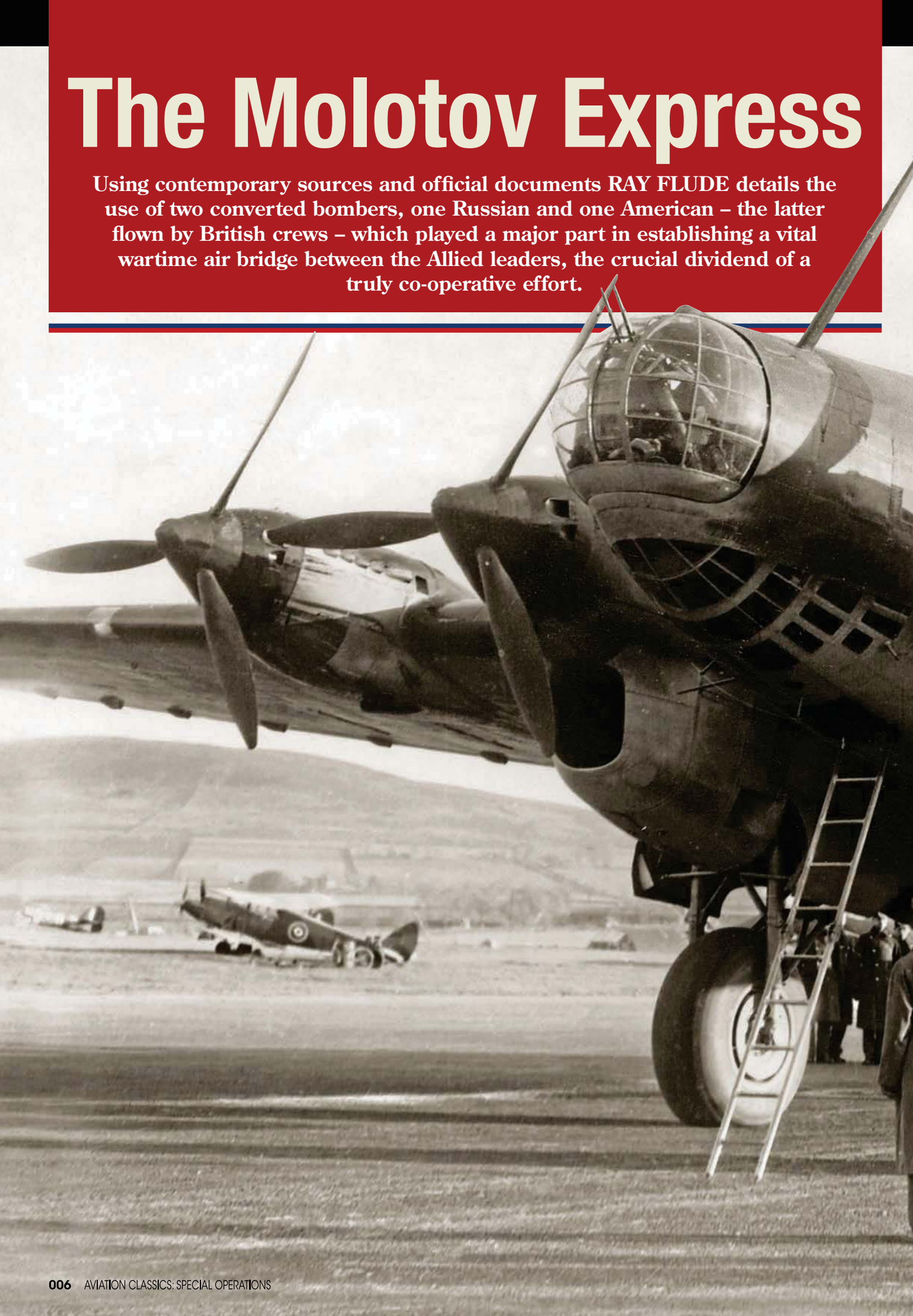
# The Molotov Express

**Using contemporary sources and official documents RAY FLUDE details the use of two converted bombers, one Russian and one American – the latter flown by British crews – which played a major part in establishing a vital wartime air bridge between the Allied leaders, the crucial dividend of a truly co-operative effort.**



When the Second World War became globalin December 1941 the air links between Britain and the USA were already in place, established on the back of the air delivery routes across the North Atlantic and the Return Ferry Service. The links to the third key member of the alliance, the Soviet Union, were more difficult to create and made more dangerous by the barrier of the fighting on the Eastern Front. Links by air were important because they enabled rapid face-to-face contact. They were essential for the establishment of collaboration among the Allies because high-status political and military leaders did not want to be away from their own countries for the long periods of time which other transport methods required. This article aims to tell the interlocking stories of two particular transport aircraft, both converted bombers, which played important roles in maintaining the Russian connection.

## RED STARS AND STRIPES

The American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, took the initiative by asking the Russian premier, Joseph Stalin, on April 12, 1942, if he would be willing to send his Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, and a military adviser, to Washington DC for talks about future strategy. Stalin had not been able to join the President and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at their previous meetings because of the precarious position of the Soviet Union after the German invasion in June 1941, but the Soviets were keen to make personal contact with their allies in the west. ▶

**BELOW: Petlyakov Pe-8 bomber c/n 42066 is greeted by British officials at RAF Tealing, near Dundee in Scotland, on its arrival with the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov on the morning of May 20, 1942.** *Philip Jarrett collection*

Stalin agreed to the flight on April 20 and told Roosevelt that Molotov would have talks in London on the way. The President offered an American transport aircraft for the journey but Stalin insisted that a Soviet aircraft would be able to make the flight.[1] This was the first in a sequence of high-level meetings between all three major Allies – Britain, the USA and USSR – in the spring of 1942, made possible by air transport.

