

WW2 | MALTA

ISLAND

FORTRESS

OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED, THE RAF PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN PREVENTING THE STRATEGICALLY SIGNIFICANT MALTESE ISLANDS FROM FALLING INTO ENEMY HANDS





The opening of a new front in North Africa in 1940 made the small Mediterranean island of Malta particularly valuable to both sides.

If retained in Allied hands it could be used as a base to attack Axis shipping. All too aware of its importance, German and Italian forces subjected the island to more than two years of bombardment,

making Malta one of the most intensively bombed areas of the entire war.

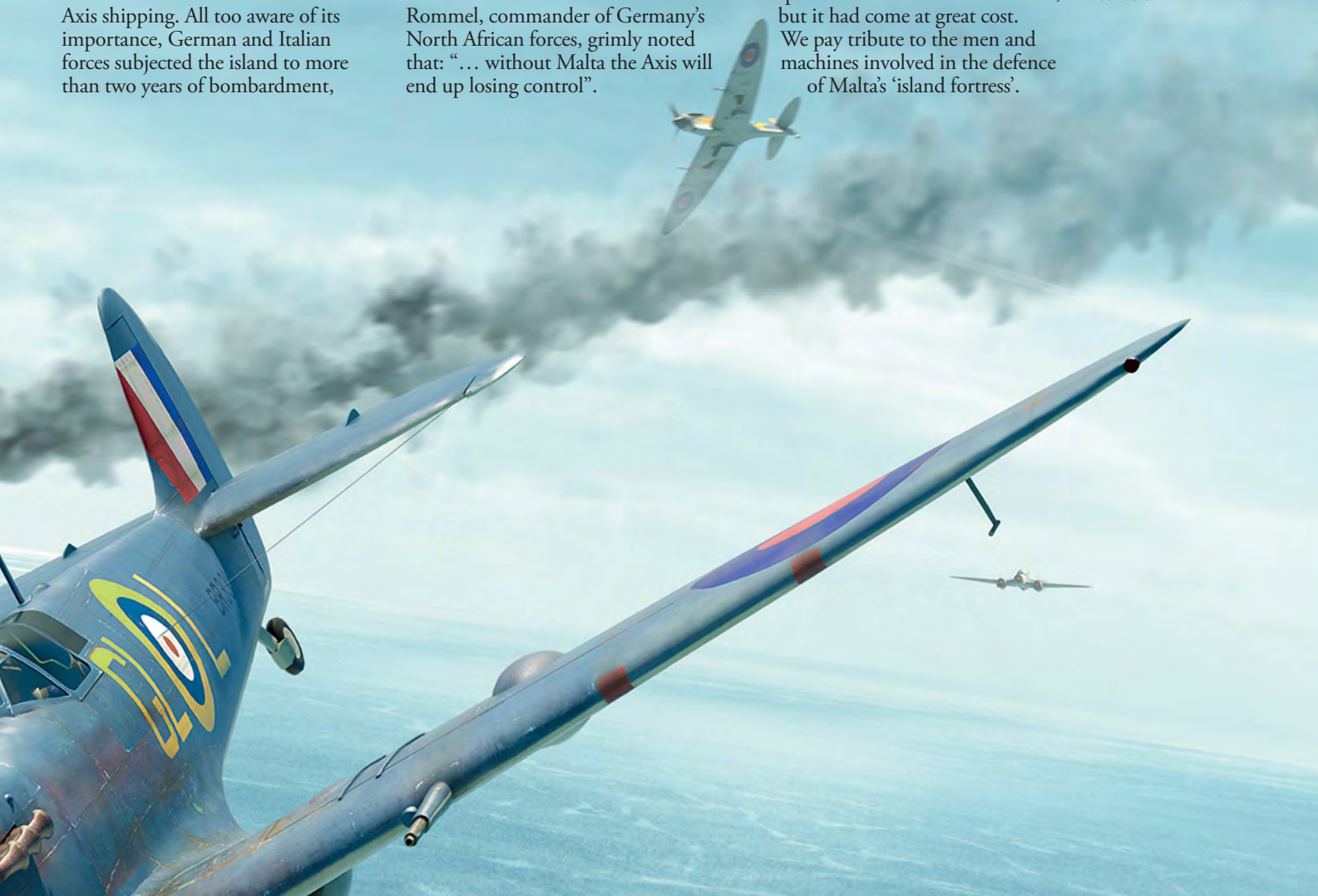
Despite being numerically overwhelmed, and faced with rudimentary facilities, the Allies nevertheless held on. Gen Erwin Rommel, commander of Germany's North African forces, grimly noted that: "... without Malta the Axis will end up losing control".

The British government later presented the George Cross to the people of Malta in recognition of their suffering and endurance. It was the first time the award had been made to a collective. Allied victory was pivotal to wider success in Africa, but it had come at great cost.

We pay tribute to the men and machines involved in the defence of Malta's 'island fortress'.

Below

In this dramatic new work by artist Antonis Karidis, Supermarine Spitfire Mk.Vs from 185 Squadron defend Malta from Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 bombers. ANTONIS KARIDIS



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TWO MONTHS

IN '42

ANTHONY ROGERS DETAILS THE FRANTIC DEFENCE OF MALTA IN MARCH AND APRIL 1942 AS THE LUFTWAFFE TRIED TO BREAK THE ISLAND'S SPIRIT



Above
The burning wreckage of Ju 88 8680 '3Z+JP' can be seen at Hal Far on March 9, 1942.

Malta provided British forces with the perfect base from which to operate against Axis supply routes between Italy and North Africa. Accordingly, Italian and German aerial units were tasked with neutralising the “unsinkable aircraft carrier”. By early 1942, the island had been subjected to nearly two years of air attacks and the battle had reached a critical phase.

On March 1, there were nine air raid warnings. Hurricanes and Messerschmitt Bf 109s were involved in a series of actions, the

RAF Daily Intelligence Summary stating tersely: “Sixteen enemy aircraft dropped bombs in sea and on Hal Far and in the Grand Harbour [Valletta]. No damage.

“Eight Hurricanes intercepted three Junkers Ju 88s and several Me 109s, damaging one Ju 88, scoring hits on another and an Me 109. Three Hurricanes were lost; the pilot of one is safe.”

Leutnant (Lt) Hermann Neuhoff of 7 Staffel, Jagdgeschwader 53 (7/JG 53) had claimed a Hurricane destroyed

at 13:10. Two minutes later Lt Hermann Munzert of 9/JG 53 got another.

Flt Sgt David Howe of 605 Squadron took to his parachute, injuring his ankle, while fellow Canadian Sgt Ray Harvey of 242 Squadron baled out into the sea, badly burnt and mortally wounded. He was dead by the time air-sea rescue arrived. It was said at the time that he'd been hit in the chest by two cannon shells,





Left
The merchantman 'Talabot', one of several vessels destroyed in air attacks on March 26.

been one combat loss when an already damaged Ju 88 of 8 Staffel, Kampfgeschwader 77 (8/KG 77) was written off after an emergency landing in Sicily. All four of the crew were injured.

CAROB TREE GRAVE

With only a nine-minute respite, between 19:12 hours on March 4 and 06:32 the following morning, there were two alerts. Anti-aircraft guns engaged the raiders, firing 22 barrages. Malta night-fighters maintained a constant patrol.

In the early hours, Sgt James Wood of 1435 Flight was airborne in a two-cannon Hurricane when he observed Ju 88 '7T+JK' of 2 Staffel, Küstenfliegergruppe 606, a naval co-operation unit, firing at a searchlight.

He closed to about 300 yards (274m), the bomber's slipstream preventing him from taking aim until he was just 50 yards behind his target. There was only time for a 20- to 30-round burst before Woods disengaged, his aircraft narrowly missing the enemy's tail and port wing.

Notwithstanding relentless fire by its rear gunner, Woods had succeeded in seriously damaging the raider. A series of coloured lights – probably flares – were seen moments before the Junkers fell in flames to the southwest of Siggiewi. There were no survivors.

Today, twisted fragments of aluminium, shattered Perspex,

cartridge cases and other debris litter the crash site atop the rocky plateau of Gebel Cantar. A carob tree is said to mark the crew's communal grave.

SPITFIRES ARRIVE

To survive, Malta had to be resupplied by sea. Food and all manner of provisions were delivered but there remained an urgent and ongoing requirement for fighters. Fifteen Spitfire Vbs were ferried towards Malta on board HMS *Eagle*, taking off from its deck for the last leg of the journey on March 7.

Spitfires were to make a distinct impression on the air battle. The Mk V had the speed to match the Bf 109F and the firepower to destroy the Ju 88. Allocated to 249 Squadron, it would be several days before Malta's first Spitfires were combat-ready.

Raids continued in the interim, with one alert after another on March 8 and virtually continuous enemy air activity on the 9th. Luftwaffe records acknowledge just one combat loss, when anti-aircraft gunners shot down a Ju 88 of 6/KG 77 over Hal Far. There was one survivor.

Seven Spitfires were scrambled for the first time at 10:12 on March 10 for a raid involving three Ju 88s and escorting Bf 109s. Eight Hurricanes of 126 Squadron and four from 185 also took to the air.

The Spitfires quickly made



presumably after abandoning his aircraft.

Plt Off James Tew, an American in 242 Squadron, was also killed. His Hurricane crashed in the area of Marsaskala Bay and he has no known grave.

