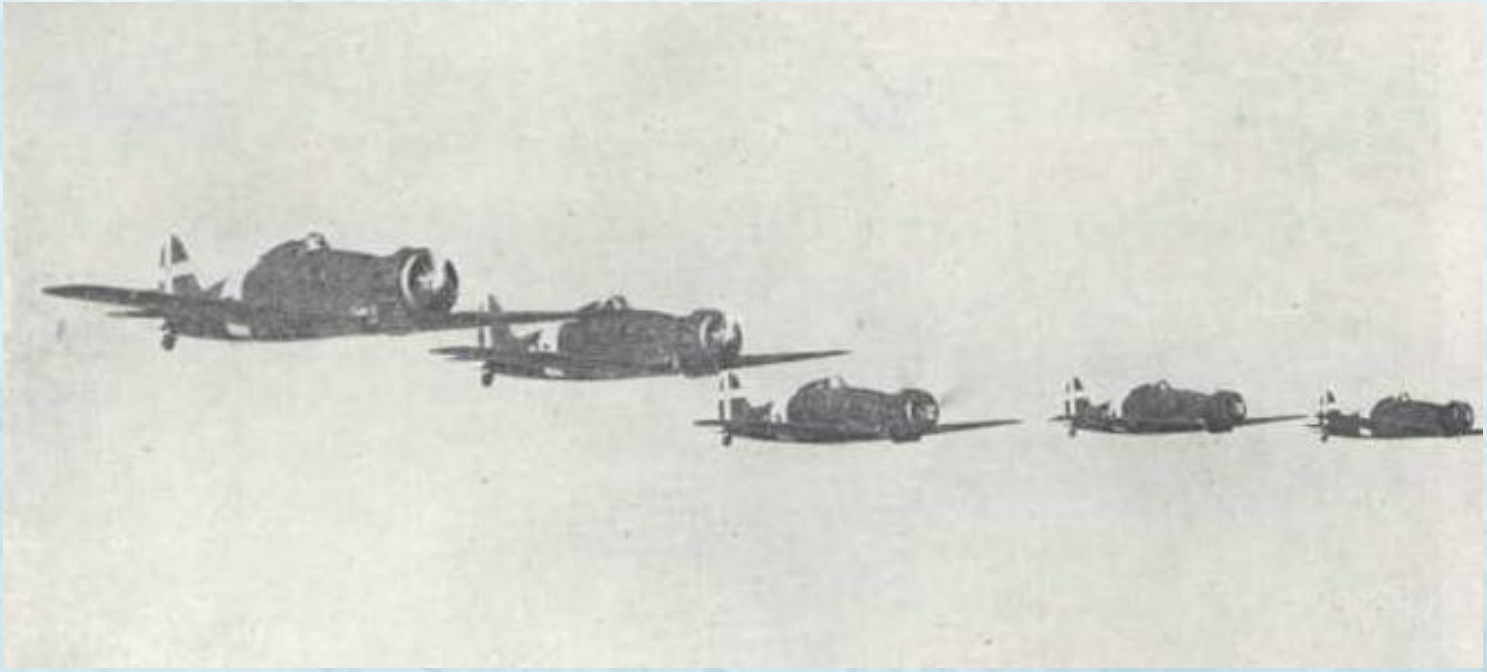
The story of these first Gladiator fighters which defended the island begins in April 1940, about the time of Dunkirk. The Air Officer Commanding at Malta, Air-Commodore [now Air Vice-Marshall] F.H.M. Maynard, had no fighters. All available Hurricanes and Spitfires were needed on the Western Front and for the coming Battle of Britain. It seemed that Malta would be without fighter defence in the threatened clash of Mediterranean forces.

It happened, however, that the aircraft Glorious had left Malta a few weeks earlier, and after her departure some packing cases consigned to her were discovered on the island. They contained four Sea-Gladiator biplane fighters. These were in store at Kalafrana, and Air-Commodore Maynard asked for the loan of them from Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, to form a local fighter defence unit. The loan was granted and the Gladiators – three of which were to win fame and respect as *Faith, Hope and Charity* – were unpacked, assembled, and fitted with guns.

There were no fighter – pilots, however, and the next problem was to raise the men to fly them. The Personal Assistant to the Air Officer Commanding, Flight Lieutenant [now Wing-Commander] George Burges, volunteered for the job. Like Burges, several of those chosen were flying-boat pilots; others had had some slight experience in fighter. They started training.

THIS IS FAITH.

When the battle started the defenders had only three fighters, all Gladiators.
They were known as Faith, Hope and Charity.



MACCHI FIGHTERS *gave protection to the Italian bombers after the first week of raids*

The training was interrupted once when the aircraft were ordered back into their cases by a higher authority; but the Air Officer Commanding managed to obtain their release again, and they were all ready for the Italians when they came.

At first the Italians flew in tight formations of bombers, usually despising fighter escort over a target which they regarded as defenceless. But one formation of five Macchi 200 fighters also came in on the first day. Flying Officer[now Flight Lieutenant] W.J. Woods described this engagement in the first combat report filed in Malta:

"We sighted a formation of five S.79 enemy aircraft approaching Valetta at a height of approximately 15,000 feet. We climbed until we were slightly above them, and then Red Two delivered an attack from astern. The enemy had turned out to sea.. I delivered an attack from astern., and got a good burst at a range of approximately 200 yards. My fire was returned. I then broke away and returned over the island at approximately 11,000 feet, south of Grand Harbour.

"While still climbing to gain height, I observed another formation of five enemy aircraft approaching. They were at about the same height as myself. I attacked from abeam at about 150 yards and got one good burst. The enemy started firing at me long before I opened up. This formation broke slightly but left me well behind when I tried to get in an attack from astern.

"Just after that, when again climbing to gain more height, I suddenly heard machine-gun fire from behind me. I immediately went into a steep left-hand turn and saw a single-engine fighter diving and firing at me. For quite three minutes I circled as tightly as possible and got the enemy in my sight. I got in a good full burst, full deflection short, and he went down in a steep dive with black smoke pouring from his tail. I could not follow him down, but he appeared to go into the sea".

Malta's air defences have rested upon the partnership of guns and fighters ever since. Of the anti-aircraft artillery's part in the opening of hostilities one of their officers wrote: "The gunners had been waiting their chance and they took it with both hands, so much so that it was calculated that the stocks of ammunition in Malta would only last thirty days at that intensity of firing. However, the Italians lost their enthusiasm and the ammunition situation improved".

During the first week there were constant raids. The Italian bombers continued to fly over at high altitudes, in faultless formation, and the accuracy of their high-level bombing earned grudging respect. The Gladiators, *Faith*, *hope* and *Charity*, took off to fight greatly superior numbers. People in the streets cheered them and photographs of the pilots appeared in shop-windows; but they were only three against all the Regia Aeronautica in icily. Yet by the 16th June they had forced the enemy into the luxury of fighter for his bombers. The raiders flew in three formations, all of which the Gladiators managed to disperse. But Air-Commodore Maynard emphasised in a signal that, although the institution of an escort by the enemy was a compliment to the Gladiators, the need for Hurricanes was pressing. He added that the Gladiators were being conserved as far as possible, but that the high speeds of the enemy aircraft were making interception difficult.

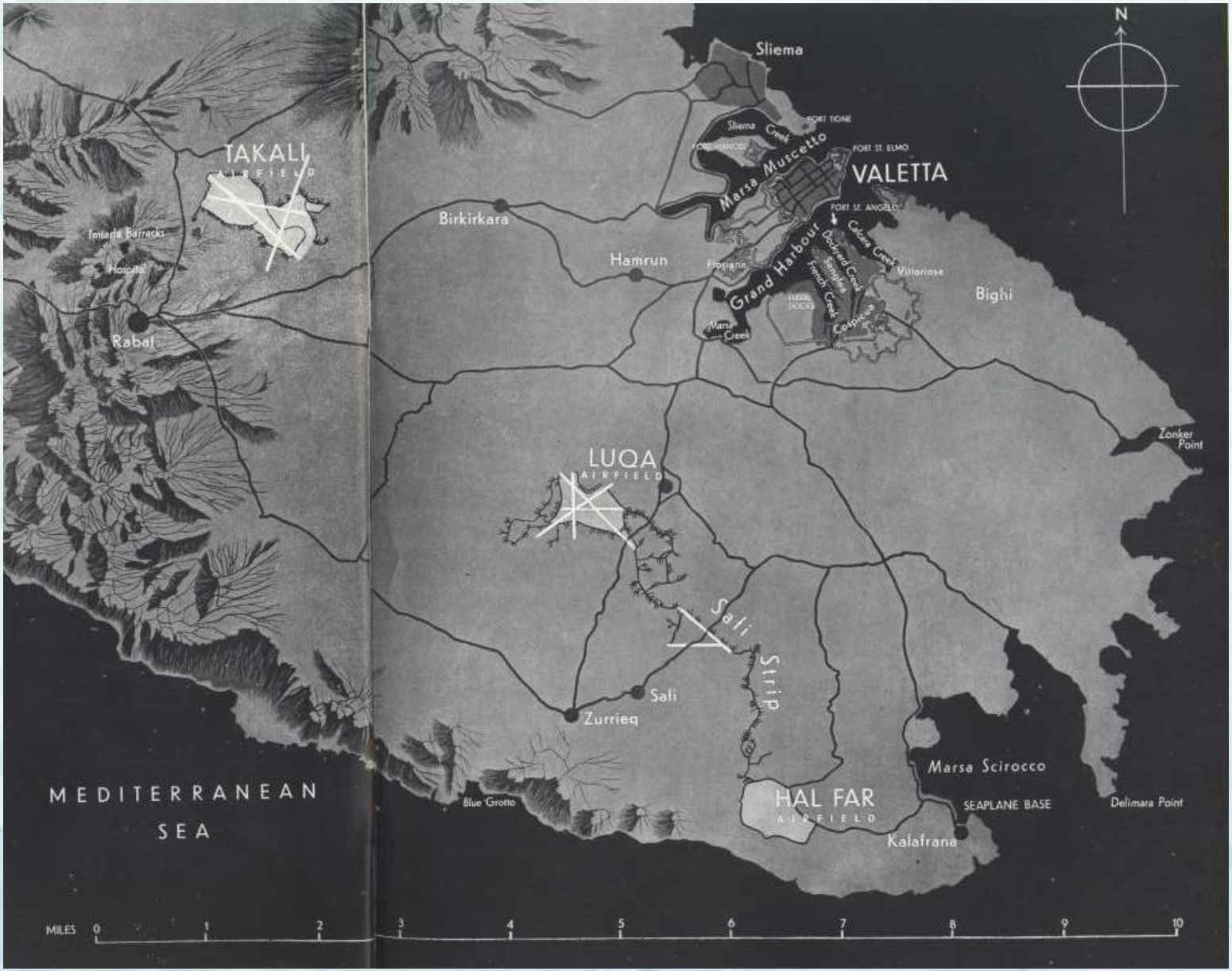
Even when unaccompanied by fighters, the Italian bombers were quick to adapt their tactics to their advantage in speed and numbers. On June 17th, for instance, it was noted during four raids that one bomber in a formation of five would straggle. When attacked by the Gladiators this bomber would lose height, flying beneath its fellows, who would then attack the Gladiator pilots with their down firing movable guns. It was found that the straggler was the only target which the Gladiators were normally able to attack.

At the end of that second week of war on the island, Berlin radio claimed that the Italian Air Force had "completely destroyed the British naval base at Malta" Late on Saturday, 22nd June, after a raid--free day, the Italians sent an S.79 bomber to take photographs of Grand Harbour in order to leave no doubt about the thoroughness of this achievement. Flight Lieutenant Burges and Flying Officer wrote in his combat report:

"Ordered to intercept enemy aircraft reported approaching Malta. Enemy sighted at 13,000 feet when we were at 12,000 feet. Altered course to intercept and climbed to 15,000 feet, and carried out stern attack from above enemy. Port engine and then starboard engine of enemy caught fire and attack was discontinued". Evening promenaders in Valetta and along Sliema waterfront saw the Italian bomber fall into the sea in flames and watched two of the crew follow it down by parachute. They were the first Axis airmen to be brought captive to the island.

Before the end of the month, four Hurricanes called in on transit passage from Britain to Egypt. Air-Commodore Maynard, who was building up a reputation for keeping everything he could lay hands on, obtained the permission of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, to retain them. This was fortunate, as two of the Gladiators had met with accidents on their airfield and were unserviceable. Though some of them were to survive for many more months upon active service, the main fighter defence now passed to the Hurricane. During the darkest days of the battle this aircraft was the mainstay of the island's defence. It is a battlefield where the Hurricane will always be honoured.

The improvisation and maintenance of local fighter defence of *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* were a singular achievement which not only appealed to the popular imagination in Malta, but also caused the Italian failure to exploit the air superiority which they obviously enjoyed in the Central Mediterranean. In presenting *Faith*, now sole survivor, to the people of Malta on 3rd September, 1943, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park said that during the first five months of the war these three Gladiators, with a handful of Hurricanes, intercepted seventy-two enemy formations and destroyed or damaged thirty-seven enemy machines. "The defence of Malta," he added, "can justifiably be included among epics of this war, and *Faith* has earned a place of honour in the armour of Malta".



THE AIRFIELDS OF MALTA.

Confined by the lie of the land, the position of Malta's three airfields exposed them to concentrated attacks. Linking the airfields of Luqa and Hal Far, the Safi dispersal strip with its intersecting runways, offered another obvious target.
Equally exposed were Valetta, the capital and administrative centre, the naval dockyard, and all the packed districts around Grand Harbour

The island, in spite of its isolated position, was tenable. Convoys, covered by the battle fleet, steamed in almost unopposed. On the first day of July Malta-based aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm were already striking at oil storage tanks in Sicily. These aircraft were Swordfish, originally part of a squadron based at Hyères in the south of France for training. The squadron was signalled to leave France on 17th June, and next morning they had taken off for Bône on the Algerian coast. Here they were received well by the French, and the squadron split up, the training half returning to England and the striking force flying by way of Medjez el Bab to Malta.

The defenders of the island faced a number of grave difficulties.

The first was the problem of supply. The island is a garrison fortress. From the time of the Great Siege in 1565, when La Valetta withstood the barbarians from the East, Malta has never been self-supporting. Vast underground granaries were built for storing food in the rock. Then, as now, food, ammunition and fuel had to come from across the sea. In the office of the Air Officer Commanding there was a coloured chart which shaped every operation. On it were plotted the weekly allowance of petrol and how it was being used. At the end of 1942, just before the siege was raised, fuel for only five days' normal flying was left. Ammunition, spare parts, and such essentials as motor transport, without which no air force can operate, also had to be carefully nursed.

For airmen, Malta has serious geographical limitations. An island of rock only some seventeen and a half miles long and nine miles wide necessarily limits airfield facilities. Not only is expansion restricted by the terrain but sites are thrown close together, forming a dense target for attacks from the air. There was no alternative airfields to which aircraft could be diverted if any of the existing three were temporarily unserviceable.

The Gladiators operated from Hal Far airfield at the south-east corner of the island. When the Hurricanes arrived they were accommodated at Luqa, on high ground a mile or so inland, commanding the Grand Harbour and the Three Cities. The third important airfield is Takali, upon the cultivated plain which lies between Rabat, the ancient capital, and Valetta. These airfields were already known to the
Italians, who had used them for commercial flying before the war. The airfields themselves were always limited by the lie of the land. They had to be levelled out of rocky country, slashed by deep, narrow gullies known as wieds and terraced by stone walls which conserve the sparse soil, zealously farmed to the very edges of the airfields' perimeters.

Linked with these problems of supply and geography was the manpower. As the island's offensive activities increased, more hands were needed. Maltese men joined the men joined the Royal Air Force and about 1,4000 of them are in it now. Many have joined the other Services.. As the attacks upon the island increased, more worker were needed to repair damage and to serve the war needs of garrison life. As the siege tightened it became more difficult to adapt and reinforce existing manpower. The solution of this problem had to come from inside, and the collaboration of Services and civilians was an achievement peculiar to the war in Malta.

That the Italians had every intention of overwhelming Malta within the first few months of the war was plain from the effort they made during July. A handful of fighters always met them, two or three British aircraft engaging formations up to twenty strong. On 13th July a formation of twelve C.R. 42s was engaged by one Hurricane and one Gladiator; the Hurricane was damaged. Reporting upon this engagement, R.A.F. Headquarters signalled that enemy tactics were attempting to reduce the island's fighter effort by sending large formations of fighters stepped up by flights. The enemy fighters were very manoeuvrable with the island's waning fighter force reduced to one Hurricane and two Gladiators they expected some difficulty in keeping the enemy reasonably respectful. They added that they would do their best to hang on in the hope of an early delivery of more Hurricanes.

On July 16th after five weeks of the Battle of Malta, the Royal Air Force lost its first fighter. It crashed a hundred yards away from a C.R. 42 brought down during the engagement. Both pilots were killed. The Italian losses were ten destroyed.

At the beginning of August the Air Ministry decided to establish the fighter flight on a proper basis. In spite of the pressing need for fighters in Great Britain, twelve Hurricanes escorted by two Skuas were flown off aircraft-carrier Argus. They arrived on the 2nd August. During this month the enemy turned their attention from the dockyards, which they had "destroyed," to the airfields and to wearing down fighter reinforcements. There were fewer raids, and such as there were occurred mostly at night. Luqa airfield, just reopened for the Hurricanes, had its first heavy raid of the war. A few days after the Hurricanes' arrival the Italians sent a demonstration in force of C.R.42s in order to entice them to combat at great numerical disadvantage.

Dive-bombing Ju. 87s, piloted by Italians, made their first appearance in September. Twenty of them, escorted by fighters, attacked Hal Far airfield on 15th September, that red-letter day in the Battle of Britain. They dropped a large quantity of delayed action bombs. During this month two important convoys arrived with stores and reinforcements. These were handled by the new organisation brought into being to co-ordinate the requirements of the Services and the civilian population. These convoys marked the beginning of the work of the Malta Shipping Committee which had been set up in Alexandria and in Great Britain to ensure that supplies would be available at short notice to be sent either the eastern or western route.

HURRICANES ARE HURRIED TO MALTA *in July 1940 in the Carrier Argus. They are seen on her flight-deck before flying off to the island. Escorting ships are centre and right, the Renown and Ark Royal.*

THROUGH AIRBORNE EYES.

This was the photograph taken home by Malta-based aircraft, after their reconnaissance of Taranto on 10th November 1940. It showed several Italian battleships lying at anchor. Next day the Fleet Air Arm, to which the photograph was flown, put three of them out of action.

Italy had declared war on Greece on 28th October, and the establishment of the naval base at Suda Bay, together with the Fleet Air Arm's successful attack on Taranto had eased the supply routes in the eastern Mediterranean.

The reconnaissance of Taranto was made by aircraft from Malta. The Royal Navy sent aircraft to Hal Far airfield to fly the information to their carrier. A letter addressed to the Air Officer Commanding from the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, shows what measure of help this information gave to the Navy:

"14th November, 1940.

My Dear Maynard,

I hasten to write you a line to thank you for the most valuable reconnaissance work carried out by your squadrons, without which the successful attack on Taranto would have been impossible.

I well know what long monotonous flying time they have had to put in and I am very grateful to them.
The work over Taranto has been particularly valuable and gave us all we wanted to know.

Good luck and my grateful thanks again for your co-operation.

Yours very sincerely,

A.B. Cunningham"

Two convoys from Egypt and a convoy direct from Great Britain arrived in November. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were able to increase offensive action based on the island, while the Italian effort fell off considerably. Attacks by Wellingtons on Tripoli and Naples hearted everybody in Malta. In spite of the enemy's claims, the Regia Aeronautica had been held by a handful of fighters; and even as the Royal Air Force was throwing its weight into the Battle of Britain, the Maltese fortress was being built up and armed for the Mediterranean conflict upon which so much in this war had turned.

Malta's eyes discovered the next move in the Axis plan to obtain some certainty of tenure upon the Middle Sea. As this ability to reconnoitre has had its affect on every event by foreseeing each hostile move, it may be convenient to outline the work of the reconnaissance units at this stage of the narrative.

From the outbreak of war with Italy until the Eighth Army's advance through North Africa in the closing months of 1942, photographic reconnaissance in the central Mediterranean was the sole responsibility of Malta-based aircraft. During eighteen months of relative isolation nearly 1,500 photographic sorties were flown from Malta. Not even during the heaviest attacks did the island's aircraft fail to bring back regular information about the enemy's forces in Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, and Tripolitania. The Mediterranean is the only major theatre of war in which German strength had depended upon seaborne supplies. Enemy shipping, therefore, has always been the first objective of Malta's eyes, and the long flight over the open sea in the face of local enemy air superiority has been the regular task of the island's reconnaissance pilots.

To the north, in the ports of Taranto, Brindisi, and Naples on the Italian mainland, and at Messina, Palermo and Trapani on the island of Sicily, the convoys were loaded for Rommel's army. To the south, at Tripoli and Benghazi, his supplies entered the battle area. Along the Greek coast under cover of airfields on the Greek mainland, or along the Tunisian coast under cover of the heavily fortified island of Pantellaria, the convoys passed with their escorting destroyers. To cover routes strung out across the expanse of the sea in the clear Mediterranean light, to photograph ports separated by many hundred miles of coastline was the task of Malta's reconnaissance.

From the beginning of the war their work went steadily on. A "borrowed" Blenheim, a Hudson, a French Latecoeur which had escaped from Vichy North Africa, and Glenn Martin Marylands all played their part. The Marylands were successful until German bombing of Malta's airfields and standing patrols of Me. 109s over the island in the spring of 1942 made it increasingly difficult for these twin-engined aircraft to operate by day. Time after time they had to fight their way out and their way home with their precious information. No match themselves for the Messerschmitts, they ha to tackle them with their guns and in fantastic dummy combats and evasions. They succeeded for a time; then they had to be superseded by Spitfires which were used for observation of long-range shipping as well as for harbour reconnaissance. Only when the attacks on Malta slackened was the Maryland reintroduced in its improved version as the Baltimore, enabling the Spitfire pilot to be relieved of much navigational strain.

After the watch on shipping, the most important reconnaissance activity was for defensive purposes. Regular photographic coverage was made of the Sicilian airfields from which Malta was being attacked. This weekly, sometimes almost daily, task was carried out for a time by Hurricanes. In the spring of 1942, however, the Hurricane was finally abandoned for operational photography and the Spitfire took its place.

