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THE AIR AND NAVAL BASES

ON MALTA

JUNE, 1940 to OCTOBER, 1942.

A report prepared by the
Italian Air Staff,
and dated 31st Oct. 1942

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AIR and NAVAL BASES ON MALTA -
SITUATION REPORT FOR THE PERIOD
FROM JUNE 1940 UNTIL OCTOBER 1942.

This brief collection of data indicates the strength and efficiency of the air and naval bases on Malta from the beginning of the war until today, in relation to the Axis air operations against the Island.

For convenience, this report has been divided into the following periods:

- 1st Period: From the beginning of hostilities (June 1940) until the 10th Jan 1941.
- 2nd Period: 10th Jan - 22nd May 1942 (1st air offensive)
- 3rd Period: 22nd May 1941 - 20th March 1942.
- 4th Period: 20th March - 10th May, 1942 (2nd air offensive)
- 5th Period: 10th May - 10th Oct. 1942.
- 6th Period: 10th Oct - 20th Oct 1942 (3rd air offensive)

The strategical and geographical position of Malta and its underground installations made it very powerful both defensively and offensively. At the beginning of hostilities between Germany and England (Sept, 1939), Malta was an efficient air and naval base which had been created as a key position between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. By virtue of the naval installations, the airfields and formidable defences all over the Island, the British were in a position to make the Island a supporting base for the fleet; use it as a port of call for merchant shipping; hamper the traffic between Italy and Italian N. Africa; and dominate the air bases in Sicily and S. Italy from the air.

It can be assumed that England had foreseen an eventual Italian invasion of Tunisia a few days after the beginning of hostilities between Italy and France. As a result she had foreseen the possible loss of Biserta as a naval base and the Tunisian airfields which were used as landing stages for the air transports between England, Gibraltar and Egypt.

In that case, Malta would have had to assume the role of an intermediate airport between England and Egypt.

1st Period, June 1940 - 10th Jan, 1941

At the outbreak of hostilities with Italy, Malta was not given any clearly defined duties. The enemy was probably waiting for the development of operations in order to use the Island to the best advantage. At that time, the following forces were on the Island:-

Ships: 1 Cruiser
 7 Submarines
 4 Minesweepers
 1 Mine-layer
 1 Aircraft Carrier in dock (ARGUS)
 4 Steamers (of which two were Italian)

Aircraft: 25 Fighters
 6 Recce (seaplanes - 202 Sqdn.)
 9 various types

As the airfields were always full of M.T. vehicles except when aircraft were actually landing, it was assumed that:

- (a) because of the menace from the air, the enemy had decided on an entirely offensive order of battle.
- (b) the enemy was counting on the possibility of an invasion.

From then onwards, a gradual re-inforcement of AA coastal defences and an almost constant escort for merchant ships was noticed. The average number of ships in the Island bases between June 1940 and Jan 1941 was roughly as follows:-

4 Steamers
5 naval escorts
2 Submarines
Numerous small auxiliary vessels, and approximately
10 merchant ships and 7 naval escorts.

It was difficult to ascertain the strength of the air force because of camouflage and concealment. From the outbreak of hostilities until the 10th Jan 1941, reconnaissance revealed that there were between 10 and 35 aircraft on Malta, with a daily average of 10 bombers, 12 fighters and 3 various types.

Submarine movements and the continuous changes in the number of steamers and escort vessels at the bases, indicated that Malta had undertaken the duty of

- (a) providing a port of call for shipping
- (b) hampering our naval traffic to and from Italian N. Africa.

2nd Period (10th Jan - 22nd May, 1941)

The 1st air offensive against Malta began on 10th Jan 1941 and continued until 22nd May.

The aims of this offensive were:

- (a) to interrupt or at least to hamper the continuous supply of re-inforcements to Egypt via the Mediterranean;
- (b) to protect our shipping to Italian N. Africa by neutralizing the defences and the air and naval forces;

The passage through the Sicilian Narrows was heavily guarded against enemy shipping on which the following losses were inflicted by the Axis Air Force:

Sunk: 3 Naval ships
 12 Merchant ships

Damaged: 29 Naval ships
 57 Merchant ships

In spite of this, 32 Naval ships and 24 transports passed through the Sicilian Narrows during the period and at the end of the offensive the enemy forces on Malta were practically intact due to supplies of air and naval material to the Island.

The average number of naval and merchant ships in the Island ports between the 10th and 20th Jan 1941 was 5 Naval ships (which included 1 Aircraft Carrier and 1 Cruiser), 5 submarines and 4 steamers, whereas at the end of the offensive, between the 12th and 22nd May 1941, the average was 6 Naval ships, 6 submarines and 3 merchant ships.

There was also an increase in the number of aircraft during the two periods (an average of between 23 and 50 aircraft).