On the German side, there appears to have





Above
A Rolls-Royce Merlin engine recovered from the sea at Marsaskala – probably from the Hurricane in which Plt Off James Tew was shot down and killed on March 1, 1942.

Below
Plt Off Kenric Murray lost his life when he was shot down on March 10. The crash site, seen in more recent times, is typical of the terrain in southern Malta.

their presence felt when Flt Lt Philip Heppell shot down a Messerschmitt. ‘Ack-ack’, it seems, destroyed a Bf 109 and there were several ‘probables’ or damaged. In the event, Feldwebel Heinz Rahlmeier of 8/JG 53 was shot down and killed. Australian Sgt Jack Mayall of 126 Squadron died when his Hurricane was shot down at Mriehel but another pilot who crash-landed his Hurricane escaped without injury.

RAID AFTER RAID

In the afternoon came four more air raid warnings. The last alert, at 16:32, continued for nearly two hours and involved an estimated 40 enemy aircraft. Four Spitfires intercepted, together with eight Hurricanes of 242 Squadron and three from 605. Although one Ju 88 was claimed as destroyed and two others as damaged it appears that none was lost on this occasion.

Plt Off Ken Murray of 249



Squadron was fatally injured when his parachute apparently malfunctioned after he had baled out of his Spitfire over Ta’ Żuta, on the island’s south coast.

German sources name Unteroffizier (Uffz) Hans Schade of 8/JG 53 as the first of his unit to destroy a Spitfire over Malta – at 11:10 on March 10. However, the only RAF fighter lost that morning was a Hurricane, suggesting that Schade had shot down Sgt Mayall.

“None of my men attacked a pilot in his parachute. A pilot in a parachute was taboo. It was the same as someone raising his hands or showing a white flag.”





Left centre
Douglas Leggo's crash site, not far from the XHB 10 heavy anti-aircraft gun position, on Malta's south coast.

Above left
Rhodesian Plt Off Douglas Leggo writing a message for Hitler in Shona - an African language - on the side of his Spitfire. Eva was Leggo's wife; Jay was his friend, Johnny Plagis.

Plt Off Murray evidently fell to the Kommandeur of II Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 3 (II/JG 3), Hauptmann (Hptm) Karl-Heinz Krahl, who claimed a Spitfire at 17:10.

A five-hour raid began soon after 08:00 on March 20, involving about 20 Ju 88s which arrived at intervals under fighter escort. Sixteen fighters scrambled: four Spitfires, led by Flt Lt P B 'Laddie' Lucas of 249 Squadron, provided top cover for 12 Hurricanes.

Patrolling at 11,000ft (3,352m), the quartet from 249 observed six Bf 109s heading north over Filfla, an uninhabited islet south of Malta. The Spitfires, with a 2,000ft height advantage, attacked and Plt Off Robert 'Buck' McNair was credited with shooting down a Bf 109.

Anti-aircraft guns also engaged, claiming one Ju 88 and a Bf 109 destroyed and four bombers damaged. The body of the Bf 109 pilot, Uffz Josef Fankhauser of 7/JG 53, was washed ashore in Sicily nearly seven weeks later.

SICKENING START

Rhodesian Plt Off Douglas Leggo was also shot down. He probably fell to the guns of Lt Ernst Klager or Lt Hermann Neuhoff, both of III/JG 53, who each claimed a Spitfire within three minutes of each other.

Years later there was considerable controversy regarding Leggo's fate, 'Laddie' Lucas saying: "As we watched the silk canopy floating down in the distance, with the pilot swinging on its end, another single '109, diving down out of broken cloud, made a run at the 'chute, squirting at it as he went and collapsing it with his slipstream as

he passed by. The canopy streamed, leaving the pilot without a chance. The next thing we knew, the '109 was diving away for Sicily with never a hope of catching it."

Members of 4th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, who witnessed the demise of 'Doug' Leggo from their position near Hagar Qim, told a different story. Lance Bombardier Stan Fraser wrote in his diary: "Before breakfast we witnessed a dogfight above our site, which resulted in a rather sickening start to the day's activities.

"One of our Spitfires had one of its tail fins practically shot off and the pilot lost control of the plane. It fell like a falling leaf, describing small circles, with its nose downwards, and several times it seemed as though the pilot had managed to straighten out into a glide, but no - on it came until, just over 100ft from the ground, the pilot baled out.

"He was too late; his parachute just billowed until the cords were taut, when he reached the ground about the same time as the plane."

The episode remained in the minds of other gunners. Yet there's one obvious and important discrepancy between what was perceived by Lucas and by those on the ground: Lucas was the last survivor of those who flew with Leggo on March 20, 1942. He died exactly 56 years later, having always maintained he saw the Rhodesian deliberately killed after he abandoned his aircraft.

Hermann Neuhoff survived the war after he was shot down over Malta on April 10, 1942 and taken prisoner. Commenting in 1999, he was unable to distinguish between his many combats, but was adamant that "none of my men attacked a

pilot in his parachute. A pilot in a parachute was taboo. It was the same as someone raising his hands or showing a white flag."

Significantly, an entry in a logbook of 8 Sector Operations Room Fighter Control states that Leggo's parachute did not open, with a further comment: "The Spitfire pilot baled out too low half-a-mile west of Siggiewi."

WIPE THEM OUT

That evening Ta' Qali airfield was targeted by a powerful force, including around 50 Ju 88s, in response to a new strategy decided by Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring. The intention was to destroy RAF fighters on the ground prior to dealing with any remaining bombers and torpedo aircraft, and then to concentrate on the Grand Harbour.

There were several nuisance raids before the next heavy attack the following morning. Bf 109s escorted an estimated 50 to 70 Ju 88s with Ta' Qali again the primary objective. No Hurricanes were airborne, but 'ack-ack' was credited with shooting down one Ju 88 and damaging two more.

Between 11:07 and 14:32 on the 21st, Bf 109s patrolled over and around Malta while eight Bf 110s bombed Ta' Qali. The '110s were engaged by Hurricanes of 185 Squadron, whose pilots were credited with shooting down four of the twin-engine machines while another was declared as damaged. Anti-aircraft fire also claimed a Bf 109 destroyed.

There was another major raid at 14:36. Bf 109s escorted some 70 or more Ju 88s, with Ta' Qali again the main target. No Hurricanes were

“Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring’s intention was to destroy RAF fighters on the ground prior to dealing with any remaining bombers and torpedo aircraft, and then to concentrate on the Grand Harbour”



Above
Mosquito W4063 of 69 Squadron after crash-landing at Hal Far.

Right
‘Slim’ Yarra (left) and C E Broad.

scrambled and anti-aircraft gunners were once more the sole defence, claiming three Ju 88s destroyed and three damaged.

Initial reports indicated that, in four residential areas, 135 civilians were killed, seriously injured or buried under debris. At Gafa Street in Mosta, 24 died and nearly twice as many were injured when the ceiling of a tunnel shelter collapsed. Among service personnel, one Royal Australian Air Force pilot officer and five RAF officers perished when a bomb landed next to the Point de Vue hotel at Rabat.

Luftwaffe losses on March 21 appear to have been comparatively light. A Bf 110 crashed into the sea about 19 miles north of Malta and a Ju 88 was lost in undisclosed circumstances. Both crews were posted missing.

A Ju 88 of 2/Küstenfliegergruppe 606 was also shot down over Ta’ Qali, crashing on farmland about 800 yards to the northwest. The pilot and Staffelfkapitän, Oberleutnant Rudolf Krieg, was unable to get out; the rest of the crew baled out to be taken prisoner.

HARBOUR RAIDS

On March 20, convoy MW10 departed Egypt for Malta. SS *Clan Campbell* was attacked and sunk en route. Then, on the 23rd, while assisting the commissioned auxiliary supply ship *Breconshire*, the destroyer HMS *Southwold* struck a mine and sank.

Following the arrival at Malta of the supply vessel and the merchantmen *Talabot* and *Pampas*, the Luftwaffe redirected its efforts against the harbours. As a result of heavy raids on the 26th, direct



hits were made on *Talabot*, *Pampas* and *Breconshire* and in the coming days all were declared total losses. Meanwhile the Royal Fleet Auxiliary *Plumleaf*, the already damaged submarine P39 and destroyer HMS *Legion* were also lost.

There were 11 alerts on the last day of March. Sergeants Archie Steele and C E ‘Ernie’ Broad of 185 Squadron were ordered to scramble at 09:45. ‘Tally Ho!’ followed at 10:05 but Steele was shot down one minute later. Around the same time, Lt Hans Langer of II/JG 53’s Stab (headquarters flight) reported his first victory, misidentifying the Hurricane as a Spitfire.

Broad noted: “Jumped by four ’109s. Sgt Steele killed. Had short burst at last Me 109. But went into spin pulling out at 100ft.” He landed safely soon afterwards.

Meanwhile, Mosquito W4063 of 69 Squadron, with Plt Off Philip Kelley at the controls and Sgt Pike as observer, had been recalled minutes after departing on a photographic reconnaissance of Tripoli. As the pilot reduced speed preparatory to returning to land at Luqa, Pike saw

two Bf 109s, at least one of which swept in to attack.

The Mosquito was struck in both wings and the rear of the fuselage. Descending from cloud over Hal Far, Kelley promptly carried out a wheels-up landing. He and Pike survived.