The purpose of the meetings and discussions was to agree the next step in joint strategy and particularly to agree a date when Britain and the USA would be able to open a second front across the English Channel and relieve the pressure on the Soviets in the east.

The British ambassador to Moscow, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, informed London on April 20 that the "Soviet government wished to send a four-engined aircraft direct from Moscow". At this stage he could not say who the likely passengers would be and, because this was the first flight of its kind, the V-VS (Soviet Air Force) wanted to know which airfield they should use. The RAF, in turn, asked for full details about communications, the route and the instruments the Soviet aircraft would have on board.[2]

On April 29, 1942, a test flight from the Soviet Union to Britain was undertaken via Zagorsk, Kalinin, Pskov, across the battle zone on the Eastern Front near the River Lovat at 20,000ft (6,100m), across the Baltic and over enemy territory at night across northern Denmark and the North Sea.[3] The aircraft used was a Petlyakov Pe-8/TB-7. This type was the only four-engined bomber manufactured by the Soviet Union during the war years and fewer than 100 were built. The flight took more than 10hr and the chief pilot was Major Sergey Asyamov, who had planned the route and persuaded the Soviet leadership that the flight was feasible.

**BELOW: Vyacheslav Molotov, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs from May 1939, was later memorably described thus by Winston Churchill: "His smile of Siberian winter, his carefully-measured and often wise words, his affable demeanour, combined to make him the perfect agent of Soviet policy in a deadly world..."**

The aircraft landed safely at RAF Tealing, near Dundee in Scotland, and the next day RAF de Havilland D.H.95 Flamingo R2764 of No 24 Sqn took the Russian Military Attaché in London, two other members of the Soviet Embassy staff and two British liaison officers, along with Asyamov, on a tour of alternative landing sites in Scotland which might be suitable for other aircraft flying from Russia. With the tour completed, the party was flying on to London when the sleek twin-engined Flamingo exploded in mid-air in a vivid orange fireball, pieces of blazing wreckage raining down on the fields near Great Ouseburn in the Vale of York. The RAF crew and all the passengers were killed outright.

## SABOTAGE?

The Flamingo had been lost at about 1725hr on April 30, 1942. An investigation was ordered immediately owing to two pressing concerns. First, Churchill – who had used this very aircraft as a VIP transport on his missions to France in 1940 to encourage the French government – wanted to know whether the Flamingo was still safe to use to carry VIPs.[4] Secondly, the presence of important Soviet officials on the aircraft raised the question of sabotage. If this was indeed the cause of the explosion it could jeopardise the vital discussions between the Allies about a joint strategy for winning the war. These discussions depended on the use of air transport.

The immediate concern was sabotage. A Court of Inquiry was rapidly drawn together and Soviet officers had to be involved. It was found, however, that the cause of the explosion was a fault in the starboard Bristol Perseus engine, as the

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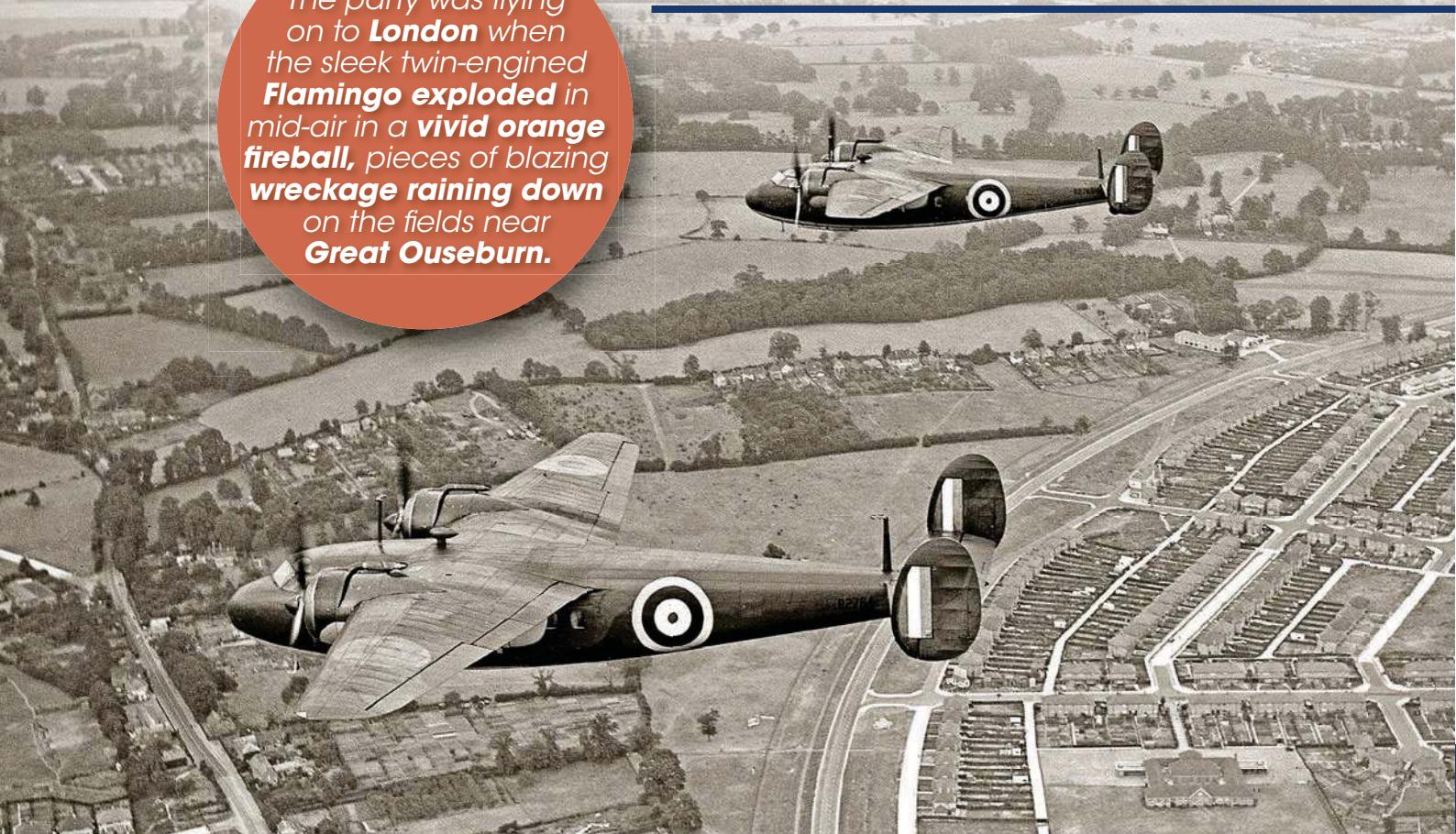
**BELOW: Two of the three de Havilland D.H.95 Flamingos built to RAF specifications fly together in formation in October 1940. Nearest the camera is R2764, which crashed on April 30, 1942, with several Soviet VIPs aboard.** *Philip Jarrett collection*



