

Faith, Hope and Charity — three Sea Gladiators of the Fighter Flight at Hal Far shortly after the start of hostilities. These aircraft created a legend among the local population. J. PICKERING VIA R. C. B. ASHWORTH



CHANGING *of the* GUARD





15 April this year marks the 75th anniversary of the award of the George Cross to the island of Malta, in honour – as King George VI wrote – “to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history”. Such attributes were on display during the early months of the Axis air assault in 1940 as the RAF did its best to hold the line, first with Gladiators and then Hurricanes **WORDS:** DAVID NICHOLAS



Hurricane Is V7418 and V7485/S of No 261 Squadron sit on standby at Hal Far during the autumn of 1940.

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Malta, with its airfields and naval base, was key to control of the central Mediterranean. However, situated just 60 miles off Sicily, it was hugely exposed to air attack in the event of a war against Italy. With fighters in short supply, none could be spared for Malta.

Thus, in April 1940, some of the 18 crated Royal Navy Gloster Sea Gladiators offloaded to Hal Far from HMS *Glorious* were made available to the RAF. Volunteers from the pilots of No 3 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit and the Air Officer Commanding's personal staff officer, Flt Lt George Burges, began training and formed the Hal Far Fighter Flight under Sqn Ldr Jock' Martin. When Italy declared war on 10 June there was the semblance of a fighter defence.

The first Italian raids came the following day when several formations of Savoia-Marchetti SM79 trimotor bombers approached. They were intercepted by the CO, Fg Off Bill 'Timber' Woods, and George Burges, but the bombers easily outpaced the biplanes, as Burges recalled: "As soon as I opened up, the Italians poured on the coal and the Gladiator just couldn't catch up with them". He did, however, slightly damage one, while Woods had a tussle with an escorting Macchi MC200 fighter.

Later that day, two Gladiators scrambled and Fg Off John Waters in N5520 believed he shot an SM79 down. He attacked another on the 13th, though in fact neither was damaged. Nonetheless, in the eyes of the local population the legend of three Gladiators named *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity* began to take root.

Further raids came, but the speed of the bombers prevented interception. The flight lost two Gladiators in crashes on the 21st, replacements

being issued from those in store. Success rewarded the unit's efforts the following afternoon when Burges and Woods intercepted a lone SM79, for once with a height advantage. Burges, who was flying N5519, took up the story: "'Timber' Woods and I were on the 16.00hrs-to-dusk watch when the alarm went off. We took off and climbed as hard as we could go, as was the custom. We did not attempt to maintain close formation because if one aircraft could climb faster than the other then the additional height gained might be an advantage. Ground control [the solitary AMES, Air Ministry Experimental Station, radar site] as usual gave us the position and course of the enemy.

“It was ordered that a number of Hurricanes, with their pilots, should remain stationed on Malta”

The enemy turned out to be a single SM79, presumably on a photographic sortie. It came right down the centre of the island from Gozo, and on this occasion we were 2,000-3,000ft above it. 'Timber' went in first but I did not see any results. I managed to get right behind it and shot off the port engine. I was told this happened right over Sliema and Valletta and caused quite a stir in the population. The aircraft caught fire and crashed into the sea off Kalafrana."

SM79 MM22068 from the 216^a Squadriglia was flown by Tenente Francesco Solimena. He and observer Sottotenente Alfredo Balsamo escaped from the burning aircraft. They were picked up from the sea.

The next day Burges and Woods again scrambled against an incoming raid. Burges in N5519 engaged the bombers without effect as the escort — MC200s of the 88^a Squadriglia — intervened off Sliema. Although faster, the Macchi was less nimble than the Gladiator, enabling Burges to "belt him up the backside as he went past". Eventually, Sergente Maggiore Molinelli's MC200 caught fire and he baled out into the sea, becoming a PoW. Woods' aircraft was hit, but he redressed the balance on 28 June when he was credited with an SM79, though it actually returned to Sicily severely damaged.

The first Hurricanes arrived in Malta on 13 June, but these were only being ferried via France to Egypt, several more arriving before the French surrender. It was ordered that a number, along with their pilots, should remain stationed on Malta. They were incorporated into the Fighter Flight. On 30 June, Fg Off Jock Barber flew P2614 on Malta's first operational Hurricane patrol.