The likely victor was Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Ehrenberger of 6/JG 53, who was credited with the destruction of a twin-engine aircraft at 10:28. He had mistaken it for a Hampden.

SEVENTY-PLUS

More heavy attacks followed on April 1 – a raid involving an estimated 70 Ju 87 Stukas, Ju 88s and Bf 109s coming between 17:10 and 18:58. Some of the fighters patrolled off the coast while the bombers proceeded inland towards Hal Far, the dockyard area and Cospicua. Bombs also fell in outlying districts and there were a number of civilian casualties.

The RAF managed to scramble five Spitfires and several Hurricanes at 17:50. There were claims by pilots and anti-aircraft gunners, and at least one Ju 87 was accounted for (another may have been shot down off the coast).

‘Ack-ack’ was probably also



responsible for the destruction of a Bf 109 of 5/JG 3. According to one source the low-flying fighter struck a wall and crash-landed in a wheat field close to Rahal Gdid, coming to a stop in an inverted position; the pilot, Uffz Hans Pilz, survived.

Among those credited with destroying Ju 87s were Plt Off Peter Nash and Rhodesian Fg Off George 'Buck' Buchanan, both of 249 Squadron, and Flight Sergeant Jack Fletcher, a Canadian in 185 Squadron. There were also claims for several 'probables' and 'damaged'.

Certainly one Stuka came down just inshore at Il-Qali, in the Delimara area. The gunner, Gefreiter Wilhelm Neubauer, was killed while pilot Uffz Winfried Günther baled out into the sea and was picked up and taken prisoner. That night, as military personnel inspected the crashed Stuka, a bomb in the wreckage exploded, killing many of those present.

Anti-aircraft and ground defences continued to account for a share



of the enemy. In the late morning of April 14, Plt Off Oliver 'Sonny' Ormrod of 185 Squadron watched from Hal Far as two Bf 109s flew towards the airfield from the direction of Safi.

He recorded: "One was hit by machine gun fire as he came over the ridge beyond the [Fairey] Albacore dispersals, where we now keep Hurricanes. He hit the ground and blew up with a vivid flash and a puff of black smoke. Such was the way in which he disintegrated that the engine ricocheted more than 100 yards farther along like a great cannon ball."

The pilot was Hptm Karl-Heinz Krahl, Kommandeur of II/JG 3. A wing section with its Balkenkreuz (black cross) marking was salvaged from the crash site and afterwards displayed on a wall of the pilots' dispersal hut. The trophy also became a popular feature in photographs of 185 Squadron personnel.

INVASION THREAT

Malta's ordeal, however, was far from over. Saturday April 25 saw some of the worst aerial attacks and widespread death and destruction, with three heavy raids during daylight hours in which the Luftwaffe specifically targeted Malta's land forces.

There was little respite during the next few days, with fatalities in the air on both sides. Before the month was over, another seven of Malta's fighter pilots had lost their lives: W/O Douglas Corfe, Flt Sgt Lucien Brooks and Plt Offs James Wood, John Fletcher, Thomas Foley, Kenneth Pawson and Walter Cripps.

The threat to Malta appeared to worsen when Allied reconnaissance photographed ➔

Above left
On April 1, Edgar Smith joined sightseers at the crash site of a Ju 87 on the seashore near Delimara. As he was returning home, a bomb in the wreckage detonated, killing many of those present. Edgar revisited the crater caused by the explosion in 1997.

Above
A Bf 109 shot down by anti-aircraft fire near Hal Far on April 14.

Below
Lt Herman Neuhoff of 6/JG 53 may have been responsible for shooting down Plt Off Leggo.





Above
Onlookers examine a Bf 109 of 5/JG 3 which crash-landed near Paola on April 1.

Below right
Flt Lt Rhys Lloyd of 185 Squadron with a wing panel from Hptm Krahl's Messerschmitt.
ALL AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

GEORGE CROSS ISLAND

The steadfastness displayed by those on Malta was formally recognised on April 15, 1942 by King George VI: "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."

It was the highest honour a British sovereign could bestow on a community.

what appeared to be three airfields under construction in Sicily. All indications were that they were intended for gliders for an Axis invasion. Such an operation had indeed been planned for that summer, with an attack force five times the strength of that deployed during the 1941 invasion of Crete.

But 'Herkules', as the Germans called the operation, was never to materialise. Hitler instead gave priority to offensives in North Africa and Russia. Ultimately, the German Afrikakorps would be fought to a standstill, thereby shifting the balance of military power in the central Mediterranean. But in April 1942 the possibility of invasion was very real and remained so for months to come.

Towards the end of the month a significant reduction in Sicily-based Luftwaffe units began as bombers and fighters were redeployed. Attacks against Malta continued,

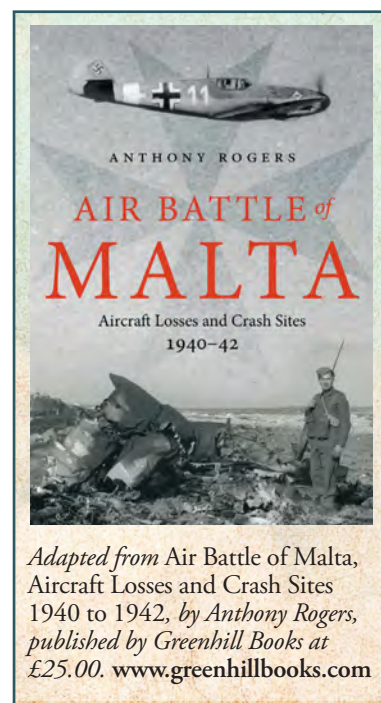


but on a lesser scale, supplemented by the Italians.

The latest Luftwaffe offensive was wound down at a critical time. Such had been its effect that the Royal Navy's 10th Submarine Flotilla had departed Malta for the safety

of Alexandria in Egypt. It did not return until the end of July.

According to Luftwaffe records, Malta operations between March 20 and April 28, 1942 involved 5,807 sorties by bombers, 5,667 by fighters and 345 by reconnaissance aircraft – a total of 11,819. In this five-and-a-half-week period, the weight of bombs dropped is reported to have exceeded 6,557 tonnes. ●



Adapted from Air Battle of Malta, Aircraft Losses and Crash Sites 1940 to 1942, by Anthony Rogers, published by Greenhill Books at £25.00. www.greenhillbooks.com



MALTA'S

NIGHT FIG

HURRICANES SERVED AS THE ISLAND'S NOCTURNAL DEFENDERS IN 1941 AND 1942, AS ANDREW

Above
Hurricane IIb Z2961,
flown by Plt Off David
Barnwell when he shared
the destruction of a Cant
Z1007bis on September
5, 1941 to claim his fifth
victory. P H P ROBERTS

Far right
Battle of Britain veteran
Sqn Ldr George Powell-
Shedden formed the Malta
Night Flying Unit. VIA C F
SHORES

For more than a year the strategically important island of Malta had been subjected to attack from Sicily-based bombers of the Italian Regia Aeronautica and the Luftwaffe. By the summer of 1941 most German units had been withdrawn to support the invasion of Russia and, with their vulnerability by day, the Italians had increasingly switched to night raids.

So the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Malta, AVM Sir Hugh Pugh-Lloyd, decided to form a dedicated night flight from his existing squadrons, and on July

30 the Malta Night Fighter Unit (MNFU) was born at Ta' Qali – commanded by 25-year-old Sqn Ldr George Powell-Shedden, a veteran of the Battle of Britain who had recently arrived on the island.

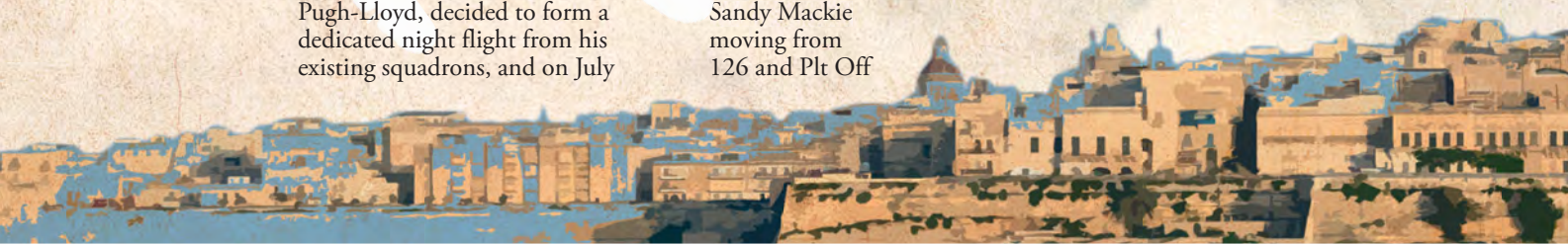
To lead 'A' and 'B' Flights, Powell-Shedden selected Flt Lts Ernest 'Cass' Cassidy and Don 'Dimsie' Stones from 249 Squadron; Fg Off Antony Thompson and Plt Off J P Mills also transferred from 249 with Plt Off Jackie Grant and Sgt Sandy Mackie moving from 126 and Plt Off

David Barnwell coming from 185 Squadron.

At first, MNFU led a somewhat hand-to-mouth existence as its Hurricanes had to be borrowed from Ta' Qali's units.

