

PIRATES of t

The Martin Baltimore is one of World War Two's forgotten aircraft, but it performed



ABOVE: Pilot Lt L. G. van Renen (foreground) with the rest of his Baltimore crew: from left to right, wireless operator/air gunner Flt Sgt Arthur Mills, air gunner WO I. R. N. Hammond, and navigator/observer Fg Off Eddie Lowe. Hailing from Stockport, Lowe was the other RAF member of the SAAF crew. VIA ARTHUR MILLS

For a young lad hailing from the north of England, it must have come as quite a shock to the system. Landing ground 07 at Matruh West in the Egyptian desert was no place for the faint-hearted or easily homesick. "It was just tents", says former wireless operator/air gunner Arthur Mills. "You couldn't hide behind very much". This was where he first went to war with No 15 Squadron of the South African Air Force and its Martin Baltimores, during a period when these twin-engined attack bombers proved themselves among the most effective and reliable strike assets available to the Desert Air Forces.

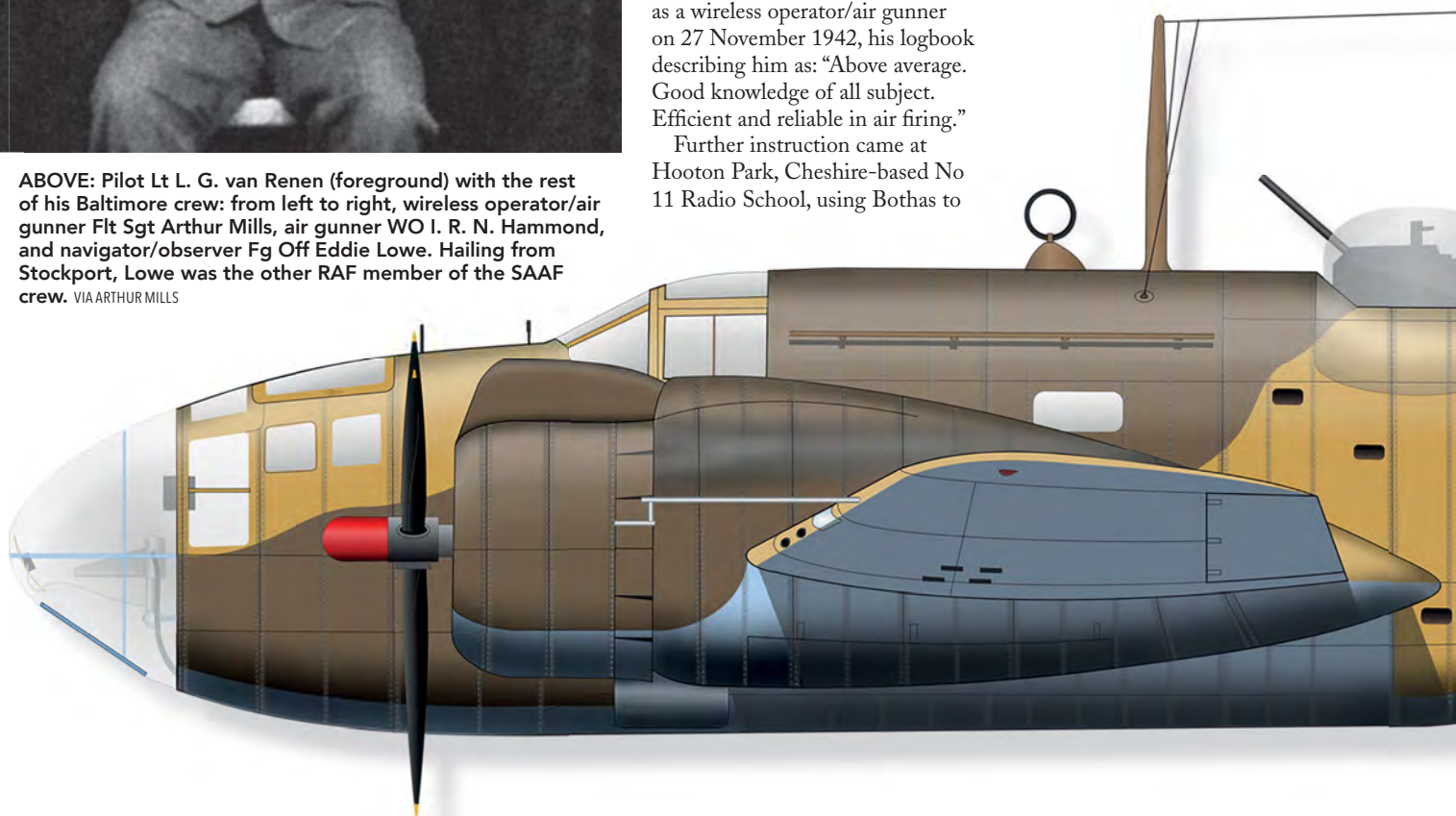
Having joined up and learned Morse code in Blackpool, Mills began the airborne phase of his training with No 4 Signals School at Madley, Herefordshire, in DH Dominies and Percival Proctors. Then it was off to No 8 Air Gunnery School at Evanton, Ross and Cromarty, where he flew in the Blackburn Botha. He qualified as a wireless operator/air gunner on 27 November 1942, his logbook describing him as: "Above average. Good knowledge of all subject. Efficient and reliable in air firing."