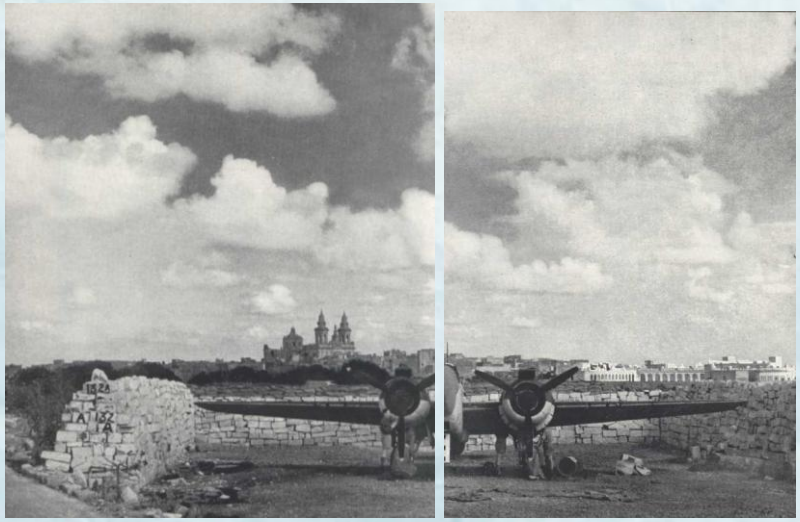
The practice initiated at Malta of going of going down to fifteen, ten or even five thousand feet for reconnaissance pictures has produced some of the largest scale photographs ever taken of individual targets; harbour and naval units have been covered under conditions which seemed almost impossible by ordinary standards.

This low-level work was introduced by Wing-Commander A. Warburton, who first came to the island at the end of 1940, and specialised in reconnaissance flying, with only short interruption, throughout the period covered in these pages. Even as a Pilot Officer, soon after his arrival, Warburton is shown in the records as having carried out some "beard-singeing" reconnaissances. one of his early reports reads;

"I was entering the Bay of Naples from the south-west at 1,500 feet when i saw an S.M. 79 with brown mottled camouflage heading across my track. The clouds were at 2,000 feet in a solid bank, so if fighters appeared I could retire. I therefore made a stern attack; some pieces of the tail flew off and my rounds started going into the fuselage. I closed the range and concentrated on the starboard engine which started to smoke and eventually stopped. My rear gunner put in a burst of about twenty rounds which ignited the petrol, and the S.M. 79 burst into a mass of flames and dived into the sea from 1,000 feet, disappearing immediately. I then carried on with my recco of Naples and returned to Luqa".

This pilot had many adventures which typify the activities of Malta's reconnaissance men, who usually fly without guns upon their daily duty. While carrying out, unarmed, a low-level photographic reconnaissance of Bizerta in November 1942, Warburton was attacked and shot up by Me. 109s. His aircraft was hit in the engine, oil tank and compass, and he was compelled to land at Bône. He made his way via Algiers, to Gibraltar, where he collected a fighter which was awaiting delivery to Malta. While flying this machine back he encountered two Ju.88s in the Gulf of Tunis and attacked them. One he shot down, the other managed to escape into cloud. He then returned to his astonished colleagues who had already given him up as missing, having heard nothing of him for four days

When the Allied campaign was launched in North Africa the whole tactical reconnaissance involved was carried out by Malta-based aircraft. During the first critical week, Taranto, Messina, Navarino and Naples were covered, often three times a day, in order that Admiral Cunningham could be informed of any movement of the Italian fleet which might threaten our seaborne operations. The movements of the Axis forces in Tunis and then Berzerta harbour, were covered from day to day until it was possible to operate over Tunisia from new bases in Algiers.



AIR POWER TAKES SHAPE.

On the sparse airfields of Malta the Royal Air Force was feeling its way and gathering its strength. Its bombers, carefully husbanded, were dispersed in protective pens like this at Luqa

THE ILLUSTRIOUS AT BAY.

The aircraft disappears behind a wall of water hurled up by enemy bombs. She lies immobile in French Creek where she is being repaired, on 10th January 1941.

THE LUCK OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS

It was these airborne eyes which, as 1941 opened, discovered the arrival of the Luftwaffe upon the Sicilian airfields and reported an increase of German strength throughout the early part of January. On 9th January nine Ju. 87s escorted by nine C.R. 42s attacked ships in Marsa, Scirocco, the bay at the south-eastern end of the island.

Next day, at about six o'clock in the evening H.M.S. Illustrious steamed into Grand Harbour with a convoy. She was listing to port and badly down by the stern, having been attacked off Malta for seven hours by German dive-bombers. During Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the next week the sirens sounded six times in Valetta. The Luftwaffe was carrying out reconnaissance. Glenn Martin aircraft followed the enemy back to locate their bases. There was a sense of foreboding in Malta. Its small force of Hurricanes and Fulmars waited for the attack.

On 16th January the Combined Services held a conference. Profiting by recent local experiences of Italian dive-bombing and in the light of methods in use at Dover, reported by Brigadier N.V. Sadler, they planned a barrage to put up a curtain of fire through which the Stukas would have to pass before releasing their bombs. One hour and ten minutes after the barrage details had been completed by the anti-aircraft artillery, the German attack began. The aircraft, approaching from the north-east, looked like a swarm of flies in the distance. The first wave was of Ju. 88s escorted by Italian C.R. 42s; the second wave was of Ju. 87 dive-bombers. Over seventy aircraft attacked between one o'clock and a quarter to three. To meet them the fighter force of three Fulmars and four Hurricanes took off.

The main target was Illustrious. She was being repaired in French Creek across grand Harbour from Valetta, close against the Three Cities. From the houses, shops and churches of Three Cities rose up a great yellow shroud of dust and smoke. From the guns went up a box barrage of greater intensity than Malta had ever known. The guns of the Illustrious, the Perth and other ships in the harbour added their weight of steel. The blue waters of the anchorage were churned and lifted in great gouts. Several times the Illustrious disappeared beneath clouds of spray from near misses; but the flame and smoke of her guns never ceased. With courage and determination the German dive-bomber pilots hurtled through the barrage out of the eye of the January sun. Their bombing was intensely concentrated and accurately placed but they hit the Illustrious only once, upon the quarterdeck.

Their own losses were heavy, five being destroyed by fighters and five by guns, although they claimed next day that all their aircraft had returned.

Malta's few fighters waited to catch the enemy as they came in and as they banked away from Grand Harbour; sometimes they followed them in through the barrage. An officer of the Royal Artillery described one such incident:

"I was on a light anti-aircraft gun position in the harbour area fro one of these attacks, and I can see clearly a German bomber diving through that terrific curtain of steel, followed by a Fulmar. The bomber dropped his bomb and proceeded to sneak his way out through the harbour entrance only a few inches above the water. He was so low that he had to rise to clear the breakwater, which is only some fifteen feet high. He was obviously wobbling badly, and as he rose the Fulmar pilot shot him down into the sea on the far side of the breakwater. The Fulmar pilot then landed at his airfield, and later I received a message from him to say that he didn't think much of our barrage! However, he never flew that particular plane again, so badly was it damaged."

Opposite the Illustrious was berthed a merchant vessel, the Essex, loaded with high explosive, torpedoes and ammunition. she received a direct hit. The bomb went down a funnel and burst into the engine room, the explosion being contained by the bulkheads. Damage would have been terrific had she blown up. A working party of soldiers and sailors unloaded her cargo of war materials and she remains in Grand harbour to this day, her service finished.

In the Three Cities where most of the bombs had fallen it was calculated that 200 houses had been wiped out and a further 500 damaged. The people of Senglea still point to the clock on the baroque ruin of their parish church of Our Lady of Victories. It stands at twenty past two, a silent reminder of that fierce afternoon of 16th January 194.

The Times of Malta, already establishing its gallant tradition of publishing in spite of bombardment and even direct hits, said in its leader the next morning: "The whole world has been saying that 'Malta can take it.' Nevertheless, the measure of punishment which we may yet have to undergo until victory is achieved must be borne, and in this we shall follow the example set by the citizens of London and Coventry, and other British cities, whose real ordeal started some months after our own."

The weather closed down. H.M.S. pert sailed during the night. There was a lull during which repair work upon the Illustrious was pressed forward.

On 18th January determined dive-bombing attacks were launched against Luqa and Hal Far airfields by more than eighty of the Luftwaffe to tie down the fighters so that the Illustrious might be finished off. For a time Luqa became unserviceable; the island's striking forces were sadly depleted but fighters shot down seven of the enemy and four went to the gunners who had worked out barrages over both airfields.

Next day the Luftwaffe returned to the attack on Grand Harbour. Six Hurricanes, one Fulmar and one Gladiator constituted the fighter strength against this heavy raid. Between them they brought down eleven of the enemy, and the guns destroyed eight. This represented about a quarter of the attacking force, without reckoning the large number of probables credited both to guns and fighters. Malta's R.A.F. Intelligence signal described it as "a good bad day with a fair score." This is how it was described by a colour sergeant of the Royal Marines, one of those manning a battery on the top of the ancient fort of St Angelo:

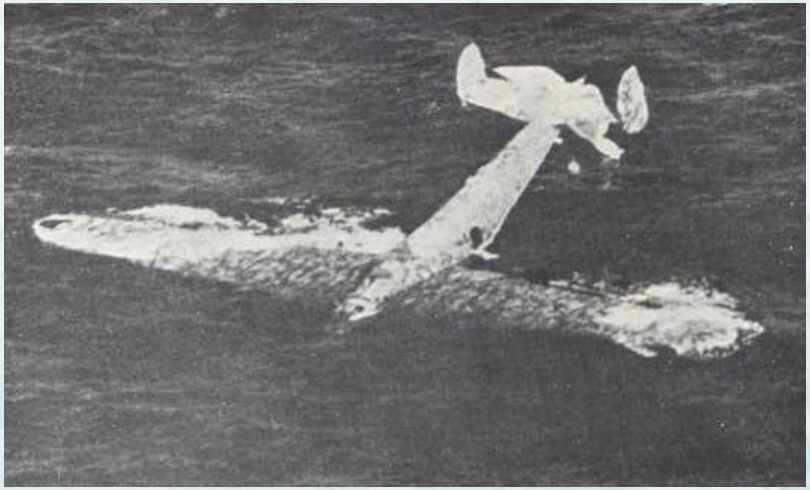
"The Sunday raids were interesting and exciting. We had two visits from Jerry. Bombs were dropped in and around all the creeks, causing terrific clouds of dust, flying masonry and iron. Although I did not see it myself, it was stated that a motor-car complete went sailing over the top of us. The dust and spray often blinded our view but the dive-bombers always came on. As they broke through the dust they seemed like hawks looking for prey.

"The sight was one never to be forgotten, the bursts of heavies, the red tracers of the Bofors and light machine-guns, and the illumination made by the crashing planes all adding to the splendour of the day.

"Since these attacks I have witnessed many more dive-bombing attacks from the same position and more concentrated on us. Although tragic, I must say that it is very exciting and good sport to be having a crack at a dive-bomber. You lose all sense of fear and self preservation while it lasts. You get the same feeling as being at a football final".

THE GUNS OF MALTA.

Top and Centre - Bofors A.A. guns in action. The anti-aircraft gunners destroyed 236 Axis aircraft during the siege. Bottom – One of the island's coastal guns.



THE DROWNING BOMBER.

This Italian S.M. 84 bomber, half submerged in the sea was shot down by Malta's fighters on its way to the island.

On 20th January the weather was fine, but the only enemy action was a reconnaissance by a Ju. 88 at 23,000 feet over Grand Harbour. There was a little indiscriminate night bombing from a high altitude, but practically no further activity by the Luftwaffe during the subsequent days. H.M. Dockyard completed repairs to the Illustrious and rendered her seaworthy. On 23rd January she sailed east under her own power at twenty-three knots; two days later she was in Alexandria. The Italian radio had just stated that "the damage suffered is of such proportions that she will be out of service for the duration of the war".

A lighter incident at the end of January was the approach of an Italian Cant Z 501 floatplane at dusk one evening. With navigation lights burning, it flew round the island for nearly forty-five minutes. Then a searchlight was exposed from the ground, and the floatplane gratefully landed near Comino Island, at the north-west extremity of Malta. Interrogation of the four members of the crew revealed that they had been lost and had just signalled their base to expose searchlights to aid their return. At this very moment one of the island's searchlights chanced to be turned on.

During this January a football match was played to raise funds for the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund. This game was a great social success, and the organisers, seeking other methods of raising funds, formed a concert party. It was called the Raffians, and was composed of officers and men of the Royal Air Force and English civilian radiolocation girls from Air Headquarters. The producer was Flying Officer Cecil Roche, a professional artiste who was finding himself in Malta at the outbreak of war, joined the Royal Air Force on the island. The Raffians toured the airfields, out-stations and camps. When transport was short they travelled on the bomb disposal lorry. They bought amusement and relief to the long siege. They worked in their spare time, often under fire. On one occasion while a performance of *The Babes in the Wood* was being given, bombs were dropped nearby. The show was carried on until the blast of a near miss brought the scenery down on the heads of the cast. On this, as on many other occasions, the theatre lighting failed, and emergency lighting was fixed by using power trailers brought in from the airfield.

In one of Valetta's narrow streets is the Manoel Theatre built by the Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena in 1731, and said to be the oldest theatre still in public use in Europe. Here it was that the Knights of St John staged masques, comedies and divertissements before Europe's most brilliant audiences, crowding the tiers. Happily the huge stage, the superb acoustics, and the seventeenth – century auditorium of boxes painted and gilded with floral designs have been preserved; and it was here that the Raffians staged their most ambitious shows, including the special performance given in honour of the men of the Merchant Navy, who, in August 1942, fought the convoy through.

The "Illustrious blitz" – it is always so remembered in Malta – marked the beginning of the seize proper and a general toughening of the war.. The relatively low figure of sixty-three civilians killed in a month was due to their use of rock shelters, which were being rapidly extended in all target areas. There was devastation in the dockyard and the Three Cities were severely battered, their ancient narrow streets being choked to this day with heavy masonry. It was the declared intention of the enemy to prevent ships from using the harbours and to blast the aircraft from the airfields. In North Africa, General Wavell's armies occupied Cyrenaica. Malta stood in the way of Rommel's campaign and of the battle for Greece. The island's significance as an air base was recognised in February 1941, when the status of the Air Officer Commanding was upgraded from Air-Commodore to Air Vice-Marshal.

SECOND ASSAULT: THE LUFTWAFFE COMES AND GOES

FEBRUARY – MAY 1941

"They don't like us", signalled Air Vice-Marshal Maynard at the beginning of February 1941. The enemy was intensifying the assault with the use of parachute mines. There were large-scale raids, by moonlight and at dawn, to lay mines in Marsa Muscetto and Grand Harbour, the waters that lie upon either flank of the city of Valetta. A system of mine-watching and sweeping was therefore instituted. Many of the mines, missing creeks, cratered and blasted the Three Cities and the dockyard district. On 17th February the island was raided for the eleventh night in succession, the alerts continuing until the early hours. Nevertheless, a convoy arrived from Egypt and the submarines continued to carry out successful operations. The harbours were still effective.

In the middle of the month the Germans went all out for air superiority. The pilots of the small Hurricane force were losing sleep by night, and by day they had to face formidable sweeps my Me. 109s. On 16th February, for instance, two formations of Messerschmitts – for which the Hurricane Mark 1 was really no match – came over Malta. Their tactics on this occasion were to split up on sighting the Hurricanes, one formation climbing above, the other dropping below. Flight Lieutenant[now Squadron leader] J.A.F. MacLachlan led a Hurricane flight. This is his combat report, notifying his own casualty:

DATE	16/2/41
NUMBER OF ENEMY AIRCRAFT	10?
TYPE OF ENEMY ATTACK	*Me.* 109s
TIME OF ATTACK	0945 *hrs*
PLACE ATTACK WAS DELIVERED	20,000 *ft over Luqa*
NO. OF FIGHTER FLIGHTS WHICH TOOK PART	4 *sections of* 2
HEIGHT OF ENEMY	24,000 *ft*
TIME ENGAGEMENT FINISHED	0950 *hrs*
HEIGHT ENGAGEMENT FINISHED	17,000 *ft*
ENEMY CASUALTIES	*Nil*
OUR CASUALTIES	
(a) Aircraft	*One Hurricane*
(b) Personnel	*Left arm written off by cannon shell. Shrapnel in both legs.*

GENERAL REPORT.

While on patrol over Luqa at 20,000 feet, we were attacked from above and astern by six Me. 109s. As previously arranged, the flight broke away to the right and formed a defensive circle. As I took my place in the circle I saw four more Me. 109s coming down out of the sun. Just as they came within range I turned back towards them and they all overshot me without firing. I looked very carefully but could see no more enemy aircraft above me, so turned back to the tail of the nearest 109. I was turning well inside him and was just about to open fire when I was hit in the left arm by a cannon shell. My dashboard was completely smashed, so I bailed out and landed safely by parachute.

MacLachlan's left arm was amputated at Imtarfa, the great military hospital on the hill overlooking Malta's central plain. When he was allowed out, he came down to Takali airfield beneath the windows of the hospital. A colleague flew him round in a Magister; then he took the aircraft off by himself and landed faultlessly. A few days later he flew a Hurricane, and asked permission to rejoin his squadron, but it was decided that he would have to return to Britain. His successes there on operations, while using an artificial arm, are well known.

The German air strength in Sicily increased towards the end of February. They sent fighter sweeps nearly every day and there were heavy dive-bombing attacks upon airfields. On 26th February thirty Ju. 87s, twelve Ju. 88s escorted by twenty to thirty mixed fighters, together with ten Do. 215s and ten He. 111s attacked Luqa. The anti-aircraft defences threw up a barrage for the airfield and eight Hurricanes took off. The guns destroyed five dive-bombers, confirmed, the fighters two; there were eleven probables. But Luqa airfield was rendered unserviceable for nearly forty-eight hours and many of the bombers on the ground were "spitchered", to use a piece of island slng which the Royal Air Force manufactured from the Maltese *spiccha*, to break. Six Wellingtons were burnt out, and of seven seriously damaged, some would take months to repair.

Although since the outbreak of war Malta's few fighters had destroyed ninety-six of the attacking enemy for a loss of sixteen fighters and eleven pilots, the enemy was slowly gaining air superiority and was flying lower and more boldly. He was neutralising the striking power of the air forces on the island, and in the course of ten days nearly all the Royal Air Force's flight leaders were lost.

March opened with another blow to these shrinking air resources. A signal reported it in these words:

"Blitz raid of several formations totalling certainly no less than one hundred aircraft, of which at least sixty bombers attacked Hal Far. A few of these aircraft dropped bombs and machine-gunned Kalafrana. Damage at Kalafrana was slight both to buildings and aircraft. One Sunderland unserviceable for a few days. Damage Hal Far still being assessed.

Preliminary reports as follows: three Swordfish and one Gladiator burnt out. All other aircraft temporarily unserviceable. All barrack blocks unserviceable and one demolished. Water and power cut off. Hangers considerably damaged. Airfield temporarily unserviceable. Eleven fighters up. Enemy casualties by our fighters, two Ju. 88s, tow Ju 87s, one Do. 215, two Me. 109s, confirmed. One Ju. 88 and three Ju. 87s damaged. By A.A., one Me. 110 and eight other aircraft, confirmed, also four damaged. There are probably others which did not reach their base but cannot be checked. One Hurricane and one pilot lost after first shooting down on Ju. 87 included above.

"For this blitz every serviceable Hurricane and every available pilot was put up and they achieved results. against extremely heavy odds. The only answer to this kind of thing is obviously more fighters and these must somehow be provided if the cir defence of Malta is to be maintained."

The swordfish mentioned belonged to a Fleet Air Arm Squadron waiting on the airfield to operate during the night against tankers and merchant vessels in Tripoli harbour that were meant for reinforcing Rommel. The enemy was beginning to achieve his end. The Wellingtons and the Sunderland had to be sent away to other bases. By day and by night, and with a special standing patrol at dawn, the Hurricanes fought on. Enemy attacks were stepped up in intensity, the Germans relying upon sheer weight of numbers and large formations protected by fighters. The anti-aircraft artillery fired geographical barrages over areas and to heights agreed with the Royal Air Force, certain gun posts being detailed to engage low-flying aircraft.

During this intensification of the air fighting, the reconnaissance aircraft made daily inspections of both ends of the Axis shipping lines, bringing back information of great value. To intercept these aircraft the enemy, enjoying a degree of air superiority, now placed a standing patrol round the island.

MALTA THE TARGET.

Walled in to north and south by enemy territory and to the west by Vichy controlled Tunisia, Malta was isolated by nearly 1,000 miles of sea from Gibraltar and over 800 from Alexandria, in 1941 the nearest Allied land bases.

Enemy minefields in the Sicilian Narrows and against the island hemmed the approaches. Encircling Axis air fleets in Italy, Sicily and Africa seemed to imprison her.

AS THE ENEMY SAW IT.

Through 1941 and 1942 dramatic photographs of the onslaught appeared in German illustrated papers. Italian and German airmen are destroying Britain's
"Bar to Africa"

ABOVE:
Left - Delimara Point, "a particularly favourable target."

Middle – Part of the Three Cities.

Right – Sliema Creek

ABOVE:
Left – Explosions at an ammunition store.

Middle – As the Stuka flies away its doors are still open.

Right – Smoke from the explosion changes in shape from a "luxuriant cauliflower" to the " vainly threatening fist of a giant".

Towards the end of March a convoy bringing supplies and reinforcements arrived in Grand Harbour. There were five alerts during the day of arrival. The most determined raid developed at 1.35 p.m. when thirty Ju. 87 dive-bombers, escorted by twenty Me. 109s, attacked the ships. Fourteen Hurricanes went up in two formations and destroyed nine dive-bombers. The guns destroyed a further four. Only slight damage was caused to the merchantmen.

In April a naval surface striking force, the 14th destroyer Flotilla, undeterred by the heavy mining of Grand Harbour and the approaches, operated successfully from Malta. In one sortie they annihilated an Axis convoy and escort off Kerkench Bank. Bombing, particularly at night, was directed chiefly against the naval base during this month.

On 3rd April a delivery flight of twelve Hurricanes brought much-needed reinforcements. They were Mark IIAs, considered to be more of a match for Me. 109s than were the Mark Is. The Ark Royal carried them from Gibraltar to a point where they could fly off, led by Skuas, and make a rendezvous with a Sunderland from Malta. They were piloted by men straight from England, some of whom had fought in the Battle of Britain. One of these pilots made the following notes about his flight:

"1st *April.* At Gibraltar. We left the Argus and went aboard the Ark after lunch. She is the most enormous ship and carries about 1,600 men. Also five squadrons of aircraft. We were supposed to sail at 1700 hours, but it was postponed. We are not allowed to go ashore, so a party started in the wardroom.