HUNTING IN PAIRS

The RAF pilots tried out various night tactics and developed appropriate procedures. Powell-Shedden had the idea of hunting in pairs,





HURRICANES

THOMAS RECOUNTS

directed by the island's radar sites and searchlights, and a close liaison developed. The Italian bombers generally flew to the south of Malta and attacked while heading north back to base in Sicily.

At either end of the island the defenders positioned pairs of searchlights,

around which fighters would orbit. Then, as radar plotted a raid, at 15 miles (24km) range the interceptors would increase height if required to ensure they were at least 2,000ft (609m) above the incoming bombers. The Hurricanes would then approach the target simultaneously – the tactic proving most successful. To avoid collisions, the fighters kept



their tail-lights illuminated.

Gradually MNFU acquired its own aircraft, a mix of Hurricane Is and II, many of which were in an all-over black paint scheme. It later standardised on Hurricane IIs with an establishment of eight cannon-armed Mk.IIcs and four Mk.IIbs.

On a typical evening, five or six would be available. As dusk fell the pilots on duty were on standby at dispersal awaiting a scramble order. Owing to incessant daylight raids, rest was often difficult.

INTO ACTION

The new unit was soon in action. At 20:40 hours on August 5, Tenente Colonnello (Ten Col – equivalent to wing commander)

Sparvieros and some Junkers Ju 87 Stukas. Four Hurricanes got airborne – Powell-Sheddan finding a BR.20 in the searchlights. He made two attacks but, having lost his night vision, failed to see Ten Livio Vercelli's Cicogna MM22626 crash into the sea on fire. It was the CO's only confirmed victory over Malta.

DOWN IN THE MED

Powell-Sheddan was in action again on August 26, with Cassidy now flying Z2825. They attacked a bomber, which fell away pouring smoke, before sighting another one. Their combined fire destroyed much of its starboard engine and it was last seen circling with its undercarriage flopped down.



Above right
Flt Lt 'Cassidy' Cassidy (left) and Fg Off Antony Thompson. VIA C F SHORES

Right
The tail of Ten Luciano Nimis' BR 20, showing damage inflicted by Plt Off Barnwell's Hurricane. GIOVANNI MASSIMELLO

Below right
Italian flying order for the attack on Valletta in which the MNFU claimed its first successes, August 6, 1941. GIOVANNI MASSIMELLO



spotted one of the raiders.

Stones recalled: "Barnwell and I shared an Italian Cant Z1007 which was illuminated by searchlight. One of the crew was picked up by an air-sea rescue launch." The share was Barnwell's fifth victory.

Three days later Powell-Sheddan and Barnwell (in Z2680) were scrambled. Barnwell, spotting a Cant caught in searchlights, closed from astern.

He reported: "I got into range just before he got out of the searchlights. I fired a few bullets – closed to about 50 yards. He was diving so I

Nello Brambilla, commander of 99° Gruppo, lifted off from Gerbini on Sicily in Fiat BR.20M Cicogna '242-8' bound for Valletta, the first of 15 sorties that night.

Hurricanes of the MNFU were scrambled and sent against the second wave, with Flt Lt Cassidy flying Z2824. Cassidy closed on one bomber he spotted in a searchlight beam and managed to get in several good bursts. He last saw it rapidly losing height, and it was later confirmed as shot down.

Nineteen-year-old Plt Off Barnwell took on two more, which he claimed as destroyed, the Italians later confirming the loss of two bombers: Brambilla in '242-6' on his second sortie of the night; and '242-7' flown by Tenente (Ten – flying officer) Antonio Romeo. Meanwhile Ten Luciano Nimis in '243-3' returned with heavy damage.

On the evening of the 11th, the Fiats again set out, together with five Savoia-Marchetti S.M.79

TURNO DI VOLO NOTTE SUL 6 AGOSTO 1941 - XIX

N° velivolo	Equipaggio	ora decollo	Obiettivo
8/242	t. col. Brambilla	20.40	La Valletta
2/242	cap. Montobbio	20.45	La Valletta
1/243	s. ten. Bordigato	21.00	La Valletta
3/243	ten. Nimis	21.10	La Valletta
4/243	ten. Fumagalli	21.20	La Valletta
6/243	s. ten. Nassimbeni	21.30	La Valletta
7/243	cap. Masoero	21.40	La Valletta
2/65	magg. Ferrari	21.50	La Valletta
7/242	s. ten. Romeo	22.00	La Valletta
7/66	ten. Mirabile	22.10	La Valletta
7/65	ten. Guazzino	22.20	La Valletta
1/65	ten. Ceccato	22.30	La Valletta
4/242	ten. Vercelli	22.40	La Valletta
1/242	ten. Pezzi	22.50	La Valletta
6/242	t. col. Brambilla	23.20	La Valletta
9/242	cap. Montobbio	23.45	La Valletta
3/243	ten. Nimis		

Both BR.20Ms were claimed as 'probables' but both returned to Sicily badly damaged.

Night standby continued with the Hurricanes regularly being scrambled. Shortly before dawn on September 5 a trio of 9° Stormo Cant Z.1007bis Alciones bombed Hal Far. 'Dimsie' Stones (Mk. IIc Z3574) and Barnwell (Mk. IIb Z2961) took off at 05:20 and

throttled back and went after him, for he showed up as clear as daylight against the moonlight. I gave him a few more short bursts and I saw burning lumps falling off the port engine... Finally, he dived straight down, levelling off, and made a perfect landing on the sea."

The Cant alighted 15 miles (24km) to the east of Malta: the crew were rescued just after dawn



“I throttled back and went after him, for he showed up as clear as daylight against the moonlight. I gave him a few more short bursts and I saw burning lumps falling off the port engine.”

and became prisoners. David Barnwell received the DFC soon afterwards – the unit’s first decoration.

TALLY HO!

As well as defensive patrols the black-painted MNFU Hurricanes also flew nocturnal intruder sorties over Sicily. On October 7, with each aircraft carrying eight 40lb (18kg) bombs, the hastily improvised bombers attacked a railway track near Scicli in bright moonlight. Stones thought this sort of operation “could be a bit of a bore”.

Italian fighters returned the compliment by strafing Malta’s airfields: shortly after dawn on the 14th, Macchi MC 202 Folgore of 9° Gruppo hit Luqa. Cassidy led five MNFU Hurricanes to intercept the Italians. Barnwell in Z3512 was heard calling: “Tally Ho! Got one, got one.” He had probably hit Ten Emanuele Annoni, who landed back at base badly damaged.

Minutes later Barnwell radioed that his engine had cut and he was baling out. Sadly he was not found – his passing was a painful loss for the unit.

David was the third son of aircraft designer Frank Barnwell, whose masterpieces for Bristol included the F.2B Fighter, the Bulldog and the Blenheim. All three of his sons died serving with the RAF.

RATHER TOO EASY

Malta remained a constant thorn in the enemy’s side, taking a steady toll on Rommel’s vital supply lines across the Mediterranean to reinforce the North African front. On the last day of October, bombers returned at night when four Cicognas of 16° Gruppo approached the island. Plt Off Peter Rathie and newly commissioned Plt Off Sandy Mackie, a 20-year-old from Edinburgh, were scrambled.

Mackie identified the targets as Cants: “I was rather astonished not to be fired at as I made my first attack from astern at about 50 yards

range, and also to find that the aircraft did not make the slightest attempt at evasive action.

“I made another attack from astern and below, still without being fired at from the enemy which kept on its straight course. After the second burst it caught fire and went down. It was all rather too easy.” Only the radio operator aboard Ten Francesco Toscano’s BR 20 survived.

The MNFU was next in action during the evening of November 9 when ten Italian bombers attacked Malta. Mackie got airborne at 19:40 and spotted one caught by searchlights at 16,000ft, correctly identifying it as a BR.20M. Closing to 200 yards he opened fire and saw pieces falling off before the bomber went into a dive. Although he followed it down, he lost it at ➔

Above
MNFU’s first victims – lumbering Fiat BR.20Ms of 242 Squadriglia, part of the 99° Gruppo.
GIOVANNI MASSIMELLO

Below
MNFU established close links with Malta radar sites, such as the 501 Air Ministry Experimental Station at Dingli cliffs. v
IA C G JEFFORD



Right
Hurricane IIb Z2827 after
a landing accident at Ta' Qali in July 1941. FRED
ETCHELLS

Below
Flt Lt Don 'Dimsie' Stones
was OC 'B' Flight, MNFU.
D WINTON VIA J S LINN

3,000ft, so claimed it as a 'probable'.
Two hours later Cassidy, in Z4002,
and Thompson damaged another
big Fiat, which was also last seen
losing height with debris falling
off. Stones also scrambled but his
Hurricane suffered an engine failure
and he had to bale out over Ta' Qali
from only 500ft. He was found by
a nearby gunner and the pair



celebrated his survival with a bottle
of whisky.

On his return to the line hut he
was told to be quiet as "Flt Lt Stones
had just been killed in a blazing
Hurricane". The slightly inebriated
pilot retorted: "It's me, you oaf!"

OMINOUS PORTENT

During the evening of November
15, three Reggiane Re.2000 Falco I
fighter-bombers of 377^o Squadriglia
raided Malta on their debut offensive
operation. An MNFU Hurricane
intercepted one, albeit without
result. The attack was repeated four
nights later when Ten Col Falconi,
intercepted by a Hurricane, had to
jettison his bombs.