Action was not long in coming. On 3 July, John Waters in P2614 shot down Tenente Sguario's SM79 of the 259^a Squadriglia, which was on a reconnaissance. As he returned to land, Waters' Hurricane was attacked by the escorting 9^o Gruppo Fiat CR42s and shot up by the legendary one-legged Maggiore Ernesto Botto. P2614 made a crash-landing.

France's capitulation allowed the Regia Aeronautica to concentrate on subduing Malta, and raids increased in size and frequency. The Fighter Flight scrambled against every reported attack but often failed to make contact. Better luck came on the 7th when, just after 09.00hrs, 'Timber' Woods led a section against two formations each of five SM79s with CR42 escorts, which were

BELOW: Pictured aboard HMS *Argus* on 11 August 1940, Hurricane I P3733 was among the aircraft of No 418 Flight that flew to Malta on the first operation.

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targeting the dockyard. He closed on one bomber and shot down Tenente Zagnoli's aircraft from the 233^a Squadriglia.

SM79s arrived without escort on 10 July and a trio of Hurricanes flown by Fg Off Eric Taylor (P2645), Bill Woods (P2653) and Peter Hartley (P2623) engaged them. The first two each shot down a bomber, while the Savoia from the 194^a Squadriglia that Hartley fired on crash-landed in Sicily with a dead gunner. A day later, when a Gladiator and a Hurricane flown by Plt Off Sugden intercepted a raid, the latter became embroiled with the escorting CR42s and force-landed with a dead engine. He was taken off fighters soon afterwards.

The Fighter Flight was next engaged on the 16th when a dozen 23^o Gruppo CR42s were intercepted by a single Gladiator and a Hurricane. In the latter, Flt Lt Peter Keeble attacked one of the Italian biplanes before being attacked himself by two more. His mount

dived into the ground and blew up. Keeble was the first RAF fighter pilot lost over Malta but was credited with Sottotenente Mario Benedetti's CR42 destroyed before he fell.

This loss led to detailed discussion on the best way to counter the agile Italian fighters. However, with few Hurricanes serviceable it was the anti-aircraft defences and the remaining Gladiators that met the sporadic Italian raids for now.



On 31 July, 'Timber' Woods made the first Gladiator claim for a month. Flying N5520, he engaged CR42s of the 23^o Gruppo off Grand Harbour and shot down that of the leader, Capitano Antonio Chiodi. However, off Marsaxlokk Bay Sergente Manilo Tarantino hit N5519 flown by Fg Off Peter Hartley, as Barber witnessed: "Peter must have been hit in his centre tank because his Gladiator burnt like a magnesium flare — a very brilliant light in the sky. He

actually baled out after his aircraft caught fire and he fell into the sea. He was very badly burnt, particularly about the knees, arms and face."