2nd *April.* At sea. Woke up to find everything vibrating like the devil, with the ship doing twenty-four knots. We have H.M.S. Renown and Sheffield and five destroyers with us. Had a long talk from the Commander [Flying] with all other pilots on deck procedure for flying off, and then we were shown our proposed course after we take off. In addition to the Skuas who are leading us, we are picking up a Sunderland flying-boat after about a hundred miles which will lead us the rest of the day. Had a run over my aircraft for R/T test and ran over the engine. Everything O.K.

"3rd *April.* The arrival. Was called at 0400 and got out of bed with a real effort. Had breakfast about half an hour later. All the knives and forks were leaping about the table because we had increased speed to twenty-eight knots. We eventually took off at about 0620 and everything went according to plan. The only snag was that X made a bad take off and punctured one of the auxiliary tanks and broke off his tail wheel. He was naturally scared stiff of using up all his remaining petrol and making a bad landing. However, all went well. He landed at the first airfield he saw, which was Takali, where we are now stationed. Most unfortunately Y crashed on landing. He came in too fast and had to swing to avoid something at the end of his run. The undercarriage collapsed. It is really sickening to have an aircraft, which is worth its weight in gold out here, broken through damned bad handling."

Another twenty-three Hurricanes arrived towards the end of the month. Wellingtons and Swordfish started operating again and the Royal Navy had further successes. It was because of the success of this Malta-based offensive in April, coinciding with General Wavell's withdrawal from Cyrenaica that mining and bombing against Grand Harbour increased again in the early part of May.

BLENHEIM STRIKE PASSING LINOSA.

The Luftwaffe's temporary withdrawal allows the Royal Air Force to increase its attacks upon Axis supply lines.

These Blenheim, eighty miles from Malta, are flying west, their objective the main enemy supply route from Naples to Tripoli.

The 5th Destroyer Flotilla arrived at the beginning of the month but was unfortunate from the start. The Jersey was sunk by an undiscovered mine at the harbour entrance only four days after arrival. The cruiser Gloucester was slightly damaged and was sent away. After the bombardment of Benghazi and several other sorties the 5th Flotilla sailed on the 21st May to take part in the Cretan operations. Further large reinforcements of Hurricanes arrived.

Almost at the same time it was observed that the Luftwaffe was leaving Sicily for the Russian front.

After achieving virtual air superiority, the Germans had partially neutralised the naval base and had limited the striking power of Malta-based aircraft: but neither was destroyed. The Hurricanes had never failed to hit back; Wellingtons, particularly the Fleet Air Arm Swordfish, had struck at Rommel's seaborne supplies in and out of harbour. The Royal Navy had never ceased to strike on and under the surface. Vital convoys had passed through Mediterranean from east to west.

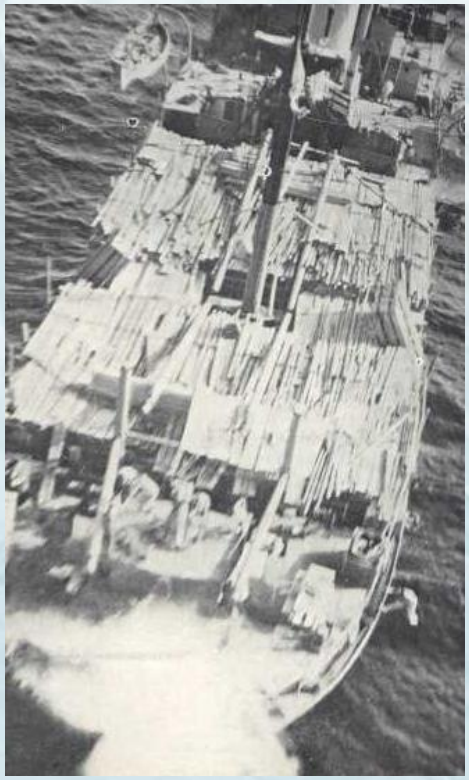
The people of Malta, after a winter of sustained night raids, dive-bombing and day alerts, stood firm. Flames flickered in the shrines among shelters deep in the limestone rock. St Paul, the saint who brought Christianity by shipwreck to their forefathers, stood by them. Their men folk joined the Services, the Royal Navy, the gunners, and the Royal Air Force. The foundation of an important base for air power has been laid under stress of constant enemy pressure. From a group of packing cases the defences had been built up into a potent weapon. Now with the summer, a new and quieter phase of the Mediterranean battle came to Malta.

MALTA'S FLASHING SWORD

JUNE – DECEMBER 1941

Air Vice-Marshall Sir High Pughe Lloyd, the new Air Officer Commanding, arrived in Malta in May, and found himself engaged by Regia Aeronautica alone. Strategically, his chief preoccupation was to build up a striking force to attack the seaborne cargoes and the harbours serving Rommel. From the spring to the summer, Tripoli was almost the only port used by the enemy for the Libyan campaign. This allowed Malta not only to concentrate strong submarine forces against his routes east and west of Sicily, but to strike heavily with naval aircraft by night and with Blenheim bombers by day. The toll taken of shipping by Malta – then the only base from which an offensive could be made – induced the Axis to increase the armed escort for convoys. Later when this proved useless, it became necessary to divert Axis shipping out of range of the island's flashing sword.

Early in May a large convoy, which included two tankers, reached Malta from the east; there were two more large convoys from the west in July and September.



AT MAST HEIGHT.

Blenheims attack an Italian timber vessel bound for Tripoli. On the starboard side one of the crew leaps overboard as a bomb bursts on the ship's stern.

A quantity of aviation arrived which, though, it displaced other stores, was a wise provision, for without it the island would scarcely have weathered the storms that were to come. The supply situation during the summer was excellent and anxiety was felt in some quarters that the standard of living was still far in excess of that enjoyed in Britain and, indeed, in most other parts of the warring world.

The Greek and Cretan campaigns were occupying the attentions of the units of the Royal Navy which had been based in Grand Harbour, and it was not until autumn that the surface forces returned to their Malta-based successes. Meanwhile, auxiliary minesweepers cleaned up the magnetic and acoustic mines left over from the winter air attacks.

As soon as the Luftwaffe left Sicily, enemy air attacks on Malta were reduced. It was noted at the beginning of June that "attacks in which only a small proportion of the force employed actually crossed the coast, and in which bombs appeared to be deliberately dropped in the sea, have been a feature of this period". More often it was an occasional low-flying attack, an occasional reconnaissance, an occasional attempt at bombing; and for such efforts the Italians paid dearly. The Hurricane Mark Is were competent to deal with Macchi 200 fighters which composed the main Italian force and they were now reinforced with Mark IIs.

It was possible to operate one, sometimes two, squadrons of Wellington bombers, at least one squadron of Blenheims, and two squadrons of Fleet Air Arm aircraft. A large amount of work was carried out to fit the airfield for these offensive operations, and aircraft dispersal areas were provided. Directly after the fall of Crete anti-invasion measures were taken upon all airfields, the runways being mined and possible landing places obstructed.

In June, while the opposing armies were building up their strength in Africa, Swordfish aircraft from Malta carried out three raids on shipping in Tripoli harbour; Blenheims introduced mast-high attacks for the first time in the Mediterranean against shipping at sea, sinking two large ships and damaging three others; and submarines from the island sank or damaged thirteen more. During the fortnight from 30th June to 13th July there were 122 bomber sorties from Malta, a record since the outbreak of war.

During the clear nights of the summer and early autumn of 1941 a certain amount of night-bombing took place. For the last year, since September 1940, there had been a night fighter organisation which had achieved a measure of success.

Brigadier [now Major-General] C.T. Beckett, Commander Royal Artillery, Malta, has explained the situation in these words:

"The conditions over Malta were unlike those anywhere in England, for not only were airfields within the gun-defended area, but it was usual for aircraft to arrive either from Egypt or Gibraltar nightly, or for the Fleet Air Arm to carry out strikes or reconnaissance. Night fighters were usually up, and the enemy was also almost invariably present.

"The problem of dealing with all these factors [of which the most-difficult were the arrival of strangers from Gibraltar inadequately briefed as to our plans, and the return of damaged bombers from Sicily, who were not always able or willing to comply with the rules] necessitated very clear cut instructions to the guns and searchlights, as well as to the air defences, if we were all to give of our best in support. Simplicity was essential, since personnel changed very rapidly, and any extended period of inactivity almost always meant beginning the work all over again, educating the pilots and the fighter controllers in the details of control."

Some flights of Hurricanes were now formed into a Malta Night Fighter Unit. The M.N.F.U. was a model of collaboration between searchlights, the gun operations room of the gunners, and the Hurricanes. The Army and the Royal Air Force together devised a scheme by which the island was divided into two part, with Valetta upon the dividing line.

At the approach of a raid, a Hurricane patrolled each area, being kept informed by radio of the speed, height and course of the raid. No orders were given to them as in day interception; it was up to them to place themselves on each side of the raider when he was about fifteen miles out. They would then turn in towards him and set course towards his presumed object [usually Grand Harbour]. The result was that when the raider was illuminated by the searchlights, there would be a Hurricane on either side of him, on a converging course and quite close. The enemy usually came in high and straight during this period, and an average taken over a number of months showed that out of every seven raiders which crossed the coast five were illuminated. Out of every five, three were attacked. Out of every three attacked, two were destroyed.

The searchlights and the radiolocation of the Royal Artillery acted as the eyes directing Hurricanes' fire, and a very enthusiastic and profitable comradeship grew up between the soldiers and the night fighters. It was only the great pressure upon fighter strength in the early months of 1942 which finally caused the Unit's work to be called off. It was replaced in time by other methods.

From the beginning, Malta had been served by radiolocation which was, and is, the basis of every fighter operation both by day and, as instanced by the M.N.F.U., by night.

One event disturbed the relative lull in the enemy's assault on Malta in the summer of 1941. On the night of 25th July it was learned that a surface force was approaching the island. No special siren had been contemplated for shelling, so ordinary air raid alert sounded just before midnight [an Axis raid having failed to synchronise with the approaching force]. Fleet Air Arm Swordfish were ordered to readiness and Hurricanes stood by for the first light.

Reports soon followed of the sound of motorboat engines along the north-east coast of the island. The coastal defences, harbour batteries and searchlights, waited on tiptoe. In Grand harbour was a newly arrived convoy. At their berths were our submarines. The teeth of Valetta were set and ready as the unknown force approached in the darkness.

Just before dawn a track was seen approaching St Elmo, the Fortress promontory where the city of Valetta forms one jaw of the mouth of Grand Harbour. Just as the look-out at Tigne, the next headland, observed its wake, an explosion occurred on the breakwater viaduct, the first barrier to the harbour. Searchlights flashed on and disclosed a force of E-boats making for the scene of the explosion. The illuminated area was at once criss-crossed by a devastating fire from every close-range weapon which could bear – six-pounders at ranges from 500 to 3,000 yards, Bofors guns and machine-guns leapt into action. For two minutes the guns continued to fire. Then there was silence. There was nothing left to fire at.

As dawn broke, the guns found two more targets and destroyed them. Cannon Hurricanes were already out seeking the remainder of the retreating force. The attack was utterly broken. Twenty dead and eighteen prisoners picked up. The whole attacking force had been disposed of. Later, this communiqué was issued:

"Shortly before 5 a.m. [local time] E-boats appeared off the entrance of Malta Harbour, and the fixed defences manned by the military garrison immediately engaged them. One E-boat was hit and blew up, and four were also destroyed by gunfire. It then appeared that the E-boats were acting as cover for the smaller torpedo-carrying craft which attempted to break into the harbour. There were also heavily engaged by gunfire from the shore defences, eight being blown up or sunk. None succeeded in entering the harbour.

"Fighters of the Royal Air Force pursued the remaining E-boats while they were attempting to extricate themselves, and our fighters were successful in sinking four more and damaging others. The British fighters then encountered enemy aircraft endeavouring to give air support to the retreating E-boats. Three enemy aircraft were shot down into the sea; while on Royal Air Force fighter was lost, the pilot was saved.

"Reports so far received indicate that the assault on the harbour was made by eight small torpedo-carrying craft, all of which were destroyed. The view that none of the assaulting forces survived is confirmed by a special Italian communiqué issued on Saturday night. This merely referred to explosions seen by escorting forces from a distance to seaward."

SHADOW OVER ROMMEL..

As the bows of this Italian supply ship lift from the water the shadow of the aircraft sweeps over her deck. Hugging the Tunisian coast, she was bound for Tripoli.

MALTESE NOCTURNE.

Drooping flares and fanning searchlights weave a flame-bright pattern of war.

The *Voce d'Italia* described the action in these words:

"The presence of the convoy was detected on Friday. Immediately the Italian Navy decided to attack with these tiny but powerful craft on which the designers have worked in silence for many years – one of the most precious secrets of the Italian war machine. The men chosen for the attack knew that retreat was impossible – they must be either killed or taken prisoner. None flinched before his task, despite the formidable nature of the British defences. The violation of Malta will go down in history as one of the most remarkable exploits of this war."

To cover the retreat of their gallant but foolhardy force, the Italians sent Macchi fighters which encountered the Hurricanes engaged in finishing off the boats in the first light of day. Three of these Macchis were destroyed. One of the Hurricanes, piloted by Pilot Office [now Flight Lieutenant] D. Winton, came to grief. His adventures have been recorded in a narrative kept by his squadron:

"Thirty miles or so out to sea, he was surprised by a Macchi and received such damage to his machine that his fan stopped. Using his speed to gain height, he was able to reach 700 feet and then baled out, both his parachute and dinghy doing all the things that a kind-hearted M.O. likes them to do. For the next few hours he sunbathed, played with a friendly turtle, wondered who would have his motor-cycle, and then he spotted a stationary torpedo boat. he paddled the dinghy with his hands and, finding progress slow, towed it and swam towards the boat. By climbing up the side he was able to peer into it and was confronted by eight very much dead Italians.

"Taking possession of the boat was thus quite easy and as he couldn't start it, he waited, flying the flag half-mast, since he didn't know which side would rescue him An Army rescue boat did a circuit round him – almost six hours after he had baled out on an empty stomach – and thinking he was an Italian, also that there was a ⁺5machine-gun on the boat, left him to cool his heels for a time. Before they could return a Swordfish with floats dropped in to pay him a visit and gave him a flag, a lift home, where he again took possession of his motor-cycle."

The Italians continued to over do it. While their prisoners were being examined and their complete operational orders, captured with one of the boats, were being scanned, they broadcast this comment:

"The extraordinary communiqué published yesterday, announcing that the naval base of Malta was successfully forced by attacking units of the Italian Navy causing eight explosions, has been reproduced in bold type by all the European press, all of which underlines the unequalled dash of our sailors who have delivered a blow to the enemy right inside one of the most fortified naval bases of the world."

Finally, this episode may be summed up by quoting extracts from remarks in his report by Vice-Admiral, Malta, Vice-Admiral Sir Wilbraham Ford:

"The most remarkable thing about these very detailed and intricate orders is the almost complete absence of any reference to counteraction on our part. In this respect it is very much noticeable that prior to the moment at which our counteraction developed – namely, when the viaduct was blown up and the fortress opened fire – the whole plan had been carried out with great determination and the time-table had been kept to with admirable exactitude. Within two minutes, however,, of our opening fire attack had been completely defeated and there was never any further risk that the defences of the harbour would be penetrated.

The harbour defences of Malta, largely manned by Maltese, scored an outstanding success in this, their first action, and to them must go the entire credit for maintaining the security of the harbour.

". . . The photographic reconnaissance on which the attack was to be based must have been at least four days old. In a desperate attempt to get photographs two bombers escorted by over thirty fighters were sent over, but thanks to the magnificent effort by our fighters both the bombers together with three fighters were shot down . . . The determined search for, and the destruction of, every retiring M.T.B. by our Hurricanes turned a failure into a disaster."

During August and September 1941, while there was less enemy air activity, Malta-based Blenheims made a great name for themselves with low-level attacks. Flying in numbers of anything from two to ten, they struck from mast height at shipping at sea wherever it could be found. There were never more than two squadrons of Blenheims upon the island at one time, but they succeeded in sinking something like 50,000 tons of shipping in the course of their operations from April to November. Only the greatly increased escort strength which the Axis was forced to provide Ultimately reduced their successes, and they then turned to enemy transport on the roads and to the airfields, with results which will appear later. Meanwhile, Swordfish of the Fleet Air Arm based at Hal Far airfield were even more successful with the offensive at night. They laid mines and attacked with torpedoes. From May to November they destroyed approximately 110,000 tons of enemy shipping, a further 130,000 being damaged.

Hurricanes with bombs were active in September, a typical operation being bombing raids on Comiso airfield in Sicily in order to ground Italian fighters while a convoy was entering Grand Harbour. In October the enemy slightly increased night bombing and daylight raids on Malta, and the island's offensive effort became sterner.

A strong force of the Mediterranean Fleet, including the four six-inch cruisers Penelope, Aurora, Ajax and Neptune, was based in Grand Harbour. These ships had already sunk an entire convoy off the Italian mainland and now constituted a threat to the Axis convoy line which could only be met by superior naval forces. On at least four occasions the Italians had had to give their merchantmen battleship escort. To cover each end of this threatened line, Wellingtons from Luqa airfield made a series of raids upon Naples and Tripoli.

While the great forces faced each other in the North African dessert, poised upon a fulcrum of supplies and metal, the battle of reinforcement was being fought out round the isolated fortress of Malta. The Intelligence report, covering twenty four hours during the middle of October, is an indication of the scope of air operations, and incidentally records the first use of 4,000 lb bombs in the Middle East theatre of war::

"OFFENSIVE. *Night, 16th/17th October;* Sixteen Wellingtons bombed Naples. Total bombs dropped, 36,000 lb including three 4,000 pounders and sixteen 1,000 pounders. 100,000 leaflets dropped. Time over target, 2312 to 0103 hours. Two aircraft returned early, engine trouble. Silurificio torpedo factory probably razed by 11,000 lb of bombs. Hits also observed on railway, engine sheds, docks, Royal Arsenal, factory buildings, I.M.A.M. Airframe Works, Alfa Romeo Works. Whole target was well alight and fires seen many miles away. Opposition; light A.A. intense, fired as barrage. Little inaccurate heavy A.A.

"*Day 17th October:* Six Blenheims with Hurricane escort bombed seaplane base Syracuse, 0850 hours. Total bombs dropped, 6,000 lb from 12,500 feet. Bursts seen on target. Three Blenheims attacked by fighters on return journey. Claim hits on the enemy aircraft which was pouring smoke from engine; unlikely to reach base. Six Blenheims in pairs bombed and machine-gunned M.T. on roads between Zuara and Sirte. Total bombs dropped 5,750 ib. Es Zauia airfield bombed, one C.R. 42 definitely destroyed, others damaged. Barracks and guard house blown up. Two lorries and trailer blown off the road, others damaged. Two Blenheims slightly damaged A.A.. One armoured car damaged. All aircraft returned safely from all operations."

INTO THE DARK

A pilot of the Fleet Air Arm takes off for a night attack.

The submarines from Malta were also scoring well. In September they sank or damaged four ships, in October eight, and in November seven. Supplies to Libya wilted and for a time virtually ceased. The Italians had to bring out almost their entire battle fleet to escort one important convoy across.

On 18th November the Eighth Army began its general advance to Cyrenaica. Malta-based aircraft had flown 453 bomber sorties during the preparatory period from 13th October to 11th November; and air operations from the island were naturally now determined by the development of this, as it was to prove, abortive campaign. At first the weather was unfavourable, but as it cleared Malta's supporting offensive was built up again. Once more the enemy determined to "sink" the island, to gain domination over the rock without which the Mediterranean could never be theirs. The expected increase of their support came in December. The Luftwaffe returned to Sicily.

THE LUFTWAFFE RETURNS FOR THE KILL

JANUARY – MARCH 1942

The end of 1941 and the spring of 1942 brought to Malta much foul weather and the most concentrated air bombardment of the war. The assault of the previous year against the Illustrious had been opportunist. The present Axis plan to destroy the weapon of Malta was strategic.

They succeeded in blunting the weapon; by April they had very nearly broken it. To accomplish this they had to make as many as 400 sorties against the small compass of the rock in one day. In one month they made 5,715 sorties. In April they unloaded 6,728 tons of bombs upon the island.

The enemy's plan, as in the Battle of Britain, was to make a series of bludgeoning blows, The bludgeon was wielded with overwhelming numbers, with limitless replacements and at great cost. It was aimed first at the airfields and fighter strength: then at dockyards and harbours; finally at the destruction of all stores, barracks and lines of communication. As in the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe never fully attained any one of its objectives, although it seemed to those who watched the fury increasing day by day that the bludgeoning came perilously close to success.

Malta's defenders, fighter pilots and anti-aircraft gunners hit back. Social service and civil defence workers and the civil population fought that staunch, relentless passive warfare in their own streets and homes known so well to the inhabitants of London, Coventry and Plymouth as "taking it". In the Palace Square in Valetta, for all to see, is the inscription:

Magnae et invicta Britanniae Melitensium amor et Europae vox has insulas confirmat.
This may be fairly translated:
To Britain great and unsubdued, these islands are entrusted by the Powers of Europe at the wish of the Maltese themselves.
The spirit of those words was never better upheld by the conduct of the people and the Services than in the stubborn battle of 1942.