The tussle with the Falcos
would be MNFU's swansong as
on December 2 it was
renamed 1435 (Night
Fighter) Flight.

At the same
time

Sqn Ldr Innes Westmacott, another
successful Battle of Britain veteran,
took over command. George Powell-
Shedden was awarded the DFC,
promoted to wing commander and
became Ta' Qali's station commander.
New pilots meanwhile arrived in small
numbers, including Fg Off F R W
Palmer on December 5.

Westmacott saw action the following
day, noting in his logbook: "Chased Ju
88 intruder. Fired short burst. Enemy
aircraft escaped in cloud."

The presence of the Luftwaffe
aircraft was an ominous portent. On
the night of December 5, Stones
had 1435 Flight's first encounter
with the enemy when he attempted
to intercept an aircraft caught in
searchlights. He closed on what he
identified as a Ju 88, but his guns
failed to fire.

Flying was increasingly hampered by
deteriorating weather, especially heavy
cloud, while rain throughout the
middle of December made Ta' Qali's
runways



Below
MNFU Hurricane IIb Z4941
on its nose at Hal Far,
1941. VIA C F SHORES



**"Winton saw one engine hit before the aircraft burst into flames
and fell like a burning torch, exploding into the sea off Valletta in
full view of the cheering Maltese public"**



Left
The pilots of 'B' Flight, MNFU in late 1941. Standing, left to right: Fg Off Palmer, Flt Sgt Fowler, Fg Off Rathie, Flt Lt Stones and Fg Off Thompson. Seated, left to right: Fg Off Winton, Plt Off Grant and Plt Off Mills. D W A STONES

unsuitable: so on Boxing Day the Hurricanes moved to nearby Hal Far.

By then, small numbers of Ju 88s – probably intruders from I Gruppe Nachtjagdgeschwader 2 (I/NJG 2) – were appearing regularly over Malta. On the day of their move to Hal Far, Westmacott, in Z3570, and Stones scrambled to intercept a lone Junkers which remained over the island for more than two hours.

It proved an elusive opponent, constantly changing its direction, speed and altitude, and although the CO engaged it he didn't gain any hits, noting: "Caught quick glimmer. Enemy aircraft chased in cloud."

Meanwhile, to his intense frustration, once again Stones' guns failed to fire.

RAIDING THE BACKYARD

Plt Off Denis Winton was more successful on December 27, intercepting a Ju 88 at about 20:20 as it approached Malta. He dived on

the bomber, which had been caught in searchlights and, despite its frantic evasion, poured a stream of fire into it. Winton saw one engine hit before the aircraft burst into flames and fell like a burning torch, exploding into the sea off Valletta in full view of the cheering Maltese public.

His victim has never been positively identified but was probably Ju 88A-4 '3Z+BM of 4 Staffel, Kampfgeschwader 77 (4/KG 77), flown by Hptm Eberhard Stähle who was lost with his crew.

That very public success was the last for some time, due to a marked reduction in enemy night activity. The next engagement for 1435 Flight, in mid-January 1942, was not so glorious.

On the 19th the CO shot up a 69 Squadron Martin Maryland he had misidentified as a Ju 88, forcing Fg Off Adrian Warburton to make a wheels-up landing at Luqa.

Around this time Westmacott

obtained approval from the AOC to conduct night intruder sorties over Sicily and catch the Ju 88s at their bases. Some Hurricanes were fitted with long-range tanks and one was adapted to drop small supply packets to an agent operating on the Italian island.

Although the tanks restricted manoeuvrability, intruder sorties began on January 24 when five Hurricanes patrolled over Catania and Comiso. Palmer spotted a Ju 88 taking off from Comiso and reported that it disintegrated in the air under his fire.

Shortly before dark on the 27th, Mackie took off for an air test in Mk.IIc Z3571 just as a 'Schwarm' of Bf 109Fs swept in. He was severely wounded, sadly succumbing to his injuries two days later.

After dark, seven Hurricanes set off for Sicily with 21-year-old Yorkshireman Sgt Jimmy Wood being the first to take off at 19:25. He spotted a Ju 88 taking off from Comiso and, closing to 50 yards on Oblt Wolfhelm Dronke's aircraft of 5/KG 77, he shot it down in flames.

Intruder sorties to Sicily continued into February and met with more success. On the 2nd, Stones shot up a car near Modica: "We'd shoot up trucks and staff cars when we saw the headlights."

Thompson meanwhile spotted a Cant Z.506B floatplane off the south coast, his first burst shooting off a float before it spun in near Licata.

DAYLIGHT AND DISBANDING

Although a specialist night-fighter unit, 1435 Flight increasingly flew by day. February 15, 1942 was a day of near continuous air attacks. In ➔

Below left
Hurricane IIc BE402 of 242 Squadron at Ta' Qali after a taxiing incident on Christmas Day 1941. VIA C F SHORES





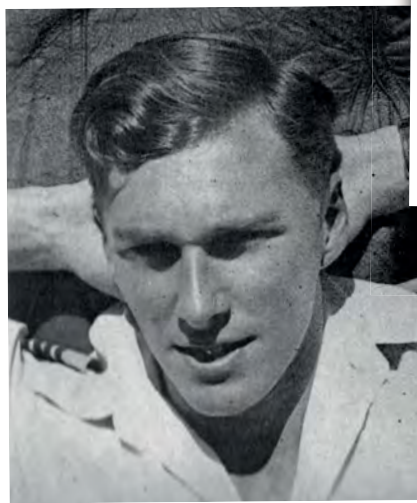
Above
All-black Hurricane IIb Z7362 after a mishap at Hal Far on March 6, 1942.
16. VIA R J BROOKS

Right
The OC 1435 Flight. Sqn Ldr Innes Westmacott, flanked by his flight commanders, Flt Lts Cassidy to his right and Stones on his left. 1 B WESTMACOTT VIA C F SHORES

Below right
Fg Off Peter Rathie, who damaged a Bf 109 during a day sortie in early 1942.
D WINTON VIA J S LINN

the late afternoon, several Hurricanes took off alongside 605 Squadron, Rathie claiming a Bf 109 damaged.

On the 21st, Winton attacked and probably destroyed a Ju 88. The Hurricane he flew that day, Z4002, was lost on March 1 while being flown by Sgt Ray Harvey of 242 Squadron. Within 48 hours, another, Z3562, dived into the ground near Rabat and a third was destroyed in a raid a few days later, while the undercarriage of yet another collapsed on landing on the pitted airfield.



Nonetheless, during a patrol on the night of March 4, Wood claimed a Ju 88 destroyed.

The first of a number of long-hoped for Spitfires arrived in Malta on the 7th, having been flown off HMS *Eagle*; and a detachment of four Beaufighter night-fighters arrived from Egypt which, under Flt Lt Gil Hayton, were initially attached to 1435 Flight.

Despite the arrival of the Beaufighters, shortly before midnight



on the 8th an estimated 19 bombers were detected inbound. Westmacott in Hurricane Mk.IIc BE402, borrowed from 242 Squadron, scrambled and positioned, by radar, behind a Ju 88. He chased the intruder in the hazy conditions for 40 miles before opening fire and losing sight of it, noting in his logbook: "Flames seen on water after firing – one Ju 88 probable."

In the desperate circumstances of early 1942 the pilots of any unit flew whatever aircraft were available.

Night raids against Malta continued through March but the Hurricanes had little success until April 3 when a pair of fighters scrambled. Rathie chased a raider that was briefly caught by searchlights but it escaped.

Three nights later seven of the heavy Fiats from 55° Gruppo dropped small anti-personnel bombs over Malta.

One intruder was caught by a pair of patrolling Hurricanes, and damaged by Wood. He later identified the BR.20M mistakenly as a Ju 88.

Meanwhile, with raids constantly causing damage to aircraft on the ground, 1435 Flight ran short of Hurricanes.

On the 26th the CO flew to Sicily in Mk.IIc BE347 where he shot up a train near Comiso. On return the aircraft was rearmed – newly commissioned Plt Off Jimmy Wood then flew it across to Gerbini where he was shot down and killed by the airfield defences.

It was a sad end to what had been a largely successful period for the MNFU and its successor, 1435 Flight. Soon afterwards the longer serving original pilots became tour expired and were posted, many seeing further action over Burma and elsewhere. ●

RED HEARTS

OVER M

+ CHRIS GOSS RELATES THE EXPLOITS OF 7/JG 26 AGAINST THE STRETCHED DEFENCES OF MALTA,



It was not until February 12, 1941 that the first German single-engined fighter made an appearance over Malta. Its impact was immediate: the Messerschmitt Bf 109 shot down three Hurricanes.

Between then and May 25, the Bf 109s of the 7th Staffel of Jagdgeschwader 26 (7/JG 26), accounted for 48 RAF aircraft: 20 of these had been flown by former Battle of Britain pilots. During this time the Luftwaffe unit, its Bf 109s sporting a red, or sometimes black, heart on their cowlings, suffered not a single loss.

The unit was commanded by Oberleutnant (Oblt) Georg Beyer, and based at



ALTA



FEBRUARY TO MAY 1941

Caffiers near Calais, France with headquarters at Abbeville-Drucat – it began operations over Britain on July 21, 1940. Three days later Feldwebel Karl Straub dispatched a Spitfire of 54 Squadron near Margate in Kent; the unit's first victory in the November battle. By 14, the staffel had claimed 31 RAF aircraft and by the end of the year had suffered

five pilots killed or missing and eight captured.