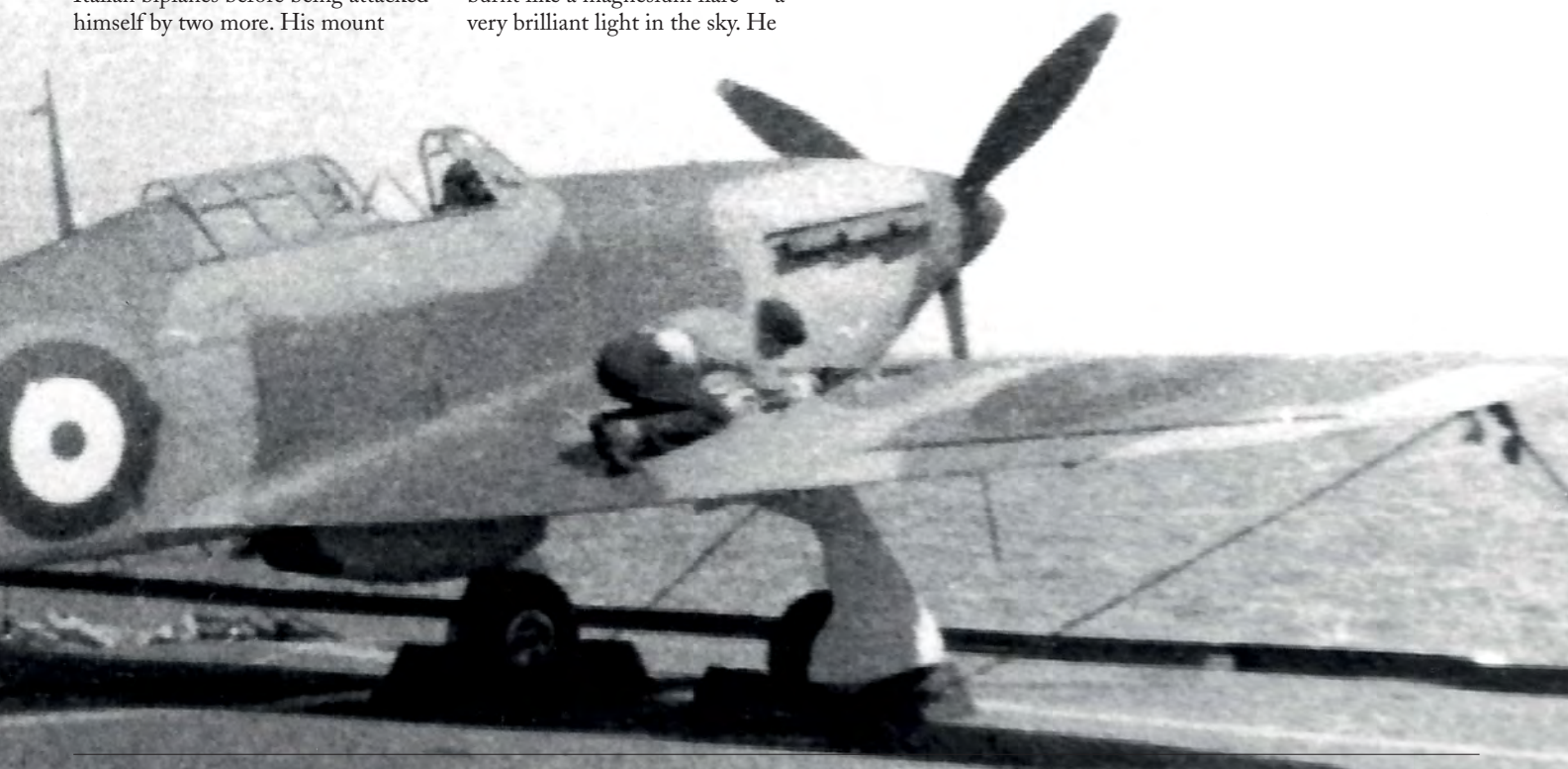
The loss coincided with the award of a DFC to Burges, the first decoration to Malta's defenders. However, the end of the initial full month of action saw the Fighter Flight reduced to a single serviceable Hurricane and a pair of Gladiators with six pilots.

Reinforcement of Malta and Egypt after the collapse of France had been exercising minds in London, and on 23 July the old carrier HMS *Argus* set off carrying the dozen Hurricanes of No 418 Flight. They were to be flown off the deck by RAF pilots who had served in the Fleet Air Arm pre-war and thus were carrier-experienced.

Argus sailed into the Mediterranean under heavy escort. At dawn on 2 August, about 380 miles west of Malta, the fighters

ABOVE: The nearest 9^o Gruppo Fiat CR42 in this formation is the aircraft of Maj Botto. The others all carry the 'iron leg' marking referring to his nickname, 'Gamba di ferro' (iron leg).

VIA GIOVANNI MASSIMELLO





ABOVE: 1940's last victory to be achieved over Malta fell to No 261 Squadron Hurricane pilot Sgt Fred Robertson, standing at left.

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launched in two waves of six, each led by a Blackburn Skua. The Hurricanes arrived at the limit of their range. Sgt Fred Robertson's engine cut as he was landing and N2700 crashed, though fortunately he survived. To their surprise, the pilots were informed that they were to remain in Malta and not be flown back to Britain. Spares and some groundcrew came by submarine. The Italians soon spotted the arrivals and mounted a heavy raid on the 5th that damaged two of them, though Plt Off Tommy Balmforth was flying one of the Hurricanes when he probably destroyed an SM79. A Gladiator, meanwhile, had a torrid time against eight CR42s.