**ABOVE: The mighty four-engined Pe-8 at Tealing on May 20, 1942. The Pe-8/TB-7 prototype made its first flight on December 27, 1936, the type becoming the only four-engined bomber built by the Russians during the Great Patriotic War. The Pe-8 that brought Molotov was a standard production example, fitted with four 1,340 h.p. Mikulin AM-35A V12 liquid-cooled engines.** *Philip Jarrett collection*

report explained: "The failure of a piston led to a cylinder breaking off, resulting in fire and explosion, presumably of the fuel tank, and the breaking away of the starboard wing at the root".

The cylinder in question was recovered well away from the central area of the crash. All the engine parts were examined by Bristol and sabotage was ruled out. In addition, no evidence was found to indicate that servicing had been inadequate. The outcome was recorded on May 3 and Churchill was assured, after further enquiries, that the aircraft type was still considered safe for VIP passengers.

The Soviet bomber returned to Moscow after the successful test flight, flying overnight on May 1–2 with Asyamov's copilot, Col Endel Puusepp, at the controls. Following the Flamingo accident, British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden and Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to London, exchanged messages of sympathy for those killed in the crash. For a while it was feared that the incident might prevent Molotov's visit altogether. Maisky [whose fascinating diaries from 1932–43 were published by Yale in 2015 – TAH] could only say that he "didn't know whether this would affect Molotov's journey".[5]

Despite these anxieties Molotov, together with military advisers Rear Admiral Kharlamov and Maj-Gen Asseyev, accepted the risks and flew overnight on May 19–20 from Moscow to Tealing using the same Pe-8, piloted by Puusepp. Information about when Molotov's aircraft might arrive was left somewhat sketchy owing to tight Soviet security.

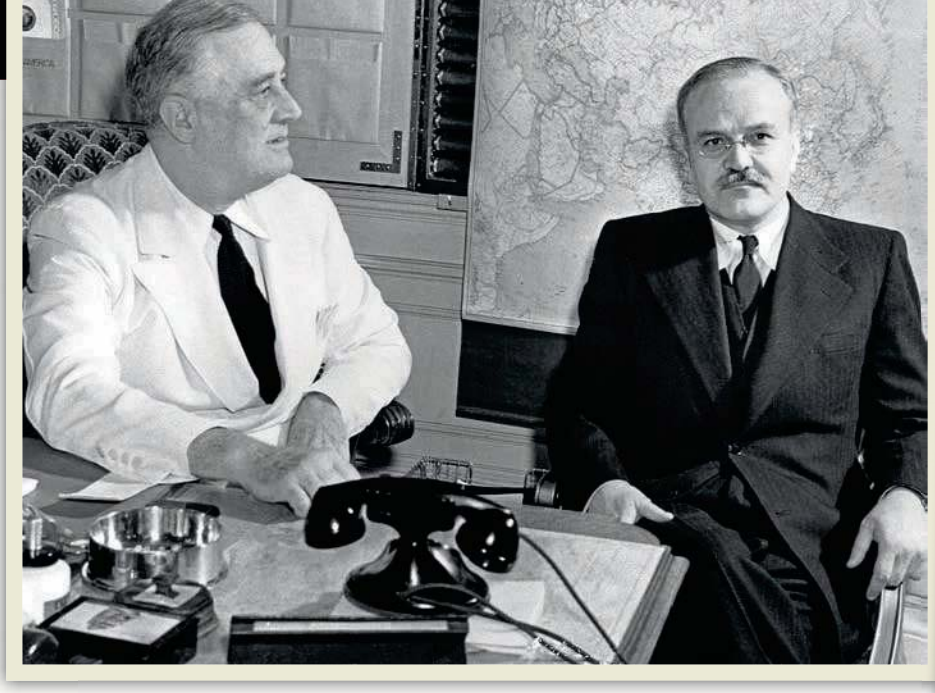
Sir Alexander Cadogan, the British Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, describes in his diaries how he flew to Tealing to welcome Molotov, who had been expected on May 10. A special train was waiting near the airfield with Soviet ambassador Maisky on board, but since the aircraft had still not arrived by May 14 the train returned to London. Molotov eventually arrived on the morning of May 20, and was photographed bundled up in a bulky flying suit, flying helmet and oxygen mask, underlining the fact that the flight had been at high altitude in an unheated unpressurised bomber.[6]