Because of changes in the command of fighter units, Major Adolf Galland moved from III Gruppe of JG 26 to become Geschwader Kommodore of JG 26. Galland took with him Georg Beyer as his adjutant.

So, a new name emerged at 7/JG 26. Beyer's place was taken by 22-year-old Oblt Joachim 'Jochen' Müncheberg, who had been III/JG 26's adjutant since September 23, 1939. His first 'kill' was a Blenheim of 57 Squadron on November 7 and by the

time he came to 7 Staffel, he had shot down 13 aircraft.

Müncheberg's first victory with his new staffel was a Hurricane on August 24. He had achieved 20 kills by September 14 which resulted in the award of the Ritterkreuz (Knights Cross) and he ended the year with a total of 23.

FIRST OVER MALTA

As 1940 came to an end, it was clear to the Germans that the British colony of Malta was a threat to their operations in the Mediterranean. ➔

Far left
Jochen Müncheberg celebrating a victory.

Below
Believed taken at Gela in early 1941; in the foreground is a Bf 109E-7 of 7/JG 26, behind is a Bf 110 of 9/ZG 26.
DR ALFRED PRICE





Above
Müncheberg (seated) in France during the summer of 1940.

Right
A brand-new Bf 109E-7 with auxiliary tank.

Right
A Bf 109E of 7/JG 26 wearing the distinctive red heart badge.

In the otherwise Axis-dominated region, the island could still be used by the Allies to launch both air and naval operations at German and Italian targets. In December 1940, X Fliegerkorps relocated from Norway to Taormina on the east coast of Sicily and various combat units followed. The first German attack on Malta's airfields occurred on January 10, 1941 after which they became an almost daily occurrence.

The only RAF fighter unit on the island was 261 Squadron, commanded by Sqn Ldr Tony Trumble, but its Hurricanes were more than capable of countering the only German opposition, the Bf 110-equipped III/ Zerstörergruppe 26. However, with the Italians struggling in Libya, the twin-engined fighters moved to North Africa and were replaced by 7/JG 26 and its nimble Bf 109s.

The groundcrews had left Belgium around January 22, 1941 and met up with their pilots at Rome. It would appear that the fliers had returned to Germany to re-equip with the Bf 109E-7, an 'E-4' version capable of carrying a long-range tank giving it the ability to loiter over Malta. These tanks were luxuries the Germans never had in the Battle of Britain.

The unit arrived at Gela on the southern coast of Sicily on or around February 9. Led by Müncheberg, on the afternoon of the 12th the staffel was tasked to escort a reconnaissance

mission after which it could carry out a 'Freie Jagd' (or fighter sweep) over the island.

As expected, 261 Squadron was scrambled only to be 'bounced' by the 'Red Hearts'. The first victory went to Müncheberg and another two to Oberfeldwebel Werner Liebing – his first of the war.

Flt Lt Gerald Watson was shot down into the sea and killed; his body never being recovered. Plt Off David Thacker, who had flown Hurricanes with 32 Squadron in the Battle of Britain and had only been on Malta for two weeks, baled out wounded over St Paul's Bay. Flt Lt Harry Bradbury was wounded when he crash-landed at Hal Far.

Unfortunately, the Operations



Record Book for 261 Squadron for the period is missing but it is thought that one RAF pilot claimed to have shot down a Bf 109. In reality, none were even damaged.

INTO THE FRAY

To help counter the Bf 109s, the following day, 261 Squadron got to 22,000ft (6,705m), ready to pounce. However, they were spotted and the Germans sped away.

On the morning of February 16, two schwarm of four aircraft each led by Müncheberg and Oblt Klaus Mietusch escorted Junkers Ju 87 'Stukas' attacking Luqa airfield. The RAF response came from eight Hurricanes of 'A' Flight of 261 Squadron led by Flt Lt James MacLachlan DFC.

MacLachlan was an experienced pre-war pilot having converted to Hurricanes from Fairey Battles after the Battle of Britain. He flew with 73 and 145 Squadrons in the Battle of Britain. He arrived in Malta in November 1940 and had claimed seven Italian and German aircraft destroyed and one 'probable'.

Müncheberg accounted for MacLachlan, who baled out badly wounded; his left arm was later

amputated. The Hurricanes flew towards Mietusch's schwarm which scattered them further and the Germans claimed another two Hurricanes. Plt Off Allan McAdam and Fg Off Spencer 'Teddy' Peacock-Edwards both landed with damaged aircraft. Much to the relief of 261 Squadron, the next Bf 109 appearance was not until February 24 and both sides came away empty handed.

The following day Müncheberg shot down Plt Off John Walsh. The Canadian had flown with 615 Squadron in the Battle of Britain and had arrived on Malta at the end of January. Earlier in the day he had been credited with damaging a Dornier Do 215.

During the afternoon, Walsh



apparently suffered engine problems and was easily picked off by Müncheberg. He baled out over St Paul's Bay and was rescued, suffering a leg broken in four places and a fractured arm. Sadly, the 23-year-old died of shock and pneumonia on March 2.

EMERGENCY FIGHTERS

Sqn Ldr Trumble was replaced by Sqn Ldr Bob Lambert who took command as the squadron's fortunes further declined. On February 26 as the Luftwaffe carried out its heaviest raid yet, 261 managed a single victory but suffered badly at the hands of 7



Left
Left to right: Jochen Müncheberg, Major Werner Mölders, Hauptmann Rolf Pingel, September 1940.

Staffel and Italian fighters.

In the space of 17 minutes, Müncheberg claimed two Hurricanes while Mietusch and Unteroffizier Georg Mondry claimed one more each. The squadron's incomplete records make mention of five Hurricanes lost that day but the only pilots that can be linked to these were Plt Offs Phil Kearsey, Charles Langdon, both former Battle of Britain veterans, and Fred 'Eric' Taylor. All three were reported missing and again, all

Germans returned unscathed.

Arriving on Malta in June 1940, Eric Taylor was the top-scoring RAF pilot on Malta at the time; credited with seven destroyed, one probable and one damaged. He was last seen chasing a Stuka, while being pursued by a Bf 109.

Thankfully for the depleted 261 Squadron, there was a break and the Red Hearts did not appear again until March 2. On that day, at 10:45 hours, leading two Bf 109s west of Marsaxlokk Müncheberg engaged

what was thought to be Hurricanes and claimed one. The 'Hurricanes' turned out to be Fairey Fulmars of 806 Squadron being used as emergency fighters.

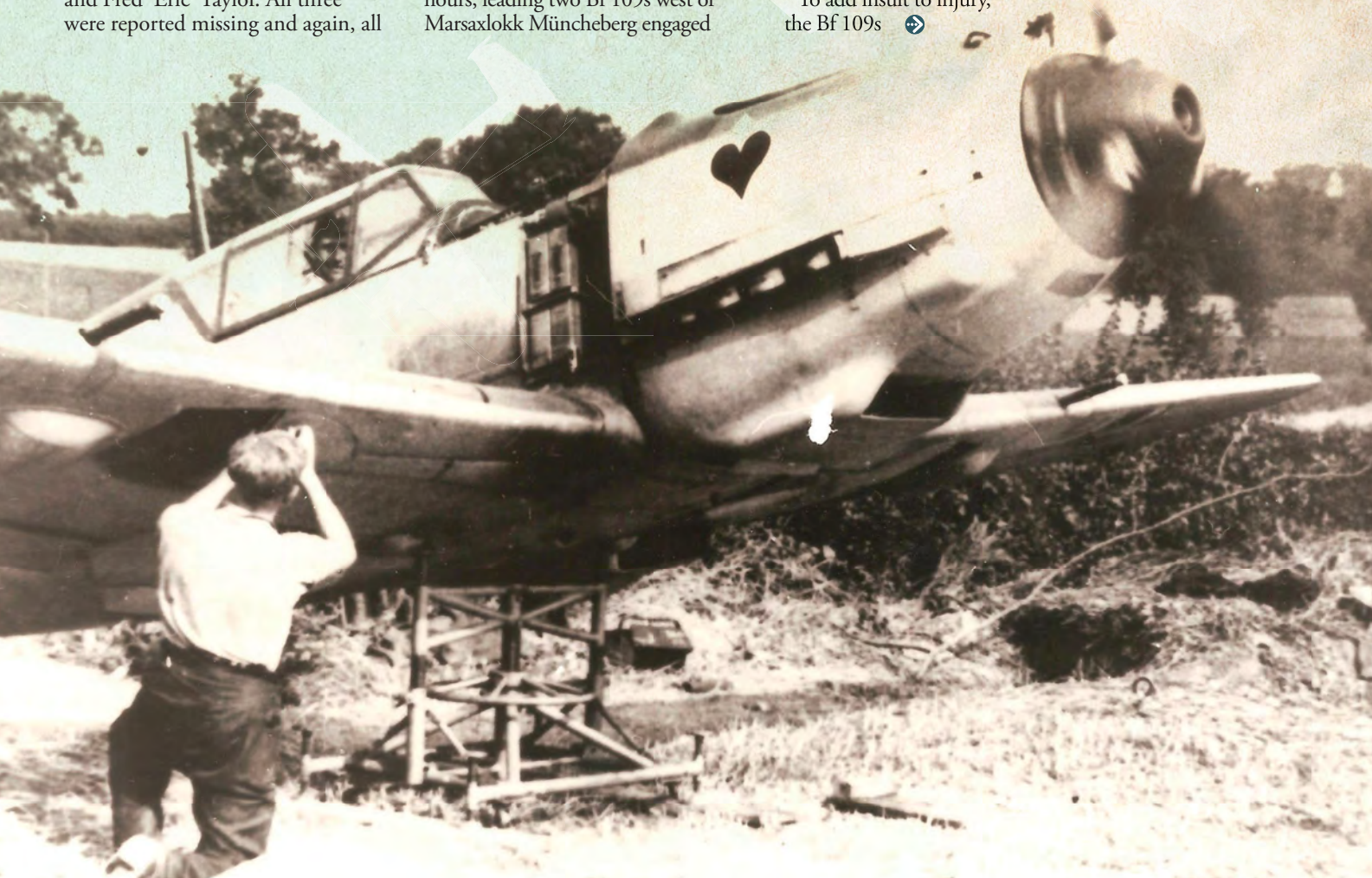
The Fulmar that fell to Müncheberg's guns was piloted by 'A' Flight commander Lt Bill Barnes, who was an 'ace' by this time with six plus two shared destroyed and six plus two shared damaged. Barnes managed to land the damaged Fulmar safely but later that day he was a passenger in a car that failed to stop when challenged and he was shot and killed by a sentry.

