

The poster is a vertical rectangular image. The top half has a dark blue background with a blurred image of an aircraft's wing and propeller. The title 'THE AIR BATTLE OF MALTA' is printed in white and light blue serif fonts. The bottom half shows a pilot in a light-colored flight jacket sitting in a cockpit, with a large circular instrument panel behind him. The price 'ONE SHILLING NET' is printed in the bottom right corner.

THE AIR BATTLE OF

# MALTA

ONE SHILLING NET



PREPARED FOR THE AIR MINISTRY BY THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

# THE AIR BATTLE OF MALTA

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

1944

London : His Majesty's Stationery Office



# THE AIR BATTLE OF MALTA

---

## I. An Outpost of the Brave

JUNE 1940

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 in the long history of warfare in the Middle Sea.

The island was not a single weapon wielded as an isolated arm; it had an 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 in the Western Desert. Never in history was the island's strategical significance greater.

To one approaching from the air, as so 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 deadly prosecution of the war by this outpost that during the period of the battle the Axis caused 3,215 alerts to be



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 must 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 siren, 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 1942 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.

---

## II. 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 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, known 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.

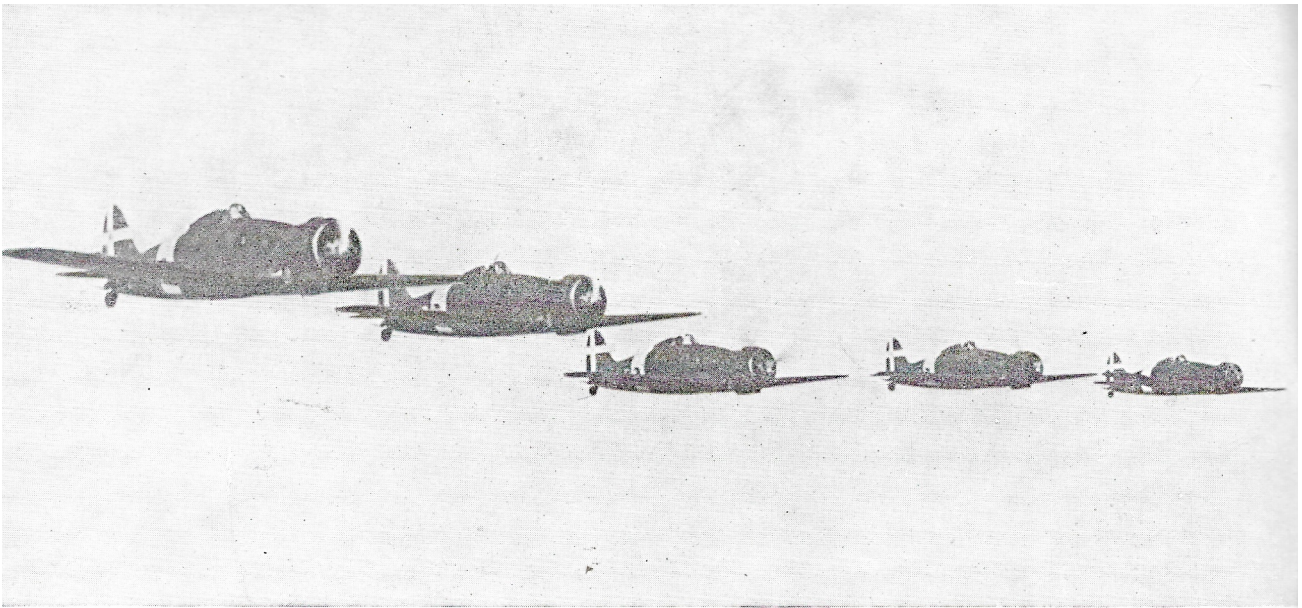
The story of these first Gladiator fighters which defended the island begins in April 1940, about the time of Dunkirk. The Air Officer Commanding at Malta, Air-Commodore





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.