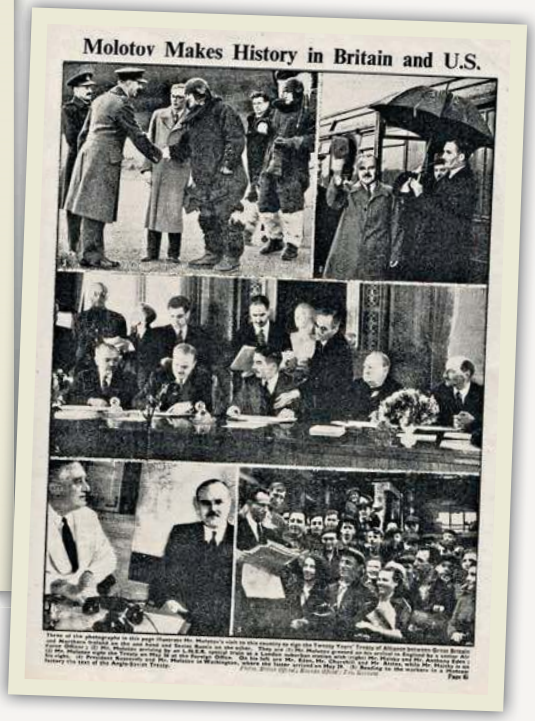
## TO LONDON AND WASHINGTON

Molotov then travelled to London by train and had discussions with Churchill and Eden. This was a very important high-level contact, since, at this point, neither Churchill nor Roosevelt had met directly with any of the Soviet leadership. Molotov was still looking for a treaty to guarantee Russia's pre-June 1941 frontier, including the parts of Poland annexed as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and he also desperately wanted to encourage Britain and the USA to begin to move on a second front to ease the pressure on the Soviet Union. He did not secure a firm commitment on either issue from Churchill, but a 20-year treaty of friendship was signed and "full understanding was reached with regard to the urgent task of creating a second front in Europe in 1942".[7]

**ABOVE: The Soviet Foreign Minister (centre) takes a stroll with the British Prime Minister in London. To the left of Molotov, in hat, is the Soviet Ambassador to London, Ivan Maisky.** *via Mikhail Maslov*

**ABOVE: Molotov, in heavy flying suit and boots, is welcomed to the UK by RAF officers after climbing out of the Pe-8 at Tealing on May 20, 1942.** *via Mikhail Maslov*






**ABOVE:** President Franklin D. Roosevelt (left) and Molotov discussed the possibility of opening a "second front" during the Soviet Foreign Minister's visit to Washington DC during May–June 1942. Roosevelt was initially keen to land troops in France and relieve pressure on the Russians by the end of 1942, but Churchill counselled that any such plans be shelved for the time being.

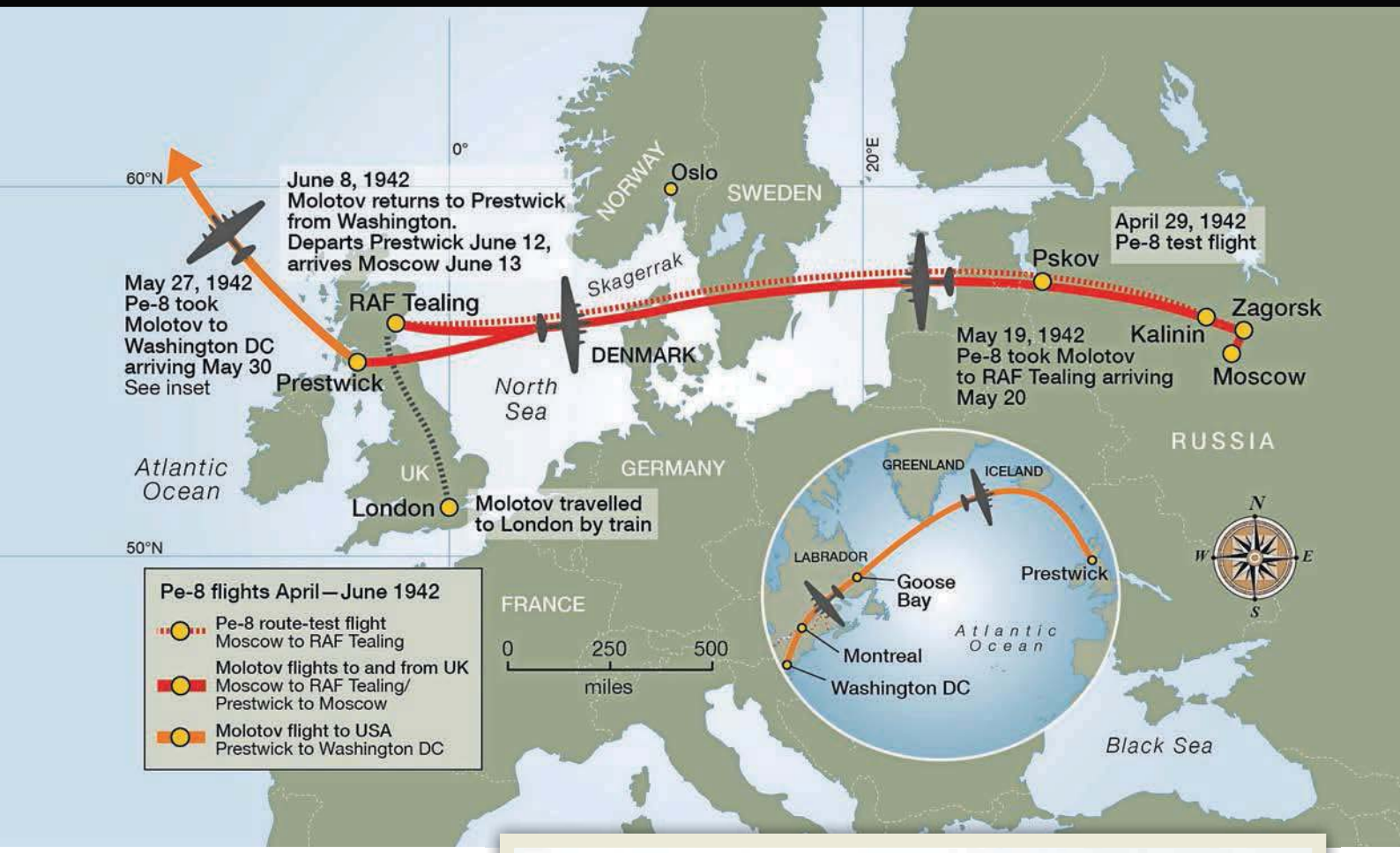
On May 27, 1942, the Pe-8 took Molotov on to Washington DC from Prestwick via Iceland, Goose Bay, Labrador and Montreal, arriving in the American capital on May 30. There he met with Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, one of the former's closest advisers who had helped to create and run the USA's New Deal development programmes of the 1930s. The flight had been codenamed Operation Switch and all RAF personnel involved were instructed that "the utmost secrecy is to be observed regarding this operation".8 Puusepp was personally congratulated by Roosevelt on completing the flight safely after the aircraft burst a tyre on landing at Washington DC.