The Fighter Flight was almost immediately incorporated into No 418 Flight under Sqn Ldr Martin. It had its first success late on the 13th when Fg Off Barber scrambled after a night intruder. He claimed an SM79 of the 259^a Squadriglia as damaged, though it actually ditched off Sicily. On the afternoon of the 15th, 10 SM79s from the same unit with 72^a Squadriglia CR42 escorts were detected heading for Hal Far. Four Hurricanes took off after them. Tenente Sartirana's Fiat hit N2716, and although Sgt Roy O'Donnell was seen to bail out he was never found.

Re-formed on 16 August into No 261 Squadron under the newly promoted Sqn Ldr Balden, operations continued with a mix of Hurricanes and Sea Gladiators based between Ta Kali and Luqa. Pilots regularly flew both types, though success usually eluded the biplanes. 261 scrambled aircraft most days, claiming its first victory shortly after midday on the 24th when intercepting a bomber raid. The Hurricane quartet was

soon engaged with the escorting 23^o Gruppo CR42s and Burges' aircraft was damaged. Fg Off Eric Taylor shot down a 75^a Squadriglia fighter; Sgt Reg Hyde went for another, "and saw my bullets entering fuselage and cockpit. I could observe nothing further as I was attacked by remaining fighters."

Scrambles continued, such as on 2 September when John Waters led three others against an inbound raid. Sgt Harry Ayre opened his account by probably destroying a Fiat, while during his three sorties that day

“We did head-on attacks. I was firing, he was firing. I whipped round in a turn as we passed and, to my amazement, I saw him losing height”

Sgt Fred Robertson hit an MC200 from the 6^o Gruppo flown by Capt Giuliano Giacomelli.

Italian-flown Junkers Ju 87s appeared over the island on 4 September, a sight that would become achingly familiar. Another raid arrived mid-morning on the 5th, when eight SM79s with accompanying CR42s attacked Grand Harbour and the airfields at Hal Far and Luqa. The six intercepting Hurricanes did not make contact. Later, during another Stuka attack Flt Lt John Greenhalgh brought down one of the escorts. He was involved with Barber and Flt Lt Lambert two days later when a raid was intercepted and they combined to bring down an SM79.

Despite these losses the intensity of the raids mounted, causing increasing damage to military installations and civilian infrastructure. Many were

intercepted — on the 17th, Barber and Ayre each claimed a Ju 87 and 'Timber' Woods a CR42. Barber described the fight: "We did head-on attacks. I was firing, he was firing. I whipped round in a turn as we passed and to my amazement, I saw him losing height... and he landed with a very big splash in the sea."

The next day the Italians sent over a fighter sweep of seven CR42s. The RAF countered with a pair of Gladiators and three Hurricanes. In one of the latter, Plt Off Tommy Balmforth was hit and injured by burning oil, but claimed his first victory. The next significant combat occurred a week later during a recce and sweep by MC200s of the 79^a Squadriglia. Maresciallo Gino Lagi was shot down by Fg Off Eric Taylor, while Jock Robertson hit another of the enemy fighters in the wing.

Targets on Malta continued to be subjected to bombing attacks but without significant intervention by 261's few fighters. There was a relative lull until 4 October when Tenente Nasoni's MC200 (MM4585), with escort, appeared on a recce. All available Hurricanes scrambled, together with a Gladiator flown by Sgt Pickering. Sgt Hyde shot down Nasoni's Macchi, which, in the combat report's words, he "attacked from astern and followed down in a spiral dive. Seen to strike water off [Ghajn Tuffieha]."

When Italian bombers began appearing at night, Hurricane N2484 was modified for night flying. On 8 October, five 36^o Stormo SM79s attacked Kalafrana. Eric Taylor chased one that was caught in searchlights, brought down Tenente Ferrari's aircraft from the 257^a Squadriglia, and hit a second. Air Headquarters (AHQ) Malta issued a statement noting that, since the outbreak of war with Italy, 72 raids had been intercepted and 22 aircraft destroyed by the defending fighters, for the loss of two Hurricanes and one Gladiator with others damaged or wrecked on the ground.