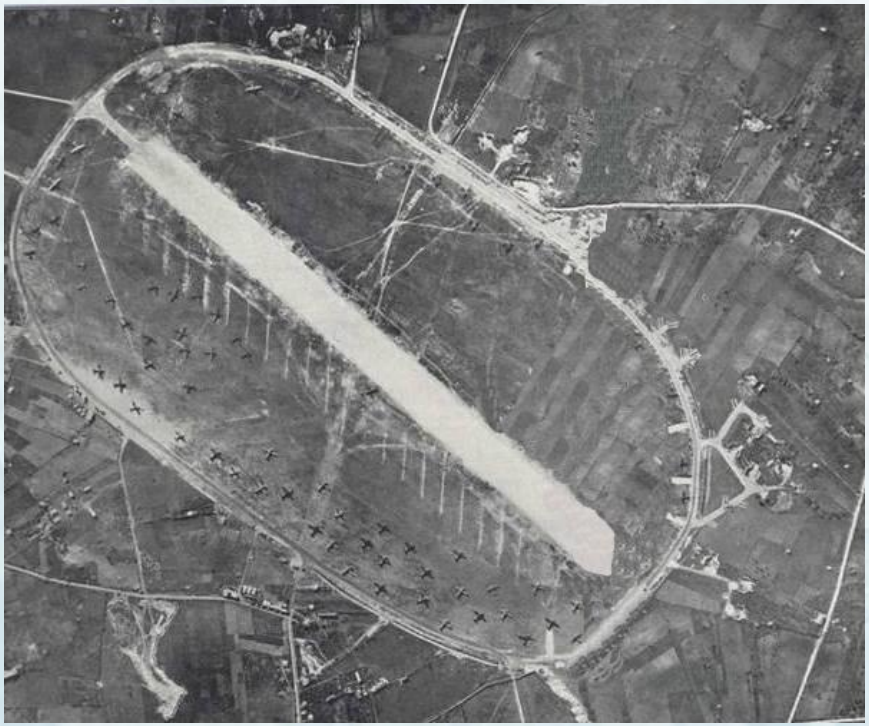
While the Eight Army went forward in the desert to relieve Tobruk in the early part of December, there were sixty to seventy Axis aircraft operating each week against Malta. As the Army met success in the latter part of December, the number of raiders rose to over 200 a week. Escorted bomber formations, varying from seven to forty in number, attacked nearly every day and night, and single aircraft made constant nuisance raids. In the first three weeks of January, during which Rommel's forces retreated, without being destroyed, to El Agheila, the enemy sent some 950 raiders against Malta. In the third and fourth week in January, when Rommel, with only three days' supplies, made his reconnaissance in force, which later developed into an offensive recapturing Ajedabia, and when a convoy vital to this move was approaching Tripoli, there were 150 and 140 sorties per week respectively against the island.

Bad weather, lashing winds and cold rain prevailed over the island almost continuously. Although at times it may have limited enemy attacks, it also reduced Malta's striking power. During the week between 2nd and 9th December, flying was possible only two days out of seven. A problem peculiar to air control from Malta is that there are no landing grounds to which aircraft may be diverted if the weather has suddenly closed down over the island bases. Any threat of sudden change, therefore, made it necessary to recall aircraft. It was difficult in the isolated situation of Malta at that time to obtain meteorological information upon which to make a forecast covering more than six hours, and sorties often had to be limited to that period.

At the turn of the year there were not only gales and torrential rains but also electrical storms and much low cloud. In January, the fighter airfields – Hal far and Takali – became waterlogged and operations were so severely hampered that the fighters had to be transferred to the bomber airfield at Luqa. Overcrowding here caused disorganisation among the bombers, which already had their own troubles. Strong cross-winds were prevalent at Luqa during January and several times these grounded the Wellingtons.

Such conditions, combined with the rising enemy pressure, left their mark upon bombing efforts from Malta. During the first fortnight of the Eighth Army's advance from Egypt, 222 sorties were made. In the next fortnight there were 181, and in the next 173; finally, in the three weeks at the beginning of January, during the army's final advance, only 106 were made from the island.

Though the enemy had withdrawn to the Gulf of Sirte,, his forces were not destroyed. Upon his power to rebuild his depleted strength by reinforcement across the Middle Sea or upon Allied power to extend its sea-line from Egypt to Benghazi, while maintaining its striking power in Malta, rested the decisive issue of the battle. It was resolved during that campaign. The Eighth Army retreated, but there was no final enemy thrust into Egypt, as all the world knows. The history of these months in the Battle of Malta is intricately linked with the fortunes of the desert, Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd, the Air Officer Commanding at that time has stated: "It was because Rommel was *out* at El Agheila that the big prize came to Malta. It was the striking force of Malta which caused him to be out from lack of supplies."
The strength of the island came near to being neutralised; but always the potential of Malta remained, upheld by stout hearts.



THE POWER OF THE FOE.

This was the threatening sight that met the Royal Air Force reconnaissance pilots above Castel Vetrano, Axis airfield in Sicily, on 3rd January 1942. Between seventy and eighty aircraft are dispersed upon the airfield. Most of them are torpedo-bombers – Z1007s and S.M. 79s. Others are transports –Ju. 52s and S.M. 82s. Outside the roadway surrounding the airfield and extending downwards on the right are clusters of empty dispersal pens. On the roadway itself are groups of motor vehicles and [extreme left] four single-engined fighters.

If anyone should doubt that potential let him consider the probable course of Mediterranean history if Malta had fallen into Axis hands and had become a power for danger, instead of a power, sometimes greater, sometimes lesser, for support.

On 4th January, the Blenheims took the enemy unawares, shattering his confidence that the offensive power of Malta had been overwhelmed. Ten of them in three formations attacked Castel Vetrano airfield in Sicily, where seventy-five transport aircraft, many of them Ju. 52s and S.M. 82s, were lined up wing-tip to wing-tip. Bombing from anything between twenty and a hundred feet, the Blenheims destroyed at least thirty-five of them and damaged many more without loss to themselves. The following night Wellingtons followed up the raid, left another fourteen aircraft ablaze, and blew up a petrol dump.

Apart from these aircraft, Fleet Air Arm Swordfish and Albacores, and R.A.F. Marylands, Beauforts and Beaufighters struck from Malta. Between 23rd December and 20th January there were fifty-two sorties against Tripoli alone.

Meanwhile the defence of the island grew increasingly arduous for the limited force of Hurricanes. Weather frequently favoured the raiders, enabling them to escape into cloud cover before being intercepted. Nevertheless, the Hurricanes saw the old year out with a tally of six destroyed and five probables for the week from 23rd December to 30th December. Their most intensive effort was between dawn and midday on 19th January, to cover a friendly convoy. That morning there were ninety-three Hurricane sorties from Luqa airfield and a standing patrol of twelve fighters were maintained over the ships.

Seventy-two enemy aircraft operated against the island in the space of two hours, scattering bombs and attacking the merchant vessels, but the convoy safely unloaded Each succeeding convoy became more valuable as the Mediterranean conflict grew. Hurricane bombers and Wellingtons covered the operation of this convoy by offensive action. The Hurricanes bombed Comiso airfield early in the morning in order to ground fighters which might operate against ships in passage, and the Wellingtons operated against Catania airfield during the night. The runways were frequently cratered, but it was due mainly to the continued spell of bad weather that operations were reduced.

February saw the Eighth Army retreating on the African mainland, and Malta once more geographically isolated, though still strategically of great consequence. The attack was intensified against the airfields. Between 21st January, the date of the German counter attack in the desert, and 24th February there were 1,960 bomber sorties against the island. 7th February was a notable day; there were sixteen alerts in twenty-four hours, a record for Malta. The bomber effort from the island was halved.

In the middle of February rain and gales swept down, curtailing operational flying; again the fighter airfields at Takali and Hal Far were waterlogged. Nevertheless, Malta struck out both in the air and at sea. There were sixty bomber sorties against Tripoli during the month, thirty against the Sicilian airfields and thirty-four against troops and lines of communication feeding Rommel's advancing Armies.

Though there were a few Italian fighters to be seen over Malta, the Hurricane defenders were now facing Me. 109s which not only outclassed but also outnumbered them. The Luftwaffe, attempting to achieve complete domination of the sky over the island, laid on constant patrols of Me. 109s during the day. They also employed these aircraft as fighter bombers for the first time against their airfields. In spite of their several handicaps, however, the Hurricanes destroyed ten of the enemy, probably destroyed six and damaged thirty-eight. They operated over a convoy which unhappily did not reach the vicinity of the island. They also flew intruder patrols over Sicily.

THE STRICKEN AIRFIELD.

This is Takali. It is 29th April 1942. The attacks of the Luftwaffe on the airfields are reaching their crescendo. The airfield seems to blaze with lights. Each white glow is in fact a bomb crater. Craters cover the landing ground almost obliterate the roughly made runway, spatter the "labyrinth" dispersal area at bottom left.

Surrounding the field are protective pens for the aircraft; many of them are empty.

Most serious for Malta's prosecution of the air war were the burnt out aircraft and the craters upon the airfields. In spite of a formidable programme for the building of dispersal pens, hard standing and slit trenches, the enemy looked like succeeding in blasting the island's striking forces on the ground and rendering the airfields useless.

The urgent need was for more protective pens for the dispersed aircraft and for maintenance squads to service the airfields quickly and to repair runways. The story of the pen building and airfield maintenance under day and night attack is one of complete understanding and comradeship between the Army and the Royal Air Force.

MALTESE PIONEERS *and other troops built the first protective pens with disused petrol cans. Later, bomb-spilled masonry was used. Often working under fire, the Army built 285 pens in three months.*

"I'd have been out of business but for the soldiers", Air Vice- Marshal Lloyd said afterwards. There has been a great expansion on the operational side of the Royal Air Force since the days of *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*. Reinforcements had been drafted to cope with this expansion, but difficulties of communications, the call on manpower at home during the Battle of Britain, and the rapidity of the expansion itself left the Royal Air Force with a serious shortage of personnel. The defensive building so immediately necessary presented apparently insuperable difficulties in manpower. Then the men of the infantry and field artillery came to the rescue.

Some 2,500 soldiers made up the working parties which were regularly distributed every day over three airfields. Some days there were as many as 3,000 infantry and Royal Artillery troops at work. Each airfield was more or less adopted by a brigade. Famous county regiments became associated with the various airfields. The Royal West Kents and the Buffs were at Luqa, the Manchesters at Takali, and the Devons at Hal Far; but a feature of the organisation was its flexibility, which enabled rush jobs of crater-filling to be done by day or by night.

In the space of three months the soldiers laid twenty-seven miles of dispersal runways, and built fourteen large bomber pens, seventy reconnaissance aircraft pens and thirty-one naval aircraft pens. They worked twelve hours on and twelve hours off. They worked in the open, without protection during raids, and everyone who saw them felt that their steadiness under fire was an inspiration to the whole island. They scattered for cover only when the red flag proclaimed imminent danger. Even then they fought back with Bren guns and rifles.

The normal coast watch and patrol of ninety miles of intricate foreshore was still being maintained, and in many cases men had only three nights' sleep each week over a period of three or four weeks.

There were other aspects of the Battle of Malta where the collaboration of the Army saved the day; as, for instance, in providing vital transport, housing and feeding men of the Royal Air Force as well as civilians, and, as will appear later, in working as airmen upon the aircraft.

The building of pens and filling of craters were recognised as vital to the survival of the air forces, and everybody joined in the work. At first the aircraft pens were made of sandbags; but it was soon found that this method was laborious and not very effective. Petrol cans and oil drums filled with earth and stones were then tried; and when these were used up, walls of stone and bomb-damaged masonry took their place. The Bomb Disposal Squad, under Flight Lieutenant Dickinson, did a heroic job in tackling unexploded bombs in inconvenient places. Officers and men from Air Headquarters made up working parties when they were not on watch. On many occasions officers' and men's messes on the airfield were emptied for urgent manual labour. For runways there were a few steamrollers, and it soon became necessary to build pens for them; until they were finally destroyed they were used day and night. In the dark the infantry who operated them marked out with lamps the strips to be rolled.

WOUND UPON WOUND

This German reconnaissance photograph shows a section of Luqa, the bomber airfield. Damage and targets include;

1] and 2], destroyed aircraft.,

3] and 4], empty pens,

5] and 6], twin-engined bombers.

One of the most remarkable dispersal strips ever devised came into being as a link between the airfields of Luqa and Hal Far. Famous among everyone who has worked in Malta as the Safi strip, it is a track winding through grey rock, small terraced fields, carob trees and scrub. here and there are small farmhouses, built like fortresses in the days when the Maltese farmer had to defend himself against Arab marauders, and guarded by clumps of tall prickly pear. Many tons of bombs have been dropped on the strip, and it was often considered an adventure to travel the length of it unless guided by someone who knew all the shelter holes. Throughout its length pens were built in an intricate pattern, making the best use of the lie of the land. It was the Hampshire Regiment which was associated with much of this work, though the labour in its early stages was provided by the Malta Police Force.

That memorable spring was a progression of alerts and an officer of the Royal Artillery suggested that the B.B.C. in their news bulletins should cut a long and say, "During the last month Malta had six all clears, one which lasted for twenty minutes". On 7th February there was a record number of alerts, the time under alert totalling thirteen hours six minutes.

So many interruptions seriously hampered maintenance and repair work on aircraft. No sooner were they repaired than they were hit again. The damage rate became higher than the repair rate, and though in some cases the damage was only superficial it was enough to keep the aircraft temporarily grounded. Fleet Air Arm attacks on shipping were heavily cut down. The fighters were fully occupied in maintaining patrols over the island, and it was obvious that if enemy attacks continued to increase, fighter reinforcements would be needed to deal with them. The fall of Benghazi and the Eight Army's retreat to Gazala had brought home to everyone the urgency of Malta's air defence.

With March began the most critical period in the Battle of Malta. At the beginning of the month the Axis air forces were just recovering from their rough handling in the Western Desert. As they were reinforced, so the bomber sorties against the island increased to seventy or eighty a day. Some idea of the mounting violence of the attack may be gained from the weight of bombs dropped; in February about 990 tons, in March 2,170 tons. The enemy was rapidly gaining local air superiority. Fighters and fighter bombers could fly in at low level with ever increasing confidence. They attained greater accuracy in their results against the airfields and the submarine base, from which the 10th Submarine Flotilla grimly refused to move on.

The island's bombing offensive still managed to show its teeth at the beginning of the month, when on the night of 2nd March sixteen Wellingtons dropped twenty-six tons of bombs on an Axis convoy in Palermo harbour. The striking force, however, virtually ceased to exist after 8th March. The Hurricanes outclassed and outnumbered, fought doggedly on.

On 5th March, Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd signalled to Cairo to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief that daylight attacks on the airfields were very serious and that little work could be done owing to the continuous alerts. Much minor damage, he said, was being done to aircraft, making them unserviceable for night operations. Every day they were repaired, only to be hit again. The longer they stayed in the island, the more they were damaged. He added that he had seventeen Wellingtons in this condition, and that the only way to prevent delivery aircraft destined for the Middle East from being damaged on the island was to pass them through each night as they arrived with relief crews. In spite of continuous intruder raids, this was being done. His most urgent request was for immediate reinforcements of Spitfires.

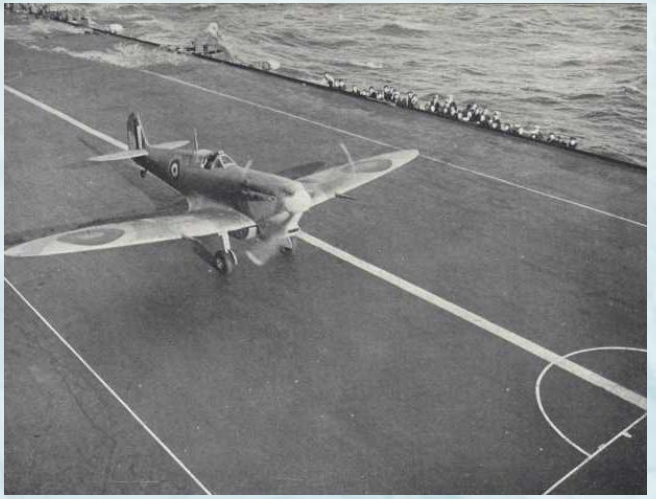
It should be explained that throughout the battle the island continued to serve as a posting station for aircraft flown from Britain to the Middle East. Its constancy was remarkable. Nearly 750 aircraft passed through between November 1941 and July 1942, the period of the heaviest assault. In March, April and May of 1942, the worst period of all, and the most vital for reinforcements for Egypt, more aircraft were passed through than in the preceding three months. From October 1941 onwards, unarmed aircraft of the British Overseas Airways Corporation on their way to the Middle East were running the gauntlet of the German and Italian bases to carry supplies to Malta and to bring out the sick and wounded. Unloading and loading, refuelling and checking of the engines had to be carried out in darkness, often while bombs were falling on the airfield. On one occasion a captain came in to land six times only to be warned off at the last moment each time because the airfield was obstructed by bomb craters. It was two hours before he landed. The pilots of this "Merchant Service of the Air" did not interrupt their hazardous flights even during the height of the blitz, but they badly needed fighter protection over their landing grounds.

The first Spitfires to reach Malta arrive two days after the A.O.C.'s signal; they provoked a new onslaught. An R.A.F. sergeant who manned a fire-tender on one of the airfields throughout the battle described their arrival in the words:

"The Spitfire came waggling their wings as if to say 'O.K., boys, we're here.' But that very same evening the 'gen' went round that a big plot was building up over Sicily and within half an hour or so we were to see that Jerry really meant business. Standing at a vantage point in the village of Zurrieq, I saw the first waves of 88s coming all the way over the island. They dived down on Takali where the whole batch of 'Spits' had landed. We tried to count them as they came in, but it was an utter impossibility. Straight down they went, and one could see the stuff leave the kites before it really got dark.

"The guns were belting rounds up like nothing on earth; tracers filled the sky, and if things weren't so serious one could have called it a lovely sight. The din was terrific and Takali seemed to be ablaze from end to end. The lads would shout that some gun or other had stopped firing, the crew had been knocked out; but no; they've started again pushing up rounds harder than ever. The Jerry seemed to be under orders to finish the place and, by hell, he tried his best."

The Spitfires numbered fifteen. They came through from Gibraltar, being flown off an aircraft carrier, and arrived without loss. Forty-four Messerschmitts carried out intruder patrols, and the Hurricanes were up to cover the deliveries. During the next few days the airfields were persistently blasted. On 10th March the Spitfires were ready for action, and they destroyed two, damaged one. A spell of bad weather and the Spitfires brought a lull. Work on the airfields proceeded furiously. The men on the guns had a breather. Once again the most famous fighter of the war seemed to have scored a triumph.



THE SPITFIRES COME.

Bound for Malta, a Spitfire roars down the flight deck of Eagle. She was one of fifteen from Gibraltar, the first Spitfires to enter the battle.

They arrived on the desperate day of 7th March 1942.

ONSLAUGHT ON THE CONVOYS

MARCH 1942

The February convoy having failed even to reach the vicinity of the island, great store was set upon the convoy which sailed in March. Often called the "Vian convoy", as a tribute to the seamanship of Rear-Admiral Sir Philip Vian, who brought it safely within sight of land after averting destruction by overwhelming Italian forces, it was planned as a combined operation.

The land forces in North Africa staged feint attacks to divert the enemy's attention from the convoy on its passage west from Egypt. A combined one-day naval and air operation was carried out meanwhile, against the island of Rhodes to reduce the air attacks against Malta, and at the same time to tie down Axis air forces in Crete. Strategical bombing was carried out by the Royal Air Force upon airfields both in Greece and in Crete.

Other air force duties were to keep watch for enemy surface and submarine forces before the convoy sailed, to give it fighter cover during its passage, to make anti-submarine searches ahead of it, and finally to support the land forces' feint attack with reconnaissance fighter sweeps and the bombing of landing grounds. The operation, proceeding as planned by the joint efforts of the services, almost succeeded. It was Malta's tragedy that at the last moment complete success was denied by the command of the air then still enjoyed by the Axis.

The convoy assembled at Alexandria, the merchant vessels being the Breconshire, Talabot, Pampas and Clan Campbell, and sailed on 20th March. Superbly guarded by the Navy against heavy enemy attacks both by surface and air forces., the ships suffered no damage until 23rd March. Then at 09.20 a.m., Me. 109 bombers scored the first enemy success when they hit the Breconshire with three bombs just outside the harbour entrance. To the garrison rejoicing in the approach of the convoy intact within sight of land, this was the first disappointment in a series of sombre events. At 10.40 a.m. the merchant vessel Clan Campbell was hit and sunk a few miles to the south. The two remaining ships, Talabot and Pampas, reached harbour that morning, and there was cause for satisfaction at seeing them in, though a strong wind and swell, together with continuing air attacks, caused difficulty and delay in securing them.

Eventually, lighters were placed between them and the shore to form a gangway to the rock shelters, and there was some respite for their weary crews. It was found that the derrick gear and winches at all hatches aboard the Pampas had been damaged by splinters. Repairs were put in hand, but it was nearly forty-eight hours before all holds could be worked. The unloading of these vital supplies was begun by Maltese dockers who were much hampered by the necessity of having frequently to take cover during raids. Within two days both ships had been badly holed but, being berthed in shallow water, only settled a few feet, and much of the cargo was unloaded.

The arrival of the convoy marked the beginning of an all-out assault by the Luftwaffe upon Malta's shipping and unloading of supplies. From 24th March to 12th April there were 2,159 bomber sorties against the island's harbours and 1,870 tons of bombs were calculated to have fallen there, sinking ships, devastating docks and installations, blocking quays and roadways, cutting off light, water and communications.

When the convoy and escort reached Grand Harbour on 23rd March, the Breconshire remained outside. Her engine room was flooded. She was without power, light, cooking or water services. Her steering gear was out of action. There was a strong wind, and a heavy easterly swell was running. After an unsuccessful effort to tow her in, she drifted inshore and came to with both anchors down near Zonker Point at the extreme east of the island. She had not yet disembarked her passengers or unloaded any cargo. The fighters and guns gave her what cover they could. Next day, 24th March, she was bombed, fortunately without result, while, within Grand Harbour, 497 tons of cargo were discharged from Talabot and 310 tons from Pampas. Hal Far, the nearest airfield to the Breconshire, was turned into a "shambles", to quote this day's Intelligence signal. There was also a direct hit on Combined War Headquarters in Valetta.

It was essential to bring Breconshire into some harbour. In the small hours, tugs took her in tow, and at a speed never greater than one and a half knots she was brought round to Marsa Scirocco, the great bay at the south-east corner of the island. Extra anti-aircraft defence was provided for her there. Her passengers were disembarked and her crew, utterly exhausted after the extreme strain of three days' attack without light, water or cooking facilities, was sent ashore to recover.

Heavy and accurate raids developed during the afternoon against the dockyard and Grand Harbour and severe damage was done to shipping. Fortunately, several important units of the fleet sailed undamaged during the hours of darkness, for the raids were even heavier the next day, 26th March, after a night of constant alerts. These raids were carried out by Ju. 88s and Ju. 87s, both types of aircraft approaching the island at about 16,000 feet and then diving down to 6,000 feet, releasing their bombs at the bottom of their dive. The Hurricanes and Spitfires continued to shoot down the attackers and their scores were high, considering how few of them faced the armada which relentlessly swooped upon Malta. Special anti-aircraft artillery barrages had been arranged to protect the harbour and the airfields.