The pressure which Malta had brought to bear against our shipping had lessened right from the first days of the air offensive, and this tendency became even more noticeable at the end of it. This easing of pressure was due either to the use of material which was continuously under attack or to the lack of adequate supplies.

3rd Period (22nd May 1941 - 20th March 1942)

The Malta ports were almost free of naval vessels for some time after the offensive, whereas the number of steamers was on the increase. As soon

as the air attacks diminished, the naval ships began to reappear in the bases and the number of aircraft increased rapidly.

The daily average for the 3rd period was 3 Naval ships, 7 Merchant ships, 3 Submarines and various auxiliary vessels. There was a maximum of 4 submarines and 4 naval ships (including 2 cruisers) at the end of the period and 12 steamers just after the offensive.

The strength of the air force increased rapidly, reaching a daily average of 120 aircraft on the airfields with a maximum of 160.

4th Period (20th March - 10th May, 1942) 2nd Air Offensive

In order to ensure a regular supply of materials by sea between Italy and Italian N. Africa and to reduce attacks against shipping at sea and in the ports, it was necessary to make a new attempt at neutralising the Island by means of air attacks. To prepare the way for an eventual occupation of the Maltese Archipelago, the offensive was also aimed at neutralising the Island in all its offensive and defensive capacities and at the same time maintaining a blockade against supplies.

During the first days of the second air offensive, reconnaissance over Malta revealed that there were 2 cruisers, 3 submarines, 2 merchant vessels and about 160 aircraft, of which approximately 50% were multi-engined.

During the period of intensive operations it was noticed that there was an absence of submarines, and only an occasional appearance by one or two destroyers. The number of multi-engined bombers rapidly diminished until there were only 6 left. The number of single-engined aircraft was maintained at 40, by means of constant reinforcements.

As far as offensive capacities were concerned the neutralization was successful, as the following facts indicate:-

- our transports bound for Italian N. Africa were carried out more frequently and regularly along the shorter route passing nearer Malta.
- during the attacks, Malta's activities were exclusively defensive.
- the blockade of the Island remained almost complete; the small quantity of supplies brought in by air, submarine and possibly from the Tunisian coast were not sufficient to alleviate the precarious condition of the Island;
- the whole of the garrison was forced to concentrate on re-inforcing the defences.
- it was quite obvious that the offensive could have been followed by the occupation of the fortress by ground troops.

It was noticed during this period that submarine activities in the Central Western sector were slight compared with the Eastern sector, where there was great activity.

5th Period (10th May - 10th October 1942)

Operations in Egypt stopped the offensive against Malta. As the pressure of air attacks was relaxed, Malta regained her offensive capacities with extraordinary rapidity, especially in the air.

In the middle of Sept 1942, reconnaissance over the Island revealed 3 corvettes, 5 steamers (4 of which were oil vessels), 5 submarines and 185 aircraft. There was much more submarine activity during this period, although there was very little air activity in relation to the number of aircraft on Malta, but this may have been due to shortage of fuel.

/Following

Following the resumed offensive air activities, naval traffic bound for Italian N.Africa had to make use of the longer coastal routes and to be escorted by aircraft thus placing a great burden on the Air Force.

In order to increase supplies for the El Alamein front, it was necessary to launch further intensified air attacks against Malta.

6th Period (10th - 20th Oct 1942) 3rd air offensive

The aims of the 3rd air offensive were:

- (a) to eliminate the enemy fighters during the first phase by engaging them in combat and
- (b) to remove the offensive capacity of the Island as much as possible during the second phase by bombing.

The intended results, however, were not achieved, due to the comparatively small number of aircraft employed. The number of aircraft located on the various airfields at the beginning of the offensive was as follows:

single-engine aircraft	129
twin " "	34
torpedo bombers	5
Total	168

On 20th Oct, photo-reconnaissance produced the following figures;

single-engine aircraft	80
twin " "	28
torpedo-bombers	5
Total	113

This shows a difference of 55 aircraft, whilst the number of aircraft shot down was approximately 100. This apparent discrepancy can be explained by the fact that some aircraft were concealed in caves and that it was easy to supply aircraft to the Island.

C O N C L U S I O N S

As far as the offensive capacities of Malta are concerned, it can be considered conclusively that the Axis Air Forces were successful in:

- (a) completely eliminating offensive capacities of surface ships;
- (b) hampering the operations of submarines around Malta and stopping their activities completely during the periods of constant air attacks.
- (c) diminishing the offensive capabilities of the Air Force and eliminating them completely during the periods of non-stop operations.

The defensive capacities on the other hand, increased, due to the large amount of material sent to the Island, and to the gradual strengthening of its defences.

When it is considered that an enormous amount of material would have to be used constantly to neutralise Malta by air operations, as in the second air offensive, which produced concrete results, the most economical solution would be to occupy the Island, thus ensuring free naval traffic with Italian North Africa.

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