In the discussions in the White House, Roosevelt felt the need to make stronger undertakings than the British had been willing to commit to about the opening of a second front during 1942, in order to encourage the Soviet Union to remain in the war alongside the Allies. The message that the British were not as positive as the USA on this issue was relayed to Stalin and was to be the cause of many future problems.

On the return flight from Washington DC, starting on June 4 via Canada, Greenland and Iceland, the RAF's No 44 (Ferry Service) Group was alerted by the Air Ministry that "a four-engined aircraft similar to a [Boeing B-17] Fortress, camouflaged brown and green, carrying important passengers,

*On May 27, 1942, the* ***Pe-8*** *took* ***Molotov*** *on to* ***Washington DC*** *from* ***Prestwick*** *via* ***Iceland, Goose Bay, Labrador*** *and* ***Montreal,*** *arriving in the American capital on* ***May 30.***

**BELOW:** The Pe-8's wingspan of 128ft 4in (39·13m) was greater than that of any contemporary operational British or American four-engined bomber, although the B-24 Liberator's slender Davis wing of 110ft (33·5m) came close. Note the Hurricane seen here in the background at Tealing, home to the RAF's No 56 Operational Training Unit. *Philip Jarrett collection*




**ABOVE: This map shows the flights made by the Pe-8 in support of Molotov's meetings with Churchill and Roosevelt during May–June 1942.** *Map by Maggie Nelson*

**ABOVE: One of the 14 Albemarles despatched to the Soviet Union by No 305 FTU at RAF Errol. Two of these, P1455 and P1645, were lost en route and another, P1647, had to return following oil-feed problems. It was, however, fixed and sent again.** *via Vladimir Kotelnikov*

was leaving Gander [in Newfoundland] for Britain... it was not to approach Britain after dark".[9] The return flight was codenamed Operation Shaft and the aircraft landed at Prestwick on June 8, allowing Churchill and Molotov to have further discussions about the possibilities of a second front. The Pe-8 then continued from Prestwick, surviving an attack by enemy fighters on the way, to land in Moscow on June 13.[10]

This had been a vitally important first contact between the leaders of all three of the major Allies and could have been put at risk as a result of the Flamingo accident. Although Molotov and Stalin would not have been satisfied with the slow pace at which Britain and the USA were moving towards a second front in Europe, an Anglo-Soviet Treaty was agreed and signed, Molotov's visits playing an important part in maintaining the relationship and holding the alliance together. There was a very real fear in Britain and America at this time that Stalin might make a deal with Hitler, which would then allow the massive German forces engaged on the Eastern Front to turn against Britain.

## INTO ACTION AGAIN

The same Pe-8 was called into action again early in 1943 to bring groups of Soviet pilots to Britain. The RAF's No 305 Ferry Training Unit (FTU) had been created at RAF Errol, Tayside (now Perth and Kinross), Scotland, in December 1942. It was an unusual unit in that, while other FTUs were busy training RAF pilots and crews to fly aircraft to the Middle East and India, No 305 FTU was tasked with training Russian aircrews to fly a total of 100 twin-engined Armstrong Whitworth Albemarles direct to Russia across the Baltic.

The little-loved Albemarle, which entered RAF service in January 1943, had originally been designed as a medium bomber, but never served in that role – it being clear from the start that existing aircraft like the Vickers Wellington were still superior. Instead it had been relegated to general and special transport duties.

The new FTU commenced operations on January 1, 1943. The Albemarles were prepared by No 2 Overseas Aircraft Preparation Unit (OAPU) at Filton, near Bristol, before being flown north to Errol. When despatched from the latter the aircraft were to have 15 flying hours available before the next inspection and to have evidence of fuel-consumption tests and a signed-off weight sheet. The aircraft would leave under the control of Prestwick and were to arrive, under the supervision of Moscow Master Control, at Kalyazin on the Volga, about 65 miles (100km) north of Moscow. Flying with three 210gal overload fuel tanks at 2,000ft (600m) at a speed of 160 m.p.h. (255km/h), the aircraft had a safe range of 1,900 miles (3,050km), equating to some 13¼ flying hours.

The plan was for the FTU to train eight crews at a time, each of four men; 16 crews ▶

## PIONEERING THE ROUTES TO RUSSIA

The northern route to Moscow had first been used in the autumn of 1941, by two US Army Air Corps B-24 Liberators carrying members of a mission to Moscow led by American special envoy W. Averell Harriman and Lord Beaverbrook, the British Minister for Aircraft Production. The two principals travelled by sea but others, including Constantine Oumansky, the Soviet Ambassador to Washington DC, used the two aircraft.