Although the sky appeared to be thick with bursting shells, and ammunition expenditure mounted to as much as 12,700 rounds a day, the bombers still came in. That the fighters and the barrage turned many away was proved by the number of bombs jettisoned over the island and in the sea. That the enemy paid a price is proved by the sixty-five aircraft destroyed, or probably destroyed, by the fighters and guns together between 25th February and 31st March.

THE TALABOT gets it. *Many a supply ship reached Malta safely only to be sunk at anchor.*

During the heavy attack on 26th March, one after another the vital ships were bombed. Talabot was hit. Pampas caught fire after a direct hit and sank so that the decks were just awash. Breconshire, still lying in Marsa Scirocco, was attacked several times and set on fire. The anti-aircraft artillery had had to be divided to afford protection to Marsa Scirocco, and this division told on the efforts of the gunners. By nightfall, however, much of the cargo had been unloaded from Pampas and Talabot in Grand Harbour. The severity of the day's raids and their persistence decided Vice-Admiral, Malta, to order that the unloading of whatever cargo could be saved from Pampas should continue day and night. A working party from the Cheshire Regiment and a party of naval ratings were therefore detailed to help the dockers.

The fire aboard Breconshire in Marsa Scirocco flared up again during the night, after having been brought under control, and the list on the ship increased. The concern of her Commander, Captain Hutchinson, R.N., was now to save her cargo of oil by trying to get her to settle down on an even keel. He flooded a boiler room and opened her stern with a depth charge. This last remedy failed, but many tons of oil fuel were eventually salvaged.

During the next four days the enemy turned his main attention to the airfields where the troops and airmen were working day and night building pens, servicing runways, and maintaining fighters. The ill-devised change of plan gave the Royal Navy a respite in which to work upon the damaged shipping and the devastated dockyards. H.M.S. Penelope was docked on 28th March. It was estimated that a month would be needed to make her seaworthy – depending on the number of raids. There was no longer any question of our operating a surface striking force; nor was there any fuel for one. The only object was to get our ships away from the island to bases from which they could be effective.

The Vice-Admiral, Malta signalled to the General Officer Commanding and the Air Officer Commanding: "Please accept my very sincere thanks for the generous help you have given the Navy in the last few days. We shall always remember the magnificent performance of the A.A. batteries and fighter squadrons during the heavy air attacks. I hope what we shall save from the convoy will be worthy of your great efforts."

Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd sent this message to Brigadier Beckett: "I wish to express my greatest admiration of your officers and men for the excellent way in which they are defending this island. I have been out when raids have been at their height, and I have seen your gun crews engage enemy regardless of their own safety. For sheer guts, determination, and hard work, your men can never be beaten. You must feel very proud of them."

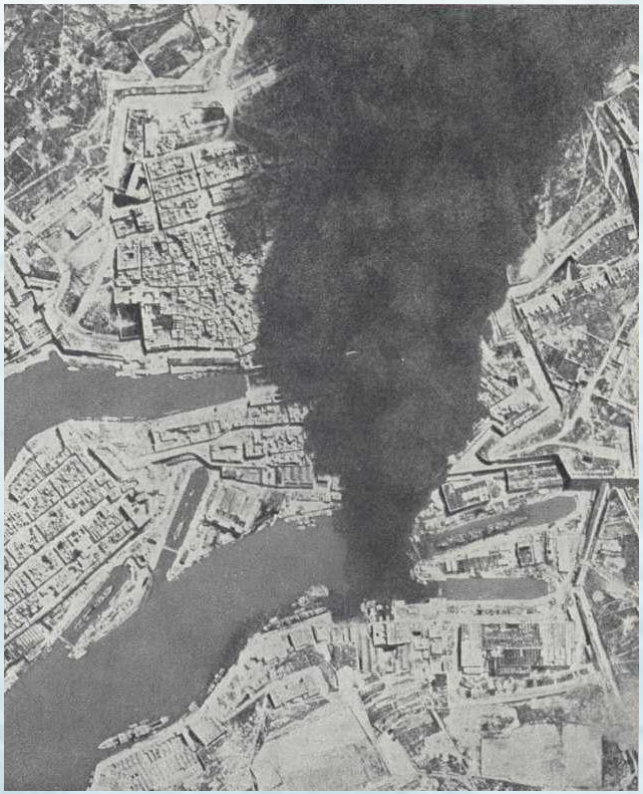
On the last day of March the raiding switched back to the dockyard. The Penelope was the bull's-eye for every raid until she sailed on the night of 8th/9th April. The epic of Penelope belongs to the Royal navy, but her destiny was so linked with the main Battle of Malta that it seems fitting it should be briefly summarised here in words written by a Naval Staff Officer:

"No ship ever had a tougher refit. She went into dock with her fore end flooded to the main deck level and her hull and keel crumpled by the force of the near misses. Her casualty list grew steadily longer. Some indication of the number of rounds she fired may be gathered from the fact that the new barrels which had been installed were, eight days later, dangerously overdue for replacement. The constant call for ammunition was in itself a major tax on the ship's company, but this was only one of her difficulties.

"The senior officials of the yard rose nobly to the occasion and designed the repairs. The workers in the shops fabricated the girders, but it was her own ship's company who built them on the ship. The dockside was pulped all around her and she herself was hit by splinters again and again. But in spite of a fire, and a hull like a pepper-pot, no vital damage was received.

Just before the repairs were completed – many days earlier than the most optimistic officials had considered possible – disaster overcame her when damage to the caisson allowed water to enter the dock and the pumps were put out of action. Her crew went on working until the water came up to their armpits and then sadly climbed out. By a supreme effort pumps were got going again. The water went down, and the work was completed.

"Her last day was a nightmare. The ship floated, but leaked like a sieve, the only lighter could not be brought round to oil her in dock, and there was no doubt up to the last moment whether the caisson could be removed to let her out. The final straw was when, in the last raid of the day, the Gunnery Officer was killed, the Captain wounded and the heavy artillery exhausted. It did not seem possible that she could re-ammunition and sail in time to round Cape Bon before dawn. To the Penelope, however, nothing was impossible; and half an hour before her final time limit, she steamed out of her harbour, filthy and scarred and bristling like a porcupine from the wooden pegs which plugged her sides, but a glowing tribute to the faith and determination of the man who pulled her through, Captain A.D. Nicholl."



A TANKER BURNS.

A gigantic tree of black smoke branches into the sky above Grand Harbour. At the base lies a bombed harbour tanker. The photograph was taken by a German reconnaissance aircraft.

MALTA FIGHTS FOR HER LIFE

April 1942

Doggedly the defenders of Malta fought during April – "April, the cruellest month," as the poet wrote prophetically. In the desert there was a lull in the fighting; and the enemy could not thrust forward towards Suez until cargoes had been shipped across from Europe to North Africa. Malta's offensive threatened these supplies. For that reason a vast weight of air power was tied down in Sicily to batter the island. For such a small target, enormous forces were engaged. But for the strategical significance of Malta, they were forces which might have been used to advance Russia or in the desert. During the month of April, 6,728 tons of bombs were dropped. Most of them fell upon a handful of targets situated within a few miles of each other. The distribution was:

Dockyard area	3,156 tons
Luqa airfield	805 tons
Takali airfield	841 tons
Hal Far airfield	750 tons
Kalafrana seaplane base	196 tons
Elsewhere	980 tons

The dockyard district includes the densely populated areas of the Three Cities and Valetta, which contain the waters of the docks. While the inhabitants took to the rocks, their homes, churches and historic buildings were pounded and trampled, together with the military objectives. The loss of civilian life during this black month rose to 300 people, the highest figure for any month, but still relatively low owing to unassailable rock shelters in which by this time many people were spending their lives. By March, there was already shelter accommodation for some 440,000 – nearly double the number of the estimated population.

But over 10,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged during April. The lovely baroque facades crashed down, the painted roofs of the churches were broken open to the sky, the palaces of the Knights of St John and their hewn bastions were scored and wounded. Valetta's streets of stairs were blocked with masonry. The dockyards were clogged with debris. The Opera House was demolished. The University, the Museum and the Palace of the Grand Masters were hit. *The Times of Malta* received a direct hit on 31st March, but the issue for 1st April was on the streets in the morning. The nerves of everybody were strained, and the strength of every man was put to the test.

Upon the airfields men of the Army and the Royal Air Force sweated in the growing heat to keep the machines airworthy and the ground clear for flying. All the while, work went forward upon the protective pens. With the exception of three days of bad weather, daylight raids came every day with German persistence and regularity. The Italians had disappeared from the sky, handing over the offensive to their masters. On an average there were 170 bombers over every day, Ju. 88s and Ju. 87s coming in waves of twelve to fifteen at a few minutes' interval from a variety of directions, sometimes making for a single objective, sometimes for several. There were usually three raids every day; meals in the Royal Air Force messes were arranged to fit in with them. Each raid lasted about one hour. The total time spent under raids during the month came to twelve days ten hours and twenty minutes.

One Hurricane squadron had been re-equipped with Spitfires in March, another re-equipped during the second week in April; but many Spitfires had been lost on the ground, and it was the Hurricanes again which bore the brunt of the battle. Sometimes a dozen Hurricanes would take off to meet a raid of a hundred enemy aircraft. Often the odds were greater.

During the heat of the crisis a Royal Air Force corporal wrote these words;

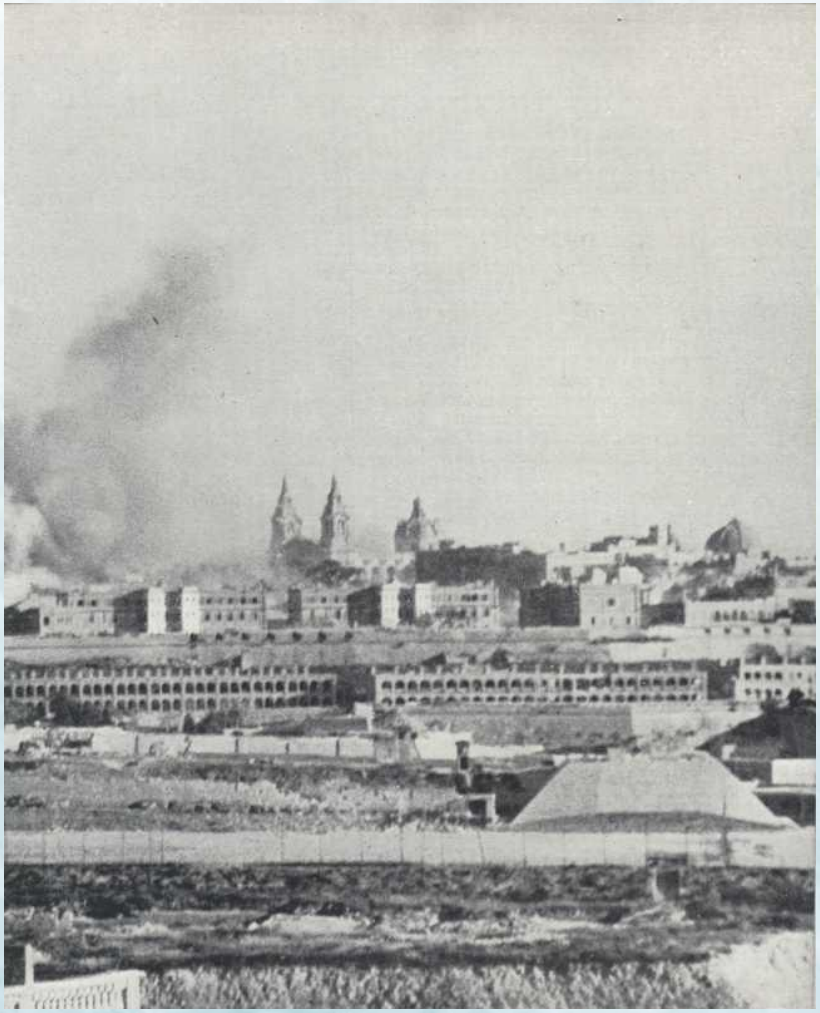
"During dinner the Hun started again. This time he dropped quite a number of bombs on Luqa village. A direct hit was scored on a shelter. It appeared that water was seeping into the shelter, drowning the people trapped there. The Army and R.A.F. squads were attempting to get through to them. After tea another raid – bombs all over the place. As I am writing, the 6 p.m. news from Blighty can be heard in the sergeant's mess. It makes me just a little homesick.

"Back home I can picture the family having tea – Thursday evening – I wonder whether Dad has any inspections to-night. And my thoughts fly to Joan – she is probably making tea now for Jack and her Dad. How I wish I could be there. But this war can't last forever. The Camp All-Clear has sounded. I wonder how much peace we shall get now. The place seems much the same after a raid, when the smoke dust has cleared – at least from a distance – as I look over the valley to Rabat on the hill, or slightly to the left to Takali then follow on to B'Kara, Hamrun and the Harbour."

Bombs thunder across Floriana, south-west of Valetta, in an afternoon attack on 24th April. Malta's light soil and soft stone blow up into dust clouds thick as a smoke screen.

The church with twin towers is the famous St. Publius, badly damaged in the April raids.

AFTERNOON IN SPRING.



By the middle of April the fighter defence was seriously weakened. The defenders thought they were lucky if they could regularly put up six aircraft, four to engage the enemy and two four airfield defence. The system used was to scramble the four strikers immediately the warning was received of the approach of hostile aircraft. The fighters would then gain height as rapidly as possible in the sun. In order to save petrol, the airfield defence pair were sent up at the last possible moment. Keeping radio silence, they would fly to a point twenty or thirty miles south of the island. There they would gain height until ordered by radio to swoop in to whichever airfield was most in need of defence.

The Messerschmitts were in the habit of flying into the airfield circuit as the pitifully small striking force returned with ammunition spent. Then airfield defence fighters then came into action.

Amazing battles were fought by Malta pilots without ammunition. The Germans were never certain when they were really without it but it was seen that the enemy always sheered off as soon as the fighters formed upon them. But prisoners of war captured later affirmed that they were no longer afraid to fly over the island in their Ju. 88s in broad daylight without fighter cover. They began to believe that the Battle of Malta had been won. They had been doing three sorties a day, four days a week.

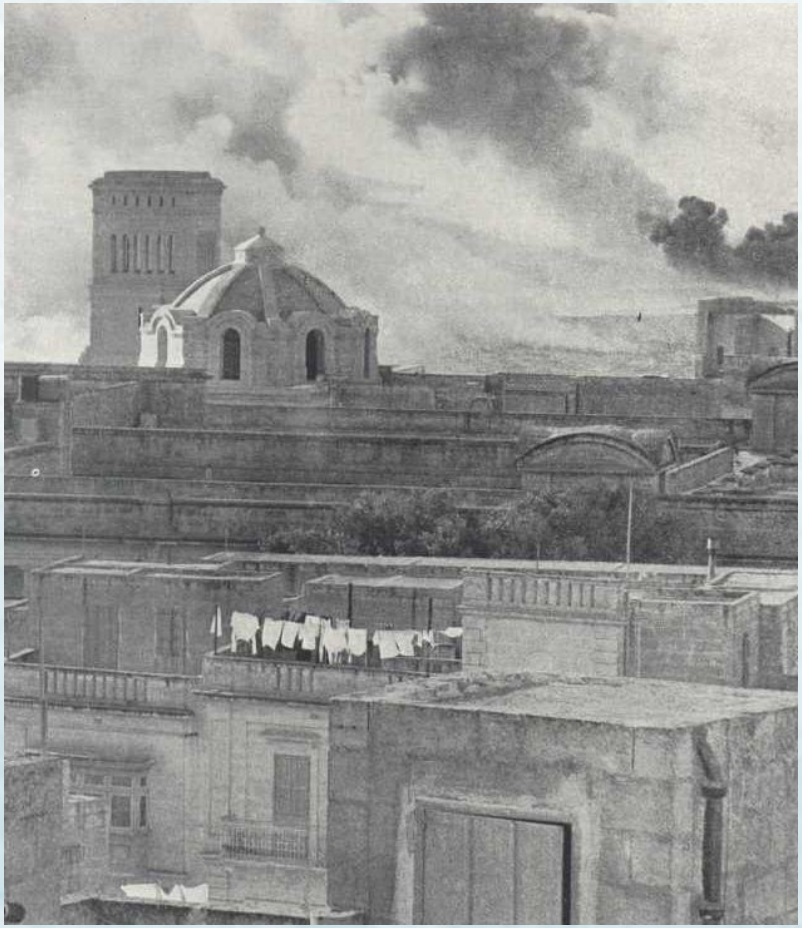
Sometime ingenuity played a part in the fighter effort. During April, Pilot Officer "Humgufery" appeared upon the scene. His parent was Group Captain A.B. Woodhall, who was in charge of the Operations Room. He described this accident: "On one occasion all our fighter aircraft were grounded in order to try to increase serviceability. The Hun bombers came over in force with quite a large fighter escort. It happened that there were several fighter pilots with me in Operations Room, one who was a Canadian with an unmistakeable voice. I put him at the microphone at a stand-by radio set and proceeded to give him dummy orders. He replied just as if he was flying his fighter. This, we suspected, caused a cry of 'Achtung! Spitfeuer!' to go over the German radio. In any case, two 109s enthusiastically shot each other down without any British aircraft being airborne. This knowledge that the Germans intercepted our orders stood us in good stead. We claimed that Pilot Officer 'Humgufery' shot down two Huns."

The anti-aircraft artillery for a time had the battle almost to themselves. They destroyed 102 enemy aircraft in the month, their best achievement. Thirty of these fell to them during one week ended 8th April. In the course of that week they achieved their record of ammunition expenditure. In one day an average of sixty-nine rounds were fired for every heavy anti-aircraft gun and fifty-six rounds for every Bofors gun. "Malta's anti-aircraft artillery", said the German radio, "must be counted among Tommy's very best, and plays the greatest part in the defence of the island."

A Staff officer of the Royal Artillery described the raids from a gunner's point of view:

"The dust after any air raid is terrific; but in Malta, where the soil is so light and th stones so soft, the cloud of dust that rises is as thick as any smoke screen and makes the work of the gunners trying to see their targets doubly difficult. Sometimes an hour later one could see the dust cloud in a compact mass miles out above the sea, driven along with the wind. The weight of these attacks was particularly severe on the gun positions surrounding the airfields.

"At first, the enemy made the actual airfield itself his main objective. Gun positions suffered from badly aimed bombs and from those released too early or too late, but very soon his main objective became the fringes of the airfield where the aircraft were lying. Combined with this, he made deliberate attacks on the anti-aircraft positions. These suffered severely as they could not be moved out to far lest the airfield runways became bereft of protection, particularly by the light of the anti-aircraft guns."



FURY OF ATTACK.

Men went out to their work. Women tended their homes. The dive-bombers came in seemingly endless waves of twelve to fifteen every few minutes. This time it is Sliema that is blasted. In April, nearly 7,000 tons of bombs rained down on an area of a few miles.

Not only were the fighters unable to operate during eleven days in this month, but a serious shortage of ammunition developed. Cuts were imposed upon the gunners, restricting them to fifteen rounds for each gun. These restrictions were only lifted upon special occasions, such as the arrival of fighter reinforcements later this month. To meet the difficulties of this shortage the guns and the fighters collaborated in the creation of a "sanctuary" at Takali. Bofors guns round this airfield were not limited in their number of rounds; and if any fighters were being harassed by the enemy and had expanded their ammunition, they would immediately make for Takali and remain low down in the circuit. The guns then saw them safely in to land.

The gunners, Maltese and British, stood side by side and fought with courage in conditions of frustration and strain. The ammunition expenditure rate was very carefully watched and reports were called for twice in every twenty-four hours. This in itself presented a problem to detachment commanders when communications broke down. One of the battery commanders twice swam across a creek in the harbour to deliver his report.

During the period of the Battle of Malta, there were seventy-eight direct hits upon main cables: half of these were in April. Gas, water and electric light services were often cut off. For four or five weeks main water was not available in Valetta, much loss having being caused to water reserve by bombs dropping on reservoirs. After every raid the Maltese people emerged stoically from the rock and attempted to carry on the business of living, of salvaging their goods, of looking after the needs of the hordes of dark-eyed shrill children who played and prayed in the shelters. The civil defence services were quick to arrive at the scene of every bombing. The only horror they were spared was fire; from the sixteenth century, when so many present of them were built, till the present day, the buildings of Malta have been made of stone.

Malta's proudest reward in the midst of these trials was contained in a message of 15th April received by His Excellency General Sir William Dobbie, Governor and Commander-in-Chief, from the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

"I have it in command from the King to convey to you the following message: 'TO HONOUR HER BRAVE PEOPLE I AWARD THE GEORGE CROSS TO THE ISLAND FORTRESS OF MALTA TO BEAR WITNESS TO A HEROISM AND DEVOTION THAT WILL LONG BE FAMOUS IN HISTORY – GEORGE R.I.'" The people of Malta rejoiced, and *The Times of Malta* printed a banner headline – "King Sets His Seal on Living History". The Governor's broadcast to the people included these words: "The safety and well-being of this fortress rests under God on four supports. They are the three fighting services and the civilian population. Each one of these is essential to the well-being of the others, and each one depends on the other three and cannot do without them."

The same evening the Italian radio added its version of the event's significance: "This is but one more preposterous deception by the British Government. Had not our unfortunate Maltese brethren been under the heel of British domination which is being forced on them under the threat of guns and bayonets, we have no doubt as to how the Maltese would behave."

On April 20th Spitfire reinforcements were flown from the American aircraft carrier Wasp. They were chased in, and the moment they arrived a terrific attack was launched at them on the ground. While they were being refuelled, rearmed and serviced many of them were "spitchered". The enemy sent 306 bombers in one day to destroy them. Within three days they were all grounded. Such bitter experiences against overwhelming odds pointed to the necessity of an even greater acceleration of methods on the ground. In that lay the only hope of reinforcing the sadly reduced fighter strength.

As April drew to a close the situation in Malta was nearly desperate. Though in that month the guns and fighters destroyed or probably destroyed two hundred of the attackers, the defenders had lost twenty-three Spitfires with fifty-seven damaged and, eighteen Hurricanes with thirty damaged.

The serviceability of the fighters dropped; some days the air force was virtually grounded and, while the gunners were still rationed with powder and shot, the losses could ill be afforded.

During the whole of this period, the 10th Submarine Flotilla had continued to operate successfully, but conditions of "rest" in harbour naturally fell far short of normal. The crews could not continue indefinitely to dive by day in selected berths and undertake repairs by night. It was therefore decided at the end of the month that the Flotilla should temporarily withdraw and be refreshed.