INSULT TO INJURY

On March 5, I/JG 27 transited through Gela on the way to North Africa and 7/JG 26 accompanied it. Müncheberg and an unknown pilot claimed a Hurricane each and Leutnant Willi Kothmann of 2/JG 27 claimed one. Two of 261's Hurricanes were lost. Sgt Harry Ayre managed to crash-land but immediately took off again in another machine to claim a Ju 88 destroyed and a third share in a Do 17 (more likely a Bf 110). Former Battle of Britain veteran Sgt Charles MacDougal was shot down and killed just after claiming to have destroyed a Ju 87.

To add insult to injury, the Bf 109s

Below
Ground crew at work on a Bf 109E-3 of 7/JG 26.





Above
A Stuka over Malta, March 1941.

Right
Sgt Harry Ayre, shot down on March 5, 1941.
VIA THOMAS

Below right
Fg Off Len Rees' Sunderland L5807 after being strafed by 7/JG26 on April 27, 1941. VIA THOMAS



"The Messerschmitts then strafed a moored Short Sunderland in St Paul's Bay. Sgt Allen Jones, who was guarding it, was killed. Badly damaged, the flying boat was finally destroyed three days later"

went on to strafe aircraft and ships in St Paul's Bay, a clear sign of the air superiority they had achieved and a tactic that later paid dividends.

At midday on March 7, Bf 109s chased a Martin Maryland of 69 Squadron that was returning from a reconnaissance of Taormina. Fg Off John Boys-Stones and one of his crew were killed when the twin-engined aircraft crashed at Wied Tal Kleigha. A Hurricane of 261 Squadron sent to escort the Maryland back in was also downed; Sgt Ernest Jessop escaped injury when he crashed in the sea.

The Messerschmitts then strafed a moored Short Sunderland of 228 Squadron in St Paul's Bay. Sgt Allen Jones, who was guarding it, was killed. Badly damaged, the flying-boat was finally destroyed in another strafing attack by 7/JG 26 three days later.

The next RAF casualty did not occur until breakfast time on March 15. Three Wellingtons had flown from Stradishall in Suffolk to Gibraltar and took off from 'The Rock' at dawn for Malta. Unfortunately, the one flown by Sgt John Crawford and Sgt Richard Alington was intercepted by Müncheberg northwest of Gozo; the crew of six plus passenger Gp Capt Dudley Humphreys were all killed.

REINFORCEMENTS

At last desperately needed reinforcements arrived in the form of six Hurricanes of 274 Squadron on March 17 led by ace Fg Off Ernest 'Imshi' Mason DFC. Five days later eight Hurricanes of 261 chased German bombers back towards Sicily, but were bounced by 7/JG 26 which claimed seven aircraft shot down between 16:24 and 16:31. Fg Off James Foxton, Sgt Dick

Spyer, Plt Off Tom Garland, Fg Off John Southwell and Plt Off Dennis Knight were all reported missing. Despite 261 submitting claims for at least two Bf 109s, none were damaged.

Müncheberg flew his 200th operational flight on March 28 and downed his 33rd victim, again from 261. Sgt Reg Goode was attacked from behind and seriously wounded in the back and neck. Despite his Hurricane being badly damaged, he managed to crash-land at Ghajn Tuffieha, the tail of his fighter snapping off. Sgt Alex Livingston's Hurricane was also damaged in the same combat but he successfully landed at Luqa.

Between April 3 and 10 there were no Bf 109 sightings as for much of this period, 7/JG 26 was operating from Taranto on mainland Italy in





support of the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece.

This was fortuitous for the RAF as on the morning of April 2, ten Hurricanes and two Blackburn Skuas arrived from Gibraltar. The following day, Operation Winch brought about the arrival of a dozen Hurricane IIs and nine Fulmar fighters of 800 Squadron. They were soon in action.

NO RESCUE

Eight Hurricanes were scrambled on the 11th only to be intercepted. Two recently arrived pilots, Plt Off Peter Kennett and Sgt Peter Waghorn were brought down into the sea. Both were killed. Furthermore, three Hurricanes crash-landed due to combat damage; their pilots were uninjured.

Late morning on the 13th, 'Imshi' Mason claimed a Bf 109 just off the island only to be attacked by Mietusch. Mason succeeded in levelling out just above the sea but then his engine failed. He was quickly rescued and rushed to hospital where he was found to have bullet wounds

to his right arm and left elbow, metal splinters in his left leg and skull, as well as facial injuries, including a broken nose. Again, another Hurricane returned damaged and no Bf 109s were lost.

The next combat was apparently on April 21 with each side claiming kills but no aircraft were lost. Two days later, Müncheberg shot down Fg Off Henri Auger into the sea off Delimara. Auger was seen to bale out, coming down between Filfa and the mainland but as there were still German aircraft around, no rescue launch was sent out.

Flt Lt Charles Whittingham, who was just about to take command of 261 from an exhausted Bob Lambert, wrote: "*Auger ran into a bunch of '109s. Saw his parachute coming down, south of the Island. But he was never picked up.*"

"The pilots in the squadron were

all very indignant because they felt that control should have sent some searchers up. Things being as they are ... people's nerves [are] somewhat frayed, what with the stream of so many casualties, bombing at night and bad news in Greece and Libya."

PULLED OUT

A Sunderland of 228 Squadron captained by Plt Off Leonard Rees led 23 Hurricanes to the island on April 27 – the fighters became the basis for 185 Squadron. The flying-boat touched down at Kalafrana. Two Bf 109s strafed it and set it on fire.

On May 1 Müncheberg got three kills, which took him to 41 and resulted in the award of the Oak Leaves for his Ritterkreuz four days later. The Germans claimed

Above left
Plt Off David Thacker of 261 Squadron, one of the first three victims of 7/JG 26 on February 12, 1941. VIA THOMAS

Above
Ta' Qali, May 25, 1941 - 7/JG 26 leave an 'arrival present' for 249 Squadron.

Below
Martin Marylands were operated by 69 Squadron from Malta on reconnaissance sorties.





Right
Sgt Bert Deacon's Hurricane after meeting with 7/JG 26 on April 11, 1941.

Below
Oblt Erbo Graf von Kageneck of 9/JG 27. ALL AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE UNLESS NOTED

five Hurricanes in two sorties that day, the only recorded losses being former Battle of Britain pilot Plt Off Bob Innes who baled out, his Hurricane crashing at Ghaxaq. Sgt Brian Walmsley was wounded on the second sortie.

Müncheberg achieved another two victories on the 6th and was joined by Oblt Erbo Graf von Kageneck of 9/JG 27. The aircraft of III/JG 27 had recently arrived at Gela on their way

to North Africa. Plt Offs Alan Dredge, Colin Gray and Peter Thompson (all Battle of Britain pilots) and Sgt Richard Branson were all wounded: Gray and Branson baled out.

Another Sunderland, this time from 10 Squadron RAAF, was set on fire at Marsaxlokk Bay by a lone Bf 109 of 7/JG 26 on May 10.