The flight represented an innovation in air transport, showing the potential for long-range aircraft to make possible frequent face-to-face meetings of decision-makers anywhere across the globe. The B-24s flew non-stop from Prestwick, far to the north beyond the North Cape, over Archangel and on to Moscow. At times the temperature inside the aircraft dropped to -20°C (-4°F) and heavy ice formed on the wings.

At the banquet for the delegation in the Kremlin a few days after its arrival, Stalin made a point of walking around the table to toast the two B-24 pilots to recognise their achievement. The main delegation returned to Britain by sea but the two B-24s again demonstrated the potential power of air transport for the Allies. One returned to the USA via Tehran, Cairo, Bathurst in West Africa and across the South Atlantic to Natal in Brazil. From there it flew on to Miami, gathering information about the route on the way.

The other returned to the USA by flying the other way around the world via Tehran, India, the Philippines and across the Pacific, stopping at Wake Island, Hawaii and California.

*Sources: Special Envoy to Churchill and Stalin, W. Averell Harriman, 1975, pp 83/4; also The Flying Years, Lou Reichers, 1956, pp174–216*

altogether would be needed to deliver all 100 Albemarles. Training the crews would take a total of two months, after which the station would be a despatch base for about six months while the delivery flights were undertaken and the crews were rotated back to Britain. This was a project with a very high profile politically and diplomatically. It was an early example of joint Soviet/British activity in Britain and as a result there was a stream of VIP visitors from the British Air Ministry, Soviet Embassy, Soviet Military Mission and Trade Commission.[11]

The Pe-8 which had carried Molotov had by this time been converted to carry up to 20 passengers, and in the spring of 1943 the aircraft made two flights from Russia to the UK. The first was made on March 13, 1943, when eight Russian officers were flown to Prestwick in the Pe-8, piloted by Endel Puusepp, to join the FTU at Errol. The flight started from Kratovo on a route to Prestwick via the Baltic, neutral Sweden, Norway and the North Sea. This flight, however, gave rise to a complaint from the RAF sent through the Military Mission in Moscow. The Soviets had ignored the arrangements for flights over the northern routes between the Soviet Union and Britain, which included a warning of the flight 48hr in advance, an exchange of weather forecasts, a flightplan sent an hour before take-off and a departure signal to confirm that the aircraft had left. As a result the controllers at Prestwick could not alert the air defences and the aircraft had run the risk of being intercepted and shot down. The British Ambassador had to take this up in Moscow.

The next flight from the Soviet Union, on April 8, brought 13 Russian officers, of which five were returning to Britain after having made successful Albemarle delivery flights.

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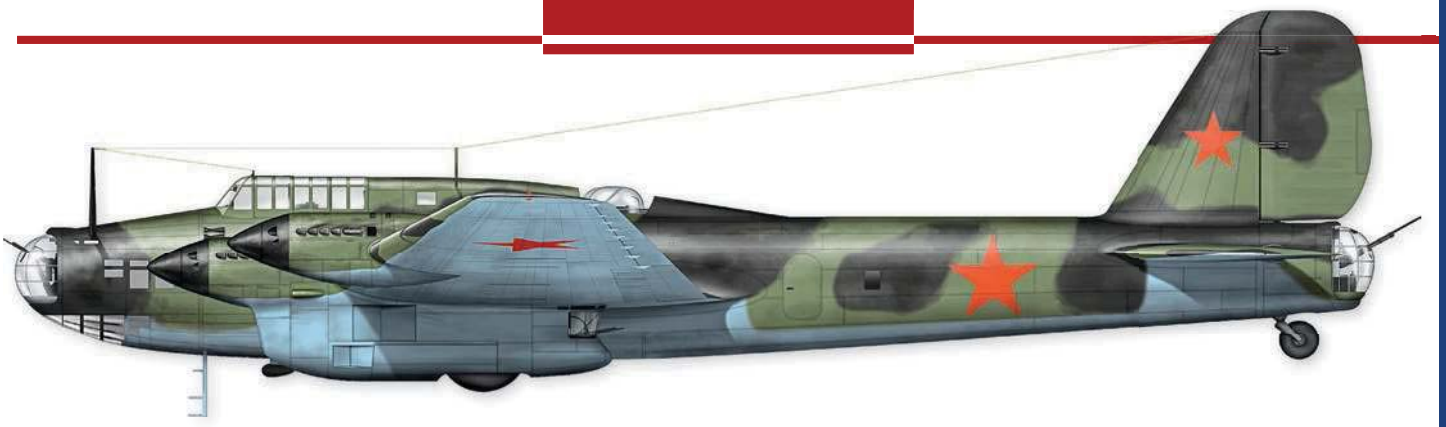
## ROUTE CONSOLIDATION

The job of carrying the Russian crews to Britain was shared between the Pe-8 and a BOAC Consolidated Liberator Mk I. At the time there were two main BOAC air routes to the Soviet Union, one codenamed Sealyham and the other Festoon. The former took a route via Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean to Cairo in Egypt, on to Tehran in Iran and into Russia. This was used on an irregular basis from 1941 onwards, but in October 1942 a BOAC crew tested Festoon, a more direct northern route to Moscow from Prestwick.