On 27th April, the Air Officer Commanding signalled that the enemy might prove disastrous unless immediate steps were taken to encounter them. There was a danger that radiolocation and wireless equipment would be destroyed, making it impossible to operate Spitfires. He stated that he could not tolerate the enemy's ability to operate without hindrance.

No sooner had this signal been sent than there were encouraging signs that the enemy was slackening off. One afternoon when the sirens went, instead of low-flying Junkers, five "Black Crows" – as the gunners called the multi-engined Italian bombers – appeared. They flew at an immense height in precise formation, just as they had flown before the Luftwaffe took over. The Germans had had to transfer some of their strength to other fronts; they also needed time for resting and servicing their aircraft. On 29th April there were 220 sorties against the island; on 30th April there were only sixty-eight. These attacks were directed mainly against stores, camps, lines of communications and civilian targets. Four churches, a convent and a hospital were bomb in one day.

The possibility of an invasion of Malta, particularly since the German invasion of Crete, had always been present in the defenders' minds. They therefore planned to meet it. The Royal Air Force was still flying reconnaissance sorties regularly, often at great hazard, to keep a check on the numbers of enemy aircraft opposing Malta.

"THE CRULLEST MONTH"

Three raids a day.

The gunner's motto.

"Time we got back."

The gunner's hour.

More pens for defence.

More bombs for attack.

On 21st April, when the offensive was at its height, attention was drawn to a feature which had appeared to the west of Gerbini airfield, one of the enemy's main bomber airfields in Sicily. It consisted of a rectangle marked out on the ground by a plough. On 24th April more photographs were taken of the same area, and it was observed that the ground enclosed in the rectangle had undergone a change. The vegetation had been cut short and small hollows and mounds had been levelled. This rectangle measured some 1,500 yards long by 400 yards wide. The immediate interpretation put upon it was that the enemy had found the existing bomber airfields, Gerbini, Catania and Comiso, inadequate and were preparing a satellite landing ground.

This theory was not accepted for long. By the end of April two other strips were found in the same vicinity, one of which was nearly complete when first photographed. The new satellites were about the same size as the first, and all three ran parallel to the runway of Gerbini airfield – that is, roughly west to east, the direction of the prevailing wind. It was also observed that each strip had been laid out within easy reach of a railway station, and that at four of these stations new sidings were under construction. It became evident that there was a second and more disturbing explanation of the strips, namely that they might be intended to provide additional dispersal for bomber aircraft but to accommodate a large number of gliders for an airborne invasion of Malta.

The vale of Catania, where strips were found, is a flat tract of open land, nearly a hundred miles square. It is only about a hundred miles from Malta, and would be an ideal site for the purpose. The satellites could be prepared with the minimum of time and labour, and each would be within easy access of its railway station., of which the significance was that the two most common of German gliders, the Gotha 242 and the D.F.S. 230, are built in sections which can be easily transported and rapidly assembled. The sections could be brought from Italy by rail the whole way, over the Messina train ferry, to the strips. Following their customary plan of surprise, the Germans could bring down their gliders in sections, and need not assemble them until a day or two before the operation was due to begin. Though it is possible on air photographs to distinguish glider components on an open landing ground, the parts could easily be concealed under tress or camouflaged. The invasion troops could be accommodated in the large camps already existing farther afield until they were required. Obviously, large quantities of stores and ammunition would be required, but any increase in the size of the existing dumps in the vicinity may well have been interpreted as heralding an even greater air bombardment of Malta. It is probable that the enemy intended to give this impression, and hoped that the new satellites would be regarded as take-off strips for more bombers. Their real intention would not be fully proved until assembled gliders themselves appeared at the last minute. On the discovery of the three strips, the Royal Air Force photographic reconnaissance staff considered in what areas further strips could be built, and aircraft were sent out to photograph these areas.. As a result, photographs were obtained of the whole of the Vale of Catania, and other areas in southern Sicily. In all, about 300 square miles of country were photographed, but no further strips were discovered. It seemed that the enemy thought that the three existing strips were enough.

Regular reconnaissance was therefore made every other day, and progress closely observed. New huts were erected. Underground cables were laid. By 10th May, all three satellites were complete. A close watch was kept for any increase in stores, or the arrival of anything resembling glider components but no further developments occurred and no anti-aircraft defences appeared to have been prepared.

CLIMAX OF BATTLE:

The Defenders' Triumph

MAY 1942

The relative lull at the end of April was a godsend to the defenders and a blunder by the attackers. By almost neutralising the striking power of Malta, supplies had been pushed through to the Axis armies in the desert without overwhelming loss. But the failure to follow up the air assault gave besieged Malta valuable time. Once again relief was on the way – ammunition for the guns, and more Spitfires. The arrival of this relief was the occasion of the climax in the Battle of Malta. The information that sixty-four Spitfires were due to land on the airfields from 1 a.m. onwards on Saturday, 9th May, was given to all three Services on Thursday, 7th May. H.M.S. Welshman, a mine-laying cruiser capable of forty knots, was due to berth in Grand Harbour at 6 a.m. on 10th May. The Services had three days in which to work out a combined operational plan to cover these events.

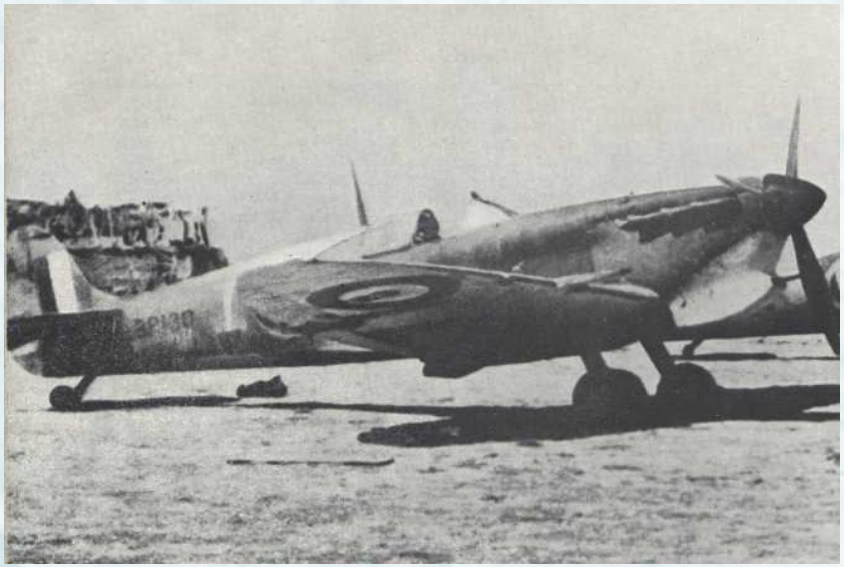
All ammunition and target restrictions were lifted after dawn on 8th May. The system of rest and relief which had been introduced for the gunners under constant bombardment was cancelled. The Royal Artillery and the Royal Air Force agreed that airfields should have priority for barrages during the aircraft deliveries; and it was arranged that on arrival the Spitfires should orbit Takali airfield at a very low altitude so that the light anti-aircraft could afford them maximum protection.

The welcome for the Spitfires upon the ground was worked out to the last detail. Wing Commander E.J. Gracie, who led a formation of Spitfires which had landed previously, described the preparations for the present operation:

"We went to our pilots and ground crews and administrative staffs and told them we were going to give them, we hoped, an organisation which would enable us to win the Battle of Malta, which at that time we were in grave danger of losing. We then told them it would mean the hardest possible work under very difficult conditions, that we were going to enlist the aid of the Army, both in men and materials, but that the battle was lost unless they all pulled their weight one hundred per cent.

"The response was tremendous. Every man felt himself an important item in the battle and not merely an insignificant unit. So magnificently did the ground staffs work that our half-hour service became an absolutely outside limit, and the official records show that six Spitfires of one squadron took off to engage the enemy within nine minutes of landing on the island. What a change in thirty-six hours! Within half an hour every serviceable Spitfire was in the air. I shall never forget the remark of one airman who, coming out of a slit trench, and seeing two or three squadrons in the air, said; 'Heavens, look at the fog!' "

The turn-round of the Spitfires was accomplished in six minutes in some cases on 9th May, so thoroughly rehearsed were the arrangements. When the enemy came to bomb them on the ground, he was met and attacked by them in the air. The infantry contributed essential manpower to carry out this plan. Each arriving Spitfire was met and directed by a runner to a dispersal pen, which was a self-supporting unit. Owing to the shortage of petrol bowsers and the number of aircraft to be refuelled simultaneously, a supply of petrol was put up in tins for refuelling by hand. These tins, together with oil, glycol, and ammunition, were waiting ready in each pen. Two airmen, assisted by two soldiers, fell upon each Spitfire as it reached the pen. The moment their work was done a Malta pilot took over the machine, though in some cases newly arrived pilots went straight into action. All day long, ground crews, pilots and relief pilots lived in the pens, where food was brought to them.



LINE OF BATTLE.

Spitfires flew to the relief of the defenders at the moment Malta's crisis – 64 on 9th May 1942, another batch nine days later. They got in safely, and they turned the tide of the battle.

Army wireless sets, dispatch riders and signalmen maintained a communication system between the widely dispersed pens. All day long the repair squads were out filling up craters upon the runways while the bombers which made them were fighting their back to Sicily.

One of the new pilots described his day in these words:

"Took off from the Wasp at 0645 hrs. Landed at Takali at 1030 hrs. The formation leader flew too fast and got his navigation all to hell, so I left them forty miles west of Bizerta, five miles off the N. African coast, and set course for Malta, avoiding Pantellaria and Bizerta owing to fighters and flak being present there. Jettisoned the long-range tank twenty miles W. of Bizerta and reached Malta with twenty gallons to spare in the main tank. Of the forty-seven machines that flew off the Wasp, one crashed into the sea on take-off, one force-landed back onto the deck as he had jettisoned his auxiliary tank in error, one landed in Algeria, one ran out of petrol between Pantellaria and Malta, one crashed on landing at Hal Far, and one crashed off Grand Harbour.

"On landing at Takali I immediately removed my kit, and the machine was rearmed and refuelled. I landed during a raid and four 109s tried to shoot me up. Soon after landing the airfield was bombed but without much damage being done. I was scrambled in a section of four soon after this raid, but we failed to intercept the next one, though we chased several 109s down on the deck.

"Ate lunch in the aircraft, as I was at the ready till dusk. After lunch we were heavily bombed again by eight Ju. 88s.

"Scrambled again in the same section after tea – no luck again. One 'Spit' was shot down coming in to land and another one at the edge of the airfield. Score for the day, seven confirmed, seven probables, and fourteen damaged for the loss of three Spits'

"The tempo of life here is just indescribable. The morale of all is magnificent – pilots, ground crews and army, but it is certainly tough. The bombing is continuous on and off all day. One lives here only to destroy the Hun and hold him at bay; everything else, living conditions, sleep, food and all the ordinary standards of life have gone by the board. It all makes the Battle of Britain and fighter sweeps seem like child's play in comparison, but it certainly history in the making and nowhere is there aerial warfare to compare with this."

There were nine raids that day, the "fog" of Spitfires were beginning to show results. Eight enemy planes were destroyed and there were many 'probables'. A shock of confidence and excitement went through flyers and ground crews. The organisation was going well.

The climax of the battle was still to come H.M.S. Welshman, loaded with ammunition for the guns, was due next morning. With bombs falling intermittently, Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd called his fighter pilots together on one airfield and told them how vital the morrow's work would be. He mentioned that 9th May was his lucky day, for it was on 9th May 1915, when he was riding a motor cycle as a corporal dispatch rider in France, that he had been knocked out by shelling while travelling fast and had lived to tell the tale. A bomb fell ominously close while he was telling the story, and the party broke up hurriedly while the A.O.C.'s luck still held.

H.M.S. Welshman entered Grand Harbour at 5.25 a.m. At 5.54 an alert sounded. One Ju 88 with an escort of Messerschmitts was making a reconnaissance. The Luftwaffe stood by in force to destroy the ship and the supplies she carried. There were three surprises for them that morning in Malta – a smoke screen, the most intensive barrage ever developed, and a wealth of Spitfires.

The loss of so much cargo in March through the bombing of the ships while they were being unloaded led to very careful plans being made for the unloading of the Welshman. In order to relieve her crew, four naval working parties went aboard to supervise it. The Royal Artillery provided manpower for most of the work, and the Royal Air Force sent men to unload their own stores. The job was continued throughout alerts, the men taking cover only when the warning of immediate danger was given. The whole of the cargo, most of it ammunition, was unloaded in five hours.

Smoke containers were the first stores to be brought ashore. These augmented the generators which were already in use for the first time in Grand Harbour. The smoke screen was ignited at a signal from the Fighter Operations room. The harbour area had complete priority for the gun barrage which had been specially prepared to cover the Welshman, and the ammunition restrictions were told that the barrage would continue regardless of their whereabouts.

The heaviest raid of the day developed at 10.56 a.m. with twenty Stukas and ten Ju. 88s escorted, as was every bomber now, by Me. 109s. They dropped some forty tons of bombs, one of which was a near miss on the Welshman. Thirty-seven Spitfires and thirteen Hurricanes went out to meet them. As the first wave of 88s dived down from the south-east out of the sun it was seen that the fighters were mixing up with them; there were fights all over the sky. Then came the 87s from the east. The harbour barrage went up, and the fighters jumped on them, many Spitfires following the Stukas through the barrage. In the afternoon, by which time the ship had been unloaded, there was another attack. The smoke screen was lit again and the barrage went up. One Ju. 88 was seen to blow into two pieces as it dived. The evening raid came in two waves; first a high-level attack by Cant 1007s, then dive bombing by heavily escorted Stukas.

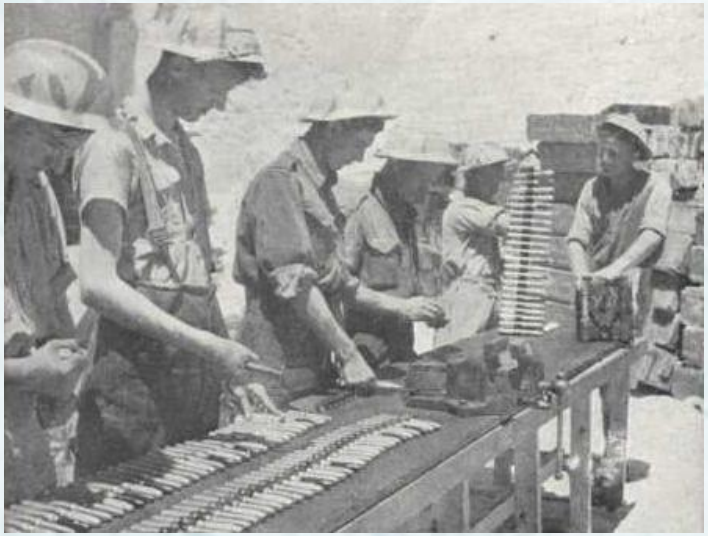
The "new" pilot had an exhausting but triumphant second day in Malta:

"We climbed to 4,000 feet, and then the barrage was put up by the harbour defences and the cruiser. The C.O. dived down into it and I followed close on him. We flew three times to and fro in the barrage, trusting to luck to avoid the flak. Then I spotted a Ju. 87 climbing out at the fringe of the barrage and I turned and chased him. I gave him one sec. burst of cannon and he broke off sharply to the left. At that moment another Ju. 87 came up in front of my nose and I turned into him and I let him have it. His engine started to pour out black smoke and he started weaving. I kept the tit pushed hard, and after a further two or three second burst with one cannon I had left, the other having jammed, he keeled over at 1,500 feet and went into the drink.

EACH TO HIS STATION. *Throughout the days of the May battles, airmen and soldiers fought together to keep the Spitfires in action.*

While the pilot waits, soldiers and airmen refuel and re-ammunition his Spitfire in its pen.

Soldiers load and make up cartridge belts for the Spitfires' guns.



Army dispatch riders and signalmen, working together with the R.A.F., maintain a communications system between the dispersed pens.

"I then spotted a 109 firing at me from behind and pulled the kite round to port, and after one and a half turns got on his tail. Before I could fire, another 109 cut across my bows from the port side and I turned straight on his tail and fired until my cannon stopped through the lack of 'ammo'. He was hit and his engine poured out black smoke, but I had to beat it as I was now defenceless and two more 109s were attacking me. I spiralled straight down to the sea at full throttle, and then weaved violently towards land with the two 109s still firing at me. I went under the fringe of the smoke screen to try to throw them off, but when I came out the other side I found them both sitting up top waiting for me. I therefore kept right down at nought feet and steep-turned towards them, noticing the smoke from their gun ports as I did so. After about five minutes of this I managed to throw them off.

"I landed back at Takali and made out my report, claiming one 87 destroyed and one Me. 109 damaged.

There were 110 Spitfire sorties and fourteen Hurricane sorties that day. Between them they destroyed fifteen of the attackers; anti-aircraft fire destroyed eight. Many were damaged. Three Spitfires were lost, but two of the pilots were saved.

The combined operation had successfully completed the task of providing reinforcements of Spitfires and of ammunition. The Air Officer Commanding sent this signal in reply to the Commander, Royal Artillery; "We much appreciate your message of congratulations. Spitfires seem to be body-line bowling, and opposition not to anxious to leave the pavilion. We sincerely hope to be able to give you a well-earned rest from your magnificent work of destruction. The Hun thinks that Malta is either to hard to crack or the effort has been miscalculated to break it."

The opposition indeed was declined to leave the pavilion in the ensuing days. The effort has been of 10th May, together with the arrival of further reinforcement of Spitfires on 18th May, was the turning point of the struggle for local air superiority. During the rest of the month the enemy's activity was reduced to daily bombing by small numbers of German and Italian bombers combined with daily sweeps. The number of night raiders, however increased. They aimed mostly at airfields, but their bombing was inaccurate. The Beaufighters, which had taken over most of the night fighting duties from the Hurricanes, shot down twelve bombers in under three weeks. Malta's own bomber effort recovered gradually. In the period from 26th May to 27th July, Malta-based aircraft 191 sorties, of which 102 were directed against shipping at sea, and sixty-two against ports and bases. With the aid of air superiority Malta was regaining her position as an air-sea offensive base.

THE FIGHTER PILOTS OF MALTA.

Airmen such as these from Britain and the Dominions, held the Axis assault for nearly two years, in a long defensive action. Now they carry the battle to the enemy.

THE FIGHTERS GO OUT TO ATTACK

JUNE 1942

The month of July saw decisive developments in the air due to Malt's ever increasing strength. Because the fighters had not being strong enough, they had had to allow the attackers to reach the island in the majority of cases before attacking. Circumstances had always forced a defensive plan upon them . As the situation eased month by month, Spitfires had been freer to go forward to make their attacks, endeavouring to smash each raid before it crossed the coast.

On 1st July the Germans, evidently feeling again that Malta was becoming too much of a nuisance, opened a new attempt to bomb it into submission. They tried first to knock out the fighter force. But in contrast to the last time they had undertaken a blitz, there now awaited them fully equipped Spitfire squadrons. The enemy raids, although nearly continuous for a time, were on a smaller scale than the spring attacks, and their losses were far greater. In the first ten days of July over one hundred enemy aircraft were shot down. Malta lost less that a fourth of that number in pilots. It is known that one Ju. 88 bomber Squadron had to be stood down. By the middle of July losses were so heavy that dive bombing was stopped. About the same time, it was possible to develop offensive plans still further. A plan for forward interception was tabulated. It was the harvest of many months of toil against unequal odds.

On 14th July Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd relinquished his command. He had directed the air forces during unparalleled assaults, and he had never ceased to wage war by bomb and torpedo. The people of Malta honoured his name. As he was preparing to leave Valetta, an unknown civilian presented to him a cigarette case bearing the letters M.T.A.P. He discovered that the inscription stood for "Malta thanks air protection".

Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park, his successor, had had experience of fighting the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain when he commanded one of the most active fighter groups. He initiated the plan of forward interception. These are extracts from his Special Order of the Day:

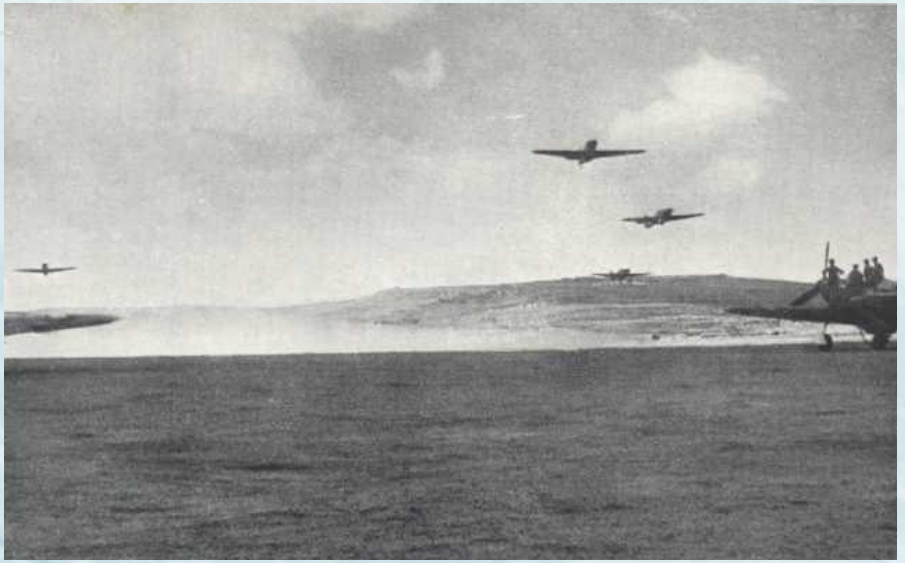
"The magnificent fighting by our fighter pilots at Malta in April and May has very rightly been generously acknowledged. The courage, endurance and fine work of the Officers, N.C.O.s and men on the ground has not, however, received full acknowledgement. During the blitz in the spring, the enemy was so vastly superior in strength that our day fighters were practically forced on to the defensive. Under these conditions it was inevitable that Royal Air Force personnel on the ground, and civilians, should undergo severe bombing daily, and I now pay tribute to the courageous manner in which they kept our airfields going in spite of the lack of protection from our fighters.

"Our day fighter strength has during June and July been greatly increased, and the enemy's superiority in numbers has long since dwindled. The time has now arrived for our Spitfire squadrons to put an end to the bombing of our airfields by daylight. We have the best fighter aircraft in the world, and our Spitfire pilots will again show their comrades on the ground that they are the best fighters in the world."