Despite the arrival of a convoy, October proved fairly quiet, though aircraft availability was an increasing concern. This led to greater use of the Gladiators, and the need for another reinforcement flight from *Argus*: Operation 'White'. On 2 November, 34^o Gruppo SM79s attacked Valletta. Six Hurricanes, led by 'Timber' Woods, and a pair of Gladiators were scrambled and engaged the fighter



LEFT: The last RAF Sea Gladiator claims over Malta were made on 2 November 1940 by Flt Lt Burges. He was in N5520, which had earlier been fitted with a Mercury VIII engine and Hamilton propeller from a crashed Blenheim. NWMAVIA B. CULL

escort. The Hurricanes fought the MC200s of the 72^a Squadriglia, and Plt Off McAdam was shot down by Sgt Lanzarini's Macchi at Zejtun. Burges in Sea Gladiator N5520 joined a dogfight with the CR42s, claiming one shot down and another damaged. These were the RAF's final Gladiator claims over Malta.

A relative lull occurred as the Regia Aeronautica concentrated on inbound convoys. However, given the increasing air threat the Royal Navy insisted on launching the dozen Hurricanes off *Argus* 400 miles to the west, at the very edge of their practical range. It resulted in tragedy. The first six took off at dawn on the 17th, again led by a Skua providing navigation assistance. Just four made it — Flt Lt MacLachlan landed with six gallons left while the rest of his section, Plt Offs Eliot and Hamilton, were equally short. Of the other section, only Sgt Norwell reached land. Leading the second formation, Plt Off Stockwell crash-landed his Skua in Sicily, but all six Hurricanes and their pilots were lost. It was a bitter blow, though the new arrivals brought a wealth of experience gained during the Battle of Britain.

There was little time to draw breath, as the next raid came early on the 22nd, and another daylight attack on the 23rd when 10 SM79s bombed Ta Kali. Eight Hurricanes scrambled and engaged the raid over Filfla but made no claims. The Italians returned in mid-afternoon, and Burges thought he hit one bomber "pretty hard". It was credited as a probable. Firing on a second he saw pieces flying off and claimed it damaged. The escort engaged Sgt Robertson, whose fire struck one of the CR42s, as did that of Sgt Hyde. Both were assessed as probables. A precious Hurricane, flown by Fg Off Bradbury, was badly damaged.

Strafing attacks by CR42s came the next day, damaging several aircraft on the ground. Three biplanes from the 74^a Squadriglia appeared on the 26th, conducting a recce; they were intercepted by a pair of Hurricanes. Flying N2701, Sgt Dennis Ashton shot one down but was immediately downed himself by Capitano Bobba. Both pilots were killed.

Further convoys arrived and intermittent enemy activity continued into December, mainly in the form of small fighter sweeps or night raids. It was during one of the latter when, shortly before midnight on the 18th, Sgt Fred Robertson took off in Hurricane P3731. Just south-east of Grand Harbour at 15,000ft he spotted an aircraft in the searchlights: "I dived over Filfla towards the interception of the beam. I then closed to 200 yards and put three bursts of fire into it from dead astern. The enemy aircraft burst into flames, first in the fuselage and then the wing roots and dived straight into the sea". Robertson's fourth victory was Tenente Guilo Molteni's SM79bis of the 193^a Squadriglia, and was the last Italian aircraft to fall to Malta's fighters in 1940.

By the turn of the year, 261 still had four Gladiators on strength. These old soldiers never died but just faded away.

Large elements of the Luftwaffe's Fliegerkorps X had by now deployed to Sicily so as to neutralise the British fleet and the Maltese bases, securing the Afrika Korps' maritime

flank as it moved into Libya. On 10 January a convoy approaching Malta came under deadly air attack, the Stukas concentrating on HMS *Illustrious*, which took six direct hits. That night the battered carrier limped into Grand Harbour for emergency repairs. There she acted as a magnet to a series of savage air attacks.

The game had changed irrevocably, and Malta's long torment entered a deadly new phase. ■

NEXT MONTH...
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