The Liberator I which made the BOAC Festoon test flight and provided the resulting service was AM259, operating with the civilian registration G-AGCD. This aircraft was one of those that had made emergency ammunition resupply flights to the Middle East in July 1942 (see the author's

**BELOW: Originally conceived as a medium reconnaissance-bomber made from non-strategic materials, the Albemarle started life as a Bristol design, the type's heritage in terms of its general configuration and distinctive Blenheim-type scalloped nose being much evident; but the aircraft proved inferior to the RAF types it was meant to replace, and it was quickly relegated to general duties in service.** *TAH Archive*



**ABOVE: Petlyakov Pe-8 c/n 42066, the 28th production example of 93 built, was relatively new when called upon to transport the Soviet Foreign Minister on his travels. The radiators for the cooling of all four liquid-cooled V12 engines were installed in the two inner nacelles.** *Artwork by Juanita Franzi / www.aeroillustrations.com © 2019*

A Supreme Effort in TAH10). The Festoon test flight on October 21, 1942, had taken off from Prestwick in the evening, flown north to the Arctic Circle, crossed Norway during the night and the Eastern Front before dawn, arriving over Moscow in daylight so that it could make a landing with reasonable visibility.[12] The Liberator had arrived safely despite encountering some anti-aircraft fire over the front line, and nine further flights took place over that winter following the same route.

Several of these flights were to bring Soviet aircrews over for training at RAF Errol. On the first of these the Liberator left Prestwick for Ramenskoye airfield, 30 miles (50km) south-east of Moscow, on January 4, 1943, and returned with ten Soviet officers on the 11th. Similar round-trips delivered a further 12 Soviet officers to the UK on January 28, a dozen more on February 22 and another 12 on March 7. The weather took a hand in the next BOAC round-trip, which left Prestwick on March 18 and collected eight more officers. The Liberator was forced by bad weather to return to Britain using the southern Sealyham route via Tehran, Cairo and North Africa, and is logged in the No 44 Group traffic reports as arriving at Prestwick on March 22 from Marrakesh.

By this time the Albemarles were being ferried to Russia, the first departing Errol on March 3, followed by five more the same month. The flights left in the early evening, requiring a lengthy period of darkness to cross the Skaggerak and the Eastern Front in safety. By the middle of May 1943 20 crews had been brought to Britain and trained and no more had arrived. In the lull the Russians were taken to see Blair Atholl Castle and to the Scottish Cup Final at Hampden Park.

A total of 14 Albemarles (of which two were lost) had been despatched by No 305 FTU over the northern route to the Soviet Union when the Russians asked for the remainder of the aircraft to be delivered through the Mediterranean. This route was now cleared after the Allied victories in North Africa and was available for use. It was also apparent that the northern route across German-occupied territory and the combat zone on the Eastern Front was already very hazardous for the Albemarles, particularly in summer when the period of darkness and the cover it afforded was very short. The Festoon transport route was also shut down for the summer for the same reason.

The shortcomings of the Albemarle were also becoming increasingly obvious and the Russians cancelled the order. They were already beginning to receive hundreds of Douglas C-47 transports via the ALSIB (Alaska–Siberia) route from the USA, which fulfilled their needs much more effectively. Liberator G-AGCD continued to carry out Sealyham flights to Moscow via the Mediterranean, Cairo and Tehran during the autumn of 1943.

## BIG PLANS FOR 1944

At the first meeting between Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt at the end of November 1943 in Tehran (codenamed Eureka), it was agreed that the Soviet summer offensive for 1944 in Belorussia (now Belarus) should be timed to support the D-Day landings in Normandy, and that deception plans leading up to the two operations should be linked.


**ABOVE: The first Liberator to arrive in the UK, at Squires Gate on March 14, 1941, AM259 was allocated to BOAC and given the civil registration G-AGCD the following month, before beginning extensive operations on the Corporation's transatlantic Return Ferry Service between Prestwick, Newfoundland and Montreal.** *Philip Jarrett collection*


**ABOVE: Consolidated Liberator Mk I c/n 2 was originally given the RAF serial AM259, but official documents show that the aircraft flew with the civilian registration G-AGCD for its Festoon and Sealyham flights to the Soviet Union during 1942–44.**
*Artwork by Juanita Franzi / www.aeroillustrations.com © 2019*

Colonel John Bevan, an ex-stockbroker and decorated veteran of the First World War, led the Allied top-secret London Controlling Section, responsible for the overall planning, supervision and co-ordination of strategic deception on a worldwide basis. On December 6, 1943, Bevan received his formal brief: "To persuade the enemy to dispose forces in areas where they can cause least interference with Operations Overlord [the invasion of Normandy], Anvil [the invasion of southern France] and with operations on the Russian front".

To co-ordinate the planning Bevan was sent to Moscow with an American colleague, Col William Baumer. The pair departed Prestwick on January 29, 1944, in Liberator G-AGCD (AM259). Bevan's position and his knowledge of vital Allied secrets – including the various elements of the Operation Bodyguard deception plan, the codebreaking secrets of Ultra and the plans for Overlord – made travel outside the UK by air so close to enemy occupied territory a very serious security risk. Nevertheless, it was felt that despite this he had to fly to Moscow to brief senior Soviet officials in person to get their support for the plan.

Along with Bevan and Baumer in the Liberator were Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, British Ambassador to Moscow, three RAF officers and a returning Soviet diplomat, Gronov, with his wife. All were sitting on mattresses and sleeping bags on the floor of the boarded-over bomb bay. The aircraft was flown by Capt Jan Moll, a legendary pre-war KLM pilot who had flown some of the Middle East resupply missions in July and August 1942.

This flight to Moscow was designated as a Special Festoon flight over the northern route.

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*Map by Maggie Nelson*

Most of the flights to Moscow by early 1944 routed via the southern Sealyham route through the Mediterranean, following the defeat of the German and Italian forces in North Africa in May 1943. Although safer, the Mediterranean route took much longer; 3½ days as opposed to 13hr.[13] Unfortunately, Bevan's flight turned into a shambles and shows how close to the edge of disaster these long-distance flights could stray.