The interception of an increasing proportion of bombing raids before they crossed the coast was saving lives, aircraft, time, labour. The enemy gave it up; and in place of daylight bombing they started fighter sweeps in several formations stepped up from twenty to thirty thousand feet. In this phase of fighter versus fighter the Air Officer Commanding still ordered aggressive tactics:

"All fighter formations leaders are warned that the enemy will probably reintroduce bomber formations whenever there is an important operation in the Malta area. Because our Spitfires, using the forward plan of interception, have recently stopped daylight raids does not mean that only fighter sweeps are likely to be encountered over or near Malta in the future. Any signs of defensive tactics by our fighters will encourage the enemy to reintroduce formations of bombers or fighter-bombers. Therefore the more aggressively our fighters are employed, the better will Malta be defended against daylight bombing."

The gradual development of more aggressive tactics made increasing demands upon the ground organisation. Take-off of squadrons was accelerated; the squadron at stand by to be off within two minutes, the squadron at immediate readiness to be off within three minutes, the squadron at readiness to be off within five minutes. All the while conditions were improving. The grim fighting of the spring contributed to that improvement. Reinforcements helped. Radiolocation conditions, which often reduced the chances of off-shore interception during previous months, were now being improved after exhaustive work by experts brought from Britain. Consequently the Fighter Operations Room, so long the key to Malta's successful air battles, was able to attain greater degrees of accuracy than had before been possible.



INTO BATTLE. *Hurricanes climb to attack as the approach of Italian raiders is signalled. The airfield is Takali.*

"The Fighter Sector Controller cannot win an air combat in a hundred years, but he can lose one in a hundred seconds." This well-known Royal Air Force motto made its appearance in Orders. The Controller has the difficult task of anticipating the enemy's movements and deciding his plan in accordance with prevailing cloud conditions and the sun's position. He must work out the problems of time and distance at very high speed. Malta's fighter operations room, hewn out of rock, differs from the usual organisation in the United Kingdom in that it combines the functions of a fighter Group and a fighter Sector. The Controller must therefore combine a strategical sense [the Group function] with a tactical sense [the Sector function].

One of the Squadron Commanders said of Group Captain Woodhall, who was in charge of the control room through many vital months: "The boys had a fanatical, yes , fanatical faith in his controlling. It was a faith which gave them completely unreasonable confidence when, one day in April, he had controlled three Spitfires and four Hurricanes against a Hun plot of 130 plus. And, remember, he it was who organised and conducted the fighter defence of the island before as well as after the 'Spits' arrived".

The carrying of the air battle forward over the sea cast new responsibilities upon Malta's Air-Sea Rescue Service. From June 1940 till the end of 1942, one hundred and twenty three Royal Air Force pilots, thirty-four Germans, and twenty-one Italians have been rescued from the sea. The Service has always run in a specialised manner because its geographical situation is unique. It has always developed according to the air tactics of the moment, though the fundamental reasons for its success have remained the same. These are the quick diversions of operational aircraft to look for survivors in the sea, and serviceable high-speed launches ready at all times for a quick getaway. The work is often hazardous and there have been casualties among the crews.

These extracts from the log of Flight Lieutenant G.R. Crockett, indicate the type of operation they were called upon to perform:

"We left Kalafrana in H.S.L. 128 AT 725 ON 14TH April for two crashed Beauforts between Filfla Island and the mainland. Five minutes after leaving base we sighted Me. 109s circling high over Filfla but I decided to keep on. Though we had been shot at several times before and one other launch had been badly marked, I reckon that with our own fighter protection and the launch's manoeuvrability there was a very sporting chance of getting away with it.

"When we were about half-way out to Filfla, our fighter protection, which consisted of three Hurricanes, contacted us, and we proceeded with them circling close overhead to the scene of the crashes. Me. 109s seemed to be approaching from all directions, and they started diving straight down for us, but with the Hurricanes turning inside them and deflecting their aim, their fire never came within fifty yards of us. We stopped and investigated a half-inflated dinghy, but there was no one near it, so we steamed over half a mile to the southward where we could see more wreckage and saw one man in a Mae West. On pulling him aboard we found he was dead.

"Things were getting even hotter by this time, as one of the Hurricanes had had to leave as it had run out of ammunition. I reported 'no survivors' by the wireless and requested instructions. We were told to return to base, so I set course for the nearest land, intending to crawl along under the cliff. We got close into the land in safety and the Hurricanes cleared off. Unfortunately, the land opposite Filfla slopes gradually to the sea and doesn't offer much protection. As we rounded out of the points an Me. got us practically in his sights and let us have a long burst from right ahead.

"The man at the wheel was one of the five wounded by this burst; he collapsed with a bullet through his thigh. As the wheel was to port at this time, the launch took a run for the shore, but jumping down from my look-out position I dragged the coxswain from the wheel and got the launch under control again.

"Creeping along within a few yards of the shore until we came to the Blue Grotto, we avoided any more attacks and, as none of the casualties were too serious and the Me.s were still stooging around, I decided to stay in the Blue Grotto until dusk. There was a fairly strong wind from the south-east, but after a bit of manoeuvring I managed to anchor so that we were protected on three sides by steep cliffs. The launch had been hit by six explosive cannon shells and about twenty bullets, but with some quick patching we had her seaworthy – and we were out on another search within an hour of reaching base."

Here is another story from a High Speed Launch log:

"At 11 a.m. on 18th May 1942, we had a call out in H.S.L. 128 for a Spitfire pilot said to have bailed out on a bearing of 160 Hal Far about one hundred yards out. Sounded like a piece of cake, for even though enemy fighters were plentiful in the vicinity the position given was close to the island and we now had Spitfires on the job as well as Hurricanes. Getting on the given bearing we steamed 100, 200, 300 yards – still nothing seen – and kept on going, though enemy activity was getting more and more lively overhead.

"After we steamed out about three miles one of the escorting Hurricanes was shot down a couple of miles ahead of us. It was while we were investigating this wreckage that Jerry got closest to us, but even then the bullets only churned up the water over a hundred feet away. As there was no survivor from this crash and still no sign of the original pilot for whom we had been called out, I decided to make for base, but on our way back we saw another lighter crash about six miles over to the westward and a parachute drifting down. We picked this pilot up within a few minutes of him hitting the water, and he turned out to be a Hun – a cheery soul, who advised us to get back ashore before we were hurt.

"As we were then fairly well out I decided to run out and then come in on our original bearing from a distance of about ten miles, as even the worst possible estimate of distance could hardly be over ten miles. We actually found the Spitfire pilot in his dinghy about nine miles from the land, and the German pilot insisted upon shaking hands with him as he welcomed him aboard."

The last weeks of July justified the plan of forward interception and, with greater fighter strength, placed the weapon of air confidence in the hands of the besieged. An offensive from Malta, limited only by fuel considerations, was steadily being waged by torpedo and bomb.

On 28th July and adventure befell the crew of a Beaufort engaged far afield in this offensive – off Sapienza, in Southern Greece.

The captain of the aircraft was Lieutenant E.T. Strever of Klerkdorp, South Africa; the rest of the crew were Pilot Officer [now Flying Officer] W.M. Dunsmore of Maghull, near Liverpool, Sergeant J.A. Wilkinson of Auckland, and Sergeant A.R. Brown of Timaru, both from New Zealand.

After releasing his torpedo at a merchant vessel, and being badly shot up by flak, Strever realised his aircraft was doomed. As it hit the sea, he went under, but somehow managed to clamber clear of the wreckage and join the crew in their dinghy. Ninety seconds later the aircraft sank. After paddling for some time towards the coast, they saw an Italian floatplane, which presently landed about a hundred yards away. Strever swam over to it and he was courteously received with brandy and a cigarette; he then explained in pantomime what happened. The rest of the crew was picked up, and the Cant floatplane taxied to a nearby island. Here, after a hearty meal, they were given the run of the officers' mess for the rest of the day. In the evening they had another excellent meal with the Italian officers, who considerately gave their rooms to the crew when bedtime arrived. The only sense of imprisonment was that guards were posted in the passage and outside their windows. In the morning, after a breakfast of eggs and coffee specially provided for them, and having been photographed with their captors, the crew were taken aboard the Cant again, which then set off for Taranto.

The Cant crew consisted of a pilot, second pilot, engineer, wireless-operator-observer and a corporal acting as an armed escort. Wilkinson was the first to see an opportunity of capturing the aircraft. Attracting the observer's attention, he hit him on the jaw and seized the escort's

revolver. Passing this to Strever, he then used the corporal's body as a shield in approaching the first pilot. Stever followed, brandishing the escort's pistol, and held up the pilot before he could get his own weapon. The Italian had put the aircraft's nose down as though to land, but at a menacing sign from Strever he changed his mind and pulled the stick back again. Meanwhile, Dunsmore and Brown dealt with the rest of the crew and Strever took over the controls.

The capture of the aircraft took only a few seconds, but Strever was now faced with the difficulty of having no maps or charts, and of not knowing the speed or capacity of the aircraft, nor how much petrol would be needed to reach Malta.. He therefore set the second pilot free and put him at the controls. After making rough and ready calculations of his own, Strever decided that if they could not reach Malta they would come down in Sicily and trust to luck. The Italian steered the course set for him and Strever himself took the controls from time to time. At length they hit the toe of Italy, which enabled him to get some sort of fix, and he decided to chance the petrol situation and head for Malta. As they approached the island there began the most terrifying episode of the trip. While flying at deck level, three Spitfires attacked them. Brown spun the guns about to show the fighters that he was not going to fire, and Dunsmore took off his white vest and trailed it out of the cockpit as a sign of surrender. But still the Spitfires spat, and when one of the wings was hit by machine-guns and cannon, Strever ordered the Italian to come down on the water. As they did so the engine stopped. They had run out of petrol.

Subsequently they were towed into Malta, where Strever personally supervised the Italians' comfort, which was the least he could do in return for their hospitality. They all cheerfully agreed with him that there was nothing personal in the affair, and his fraternal spirit was emphasised by one of the Italians who produced from his suitcase a bottle of wine that he intended to take with him on leave.

NO RETURN.

This is the smoking wreckage of a Messerschmitt 109. During July enemy losses were heavy, and a high proportion of the attackers never got back from Malta.

SOME RELIEF FOR THE GARRISON: THE AUGUST CONVOY

AUGUST 1942

Though the tide of the air battle was turned by the defenders in May, June, and July, the siege was still tightening. The island had to swing suddenly to stringent rationing, and to ensure its strict enforcement.

On 6th May bread, the staple diet of many of the Maltese, had been rationed for the first time. As each commodity came into short supply, so the rationing extended. Though the one thought in everyone's mind was to resume the offensive at the earliest possible moment, Malta must have supplies not only for that purpose but, indeed, in order to hold out at all for more than a limited period.

To get in supply ships and to prepare for the return of the 10th Submarine Flotilla – itself an integral part of any offensive – meant that the first essential task rested with the Royal Navy. The enemy had been attempting during the dark days of the spring to mine the garrison in. A route through the mines which infested the approaches to Grand Harbour had to be made. The work of the minesweepers can only be acknowledged when the story of the Royal Navy at Malta is fully told, but some indication of the problem which confronted them can be surmised from the fact that the only Oropesa sweeper had been sunk and almost every other sweeper damaged. Two harbour tugs, therefore, set about the job, and after just over a month of unremitting labour and gallant perseverance, a channel was completed the day the first convoy arrived.

Two convoys were expected in the middle of June, one from the east and one from the west. Strategical bombing was carried out from the island to assist the operation. These raids, made by Wellingtons, were first of all directed at the train ferry terminus at Messina. Then the submarine base at Augusta was bombed. Naples, Cagliari and Taranto were visited in turn as the convoy was setting sail.

The convoy from Egypt, after much bombing, was forced to turn back by the Italian fleet. The convoy from the west was also heavily attacked, an Italian cruiser force attempting to destroy it. The naval escort, succeeded in chasing off the Italians, however, and Fleet Air Arm and Beaufort torpedo bombers from Malta attacked them three times. But the convoy was slowed up under persistent air and submarine attacks. Only two ships arrived in Grand Harbour. One of them carried Royal Air Force reinforcements; the following extracts are from the diary of a Flight Lieutenant who was with them:

"15th June. 0300. Took an hour's watch on deck, and saw the lights of Tunis. Flares dropped miles to the starboard. We had dodged the enemy. Alarm at 0630. On going on deck saw shells splashing in sea around us. Warships of the Italian Navy were attacking us. A heavy smoke screen was laid round convoy while our A.A. ships and four destroyers left us to give battle. Italian units were chased away. We were left only with minesweepers as escort and attacked by four or five planes of which one was brought down.

A merchantman was hit but continued in convoy for five or ten minutes, when smoke came from her stern and she gradually dropped behind, sinking slowly. Probably all on board saved, except those killed by bomb, understood actually to be seven. One plane was destroyed. The American oil tanker, which joined us at Gibraltar, then dropped out of convoy through engine trouble – later learnt caused by near miss. Destroyer stood guard. We then sailed past two German airmen floating in the sea who had escaped from their weekend aircraft. Thy shouted '*Hilfe*' to us, as if we who had nearly lost our lives through them should risk them even further by stopping to save their lives. They were picked up by warship. Stand down for breakfast at 0900 hours.

"0930. Our escort returned, and then again attacked Italian units to the south. Laying a smoke screen, we turned north-west. Understood later that our position seemed hopeless and we were making for a sandy beach in Tunisia, or at least to shelter in neutral waters until nightfall. Beaufighters and Spitfires now protecting convoy which was a hell of a relief.

"1030 – 1100. Instructions cancelled and turned south again. Understood Italian Navy beat it, though had they stayed they could undoubtedly have sunk everyone of us. We were informed that a strong escort from Malta was expected but had not turned up. Later learned that this was probably escort of convoy from east which had already turned back and never reached Malta. Feeling very unhappy, especially as there was nothing I could do about it. It is far better to be one of the men on the guns hitting back at the enemy than to be a helpless nobody just waiting for anything to happen.

"1100. Attacked by bombers. No direct hits, but another merchantman put out of action. Position of convoy now two sunk, two O.K. After stand down, several alarms, but fortunately only Spitfires until 1210.

"1315. Alarm and immediate attack by bombers which were chased away by Spitfires from Malta. Depth charges dropped at 1405. Our warships firing at hostile surface craft. Travelling south-south-east at thirteen knots. False alarm at 1415. It was a beautiful day, sea looking glorious with hardly a ripple. The only clouds were formed by dense smoke from burning oil. Alarm during afternoon. One bomber, but chased away by Spitfires.

"1830. Great feeling of relief as worst danger was passed and we were now continuously escorted by Spitfires from Malta. Only fifty or sixty miles to go. The behaviour of the men on board had been magnificent, perfect calm and no grumbling though they were kept below and just did not know what on earth was happening. Our warships now returned, having chased the Italians away for good. At about 1900 two or three Stuka dive-bombers bombed Troilus, dropping bombs within ten yards of starboard. Came out of saloon and saw splash, and then blown back in again by another exploding bomb. It was terrifying , and knees started knocking again after explosion. Could not hear engines and thought we too had 'had it' but everything O.K., as I was temporarily deafened. We had been attacked out of the sun dead behind us. The cruiser, Troilus and Orari were all in direct line of sun. After raid we changed out positions.

"2240. Alarm but bombers chased away. Now within a few miles of Malta and safety, but told it was too dark to enter harbour before dawn."

Once the ships were within range the Spitfire protection was most effective. They flew as many as 170 sorties in one day. The sky was theirs. No enemy aircraft came to bomb the ships while they were being unloaded. The cargo was handled by a combined force of civilians and Service personnel, including 2,500 soldiers and was quickly removed to dispersal areas.

Although two ships, after a gap of months, were inadequate to replenish the island's supplies, they brought vital additions to the minesweeping strength and the Royal Navy was able to set about the mines which still fenced in approaches. Flour, fuel and ammunition were still needed and supplies of aviation spirit were seriously depleted.

On 20th June the Air Officer Commanding signalled to the Chief of Air Staff: "Until further supplies of 100 octane reach this island all available octane must be used for defence."

The Welshman meanwhile, running through alone in June and July, brought small supplies of various vital commodities and some spirit. "Sweeteners" of spirit also arrived from time to time by submarine. Nothing short of a large convoy, however, could readjust Malta's supply situation.

This battle for supplies was the battle within the Battle of Malta. There could only be the two routes, east and west. Common to both of them was the necessity for air superiority over that last hundred miles of the journey and during the unloading in harbour. The most vital supplies had been lost after they had been fought through to within sight of land; more vital supplies had been destroyed within the harbour itself. It was the duty of the Royal Air Force in Malta to see that such losses were never repeated. By the summer of 1942 it had the strength for this, and the waters in the approaches and in the harbours were made relatively secure. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean convoy passage continued to be hazardous and was expensive in lives, ships and war materials.

In its early stages the route from Gibraltar was easier because the ships were able to steam far away from the enemy's bases. Only submarines menaced them. From the longitude of Sardinia, however, through the Sicilian narrows to some fifty miles east of Pantellaria, the ships had to make the most dangerous sea passage in the world. These narrow, mined waters were bounded on the one side by the unfriendly Vichy territory of Tunisia and upon the other by Axis shores, studded with naval bases and thick airfields.

Until the Germans arrived in Sicily the inactivity of the Italian fleet and the frail constitution of the Regia Aeronautica let the convoys through almost unscathed. The Germans, with the Luftwaffe, U-boats, E-boats and moral pressure upon the Italian fleet, turned the narrows into a death trap for British shipping. This was not surprising. Indeed, had the position been reversed and British forces controlled both sides of this ninety-odd miles of canal, it is inconceivable that the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force would have allowed a single ship to pass through.

Conditions on the eastern route from Egypt varied with fortunes of the Eighth Army in North Africa. For the short time it held Benghazi in the winter of 1941-42, ships could coast along the African shore under strong fighter cover and without necessarily revealing that their destination was Malta.

The passage across the open sea could be accomplished largely by night, the edge of the island's air umbrella being reached by dawn.

With good air reconnaissance and attack both from the African and Cretan shores, but ample time was given for the enemy to appreciate the situation and at his leisure to sail his battle fleet into a position to block the convoy's path.

The big August convoy was therefore planned to sail from England through the Straits of Gibraltar.

This August convoy, without which the besieged would be unable to hold out upon the rock, became the test for Malta's new-found air strength. The convoy was attacked through-out the eastward passage. The aircraft carrier Eagle was lost. Only six of the ships re-formed with the convoy at dawn on the fourth day. Two more of these were sunk by an attack that morning and things looked bad indeed when the all-important American tanker Ohio was immobilised west of Lampedusa. Four of the merchant ships eventually reached Grand Harbour. The story of the tanker Ohio struggling in, supported on either side by destroyers, stirred the world, and it seems fitting that it should be retold in these pages in the words of a Leading Signaller of the Royal Navy who was aboard her.

"Only twenty-one hours to go, if we're lucky, and all merchantmen still afloat. We got over the first hour and then came into trouble. On the Ohio we had seen two others get hit, and when ours came back the shock didn't seem quite so bad. There wasn't much noise about it. So little, in fact, that after I had made my way to the bridge I found the first mate, who was on watch at the time, quite unaware of the fact. It seemed a silly situation and I actually tapped him on the shoulder and said, 'Excuse me, Sir, but we've been hit and we are burning badly.'

"I made my way with him from the bridge to the deck below where the skipper, Mr Mason, was already in the thick of things and with the rest of the available hands was setting about putting out the flames. he was truly a fine man to sail with, and the way he met his emergency fully justified our confidence in him. He told us that the flames could be extinguished and that there was nothing to worry about. That was good enough for everybody on board, and we set to and fought the fire. Four of the crew had jumped for it, two galley boys and two marine gunners, but they were picked up by escorting destroyers.

"The fire was nearly under control when over came more enemy planes. It was a grim experience, bombs falling each side of us, and always the possibility of another torpedo attack. Another ship ahead of us was hit during this attack and she was blazing from stem to stern. While we were fighting the fire the engineer below had been repairing damaged steam pipes. We were stationary now, and saw the rest of the convoy drawing away from us. The destroyer Ashanti came alongside to ask how we were getting on. Mr Mason informed them that he would do his best to get to Malta alone, and Ashanti carried on with the job of escorting the convoy.

After about half an hour the engineer reported that could get under way again and would make nineteen knots if necessary. This was most heartening news and we got under way again. We had a quiet night, though we had little sleep, for we passed through the Straits of Pantellaria during the night and we did not expect to get through there unmolested. As dawn broke next morning we saw the convoy ahead. At0600 we had reformed the convoy; all that remained were six other ships together with the crippled Ohio. At 0815 enemy bombers made another attack, and we had difficulty in manoeuvring with the fleet as our steering was gone.

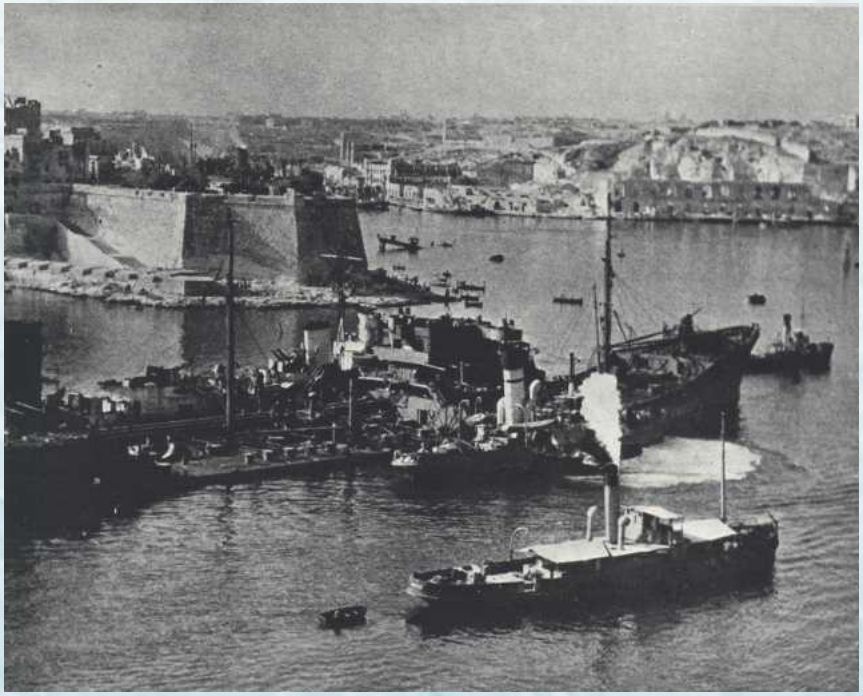
The next attack was at 0935. Mines and bombs were dropped; Ohio was hit twice and we stopped once more. A Stuka must have thought we were easy meat as he dived at us, but our Oerlikon gunners hit him as he crashed on the bows of the hip and showered us with debris.