Further instruction came at Hooton Park, Cheshire-based No 11 Radio School, using Bothas to

teach coastal patrol techniques, and Avro Ansons for wireless telegraphy. Arthur remembers, "The station commander called me in and said, 'You've done very well. I'm very pleased with you. You will go far'. I think I said to him, 'Sir, is it Berlin, this weekend?' I was waiting to join a bomber squadron... Four or five weeks later, I found myself in the desert, about to join No 15 Squadron of the South African Air Force. The South Africans were desperately short of signallers and air gunners."



First, though, came the required period on an operational training unit. Mills' initial Baltimore trip was on 13 July 1943 with Sqn Ldr Mackay of No 75 OTU at Gianacelis in Alexandria, Egypt, conducting air-to-sea firing. He also undertook bombing and navigational exercises, including some night flying. Soon Arthur was



he AEGEAN

outstandingly over the Aegean — as one crewman remembers **WORDS: BEN DUNNELL**



flying as part of a regular crew, led by pilot Lt L. G. van Renen from Strydenburg, Cape Province. “He was a great chap”, Mills remembers.

Meanwhile, No 15 Squadron had been stationed in the Middle East

since January 1942, when it arrived at Amriya in Egypt. At that time it was equipped with Bristol Blenheim IVs, soon supplanted by Bisleys (otherwise known as Blenheim Vs). From a new base at Mariut they

assumed the coastal reconnaissance role, participating that October alongside torpedo-armed RAF Beauforts in the successful sinking of the Italian tanker *Proserpina*, part of an Axis convoy bound for Tobruk. Maritime work became the squadron’s stock-in-trade: anti-shipping and anti-submarine patrols, and Allied convoy escorts, to name but a few examples. Baltimores arrived in July 1943, and the following month the unit moved to LG 07.

Arthur Mills’ first flight with No 15 Squadron was a four-hour navigation exercise on 28 September 1943. “Almost immediately”, he says, “we started operations against the Aegean islands, which were occupied by the Germans. It was a busy time. We seemed to do very well. There was a lot of ‘ack-ack’, and we were lucky not to be shot down. We had no personal protective equipment, so it was quite a risky business.”

LEFT: A No 15 Squadron Baltimore coded ‘A’ taxiing at a desert aerodrome. The Martin-built attack bomber proved exceptionally reliable, the unit routinely seeing serviceability rates in the high 90 per cent range despite the tough operating environment.