The aircraft was fired on by anti-aircraft artillery as it crossed occupied Norway, added to which the oxygen system failed to work properly. On arrival at Moscow, the crew could not find the correct landing field in the snow-covered terrain and had to make an emergency landing on a military airfield. The passengers were in such a poor state by the time they reached the ground that Bevan had to be carried unconscious from the aircraft.[14] The Head of the Air Section of the Military Mission in Moscow complained bitterly about the management of the flight: "[His Excellency the Ambassador] and the rest of the afterguard [passengers] arrived in a very dicky state having spent a few hours at 22,000ft [6,700m] without oxygen".

The subsequent investigation found that the radio officer had failed to open the valve supplying oxygen to the passengers' masks, and that the briefing officer at Prestwick had confused Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and Moscow local time, which meant that the radio beacons at the Soviet airfield used to guide the aircraft to the correct landing field were not turned on as the Liberator approached.[15]

Having disembarked the passengers, the aircraft was unable to return over the same route because of severe weather conditions, and on February 7, 1944, it flew back to Britain via Habbaniya in Iraq, Cairo and Gibraltar, arriving at Lyneham on February 11.

Fortunately Bevan recovered from the journey and the discussions kept him and Baumer in Moscow for five weeks until the Soviets sanctioned the deception plan and agreed to co-operate with its implementation, after which Bevan and Baumer returned to Britain again using G-AGCD on the Sealyham route via Baku in Azerbaijan, Tehran and Abadan in Iran, Cairo and Gibraltar.[16]

## SQUEEZING FROM BOTH SIDES

As agreed by the "Big Three" in Tehran and reinforced by Bevan's mission, Russian plans for Operation Bagration – the Soviet clearing of German forces from Belorussia – were ▶

### THE SUMMER OF '42 – THE IMPORTANCE OF AIR TRANSPORT TO ALLIED STRATEGY

The spring and summer of 1942 saw several important Allied strategy meetings, all of which were made possible only by the use of air transport. These were:

*April 8*

President Roosevelt's close adviser Harry Hopkins and US Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall flew to London using a Boeing 307 Stratoliner and a Boeing 314 Clipper

*May 19–June 13*

Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslev Molotov flew to London and Washington DC and back to the Soviet Union aboard a Petlyakov Pe-8

*June 15*

British Chief of Combined Operations Vice-Admiral Louis Mountbatten flew to Washington DC for a meeting at the White House using Consolidated Liberator AL504 Commando

*June 17*

Prime Minister Churchill and British Chief of the Imperial Staff Gen Alan Brooke flew to Washington DC aboard BOAC Boeing Clipper G-AGBZ Bristol

*July 18*

Hopkins, Marshall and the American Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest King flew to London aboard a Boeing Stratoliner

*August 10*

Churchill and American special envoy W. Averell Harriman flew from Cairo to Moscow to brief Stalin, using three Liberators including AL504 Commando

**BELOW: Another type which made an invaluable contribution to the establishment of an air bridge between the Allied leaders was the Boeing 314A Clipper, BOAC examples of which carried Churchill to the UK from the crucial Arcadia conference in Washington in January 1942 (G-AGCA Berwick) and back to the USA for the Second Washington Conference that June (G-AGBZ Bristol, as seen here).** *Philip Jarrett collection*

**ABOVE:** **The "Big Three" – Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill – at the Tehran Conference held during November–December 1943. It was the first time the three leaders had met together, and was crucial for the planning of the 1944 operations that would see the beginning of the end of the war in Europe.**

now closely co-ordinated with the Anglo-American plans for the invasion of France.

Stalin was informed of the planned date for the Normandy landings on April 18, 1944, and on the 22nd he confirmed with Roosevelt and Churchill that "as agreed in Tehran, the Red Army will launch a new offensive at the same time so as to give maximum support".[17]

All the elements of the deception plan to which the Soviets had agreed to contribute were also put into effect. Information was leaked that the Soviet offensive in the east would not begin until July, German attention was drawn to a proposed invasion of Norway by American, British and Soviet troops and a proposed British attack on Crete. The Germans were fed information on potential Soviet attacks on the Bulgarian and Rumanian coast and the Soviets exerted pressure on Axis satellites to defect from the alliance.

All of this worked well and in the weeks leading up to the Normandy landings Soviet forces made menacing moves in the Arctic and Black Sea regions, and simulated a developing seaborne attack on Petsamo from the Kola inlet. Diplomatic pressure was also exerted on Bulgaria and Rumania, and misleading intelligence was leaked to the Germans about meetings between Soviet, British and American military planners in Scotland to co-ordinate attacks on Norway.[18]

On June 22, 1944, the Red Army launched Operation Bagration to attack the German Army Group Centre in Belorussia. The start date had been delayed from June 14 by rail hold-ups but when it came the Soviet attack was the largest single operation of the war. There was now a concerted effort by the Allies to attack the Germans from both east and west. Some 2.3 million men from the Red Army were involved in Bagration and the attack led to the movement of strategic German reserves away from France.[19]

The US Army's breakout from the Normandy beachhead under General Bradley as part of operation Cobra followed on July 25. This opened up the last and most bloody stage of the land war. In July 1944 German war dead since the conflict began was already standing at 2.8 million, but the next nine months would bring the deaths of 4.8 million more. [20]

Two aircraft, one Soviet and one American – but flown by a British crew – had played a vital role in linking the Allies at some of the most significant points in the war. •

**BELOW:** **Liberator G-AGCD following its conversion to civil configuration at the end of April 1941. The aircraft went on to have a distinguished wartime career, including participating in the vital resupply flights to the Middle East in July 1942, before being struck off charge at Dorval in November 1945.** *Philip Jarrett collection*

**ABOVE:** Typical accommodation looking aft in the cabin of a Ferry Service Liberator, with side seats in the rear of the cabin, bunks in the bomb bay and a shelf – known as the "Bridal Suite" – above the bomb-bay. *TAH Archive*

## ENDNOTE REFERENCES


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