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

(now Air Vice-Marshal) 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-carrier *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 the 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 from all the island 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 fighters. They

started training. This 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 in 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 in 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 burst, full deflection shot, 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."

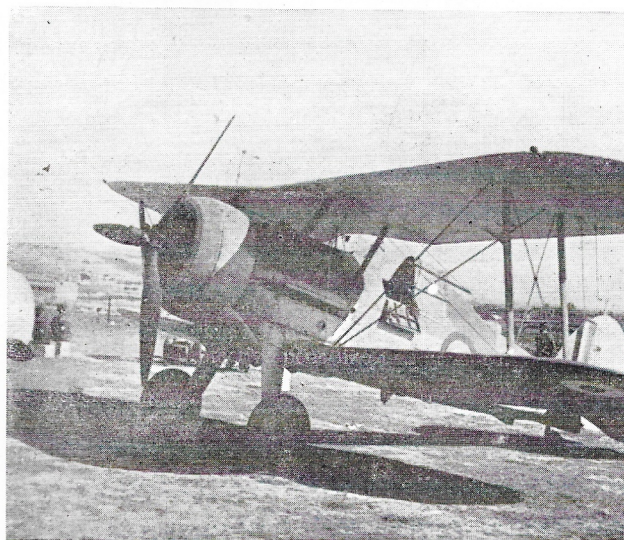
During the first week there were constant raids. The Italian bombers continued to fly over at high altitudes, in faultless formation, and the accuracy of their high-level bombing earned grudging respect. The Gladiators, *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*, took off to fight greatly superior numbers. People 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 Sicily. Yet by 16th June they had forced the enemy into the luxury of fighter escort 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 17th June, 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 Woods met this raider, and Burges wrote in his combat report:

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



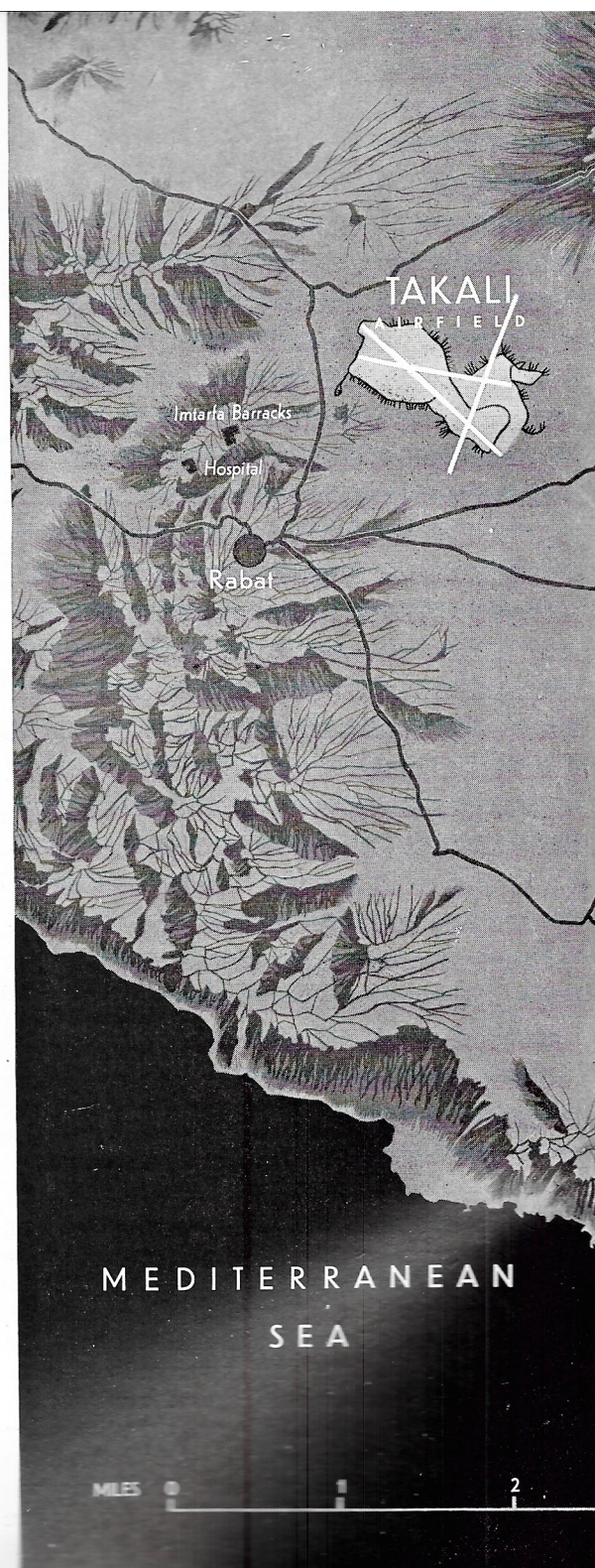


“Ordered to intercept enemy aircraft reported approaching Malta. Enemy sighted at 13,000 feet when we were at 12,000 feet. Altered course to intercept and climbed to 15,000 feet, and carried out stern attack from above enemy. Port engine and then starboard engine of enemy caught fire and attack was discontinued.” Evening promenaders in Valetta and along the Sliema waterfront saw the Italian bomber fall into the sea in flames and watched two of the crew follow it down by parachute. These 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 in the shape 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 the epics of this war, and *Faith* has earned a place of honour in the armour of Malta.”

The island, in spite of its isolated position,



THE AIRFIELD OF MALTA. Confined by the lie of the land, the position of Malta's three airfields caused them to be concentrated