SAAF



ABOVE: Baltimore IV FA428 was an important aircraft for No 15 Squadron, SAAF: flown by Maj D. V. Dodd, it made the first South African reconnaissance flight over the Aegean Islands on 27 August 1943. At the time, Dodd was the unit’s acting officer commanding. FA428 crashed into the Aegean on 17 September 1943, while being flown by Lt Meijer and his crew, all of whom were lost. PIET VAN SCHALKWYK

“It was always an advantage being low and over the water. My pilot was a great one for flying down to the water. He said it was the safest place — they didn’t like attacking you there”



ABOVE: Two marks of Baltimore were flown by No 15 Squadron — this is a MkV, pictured over the Italian coast in August 1943. It was more powerful than the MkIV, having 1,700hp instead of 1,600hp Wright R-2600 engines, and 0.5in as opposed to 0.303in machine guns in the wings.

VIA M. SCHOENMANN

In October, the van Renen crew started performing close convoy escorts, armed reconnaissances of the Aegean and so forth. Mills’ logbook records the sorties they undertook as the Baltimores increasingly went on the offensive. An Axis ship in Syros harbour was hit by their bombs on 19 October, in the course of a three-aircraft attack with a 1,000-tonne German motor vessel as its prime objective; on the 28th, they braved intense anti-aircraft fire to make a low-level attack on some Axis caïques (smaller fishing boats).

“It was always an advantage being low and over the water”, Arthur recalls. “My pilot was a great one for flying down to the water. He said it was the safest place, and he knew what it was about. They didn’t like attacking you there.”

That first month alone, Mills and his fellow crew members accumulated 60 hours 40 minutes in the course of 14 operational sorties. Fighter escorts were not then on the agenda, since, he says of the Baltimore, “It was quite a swift machine”. Sometimes they flew by night as Axis forces tried to get vessels through under cover of darkness, although, he added, “The aeroplane was never geared-up for night flying.”

For a time it became regular practice for two pairs of Baltimores to be sent off: two on a long-range reconnaissance mission, then, one-and-a-half to two hours later, another two engaged in an offensive reconnaissance. The time gap often saw the latter pair being called on at short notice to attack caïques that came within range. The squadron’s operational review for January 1944 says: “These routes were designed to intercept the enemy’s shipping routes, but the attacks of previous months had obviously restricted small craft traffic to night sailings, while by day vessels which had not completed their journey always sheltered, usually near shore ack-ack defences, in bays which made attack and bombing approaches most difficult.”



It went on: “The Rhodes Harbour reces were undoubtedly the hardest task the aircrews had. Even though by flying at deck level the aircraft probably kept out of the enemy’s effective chain of radar stations, approach to the harbour undetected was virtually impossible. The harbour’s concentration of ack-ack positions, and later fighters based on the neighbouring aerodrome

of Maritza, made the recce one of considerable difficulty — to say the least — and the fact that it was on almost all occasions carried out effectively was an exceptionally good performance on the part of the crews concerned.”

Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 109Es and Fs were stationed at Maritza from late January 1944 onwards. They made life increasingly difficult for the Baltimores, but No 15 Squadron fought outstandingly against the new menace. Meanwhile, a reinstated squadron detachment at Gambut provided convoy protection for supply vessels and naval forces and took part in searches for downed airmen, among other tasks.

Also at LG 07 were Bristol Beaufighters of RAF Coastal Command’s No 252 Squadron, which arrived on 15 January. They provided an extra (rocket-armed) striking capability in theatre. Joint tactics were developed, using the Baltimores — with their very effective 0.5in turret guns — to give top cover for Beaufighters engaged in attacks on shipping. This was trained for extensively but never used, as numbers of suitable targets decreased.

The most memorable day for the van Renen crew was 20 February



LEFT: Flt Sgt Mills in front of some of landing ground 07's tented accommodation, which proved rather susceptible to the stronger desert winds.