Three days later Klaus Mietusch, with von Kageneck, accounted for Flt Lt Innes Westmacott, who baled out

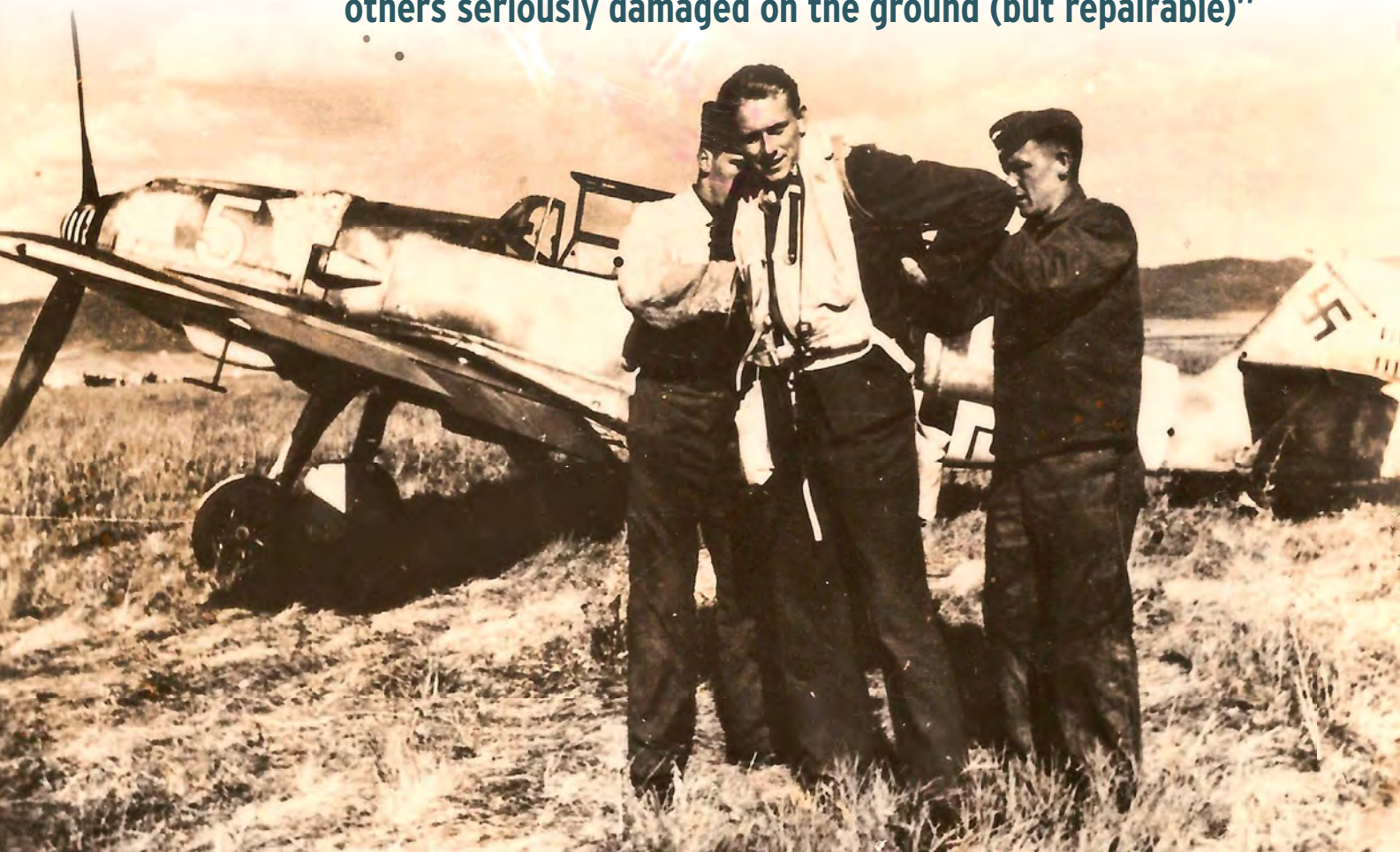
wounded, and Plt Off Thompson, who was killed.

Three more kills were credited to III/JG 27 on May 14, 15 and 20 – two from 261 and one from 185 Squadron. On May 25, the Bf 109s of 7/JG 26 made a spectacular last show before departing to Greece and North Africa.

The Ta' Qali diary related: "...Me 109s machine-gunned a searchlight station on the airfield, wounding one gunner. Two Hurricanes are burned out and three others seriously damaged on the ground (but repairable). A Lister engine is damaged and 90 gallons of oil are lost. One pilot and one airman are injured by shrapnel and admitted to hospital; two other airmen are slightly wounded." It was a baptism of fire for the recently arrived 249 Squadron.

In its short time over Malta, 7/JG 26 under the leadership of Jochen Müncheberg had done extremely well, but it was not able to repeat this in the months and years that followed. Many of the pilots who flew over Malta in those three months, including Müncheberg, did not survive the war. ●

"...Me 109s machine-gunned a searchlight station on the airfield, wounding one gunner. Two Hurricanes are burned out and three others seriously damaged on the ground (but repairable)"

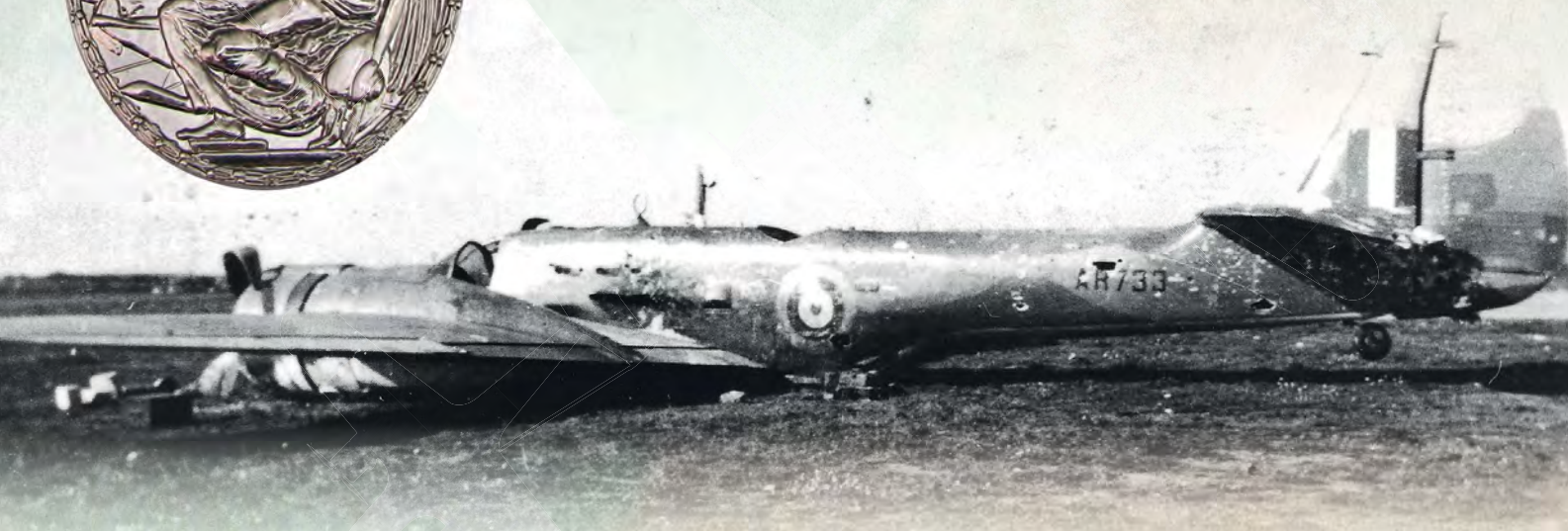




UNLUCKY

13TH

THE MARYLAND OF 69 SQUADRON SHOULD HAVE BEEN EASY PREY BUT, AS ANDY THOMAS RELATES, ITS CREW SHOWED DOGGED DETERMINATION



Malta was a thorn in the side of the Axis forces because it dominated the Mediterranean. The siege and air bombardment of the island aimed to neutralise the potential for based air and naval units to interdict the vital air and sea supply routes to North Africa.

The 'eyes' of the Malta strike forces were reconnaissance aircraft, largely provided by Luqa-based 69 Squadron with its mix of Martin Marylands and a few Hurricanes and Spitfires.

Early on February 13, 1942, ominously a Friday, Plt Off Terry Channon set off in Maryland I AR733 with his crew of sergeants Arthur Moore and Robert Watson on patrol between the island of Pantelleria and Cap Bon on the Tunisian coast.

Task completed, while returning

to Luqa they were intercepted about eight miles south of the island by a pair of Messerschmitt Bf 109F-4s, most likely from the II Gruppe headquarters flight (Stab) of Jagdgeschwader 3 from Sciacca, Sicily. The fighters rapidly closed on AR733 and opened fire from just 40 yards (36.5m) on their first pass.

A devastating burst killed Moore in the turret, caused serious damage and started several small fires. Disregarding his injuries, Watson crawled to the smoke- and flame-filled rear fuselage and dragged the body of his comrade out of the turret and took his place.

As the Messerschmitts closed for a second pass Watson managed to fire an accurate burst into the second one and it appeared to fall away on fire. Fortunately, the other fighter disengaged and flew off.

As Channon headed the shattered

Maryland towards base the gallant Watson attempted to quell the blaze by throwing out burning equipment. He beat out the flames on Moore's body and sustained severe burns in the process.

Barely conscious, Watson assisted Channon as he brought the still burning Maryland in for a wheels-up landing. Watson was rushed off for emergency treatment for his injuries, and for his selfless courage received an immediate award of the DFM.

Over 60 cannon and bullet holes were counted in the damaged aircraft. It never flew again. The ground crew was astonished it had stayed in the air.

As for the Bf 109, it was probably *Black 3* flown by nine-victory 'ace' Leutnant Karl-Heinz Ponec. The Messerschmitt crashed with engine damage on the Sicilian coast near Agrigento, and Ponec was killed. ●

Above left
The Distinguished Flying Medal. VIA AUTHOR

Above
Shattered Maryland I AR733 at Luqa following its crash landing on Friday the 13th. VIA AUTHOR