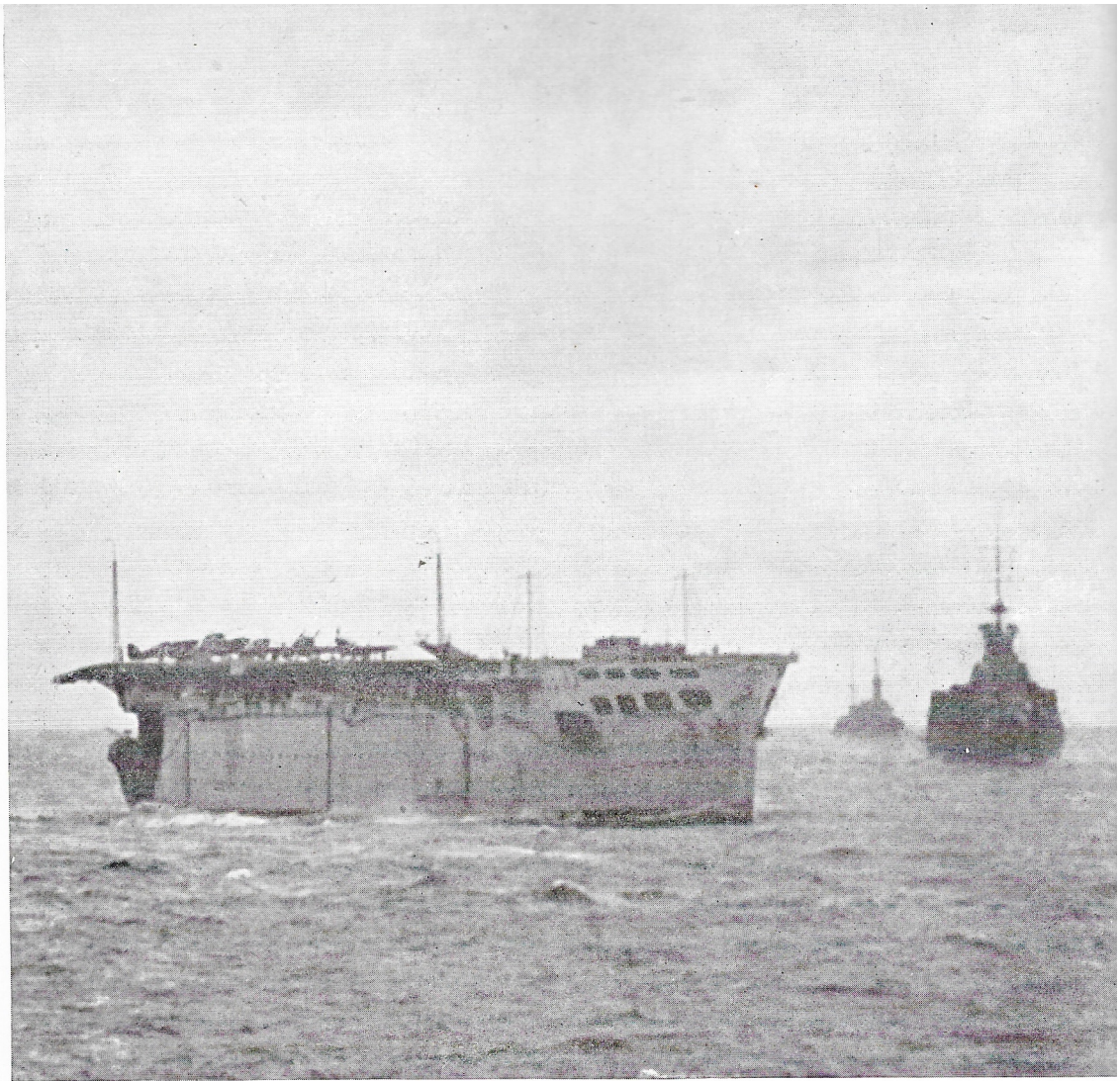




attacks. Linking the airfields of Luqa and Hal Far, the Safi dispersal strip, with its intersecting runways, offered another obvious target

Equally exposed were Valetta, the capital and administrative centre, the naval dockyard, and all the packed districts around Grand Harbour.





HURRICANES ARE HURRIED TO MALTA in July 1940 in the carrier Argus. They are seen on her flight-deck

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 the 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.