VIA ARTHUR MILLS

1944. In Baltimore V FA302, they conducted a photo-recce of the Aegean, covering Leros and Rhodes harbour. They and a second machine brought back what the unit records called "some of the best photographs taken of Rhodes", together with "a most detailed report" on vessels there and at Leros, "giving exact map references of each vessel and also ack-ack positions". Then the aircraft were subjected to Luftwaffe attentions.

"Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Junkers Ju 88s arrived and we were knocked about a bit", Mills remembers. "The undercarriage was shot away, and the skipper said, 'Hang on, I'm going to dive on top of the sea to get away'. We were followed by the odd Messerschmitt, but we had set 'scare guns' on the sides of the Baltimore's fuselage as well as the turret, and they were helpful. They were operated by me, without me being able to see what I was shooting at."

According to the crew's combat report, the quartet of Ju 88s approached out of cloud from astern. One broke away to port, two formed up on either beam and fired on the Baltimores from 800 yards out, and the fourth attacked from astern at 300 yards. The latter was shot down

by the No 15 Squadron aircraft, the Junkers bursting into flames, hitting the water and disintegrating for a confirmed kill.



Then the Bf 109s approached from the direction of Calato airfield, two of them forming up on the Baltimores' port beam, one at 400 yards and the other at 700. After jettisoning their long-range tanks, the closer Messerschmitt opened fire. It was returned by the Baltimore, bullets being seen to hit the fighter's nose, whereupon it broke off and spun into the sea. van Renen used evasive tactics, turning into each attack. The second pair of Bf 109s formed up to starboard, and a fifth appeared too, but was hit in its belly by fire from the Baltimore's turret and broke off, being declared as a probable kill.

The engagement thus concluded after eight minutes, whereupon the second Baltimore, flown by Lt Otto, was seen to be missing. It was later confirmed lost. van Renen's aircraft suffered a damaged main spar. The action was the subject of one of many enthusiastic SAAF statements issued to the press. Turret gunner WO Hammond "did some remarkable shooting, completely

routing the enemy... Hammond only fired his guns three times and claimed two destroyed and one probable, which means, in estimated terms of profit and loss, that for the expenditure of a few shillings' worth of ammunition he cost the enemy about £30,000 in aircraft apart from the pilots."

The van Renen crew completed 31 operational missions. Their last was on 20 March 1944, between Ramat David and LG 07, at the end of which their Baltimore — MkIV FA640 — was damaged in a crash-landing. A note in Mills' logbook from squadron signals officer Capt Richardson reads: "Flt Sgt Mills demonstrated an excellent knowledge of signals, wireless operating and radar operating and in these subjects can be assessed as well above average."

His tour completed, Mills joined van Renen and Hammond in heading for South Africa, where he flew as a signaller on Ansons with No 43 Air School at Port Alfred. Post-war, Arthur spent a long time with Coastal Command, then — having always been a keen sportsman, playing cricket for the RAF at Lords — six years as a physical training instructor at Cranwell. He received the MBE for that aspect of his service. Now aged 95, he returned to the Lincolnshire station this September, having been invited to sign No 57 Squadron's wall of honour.

The exploits of Mills' wartime South African unit, and its unsung American aircraft, are deserving of their own honour. "The Baltimore was very reliable, and quite well-equipped", states Arthur. "In the hands of a good pilot, it could handle itself, and van Renen was a very dedicated pilot. It was a fine aeroplane, but it's very little mentioned. On one occasion we came back and landed safely with probably about 50 shell holes in the fuselage. You think, 'Crikey, I wonder how they didn't get me.'"

Credit came from none other than Winston Churchill himself. On 22 February 1944, just two days after the sterling efforts over Rhodes harbour, he sent his personal congratulations to the Baltimore and Beaufighter units for their work in the Aegean. As for van Renen, he — having been posted away — was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross that September "for courage, determination and devotion to duty". The epithet could, indeed, be applied to the whole of No 15 Squadron, SAAF.



ABOVE: Arthur Mills MBE on his visit to RAF Cranwell this past September.

VIA ARTHUR MILLS