"I must say a word of praise for our chief steward. While action was on he was cooking eggs and bacon and making tea which he brought to us at our posts as none of us had time to get below for our breakfast. The sight of him nipping round with a tray of breakfast made us forget our troubles for a while.

"Another merchantman was abandoned during the action and we saw the rest of the convoy disappearing over the horizon once again. Four merchantmen left. We will make five if we can get towed in. Two destroyers remain with us and bawled encouragement. 'Only a hundred miles to go!' shouted the skipper from one of them as he tried to take us in tow. It was a gallant effort, but we were too heavy and could not help ourselves.

"Eventually we left Ohio, and went aboard the destroyer and waited for assistance from Malta. Mr Mason did not like leaving the Ohio at all, but it was decided that we would return on board her when assistance arrived and secure the lines of the towing ships and continue our journey under cover of darkness. Assistance arrived before dark, however, and we went on board and prepared towing gear. The steward took the opportunity of preparing sandwiches. He had just arrived on the bridge with them when over came some more aircraft. We received two more direct hits and one of our gunners was killed.

"The towing gear had been secured and we boarded the towing ships and made some little headway, but at dusk another attack developed and Ohio was hit again and to tow ropes parted. We circled round her all night, keeping anti-submarine patrol as we had done during the afternoon. When dawn broke she was still there but rather low in the water. Two destroyers secured themselves one each side of her and started on the last lap to Malta, sixty miles. We arrived in Malta twenty-four hours afterwards."



FUEL FOR THE DEFENDERS.

The tanker Ohio, deck almost awash, steering gear smashed, hit six times, and once set on fire, limps into Grand Harbour. One of the few survivors of the August convoy, she brought fuel at a time of desperate shortage. Malta's fighters keep the harbour safe, tugs bustle to her aid, and a destroyer, secured on her port side, keeps her steady.

MALTA THE STRIKING BASE.

The map shows, in main outline, the offensive launched fro Malta against Rommel's North African supply routes in the two months before Alamein. Before long the enemy was forced virtually to abandon the short and convenient routes from Naples through the Straits of Messina to Benghazi and between Malta and the coast of Tunisia to Tripoli. He turned to more distant routes to the east, hugging the Greek coast and even swinging away through the Corinth Canal, to get out of range of Malta's aircraft.

The part of Malta's air forces in this convoy operation was to establish the position of the Italian fleet by photographic reconnaissance, to provide patrols off the ports by night to watch for fleet movements, to shadow with Baltimores by day, and to maintain a patrol between Sicily and Sardinia as a precaution against the surprise of the surface forces. These intentions were carried out. The Italian fleet attempted to pass round the north-western point of Sicily during the night of 12th-13th August to attack the convoy at dawn. The enemy was successfully illuminated and attacked by Wellingtons, however, and shortly afterwards he was worried by dummy signals in plain language giving his position and ordering an imaginary attack by Royal Air Force Liberators. Possibly from these causes, he turned back, robbing the torpedo bombers of the Fleet Air Arm from Malta of their target, but running into submarine patrols, which torpedoed two of their cruisers.

Four hundred and seven sorties were flown to afford air protection for the convoys as soon as it was within range by Beaufighters and Spitfires. Low-flying Beaufighters also carried out attacks on airfields to ground Axis air forces. Night bombing sorties in support were made by Malta-based Liberators and by Liberators of the United States Army Air Force based in the Middle East.

Constant fighter patrols were flown during the unloading of the convoy but the enemy made only one half-hearted attempt, this time upon Grand Harbour with Ju. 88s, which the Spitfires drove away. The combined operation of handling and storing cargoes was rushed through according to plan, while the crews and survivors of the merchantmen were feted by the people of the island.

There was some relief for the besieged. A slight moderation of the bread ration was possible. Oil fuel was easier and the A.A. ammunition supplies were satisfactorily though not profuse. Aviation spirit and benzene still caused anxiety. The Air Officer Commanding signalled to the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief that, provided air superiority over Malta could be maintained, ten weeks' fuel could be added to the present four weeks' stock.

NIGHT RAID.

Bombs are taken aboard a Wellington for an attack by moonlight on enemy shipping.

OFFENSIVE AGAINST ROMMEL

AUGUST – OCTOBER 1942

Malta's air superiority held. The island was again not only a fortress but a weapon of far-reaching consequences in Mediterranean events. Only limitations of supplies could restrict the air offensive. It was clear that another operation on the lines of the August convoy was too great a luxury to be expected, except as a last resort. Reserves had to be kept in hand. At the same time the enemy must be prevented from sending his shipping lightly escorted by the direct route west of Malta. Egypt must be defended by weakening the Axis armies along their lines of communication.

These were the days when torpedo-carrying Beauforts, often escorted by Beauighters, came into their own. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief signalled to Malta on 20th August that he attached supreme importance to attacks on all south-bound convoys of enemy shipping in the next ten days. The convoys were attacked on most days by R.A.F. squadrons and frequently at night by the Fleet Air Arm aircraft based at Hal Far.

How successfully these attacks were conducted may be gathered from entries in a log kept by one of the Beaufort Squadrons:

"17th August: Six crews set out to prang one motor vessel and two destroyers south of Pantellaria. A successful operation, as 6,000-ton M.V. was left well down in the water, with smoke pouring out of it. One observer, who was wounded, had to extinguish a fire in his navigator's bag.

"21st August: Nine Beauforts attacked a 10,000-ton tanker [with escort of five destroyers] near Corfu. Three hits claimed, and Beaufighters hit a destroyer with bombs. The tanker appeared to be stationary when last seen, and was emitting steam. Subsequent reconnaissance showed her beached, with a large patch of oil on the sea. Wellingtons tried unsuccessfully to ignite this oil with fire bombs. One crew lost. Beaufighter escort destroyed one Ju. 52, two Piaggio 32s, and two Br. 20s.

"26th August; Nine Beauforts attacked one M.V. of 6,000 tons escorted by one destroyer north of Benghazi. One torpedo broke ship's back, and subsequent hits set her ablaze from stem to stern. Escorting Beaufighter destroyed a Cant.

"*30th August;* Nine Beauforts attacked a 5,000-ton tanker and one destroyer south-bound from Taranto. The C.O.'s torpedo was seen to hit. A second hit caused the tanker to blow up and burn furiously. Superstructure was thrown high in the air. One pilot's prize moustache was endangered when he performed a 'fly through fire' act at something like 250 feet. One Cant 501 was flying above the ship. There followed an example of mob violence of unequalled ferocity. All the escorting Beaufighters and almost all the Beauforts' air-gunners popped away at it until it was left minus a float. The worried pilot must have had a very worried trip home.

"6th August: Four motor vessels with escort of eleven destroyers, south-bound from Taranto, were attacked by twelve Beauforts. The intense flak and fighter attacks prevented the observation results, but subsequent reconnaissance showed that one M.V. of 10,000 tons was sunk and another M.V. of 6,000 tons beached. All the Beauforts were attacked by fighters. Once again the Beaufighters saved the day with some damn good work – thanks, boys! They bagged three, confirmed. One Beaufort shot down a Macchi 2000"

Vigorous fighter action meanwhile led to a further decrease of enemy activity during August. There were one hundred and twenty-eight day alerts in July; in August the figure dropped to fifty six. Seventy-three enemy aircraft came at night, compared with two hundred in July. In spite of these successes by Spitfires during the day, by Beaufighters and the guns at night, Air Vice-Marshal Park had to continue to watch his fuel consumption. At the end of the month he signalled to the Chief of Air Staff that during the week following the convoy's arrival day and night fighters consumed less petrol than in any week during July or August, the bulk of it being used in strikes against shipping and by transit aircraft.

September brought an increase in shipping strikes, with 124 sorties. The enemy's trade route to Africa now crept down the coast of Greece and tended to dodge through the Corinth Canal rather than face attacks from Malta aircraft off the west coast of the Peloponnese. These were critical times for two great armies facing each other across the El Alamein line.

But while Malta was sending Rommel's supplies to the bottom and the strength of the Eighth Army was growing at El Alamein, the siege of the island grew more serious again. The Governor, Field-Marshal Lord Gort, signalled on 30th September that, with the exception of aviation spirit and benzene, essential supplies should last until mid-December if no margin were allowed for any loss by enemy action. Flour stocks were allowed still just sufficient to enable a first issue to be made for bread-making for the period ending 14th December. There was enough of the most important rationed commodities, sugar, edible oil, preserved meats and foods, to make the first half-monthly issues for December with a small margin left over. The Governor added that if the island should have to enter the first period of December without having received any substantial replenishment a position of great difficulty would arise.

During October photographic reconnaissances from Malta of enemy shipping followed the enemy's supply line from the heel of Italy down the Greek coast to Benghazi and Tobruk. Tarranto and Brindisi were the main ports of supply and few convoys were seen attempting the route from Naples through the straits of Messina; Malta had rendered it too dangerous and costly.

Evidence of the success of attacks against Axis convoys was seen not only in the unloading of badly damaged merchantmen at Corfu, Navarino and Homs, but also in the appearance of small and old-fashioned vessels upon the supply lines hitherto sailed by fast modern ships.. Only one attempt to pass supplies down the western route between Malta and the Tunisian coast was seen during the month, and this convoy was attacked by the island's submarines.

MISTRESS OF HER SKIES.

Malta had never ceased to strike. But now, with the air battle won, she struck every hour every day, dominating the central Mediterranean.

OVER GRAND HARBOUR *the tracer bullets go up and the searchlights flash out in one of the last raids on the island..*

THE LAST BLITZ: THE SIEGE IS RAISED

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 1942

About one-third of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, and half its total bomber strength in the whole theatre, meanwhile assembled in Sicily. It was zero hour at El Alamein. On 11th October the enemy opened a new attack on Malta with a first raid of fifty-eight escorted bombers and seven of the fighters. The German radio declared that their object was "to keep the British squadrons grounded and to deny access to the port of Valetta".

These renewed attacks killed eighty people and destroyed or damaged four hundred and sixty-nine buildings. A force of something like six hundred aircraft was used by the enemy. In spite of the superiority in numbers they were defeated. The Spitfires shot down one hundred and thirty-two of them. The guns destroyed eight. Altogether two hundred and four of them were destroyed or probably destroyed. Malta lost thirty-one aircraft. For every pilot lost, the enemy lost fifteen air crews.
The policy of forward interception, though naturally unable entirely to ward off a heavy offensive, proved itself again. The lower scoring by anti-aircraft guns was due to the fact that fewer targets reached the island. The system of reporting and controlling worked excellently. In small hutted out-stations radiolocation operators worked hard and long. One of them describes life during this period:

"It was fairly easy to estimate the Luftwaffe's timetable for attacks. Always one could expect a raid for a few moments after sitting down to what small amount of food there was. As surely as the earth revolves, at precisely quarter past seven each morning, the first formation of his bombers could be discerned approaching from the east. I noticed also that 'big stuff' was little used. No 1,000-pounders chained together this time-mostly anti-personnel and incendiaries.

"Even during the day one could watch the thin streamers of light high up in the sky, indicating another load of anti-personnels' leaving the plane. Then they would burst across one of the 'dromes like so many popcorns on a hot shovel. With nightfall there was no cessation of the attacks. Flares were continually in use-usually five, sometimes six. One bunch over Grand Harbour, another in the centre of the island, bathing it soft mellow light and a pervading quietness before the next kite came in on his bombing run. Then once more came that Fifth of November effect-occasionally one of our own star shells, the weaving of numerous searchlights, incendiaries anywhere and everywhere, until it was time for bed and one had just to forget about it.

THE SINKING SHIP.

The deck of this laden Axis supply ship is crowded with motor transport vehicles intended for Rommel. They are going to the bottom of the Mediterranean. The ship is stopped, on fire, and down by the stern after an attack by Malta-based Beauforts with torpedo and bomb. Next morning she had sunk.

THE ISLAND IS SAFE..

"There was the iconic angle, too-how often on one of those very rare visits to the cinema could one watch those pictures depicting celluloid people nonchalantly lighting a cigarette, only to grind it immediately into so many shreds of tobacco. And the groans from many throats as they thought of their own meagre ration and the rubbish they had smoked by necessity, if only to soothe tired nerves. Similar sounds would greet the placing of the delegate dishes upon an already lavishly prepared table. This time, perhaps, they were prompted by a memory of bully-beef and biscuits.

"The last daylight raid to reach the island was a formation of three Ju. 88s, all of which were shot down, the last one circling my own station and eventually putting her nose down and diving straight for us. I ran, only to find everyone else running in the opposite direction, which is rather complicating. About a hundred feet from the deck she levelled out, crashing 500 yards away. I think that it was the pilot's unlucky day for his 'chute never opened and I remember him flashing past my eyes to disappear in a cloud of dust fifty yards distant."

Not one airfield was rendered unserviceable for more than half an hour throughout October. From 11th to 19th October, during the heaviest period of the attack, when there were nearly 250 raids by day, there was only one night when our aircraft did not carry out shipping attacks. Such was the measure of the enemy's failure to achieve his object.

Air Vice-Marshal Park, in introducing his forward interception plan, had demanded the highest quality of controlling, implicit obedience in the air to the directions of the controller, and good shooting. The Spitfires went for the bombers head-on. In their attacks they were ordered not to open fire at long range but to preserve the element of surprise and to save ammunition.

Captured German pilots confessed that they found the Malta of October 1942 stronger than the island had ever been before. Many of them had imagined that they had bombed the island to the point of surrender in April. From the moment they returned to the attack and were beaten, they lost their belief in the invincibility of the Luftwaffe and became acutely conscious of the superiority of the Royal Air Force in the Mediterranean theatre. A corporal brought down in a Ju. 88 in the middle of October, referring to sorties over the island, said: "Wir wurden auf Malta gehetzt" ["We were being continually driven to it"].

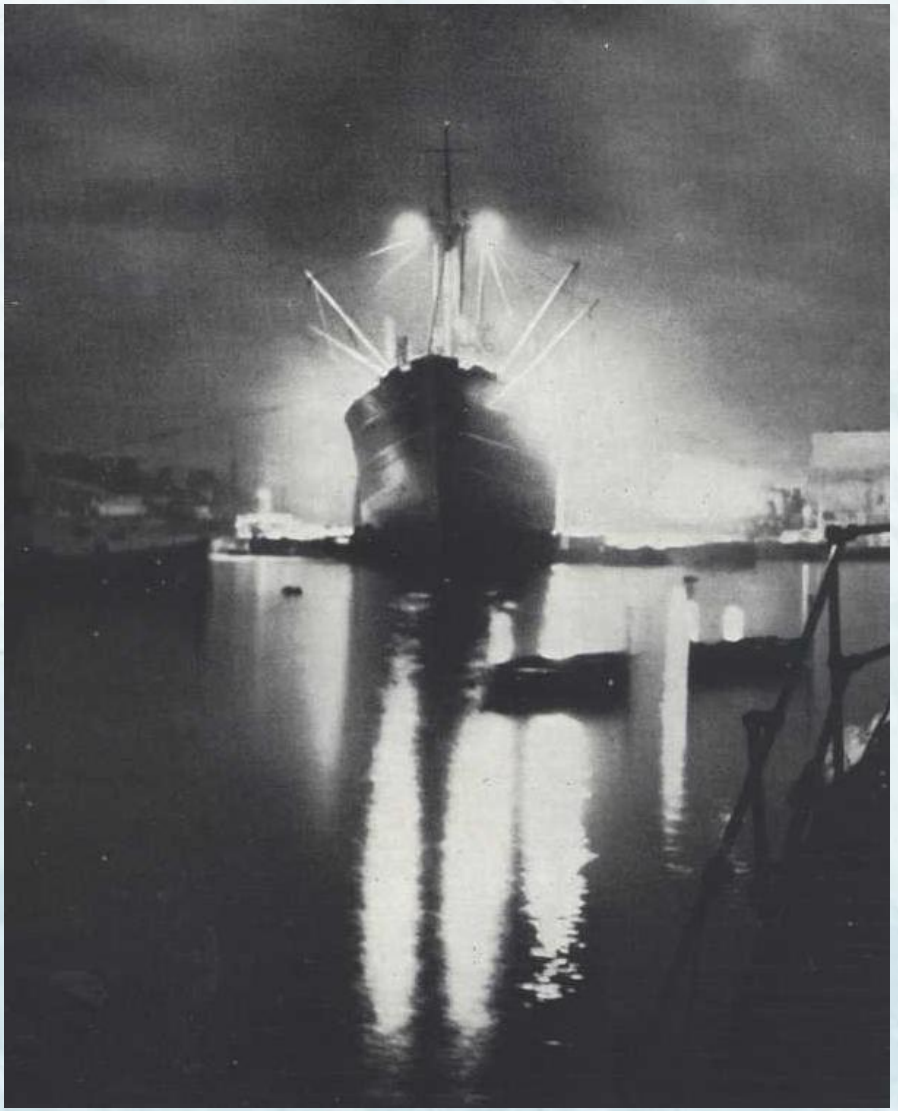
On 23rd October the Eight Army attacked at El Alamein, and was soon sweeping along the coast of North Africa. Nowhere was its success more keenly felt and cheered than in besieged Malta.

There was not enough to eat. The people had withstood the terrific battering of aerial bombardment in isolation. The Royal Air Force had cleared the skies for them, and the Eighth Army day by day fought nearer. The townsfolk had had to live underground. Thousands of homeless people were living in caves and in rock shelters. Their washing and open-air cooking lined the approaches to War Headquarters; their children played around guns and sentries.

They were a people grown used to total war. The country folk farmed their more distant fields during the all clear and worked the fields nearer the farm air raid shelter during alerts. This ancient and loyal people, who had seen the wars of the Greeks, of Carthage, of Rome, of Napoleon, watched and waited, besieged and hungry, for relief. The October battle of the skies won. There must be a convoy in November.

The enemy's effort against the island during this month was on a very limited scale. There were fifteen day alerts and fourteen night alerts. Fighter bombers managed to cross the coast on two occasions only. Little damage was caused.

Allied forces landed in French North Africa on the night of 7th-8th November, after a period of intensive reconnaissance by Malta-based photographic aircraft. To cover the landings that night Wellingtons flew from Luqa airfield to bomb the airfield at Cagliari at the south of Sardinia, facing Tunis. Every night of the month, save four when the weather was bad, the Wellingtons from Malta were out. As soon as it was seen that the enemy intended to defend Tunisia, they transferred the main weight of their effort to the airfield at Tunis, with great numbers of Axis transport and other aircraft were concentrating.



THE LIGHTS OF VICTORY.

In the blaze of arc-lights ships are unloaded in Grand Harbour. The quays are battered from past raids. But now few raiders come. In November and December convoys steam in without loss. The long siege is over

Their flying time for the month was over 1,000 hours; they dropped 334 tons of bombs. Photographs showed that El Aouina, the Tunis airfield, was unserviceable for several days on end and that many aircraft were destroyed on the ground. Beaufighters arrived to take up the strafing of Tunis. They operated on eleven days during the month, averaging eleven sorties a day. Each squadron of them also accounted for four ships.

Sicily was attacked by the Wellingtons toward the end of the month. A successful innovation were the Spitfire bombers. They dropped thirteen tons of bombs, mostly upon Comiso and Gela airfields, during the month.

Although there were still many German and Italian fighters based there, the "Spit-bombers" met with little opposition. On the few occasions when enemy fighters were encountered, the close escort of Spitfire fighters had little difficulty in driving them off.

The November convoy which raised the siege of Malta sailed from Egypt on 16th November. It was attacked by torpedo-bombers during its passage across, but it reached the approaches to Malta intact. Strategical bombing of the Sicilian airfields was carried out by the Wellingtons to cover its passage. An umbrella of Beaufighters and Spitfires was provided for it during the last 135 miles of the voyage. The patrols were flown in very bad weather, and three Spitfires were lost.

The long line of ships forming up outside Grand Harbour presented an easy target for an enterprising torpedo-bomber; but none came. Upon the bastions of the Knights amid flowers and debris of Baracca Gardens, upon thousands of flat roofs, from all the ancient vantage points of Valetta and the Three Cities, the people and garrison of Malta stood to watch these ships. They cheered them. They sang. They listened to the naval bands playing upon the escort vessels. The arrangements to receive the ships and for unloading them went well, though it taxed the outworn transport. The sound of patrolling fighters never ceased. The life-saving cargoes were safely brought ashore. The siege was raised.

In the House of Commons on 3rd March, 1943, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr. A.V. Alexander, presenting the Navy Estimates, said:

"The gallant island of Malta has been sustained and relieved. Since the beginning of 1942, our operations for that purpose, including the reinforcement of the Royal Air Force in the island, cost us the loss of three cruisers, nine destroyers and two aircraft carriers, in addition to merchant ships. In view of the great history of the contribution by Malta, the Royal Navy were glad to render that service. With the help on two occasions of a United States carrier, our aircraft carriers carried altogether 744 fighters for Malta."

All the while these pages were being written within sight of the twin towers of St John's Pro-Cathedral in Valetta in the early months of 1943, not one bomb fell. Blue water lapped against the wreckage of many gallant ships in Grand Harbour. Great mounds of broken masonry disfigured the streets of stairs and the alleys in towns and villages.

The airfields were unlovely with thousands of old wounds. But every hour of every day Malta was striking. The fleet sailed in and out. Submarines added notches to the pictorial chart of sinkings which hangs on a wall at their base. Spitfires, Mosquitoes, Albacores, Beauforts, Beaufighters, Wellingtons and other aircraft rode the skies on their way out to attack.

There had been terror; and there was near-starvation, even after that November convoy. There was disease, infantile paralysis, and all the after effects of under-nourishment. That is past. Gone are those days of heat and choking dust; the atmosphere, remembered by so many airmen, of flies and calls to action and weariness.

With spring and the thunder of the island's aircraft came more food, healthier bodies, smiles, and the flags out for victories. Upon the steep hill at Bighi, overlooking the harbour, the churches, and the streets, a shapely tree flowered magenta against the cypresses and firs shading the resting place of the airmen who fought and died upon this battlefield of rock and sky and sea.

THE LAST OF THE GLADIATORS..

MALTA AIRFIELD AUGUST 1943

WORLD WAR II

1939 - 1945

Presentation by
the2xislesteam