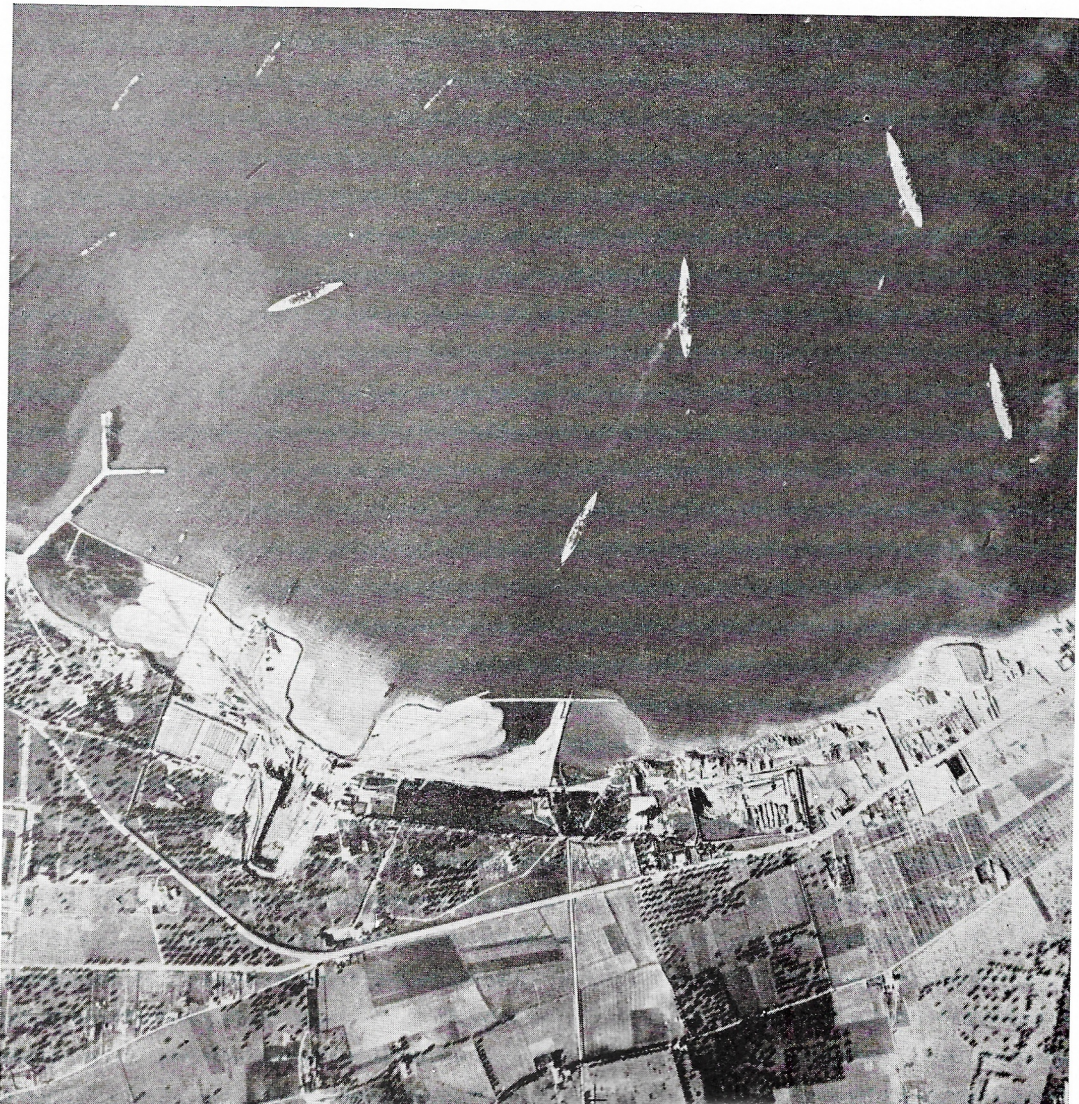
The first was the problem of supply. The island is a garrisoned fortress. From the time of the Great Siege in 1565, when La Valetta withstood the barbarians from the East, Malta has never been self-supporting. Vast underground granaries were built for storing food in the rock. Then, as now, food, ammunition and fuel had to come from across the sea. In the office of



and the Three Cities. The third important airfield is at Takali, upon the cultivated plain which lies between Rabat, the ancient Maltese capital, and Valetta. These airfields were already well 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 wiefs 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 that of manpower. As the island's offensive activities increased, more hands were needed. Maltese men joined the Royal Air Force and about 1,400 of them are in it now. Many have joined the other Services. As the attacks upon the island increased, more workers 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

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





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 manœuvrable and 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 16th July, 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 the aircraft-carrier *Argus*. They arrived on 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 civil 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 by either the eastern or western route. 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 off 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 air effort fell off considerably. Attacks by Wellingtons on



Tripoli and Naples heartened 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 has 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 effect 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 has 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 sea in the clear Mediterranean light, to

photograph ports separated by many hundred miles of coastline, was the task of Malta's reconnaissance pilots.

From the beginning of the war their work went steadily on. A "borrowed" Blenheim, a Hudson, a French Latecœur 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 had 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.

A special feature of reconnaissance from Malta was the use of a Beaufighter for low-flying photography in winter when cloud made it impossible to obtain cover at normal heights.

The practice initiated at Malta 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; harbours 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 wanted to try the new turret, so I broke away and drew parallel to the S.M. 79, slightly above and about a hundred yards to his starboard. 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 of the 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 into Tunisia, first on the airfield at Tunis and then in Bizerta harbour, were covered from day to day until it was possible to operate over Tunisia from the new bases in Algiers.

---

### III. The Luck of the Illustrious

JANUARY 1941

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